**The nuclear threat**

Dr Imran Khalid

Saturday, Oct 22, 2022

There is visible nervousness. Events of the last three weeks are indicating gradual penetration of disappointment, lassitude and desperation in Putin’s camp. Indubitably, Putin is worried about the repeated failures of the Russian forces in the Ukraine misadventure.

Putin’s desperation, as evident from his brutal and ruthless shelling on Ukrainian cities, is related to his humiliation at the hands of the Ukrainian resistance forces in recent days. The loss of Kharkiv was the first major setback that exposed the logistical and operational weaknesses of the invading Russian forces. This was followed by the fall of the city of Lyman in Donetsk Oblast, a railway junction with immense strategic importance that also became a symbol of Putin’s failures in Ukraine.

Just a week later, an explosion ruptured the Kerch Bridge, which was constructed on the personal orders of Putin to link the Russian mainland with the Russian-occupied Crimean Peninsula across the Kerch Strait. The massive damage to the Kerch Bridge, inaugurated by Putin as a symbol of resurrection of the Russian federation and pompously projected as impermeable to attack by the Russian media, was a big chastening blow to Putin.

These quick setbacks within the span of a few days triggered a despondency that started enveloping the Russian troops and catapulted Putin into a swirl of despair to hurriedly announce the mobilization of reserves, issue threat of tactical nuclear weapons, and then stage the annexation drama. This was the first major sign of Putin’s brittleness – a man who for the last two decades has carefully cast himself as the invincible macho man.

Ever since February 24, when the Russian troops marched into Ukrainian territory to conduct a ‘special military operation’, there has never been a moment when Putin appeared this weak, disoriented, exhausted and frustrated. Apparently in a desolate payback to the Kerch incident, he has suddenly unleashed an indiscriminate shower of missiles on different Ukrainian cities including Kyiv. He is trying to appear confident by continuously moving around different capitals of the region in the name of various conferences and summits – the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) in mid-September in Samarkand and now the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-building Measures in Asia (CICA) in Astana.

He has met Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan four times in the last three months as a part of his frantic diplomatic exertions to offset the Western campaign to push Russia into further diplomatic isolation after the annexation of the eastern Ukrainian regions of Luhansk, Donetsk, Zaporizhzhia and Kherson. The recent UN resolution against this annexation, though symbolic at the most, marshaled the highest number of votes against Russia since the invasion.

A deeper dissection of Putin’s actions in the last few weeks would reveal that he has overestimated the capabilities of the Russian army and flagrantly miscalculated the thrust of the Ukrainian resistance. For many months, the Western media has been talking about the major gaps and weaknesses of the ill-disciplined Russian army that lacks the competence and aptitude to withstand the stress of a prolonged war of attrition.

The Russian army is sinking deeper into this quagmire and its image as a fighting force is practically “shattered” after a series of routs. With each passing day, its image as an ill-disciplined fighting machine, equipped with obsolete weapons and supported by an antiquated supply chain and logistical support, is being further highlighted. Western capitals have been quite optimistic after the Kharkiv episode as the “beginning of the end of the Ukraine invasion”. They believe that the weapons provided by them, particularly the M777 howitzers and HIMARS, are helping the Ukrainians outfight the Russians. It is not difficult to understand Putin’s frustration, unable to digest the retreat of his army.

The massive shelling on Ukrainian towns has aggravated fears in the West – as well as Kyiv – about Putin’s possible move to go ahead with the use of tactical nuclear weapons in the coming days to muffle Russia’s humiliating defeat. Despite a weak and loose control over the region, Putin hastily ‘legalized’ the annexation of a big chunk of the occupied territories into the fold of the Russian Federation without proper preparation and consolidation on the ground.

Western leadership is also taking Putin’s nuclear threat quite seriously. As Putin’s comeuppance continues unabating, fears are ramping up in the West that he might resort to nuclear weapons to salvage his faltering military campaign. US President Joe Biden has said that Putin isn’t “joking when he talks about potential use of tactical nuclear weapons or biological or chemical weapons” and warned that we are facing “the prospect of Armageddon” for the first time since the Cuban missile crisis. Biden is right in feeling anxious about the possibilities of nuclear use, which – while still low – are higher than they have been in decades. That would be a dreadful scenario and the war would spiral out of control in no time.

A gradual consensus is evolving among the Western leaders about adopting a stern stance against Putin’s nuclear threats. "There is the nuclear threat, and Putin is saying he is not bluffing. Well, he cannot afford bluffing…And any nuclear attack against Ukraine will create an answer – not a nuclear answer but such a powerful answer from the military side that the Russian army will be annihilated, and Putin should not be bluffing," bluntly retorted Josep Borrell, the EU's foreign policy chief.

The nuclear threat saga has a different angle too and that is related to its timing – both Russia and Nato are scheduled to hold their annual nuclear exercises in the next few days. Nato will hold its nuclear exercises, ‘Steadfast Noon’, in the third week of October. These week-long maneuvers are conducted at the same time every year. Russia also holds its annual nuclear exercises in the same part of the year.

Putin’s nuclear threat ahead of the planned nuclear exercises by the two adversaries has intensified the tension. Against this backdrop, Nato Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg has also issued a discreet warning to Russia: “We will not go into exactly how we will respond, but of course this will fundamentally change the nature of the conflict. It will mean that a very important line has been crossed.”

The current stiffness in the tone of the Western leadership is reflecting that the West is quite serious in rebuffing Putin’s nuclear saber-rattling as a ploy to threaten them and get away with redrawing the international borders. They think, and rightly so, that if Putin is allowed to play nuclear tunes in the Ukraine imbroglio, then it would embolden other nuclear-armed states to follow suit in settling their disputes with other states. Such a scenario will certainly shake the very foundation of the post-1945 world order.

The writer is a freelance contributor.