

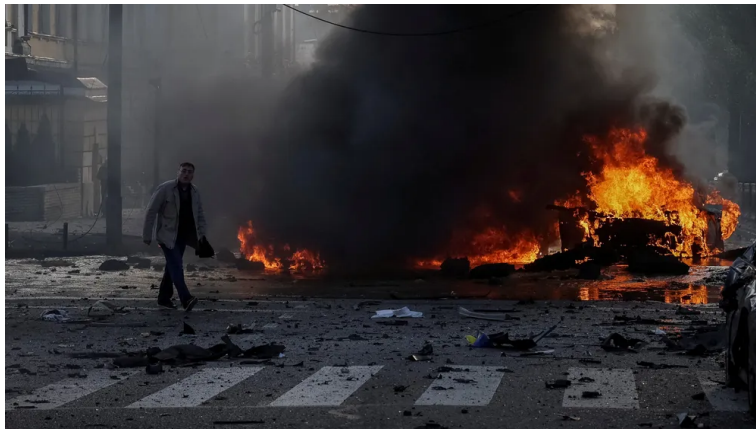
Jeremy Shapiro

"Being on the right side does not prevent a nuclear catastrophe"

The spiral of escalation in the Ukraine war must to be broken, says Jeremy Shapiro. The foreign policy expert sees only one way forward: negotiations with Vladimir Putin.

Interview: **Marcus Gatzke**

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Russia has been attacking the whole Ukraine with missiles again for days. Civilian infrastructure is one of the main targets. © Gleb Garanich/Reuters

Jeremy Shapiro is research director at the European Council on Foreign Relations. Previously, he served as a member of the U.S. State Department's policy planning staff and director of research at the Center on the United States and Europe at the Brookings Institution.

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ZEIT ONLINE: Mr. Shapiro, in a recent essay, [<https://warontherocks.com/2022/10/the-end-of-the-world-is-nigh/>] you wrote that the West and Russia are caught in a cycle of escalation. If the world continues on that path, a nuclear confrontation seems inevitable to you. Why?



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Jeremy Shapiro: It's not inevitable. But there's a very strong possibility that a nuclear confrontation will happen unless we break out of the current path. The reason is quite simple: Both sides have decided that they cannot lose, that their existential values are at stake and they have proven themselves willing to escalate continually.

ZEIT ONLINE: The West is supporting a country that Russia has invaded and against which it is waging a brutal war of aggression. The West has never threatened to use nuclear weapons. They're providing Ukraine with the possibility of self-defense. Is that escalating the war?

Shapiro: Yes, Russia is waging a criminal war of aggression against Ukraine. And the West must put a stop to it and help Ukraine defend itself against the aggressor. The question of escalation, however, is completely detached from the question of right or wrong or the justice of war.

ZEIT ONLINE: In some sense, then, the conflict is comparable to a game of chicken?

Shapiro: Yes, you could say that. The West's argument in this war is primarily about values and morals. And that is absolutely right for the time being. But being on the right side does not prevent a nuclear catastrophe. There's an old *New Yorker* cartoon where two angels are floating up above the car wreck, and one of them is yelling at the other: "But I had the right of way."

ZEIT ONLINE: Can you explain what the further escalation will look like in the coming months?

»At the moment, the Russians are not on the verge of losing. However, they are on their way there.

«

—*Jeremy Shapiro*

Shapiro: All such scenarios begin with the idea that the Russian side is facing defeat and is becoming ever more desperate because it recognizes that defeat would be an existential threat to its regime and to the lives and livelihoods of the leaders of that regime. When they're faced with the option of surrender or appeasement, the Russian regime might decide to launch a tactical nuclear strike against a target within Ukraine, either a city or a troops formation. The thought behind it: By crossing the nuclear taboo, we will frighten the West such that they will decide that they must back down. They will see that we are willing to use the most dangerous weapons, and then they'll compromise on our terms.

ZEIT ONLINE: Russia has repeatedly threatened with a nuclear escalation. In the end, though, all the red lines were pretty pink.

Shapiro: I do not believe that the conditions under which Russia threatens to use nuclear weapons are the conditions under which it will use them. At the moment, the Russians are not on the verge of losing. However, they are on their way there. But until then, they still have many more people to conscript. And they have many more terrible weapons to throw at Ukraine short of nuclear weapons. The use of nuclear weapons is a kind of desperate act. One is in such a hopeless situation that one dares to take a very risky step. It is what is sometimes referred to in the literature as gambling for resurrection.

ZEIT ONLINE: Wouldn't a step like that turn Russia into an international pariah once and for all? Even China and India would turn away from Moscow.

Shapiro: I'm not so sure about that. For sure the Chinese wouldn't want to see this happen. But in the end, they are also too invested in the Russians to allow them to collapse and to become a tool to the West. That's why I think they will continue to stay on the sidelines. Apart from that, they can't do that much. They have no direct levers to stop the Russians.

ZEIT ONLINE: ... they could participate in the West's sanctions, putting even more pressure on Russia.

Shapiro: This is very unlikely. It's not the nature of their foreign policy approach. They've never sanctioned anybody. During this war, we've had a persistent desire and hope to think that third countries like China, India and South Africa will see this war in the same moral terms that we do. And they have consistently not done so. And frankly, even if they did, I'm not sure how it would affect these dynamics.

"That's exactly how we won the Cold War"

ZEIT ONLINE: Let us assume Russia uses a tactical nuclear weapon. The West's response would be purely conventional.

Shapiro: That's right. It would be a difficult situation for the West, particularly for the U.S. administration. The answer won't be nuclear, but at the same time, the U.S. must demonstrate that the nuclear taboo cannot be crossed unpunished. They must show that there is a steep cost for doing so, but at the same time send a signal to the Russians that they are not trying to escalate the war into a direct confrontation. That's a very tricky line to walk.

ZEIT ONLINE: They would target mainly Russian ground forces in Ukraine?

Shapiro: Yes, probably. But this would again significantly worsen the Russian military situation and thus contribute to a further escalation of the conflict.

ZEIT ONLINE: You've worked at the U.S. State Department before. What advice would you give to the current U.S. government?

»We must break the spiral of escalation«

—*Jeremy Shapiro*

Shapiro: At point of having to respond to a Russian nuclear attack, you're in a real, almost impossible dilemma. My very strong advice to the American administration is: Don't get yourself in that dilemma because it's a situation in which there is no rational way out besides going further down the escalatory cycle. And that's precisely what I'm worried about. We must break the spiral of escalation.

ZEIT ONLINE: But wouldn't that mean that Vladimir Putin can successfully blackmail us with nuclear weapons?

Shapiro: Maybe. But at some point, there must be a degree of compromise between Russia and Ukraine and between Russia and the West if we are to avoid the worst. Better now than later. Nuclear blackmail, unfortunately, exists, if you look at the situations with Iran or North Korea, for example. The outcome of the war in Ukraine won't change that.

ZEIT ONLINE: What might such a compromise look like? Ukraine has to give up 20 percent of its territory?

Shapiro: I can't say exactly what that would look like, but the compromise would in no way involve Ukraine giving up parts of its territory. It would be more like a Korean or East German solution, where the Russians retain de facto control over certain parts of the country but Ukraine and the West never recognize that control.

ZEIT ONLINE: What do you mean by that?

Shapiro: These territories would remain part of Ukraine. Eventually they will return to Ukraine, just as East Germany became part of Germany again. Because the Russians will not be able to control or develop these areas. The people there want to be part of Ukraine. That would also be the better way to win this war in the long run. That's exactly how we won the Cold War.

ZEIT ONLINE: But Russia could then still claim to have won.

Shapiro: In March and April, the Ukrainians were negotiating with the Russians along the lines that I just described. Ukraine had offered neutrality. And they basically said that you can keep some de facto control of some parts of Ukrainian territory. The exact line wasn't defined, maybe on the frontline before February 24. Ukraine proposed to promote not to resolve the Crimean situation by force for several years. But the Russians wouldn't accept that.

"Vladimir Putin will always claim victory"

ZEIT ONLINE: ... because they believed that they were still on the offensive. Such an agreement today would be like a victory for Vladimir Putin. Part of the country would remain Russian indefinitely.

Shapiro: Vladimir Putin will always claim victory. The question is whether it will make any sense to anybody. If we reach the type of compromise that we're talking about, no one, including the Chinese and the Indians and the North Koreans, would look at this and say, he did well here. Putin has lost most of his army. He has roiled his country. He has cut it off from the international economy. He has wiped out 30 years of development. Russia paid an enormous price for this war.

ZEIT ONLINE: By annexing the four Ukrainian regions, Putin has now narrowed his room for maneuver. What can he still offer in negotiations? He hardly has any negotiating leverage left.

»This war has shown us how weak Russia really is«

—*Jeremy Shapiro*

Shapiro: The Russian regime is on the defensive and this is an advantage. But there is a tragedy to these kinds of wars. We are constantly saying to ourselves, we need to negotiate from a position of strength. But when we reach a position of strength, we say to ourselves, we don't need to negotiate.

ZEIT ONLINE: Is Putin a trustworthy negotiating partner at all?

Shapiro: Of course, he is not trustworthy. The point of international negotiations is not to trust each other. If we trusted each other, we probably wouldn't need the negotiation. The point of the negotiations is to reach an agreement that both sides have an incentive to follow because it's in their best interest given the current situation. This would not resolve the conflict once and for all. But if we sit around waiting until we can trust the Russian leader, we're probably going to wait beyond the end of the world.

ZEIT ONLINE: Who's to say he won't try to completely subjugate Ukraine again in a few years?

Shapiro: That is possible. But that is still a better prospect than destroying the whole world. This war has shown us how weak Russia really is. And a lot of the measures put into place will weaken them long into the future. They have irrevocably lost the gas revenue from Europe and other parts of the West. They're going to be vastly poorer. The export controls mean that they will have much less access to technology.

ZEIT ONLINE: Some people hope that at a certain point, change will come from within Russia. Putin's position has already been weakened.

Shapiro: Be careful what you wish for. It is far from certain that a solution to the conflict would be easier without Putin. In the end, the chaos could be much worse.