An Opinion on Promises, Threats, and Accusations
In the 2022 Russo-Ukrainian War

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Abstract

Promise Theory is used as a framework for analysing the baffling escalation in the third phase of the Russo-Ukrainian war that started on February 24, 2022. It is argued that an exit of the UK from NATO may constitute an important step towards a more reliable and functional security architecture in Europe.

1   Introduction

In [8] it has been argued that Brexit may constitute a step forward because the US is in need of a reliable partner in Europe, while the US will more easily develop and maintain a stable relation with the UK than with the EU as a whole. The US deserves a European partner combining military capability with political and economic strength. I will argue that a second Brexit (Brexit II), the exit of the UK from NATO, is a plausible move, and that continental NATO states will potentially profit from a Brexit II, so much that they might even pay for it. The UK would then become a militarily independent and highly weaponised ally of NATO able to pursue self-defined objectives, capable of engaging in violent conflicts with all states and blocks outside NATO. A UK outside NATO would be able to function as a proxy for one or more NATO members in an armed conflict with an enemy outside NATO, thereby allowing NATO not to be directly involved in said conflict in order to prevent out-of-control escalation.

For symmetry it might be plausible that one of the CSTO states, for example Belarus, could exit CSTO, while having at its disposal a, perhaps newly acquired, independent and up to date nuclear capability including medium range delivery systems.

1.1   Motivation

Existential risk has become a subject of scholarly work. The climate problem, biodiversity degradation, and the feared supremacy of artificial intelligence over natural intelligence qualify as existential threats worthy of systematic and professional scholarly contemplation. The Russo-Ukrainian war, however, proceeds in a much shorter time frame and could end up being even more disastrous than the three mentioned risks, with the difference that the disasters of war may take place within years rather than within decades or centuries, the plausible time frames for natural disasters. There may not even be time left to engage in an

orderly academic discussion; nevertheless it seems justified to develop the language of promises, threats, and accusations for application in this area, and to do so without delay.

1.2 Remarks on Promise Theory and Accusation Theory

This work is written in the context of Promise Theory (PT) as proposed by Mark Burgess and as compiled into a survey in [7]. Applications of PT have been developed in [8] on Brexit, in [9] on informational money, in [4] on nuclear proliferation (for which [2] and [1] served as an incentive to incorporate threats), in [6] on robotic weapons, and in [11] on software process flaws. A general perspective on the use of promises in informatics is given in [5]. Connections of PT with principles familiar to physics are discussed in [10]. A theory of accusations, complementary to Promise Theory is proposed in [12], and a case study on the application of accusation theory in the context of computer programming is given in [13].

1.3 Remarks on the Russo-Ukrainian war

The situation in the Russo-Ukrainian war changes from day to day. In [14] (April 2022) an account is given of the various pressures on NATO that emerge from the war and how such pressures might play out in the coming years. In September the situation has become so much more acute that [14] seems to be already outdated. In [16] one finds a historic account, including a description of Russian claims on all or parts of Ukraine. Assessing the situation in September 2022 it seems that the occurrence of "Aftermath" in the title of that paper has been premature, and that the author has underestimated Russian military strength as well as the single-minded determination of their actions. In [3], published in April 2022, an analysis is given which allocates partial blame to the Ukrainian government, because according to the author, a more cautious approach to engagement with EU and NATO would have been both possible and preferable. That paper has the following to say about the possible use of nuclear weapons: "The threat of Russia using tactical nuclear weapons is quite real, as it is unlikely that NATO would risk an all-out war by using its own nuclear arsenal against it." As it turns out in September, NATO, or in any case the US may have a different view on this matter (see Threat 4.2 below). Not all scholars of Ukrainian studies see any ground for blaming Ukraine, however, see e.g. [17]. In [15] this war is classified as a proxy war of the technology diffusion model, with a state acting as a proxy for NATO members. Conversely Ukrainian separatists act as a proxy for Russia. In [18] the war is understood as an activation of a frozen conflict.

2 A history of promises and accusations

I will use the language of promises and accusations to provide a brief introduction.

Fact 2.1. *On February 24, 2022 Russian armed forces invaded Ukraine in what the Kremlin called a special military operation while from Kyiv the invasion was portrayed as the start of a war.*

Accusation 2.1. *(NATO, EU and other countries to Kremlin, public scope.) By invading Ukrainian sovereign territory, Russia violates international law.*

Support for Ukraine grew rapidly and a number of countries have been providing Ukraine with weapons since the beginning of what I will call the third phase of the Russo-Ukrainian war (after the annexation of Crimea, and subsequent hostilities in the Donbas area).

Promise 2.1. *(From key NATO members to the government of Ukraine, public scope.) You will receive conventional weapons support for as long as it takes. Weapons systems enabling an attack deep into Russian territory will not be provided, however.*

Promise 2.2. *(From NATO countries to Kremlin, public scope). Support to Ukraine is provided in such a manner that it must not and cannot be understood or portrayed as an involvement of NATO in the Russo-Ukrainian war.*

Threat 2.1. *(From the Kremlin to NATO, public scope.) The Kremlin will determine when NATO support is understood as an act of war against Russia, and act appropriately from such a moment onwards.*

Threat 2.2. *(From the Kremlin to NATO, public scope; September 23, 2022.) The Kremlin may use nuclear weapons when its territory is attacked.*

Threat 2.2 matters for Ukraine and NATO as the Kremlin has announced to incorporate several parts of Ukraine into Russia, so that liberation of these areas by Ukrainian forces might then be portrayed as an attack on Russia proper.

Claim 2.1. *A nuclear threat being issued towards a non-nuclear state constitutes a military novelty in modern times.*

Claim 2.2. *Rapidly evacuating Kyiv and other densely populated areas is plausible in view of Threat 2.2.*

By evacuating Kyiv, Ukraine promises to the world (i) to accept a situation where a limited nuclear war forces a Ukrainian surrender, and (ii) to keep fighting until nuclear weapons are actually used.

Claim 2.3. *The world is a safer place once the practicality of a limited nuclear war, fought with tactical use of nuclear weapons, is acknowledged.*

Lessons from WWII are important. It is misleading to view the German style of warfare as "out of scope" for rational analysis because of the simultaneous crimes enacted by the NAZI regime. The war (even if in violation of international law) was somehow "traditional" while these crimes were not, or in any case to a far lesser extent.

Fact 2.2. *A lesson that can be taken from WWII is that there is (unfortunately) nothing very exceptional about a state starting a war in order to expand its influence or territory. That may be bad, and wrong, but the very fact that such processes take place is a part of the human condition.*

Fact 2.3. *Another lesson that can be taken from WWI as well as from WWII is that a world war can begin, and then become unstoppable, in a situation where the public at large has no clue of what it is all about.*

Fact 2.4. *A further lesson that can be taken from WWI as well as from WWII is that promised support for a country under attack, however appreciated, well motivated and honourable, can play a major role in the creation of a world war. Consequently the promise of NATO support for Ukraine inevitably comes with significant risks.*

3   A fundamental asymmetry

The Russo-Ukrainian war features a fundamental asymmetry: Ukraine has no nuclear weapons and no up to date delivery systems for nuclear weapons either. The following conditional promise seems defensible:

Promise 3.1. *("Consensus" of nuclear deterrence theory, to public, with public scope). If Ukraine were in the possession of nuclear weapons including a reliable delivery system with a range of some 1500 kilometers, Russia would not have attacked Ukraine.*

Simply buying nuclear weapons on the international market seems not yet to be an option for Ukraine. Ukraine is not a NATO country and the idea that NATO must protect a non-NATO country against Russian aggression runs counter to the NATO objective to protect NATO countries from attacks from outside. NATO membership determines the level of protection. NATO need not, and perhaps must not, protect democracy outside its area.

The assumption that whenever Russian troops cross the border to a NATO country, all of NATO is at war with Russia is so risky that it ought to be abandoned.

Claim 3.1. *Due to its monolithic structure NATO is unable to fight a limited nuclear war with CSTO. No NATO member can act against Russia militarily, without running the risk of triggering a full NATO-CSTO confrontation.*

I conclude that NATO has inadequate tools to prevent allies outside NATO from becoming victims of nuclear blackmail form CSTO members. In order for the Kremlin to fear nuclear war while remaining at some distance from starting a new world war, a non-NATO state must emerge as a nuclear state, and as an ally with protective ambitions.

Claim 3.2. *NATO is incapable of providing continental Europe with security from aggression, and in particular nuclear blackmail, by CSTO members.*

3.1 Brexit II: evolving towards scalable symmetries

The following promise by NL to the UK might makes sense. And so would similar promises from Germany, Belgium, France, and so on.

Promise 3.2. *(Hypothetical promise from EU continental European NATO countries including NL to the UK.) If the UK exits from NATO (Brexit II) and promises to protect western parts of continental Europe (for the third time in succession) against a European aggressor, by (this time) singlehandedly threatening Russia with counter attacks if Russia drives things too far, the NL will subsidise the UK armed forces with 1000 Euro per inhabitant per year on a permanent basis (under the assumption that at least four other EU countries do the same).*

Other countries or combinations thereof could play the same role as the UK is supposed to play in promise 3.2. Except for France the path towards having in place a functional nuclear deterrant might be quite long. France, however, is essential as a stronghold for NATO in continental Europe, and for that reason decoupling France from NATO is implausible. However, perhaps countries like Norway or Finland could be protected agains nuclear attacks more easily than the UK, and such countries could be supported with setting up a nuclear force.

One might object that the UK has no effective defence against a nuclear attack, but no state has such defence nowadays. There is no substitute for mutual deterrence. Nevertheless with a massive investment, paid for mainly by other NATO members, the UK could be provided with best possible military technology, including nuclear weapons and protection against these.

3.2   Alternatives to Brexit II

Proposing Brexit II may seem irrational, as an outcome of unfounded alarmism. The question then may be rephrased as follows: assuming that the Kremlin is willing and prepared to go all the way and to use tactical nuclear weapons in order to win the Russo-Ukrainian war, and assuming that NATO members intend to prevent such developments, which options exist?

1. Provide nuclear weapons to Ukraine. Doing so may well be technically feasible. It can be done in an open manner but perhaps more effectively in a covert manner. Perhaps, though hardly imaginable, it may even be done in such a manner that it is hard to detect for the Russian spies in Ukraine.

2. Extend NATO's defensive policy to Ukraine, and promise protection (retaliation) in the case of a nuclear attack on one of its undisputed areas.

3. Ukraine successfully asks (perhaps with the support of NATO members) a non-NATO nuclear power for protection. A rather implausible scenario, though conceivable in principle.

4. NATO members provide Ukraine with more destructive and effective conventional weapons; including long range airplanes and missiles, a diversity of tanks, and combat airplanes.

5. NATO members support Ukraine in evacuating all densely populated areas in such a manner that a nuclear attack can be survived by many civilians.

6. Ukraine gives in to Russian wishes.

Below we will see that as a first reaction to Threat 2.2 alternative 2 has been chosen.

3.3   If Brexit II is the solution, then what is the problem?

The problem which might be solved in principle by having the UK outside NATO is that NATO cannot produce a plausible response to Threat 2.2. The suggestion that conducting a proxy war with Russia, with Ukraine using modern NATO technology, constitutes no NATO involvement is unconvincing. Indeed for each novel weapons system that Ukraine wishes to acquire (for example, fighter jets, tanks, long range Himars launchers, larger drones, additional information acquired by US military satellites, cruise missiles), the question whether or not supplying such weapons would cross the border to actual NATO battlefield involvement arises. It is questionable, however, that NATO knows how to incorporate in its own decision taking the views of the Kremlin regarding what it means for NATO to be, or not to be, involved in the war.

Claim 3.3. *The actual response to Threat 2.2 that came from the White House (see Promise 4.2 below) forces the public to contemplate the possibility that the White House has actually threatened Russia with actions that might trigger WWIII.*

Claim 3.4. *Whatever the merits of US policies in support of legitimate Ukrainian interests: defending 20% of the surface of Ukraine, however legitimate, cannot justify a development into WWIII because there is no proof of the suspicion that Russian geographic claims would be unbounded, unless brought to a halt in this phase.*

Concerning support for claim 3.4: the domino theory as put forward by president Eisenhower in 1954 in relation to the Asian context, did not come true, and there is no evidence for the validity of a European version of a domino theory some 70 years later either.

5

4 The rhetoric of escalation – September 24, 2022

In response to Threat 2.2 a novel course of events came about: the first nuclear threat issued, in modern times, by the US with intentional battlefield consequences. The aim is to constrain Russian forces to the use of conventional weapons so that (as NATO expects) Russia will not win and may even lose the Russo-Ukrainian war.

Claim 4.1. *September 24–26 will enter the history books as a watershed phase regarding nuclear warfare.*

Claim 4.2. *The threat as issued by the Kremlin (September 23/24, 2022) that losing a conventional war, caused by sustained weapons support from NATO countries, may justify the use of nuclear weapons inside Ukraine, constitutes a change to the theory of nuclear deterrence and signifies an end to the rationale of preventing nuclear proliferation.*

Accusation 4.1. *(Author to CSTO.) By threatening the non-nuclear weapons state Ukraine with nuclear weapons, CSTO has lost much of its credibility.*

Promise 4.1. *(Author to NATO.) When not clearly reacting to the Threat 2.2 or ignoring it or portraying it as bluff, NATO countries will fail to protect the world against a drift towards nuclear proliferation.*

The condition to Promise 4.1 failed and on September 25, 2022 US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan explained that in response to the threat of nuclear warfare issued from the Kremlin to Ukraine the US has issued the following threat:

Threat 4.1. *(White House to the Kremlin; public scope.) If Russia uses nuclear weapons in Ukraine the consequences will be catastrophic for Russia.*

Threat 4.2. *(White House to the Kremlin; only Kremlin in scope.) Threat 4.1 now enriched with a Body which contains an explanation of the meaning of "catastrophic for Russia".*

The existence of Threat 4.2 is communicated externally with another promise:

Promise 4.2. *(White House to the world). The White House has communicated to the Kremlin in private the meaning of "decisive action" (in this case) as well as the intent to apply such decisive action after a first use of a nuclear weapon by Russian forces in the Russo-Ukrainian war.*

I believe that the US had no option left: whatever might be said in public is either perceived as an over-reaction or alternatively it is unimpressive. In private communication with the Kremlin, issuing a significant threat may be less problematic, because the other side knows that the US has limited options. The language of promises and threats may yet be insufficiently precise for these sensitive matters. Here is a rephrasing:

- The White House (Jake Sullivan) promises to the public, that it has issued a threat (say $T_{response}$) in private to the Kremlin only.

- The White House (Jake Sullivan) promises to the public that the body of threat $T_{response}$ has the following features:

  (i) the US will act decisively and the action will involve the use of nuclear weapons,

  (ii) said action is expected to be catastrophic for Russia,

- The White House (Jake Sullivan) promises to the public that both aspects of said threat body have been communicated successfully to their counterparts in the Kremlin.

Promise 4.2 was recorded by CNN, and labeled as marking a sobering moment for the world, on its website on Monday September 26 as follows:

> That the United States should be forced to warn Russia publicly, and in more strident terms privately, not to use nuclear weapons is a mark of how dangerous the battle for Ukraine has become – and how much more risky it might get.
>
> The war is in a critical new phase. Kyiv's forces have won victories in the east using billions of dollars in Western-provided arms and Russian President Vladimir Putin has responded by pouring thousands more men onto the frontlines.
>
> Facing increasing political pressure at home, isolation abroad and battlefield humiliations, the Russian leader ratcheted up his nuclear brinkmanship last week in warning that he could use all weapons systems available to him if he considered Russia's territorial integrity under threat.
>
> "If Russia crosses this line, there will be catastrophic consequences for Russia. The United States will respond decisively" Sullivan said on NBC's "Meet the Press." He added that in private channels, the US warning had been more stark but declined to draw red lines in order to keep such contacts open and to avoid "a rhetorical tit-for-tat."

I can only speculate about said meaning of "decisive action". I can imagine a combination of one or more of the following options: (i) US involvement in the war, (ii) destruction with nuclear weapons of all Russian forces in Ukraine, (iii) providing Ukraine with nuclear weapons. (iv) an open CSTO-NATO confrontation.

4.1 A potential rhetorical role for non-nuclear NATO members

It should be acknowledged within NATO, and by the populations of various NATO member states, that Russia can afford to mount a conventional attack on Ukraine without provoking drastic retaliation, even if CSTO principles oppose such attacks on a third party, and even if the UN loudly speaks out against such an invasion. However it ought not be accepted by the populations of various NATO member states that Russia enjoys a comparable freedom of action to use nuclear blackmail against a non-nuclear weapons state.

Claim 4.3. *There is a potential role for non-nuclear NATO members in spelling out the importance of not going nuclear, unless being provoked by either an attack or a nuclear threat, to the Russian population in clear terms. The Russian population, and in fact the population of all CSTO states, may be in need of some form of education on these matters.*

5 Apology: an underestimated option?

Apology is a special case of accusation: a self-accusation. Apology may alternatively be understood as a promise (to acknowledge a certain form of guilt or accountability). Taking blame is often done by formulating an apology.

Promise 5.1. *(Claimed by the Kremlin; Kremlin to Ukraine, public scope, early 2022.) If Ukraine promises never to join NATO and NATO promises never to incorporate Ukraine there will be no hostilities.*

Accusation 5.1. *(Kremlin to NATO, before the invasion; public scope.) NATO has wrongly and deliberately ignored the fact that at the end of the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact (back in 1991) the separation from Ukraine has been carried out on terms that were notably unfavourable for Russia while they knew from Western European history (in particular the Treaty of Versailles after WWI) that such "oversights" may have unforeseen and major consequences.*

The mentioned promise and accusation may not justify the Kremlin's initiation of the third phase of the Russo-Ukrainian war, but it may explain its coming about, a view which allows both sides to take blame, which may be preferable to further escalation.

5.1 A candidate apology

Apologizing has become "fashionable" for enlightened governments. For instance it is becoming mainstream for such governments to apologise for policies involving slavery and the slave trade. At this point one might contemplate hypothetical apologies:

Apology 5.1. *(Hypothetical apology on SU disintegration outcome.) NATO apologises to Kremlin for disrespecting their worries concerning side-effects of the disintegration of the Soviet Union.*

Mutual acceptance of viewpoints and objectives (even when totally unacceptable according to the principles of the accepting side) may serve to prevent nuclear catastrophes. Regrettably wars come with war crimes whether we like it or not, and so do undeclared wars. Ukraine as well as NATO and perhaps the UN must respond to the war crimes that have been committed by the Russian army but must also consider a wider range of issues.

Irredentist sentiments hopeful of regaining parts of Ukraine under Russian control may have become so strong in the Russian Federation that the Kremlin has no other option than to take such sentiments into account and to demonstrate to a part of their own population that they do everything possible to turn the Russo-Ukrainian war into a success.

An apology, possibly including an institutional discharge of war crimes, need not testify an awareness that a mistake was made (as is currently done in connection with slavery), an apology may also result from an acknowledgement that an alternative course of action would have been preferable. I suggest that an apology, if that ever takes place, should be followed with tangible action. Rethinking the status of parts of what has become Ukraine might be included in such actions.

5.2 Concluding remark

The most relevant observation in this opinion is in Claim 4.2. Russia, a traditional nuclear-weapons state, admits and openly proclaims that it may use nuclear weapons against a non-nuclear weapons state. This state of affairs suffices to convince all states without well-organised nuclear weapons strength protection to strive for such protection. For a number of states the simplest way out will be to acquire nuclear weapons.

This paper was essentially written on September 25, 26, 27. However, already one week later the situation had changed in a significant manner: on 30 September 2022, Russia, amid an ongoing invasion of Ukraine, unilaterally declared its annexation of areas in and around four Ukrainian oblasts – Luhansk, Donetsk, Zaporizhzhia and Kherson. Western observers generally understand these annexations as acts of aggression, however, a different perspective may be contemplated. It might just be the case that the current Russian leadership maintains the self-image of being doves rather than of being hawks. In that case the (hypothetical?) Russian hawks might be in favour of the use of so-called tactical nuclear weapons inside Ukraine. However, the annexations have all of a sudden created the situation that all battlefields are located on Russian territory, and even the hawks must and will accept that using tactical nuclear weapons on Russian territory is highly problematic, if not prohibitive. By consequence the internal pressure towards the use of tactical nuclear weapons would have been successfully neutralised by said annexations, a state of affairs which both Ukraine and NATO might in fact perceive as reassuring.

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