

# The Rise of Nationalist Populist Leaders and Nuclear Order

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**ABSTRACT:** The purpose of this paper is to examine the impact of the rise of nationalist-populist leaders in nuclear-armed states on the nuclear order and whether they may enhance the probability of nuclear war. Trump and Putin will serve as case examples in this paper, as the United States and Russia are the world's two most powerful nuclear-armed states. Trump is an illustration of how social media may affect nuclear order. His comments on social media about nuclear weapons are unreliable and do not reflect the national attitude. Putin used nuclear threats to legitimise his leadership and protect Russia's position as a powerful nation, rather than to prepare for an actual nuclear war, according to an analysis of his actions. Thus, this essay argues that nationalist populists may weaken nuclear order but may not raise the risk of trigger a nuclear war. Misperceptions among governments could be the direct cause of the danger of nuclear war rather than the rise of nationalist populist leaders.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Nationalist populist leaders usually have a different manner when compared to traditional leaders, as they might be more aggressive and unpredictable. There is little research focused on the rise of nationalist populist leaders and following possible impacts on the nuclear order.

This paper is going to begin with a theoretical framework which will present several essential terms in this essay. This will include a brief explanation of the concept of nuclear order. After that, this essay will base on the work of Olive and Maren [1] to describe characteristics of nationalist populists. The instances of Russia under Putin's control and the United States under Trump's rule will be used to illustrate, in a critical manner, that nationalist populists do destabilise the nuclear order. This will be done using cases of Russia and the United States. Both Trump and Putin breach nuclear orders and make regular use of nuclear deterrence, although they do so in very various manner.

## 2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### 2.1 Definition of nuclear order

It is mentioned by Knopf [2] that the entire nuclear order was not legally stipulated; its existence and form are subject to interpretation. Analysts determine the parameters of the order from the history of agreements reached, institutions established, and the decisions, actions, and pronouncements of key states and their leaders. In particular, Walker [3] asserts that the existing order of the global nuclear system does neither favour the unconstrained pursuit of strategic supremacy or a speedy

transition to elimination of nuclear weapons. It aims to achieve a balance between the competing objectives of nuclear disarmament and nuclear deterrence.

### 2.2 Features of nationalist-populist leaders

Olive and Maren [1] summarizes certain political features of nationalist populists, which including "Polarization, Romanticizing of the historical past, Personalistic leadership, National sovereignty and Iconoclasm". Besides, Olive and Maren [1] demonstrates several leaders who shares the features of nationalist populists, including Boris Johnson of UK, Donald Trump of the US, and Vladimir Putin of Russia.

Nationalist populists typically speak differently than conventional politicians. According to Block and Negrine [4], populists' specific kind of language includes combative, emotional, nationalistic, and confrontational discourse through which they engage with the dissatisfied frequently through grassroots, community-oriented, communicative practices and spaces. As a result, nationalist-populist speeches and announcements are more likely to be geared toward delighting home audiences, garnering their favour and votes, and therefore sustaining their political power. According to Olive and Maren's [1] analysis, the above-mentioned type of discourse that is utilised by nationalist populists may be referred to as "loose talks," and it is typically carried out through social media.

As Olive and Maren [1] pointed out, the release of nuclear policies is not likely to take place until after a drawn-out and careful procedure has been carried out by governments. This is one of the elements that goes into maintaining nuclear order. When it comes to addressing nuclear arsenals and nuclear strategy, for instance, heads of state or government frequently rely on words that have

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been painstakingly drafted and extensively scrutinised. As Freedman [5] points out, the effectiveness of nuclear deterrence is typically only demonstrated when governments are confronted with threats to their very existence, and only after a stringent government consensus has been reached. In addition, Rebecca [6] noticed that everything a politician says on social media platforms regarding a certain topic is quickly understood as the nation's viewpoint and given a feeling of authority. This is the case regardless of the context in which the politician makes the statement. In spite of this, given what has been said about the unique linguistic style used by nationalist populists, it will be difficult to comprehend the underlying meanings of nationalist populist discourses because of what has been said about this language style. This is owing to the fact that these discourses would be less likely to be the result of a thorough procedure, and they also violate the norm on when countries should display their nuclear deterrence. As a direct result of this, misunderstandings are likely to take place, which has the potential to heighten tensions between governments and may even increase the likelihood of nuclear strikes.

Using Trump and Putin as case studies, this paper will examine how nationalist populists undermine nuclear order and if they are likely to further increase the likelihood of nuclear wars. Since the United States and Russia are the two countries with the biggest nuclear arsenals and they both led by nationalist populist leaders.

### **3. CASE STUDY: DONALD TRUMP AND TWITTER**

#### **3.1 social media and nuclear order**

Twitter will be used as an illustration of how nationalist populists' 'loose talks' may undermine the nuclear order. Engesser, Fawzi, and Larsson [7] note that Twitter is one of nationalist populists' most prevalent communication channels. Thus, Twitter will serve as the focal point of a discussion on how nationalist populists disrupt the nuclear order.

According to Williams and Drew [8], communications designed to convey emotions, soft power, and determination will be received differently based on the targeted audience. A message that is directed toward a certain demographic by nationalist populists will not just reach that group, but it is also possible that the message may reach a larger audience, including foreign politicians who may interpret the tweet in a completely different manner. This is because nationalist populists are more prone to employ rhetoric to impress domestic audiences than to improve the clarity of their messages. Though Williams and Drew [8] also mentions that Twitter might be employed to immediately communicate information, which could serve to reduce tensions and create trust if the target audience is foreign politicians. Nationalist populists are unlikely to operate in this way, however, as their objective is to develop their charisma as powerful leaders via adversarial discourses, which could be used to strengthen their citizen-based domestic power. According

to the above scenario, when nuclear weapons are casually discussed on Twitter or other social media platforms, misperceptions may result. Because nationalist populist leaders' words are hostile and unreliable, the nuclear order is likely to worsen.

#### **3.2 evaluation of Trump's case**

In this section of the essay, the claim that nationalist populists might destabilise the nuclear order through their "loose language" will be reinforced by Donald Trump's Twitter discourses on nuclear weapons. As previously said, Twitter gives President Trump with a quick and simple means to interact with the American public, and it also allows him to demonstrate his determination to enemies at times of crisis. Trump's tweets that are exclusive to American audiences result in misreading of tweets. This may contribute to the underlying prejudices or worries of viewers from other nations. Even though the majority of individuals living outside the United States do not use Twitter, foreign governments are increasingly resorting to the site to acquire insight into the United States' decision-making process, express their signals, and create global narratives about the United States. President Trump tweeted the following on July 3, 2017, after North Korea conducted a nuclear missile test: North Korea has just launched another missile. Does this individual have nothing else worthwhile to do with their life? [9]. According to Chhabra [10], in reaction to a tweet from Trump, Kim Jong Un reaffirmed his nuclear weapons and said that the United States is within North Korea's capabilities to launch nuclear assaults. In spite of this, President Trump continues to engage in bellicose behaviour on Twitter, warning Kim that he, too, had a Nuclear Button, although one that is much bigger and more powerful than his, and that it functions.

As shown in his prior tweets, Trump, as the nationalist populist leader of a powerful nuclear-armed state, demonstrated nuclear deterrence aggressively on Twitter as a demonstration of his strong leadership and the nuclear strength of the United States. Due to the fact that nationalist populist leaders speak aggressively and irresponsibly on Twitter without realising the gravity of their discourses and the subsequent effects their tweets may have when read by various audiences, a future situation similar to the one described above may lead to an escalation of conflict in a delicate setting. According to Özdan [11], instead of healing relationships, bridging gaps, and building trust between counterparts, irresponsible Twitter conversations lead to misunderstandings and foster mistrust, intensifying conflict needlessly. In the background of debates about nuclear weapons, nationalist populists such as Trump engage in 'loose talks' that violates the rules of employing nuclear deterrent deliberately, so undermining nuclear order. Consequently, nuclear-armed governments are prone to develop tensions, which may lead to the escalation of hostilities. Consequently, misperceptions are more likely to occur, and nuclear warfare may become more plausible.

Although it is clear how the 'loose talks' from nationalist populist leaders could weaken the nuclear order,

the risk of nuclear wars is unlikely to increase. Pain and Chen [12] studied Trump's Twitter views, revealing that he used Twitter to convey his feelings and communicate with his followers regularly. This indicates that Trump's rhetoric on Twitter is unlikely to represent the US's position on key political matters, such as the nuclear situation with North Korea. Trump, despite his harsh tweets and speeches about nuclear weapons, is more likely to be a sensible individual who understands the result of mutually assured destruction that may be caused by nuclear warfare. It is unlikely that Donald Trump will start a nuclear war with his distinctive nationalist discourses, as Michaels and Williams [13] point out. Trump himself admits that he has always thought about the issue of nuclear war, and he has stated that nuclear war is a "very important element" that must be considered.

## **4. CASE STUDY: PUTIN AND UKRAINE CRISIS**

### **4.1 Ongoing Ukraine crisis and the condition of Russia**

Since the outbreak of the Ukraine crisis on February 24, 2022, Putin's Russia has been showcasing its nuclear might as a deterrent to the EU and the United States. Carpenter [14] explored the reasons why Russia demonstrates its nuclear capability. Putin's position in domestic matters has been strengthened by the display of Russia's nuclear military might. It is possible that this strategy may appeal to the growing nationalism in Russia and divert public attention away from the country's deteriorating economic situation. According to Kazharski [15], in the context of the existing crisis in Ukraine, nuclear power is being demonstrated both for strategic imperatives and with a greater emphasis on Russia's domestic interest in resolving its ontological insecurity as a powerful state in conflicts. This is being mentioned in light of the fact that nuclear weapons are currently being shown in the context of the situation that is occurring in Ukraine. It is reasonable for Putin to demonstrate Russian nuclear power in light of the country's lacklustre performance in the Ukraine conflict. It is likely that Putin's goal is to lessen the impact that the Ukraine conflict will have on Russia's ontological security as a superpower. In contrast to the declarations made by other nationalist and populist politicians, such as Trump, who use social media, Putin's pronouncements are almost always delivered in a formal manner. According to the declaration made by Putin [16], for example, Putin has given the order to the defence minister as well as the chief of the general staff of the Russian armed forces to put the deterrent forces of the Russian army into a special mode of combat duty. It is essential to take into consideration that Putin has included nuclear power in his list of deterrent forces.

As described by Olive and Maren [1], nationalist populist leaders typically attempt to win legitimacy from persuaded citizens by representing their capacity to resolve rising concerns through radical actions. Putin, as a nationalist populist, attempts to persuade Russian citizens

that he is conscious of the deteriorating condition and is eager to show that only his authoritative leadership can address it. Putin believes that the primary obstacle to Russia since the end of the Cold War has not been the expansion of NATO, but rather the Color Revolutions that have occurred on Russia's borders [17]. The top priority for Putin is maintaining the support of his domestic power base. In order to guarantee that their domestic power is not challenged, Putin deliberately seek to dismantle democratic institutions, notably the opposition and free journalists [18]. As a consequence, Putin weakens Russian democracy and becomes the single authoritarian decision-maker in Russia. In the absence of his political opponents' voices, Putin's policies and actions towards nuclear weapons might be more extreme, given that he is a nationalist populist. This threatens the nuclear order by undermining the complex political debate required to consider disarmament and the deployment of nuclear deterrence.

### **4.2 Evaluation of Putin's case**

Putin's recurrent use of nuclear deterrence throughout the Ukraine crisis has weakened the nuclear norm, similar to the manner in which nationalist populists discuss nuclear weapons on social media. Putin desires to demonstrate his strong leadership throughout the ongoing Ukraine conflict and reestablish Russia's status as an influential state in front of the domestic audience, who offer political legitimacy and support to Putin to stay in power. As a result, the nuclear order is weakened due to Putin's radical actions, which, from the perspective of other national leaders who adhere to the nuclear order, indicate a high probability of nuclear war.

However, in this circumstance of repeated use of nuclear deterrence by Putin throughout the continuing conflict in Ukraine, the chance of igniting a nuclear war may remain low, it is still possible. Putin is clearly aware that a nuclear war is unwinnable and should never be undertaken [19]. According to a research published by the Atlantic Council [20] in 2022, nuclear weapons has not yet been deployed by Putin. It is concerned that Putin might deploy nuclear weapons to end the Ukraine conflict and retain his status as Russia's most powerful leader. This paper argues that even in the above situation that Putin might face his failure in Ukraine, he is still unlikely to use nuclear weapons. This is because Putin calls the Russian invasion in Ukraine as 'a special military operation' that aims to denazify Ukraine [21]. The employment of nuclear weapons in Ukraine is very likely to cause mass destruction and unnecessary civilian casualties. Consequently, Putin's legitimacy and internal popularity are likely to suffer, which is unacceptable for a nationalist populist like Putin.

Another point that may explain why Putin applies nuclear deterrence frequently but is unlikely to launch a nuclear attack is that Putin tries to use nuclear blackmail to prevent Western governments from providing military and financial assistance to Ukraine as mentioned by Gretskiy [22]. Because the leaders of the United States and NATO are aware that Vladimir Putin's goal is not to start

a nuclear war, their responses have been calm and controlled, and they have avoided a lethal escalation spiral thus far. The reason for this is that the heads of these nations are aware that Putin's objective is to avoid them from becoming embroiled in the Ukraine conflict. Nationalist populists are more likely to mention nuclear weapons for their domestic goals than to declare nuclear war as the consequence of meticulous and reasonable procedures. Therefore, it appears that governments should avoid escalation despite nationalist populists weakening nuclear order. This is due to the fact that nationalist populists are more prone to bring up nuclear weapons in defence of their domestic interests. As a consequence of this, the likelihood of nuclear wars occurring is still rather low due to the fact that nationalist and populist governments are unlikely to violate the nuclear taboo and use nuclear weapons.

## 5. CONCLUSION

From what has been discussed above, it is clear that nationalist populist leaders of nuclear-armed states could undermine the nuclear order. However, it is also shown that despite the nuclear order being destabilized, nationalist populist leaders are unlikely to truly provoke a nuclear war.

In the case of Trump, nationalist-populist leaders' discourses, especially posed on social media platforms, could not represent the national view. As nationalist populist leaders are rational and they wish to use aggressive discourses to gain domestic support.

The nuclear order was undermined by Moscow's aggressive nuclear rhetoric, primarily motivated by domestic political considerations. During the crisis in Ukraine, this helped Putin achieve his aims of legitimising his power and establishing internal cohesiveness. The Russian government continues to consider nuclear weapons to be defensive tools rather than aggressive ones. It has been shown that the actions leading up to these events are the direct consequence of the attempts made by the Putin administration to strengthen its hold on the domestic political system. These developments do not suggest that Russia presents a direct nuclear threat to NATO or any other countries right now. Under these circumstances, the danger is transformed into the possibility for an accidental escalation due to misperceptions or misunderstandings, which is an issue that may be solved through diplomatic channels between states.

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