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The war in Ukraine just became even more toxic and lethal: the UK supply of 'depleted uranium' ammunition to Ukraine and Russia's 'nuclear sharing' with Belarus

Britain's announcement that it will supply Ukraine with armour-piercing tank shells made with depleted uranium and Russia's proposed stationing of nuclear weapons in Belarus represent dangerous and irresponsible escalations of the war in Ukraine. Diplomatic efforts need to be applied to reverse both decisions, and to bring Russia and Ukraine to the negotiating table to end the war.

The Russian decision

On 25 March Russian President Vladimir Putin announced that Moscow would station tactical nuclear weapons on Belarusian territory (and three days later the Belarus Foreign Ministry confirmed it would host them). Russia has been threatening to do this for several months. Although President Putin suggested that the move would not breach non-proliferation agreements, it clearly will since Articles 1 and 2 of the 1968 Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) prohibit all transfers of nuclear weapons between states. Putin also suggested that it was consistent with similar arrangements that the US has with several of its European allies. While this may be true, those agreements also breach the spirit of the NPT, despite the denials from NATO officials.

NATO spokeswoman Oana Lungescu said on 26 March: "Russia's nuclear rhetoric is dangerous and irresponsible. NATO is vigilant and we are closely monitoring the situation. We have not seen any changes in Russia's nuclear posture that would lead us to adjust our own". These words echoed those of a US administration official who said, "We have not seen any reason to adjust our own strategic nuclear posture nor any indications Russia is preparing to use a nuclear weapon". Lungescu added in her statement a general unreferenced condemnation of Russia's record, "Russia's reference to NATO's nuclear sharing is totally misleading. NATO allies act with full respect of their international commitments. Russia has consistently broken its arms control commitments".

While this is true for Russia, it is equally true for the United States, which unilaterally withdrew from the ABM Treaty in 2001, the Iran nuclear deal in 2018, the Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty in 2019 and the Open Skies Treaty in 2020. In the latter two cases US officials cited concerns over Russian compliance with and implementation of the treaties as grounds for the US withdrawal. However, there was significant domestic and international pressure for the United States to remain party to the accords and to raise their concerns in mechanisms set up by those treaties. Moreover, all the nuclear armed states, including the three NATO member states (United States, the UK and France), are modernising their nuclear weapon programmes in flagrant breach of the disarmament commitments within the 1968 Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT).

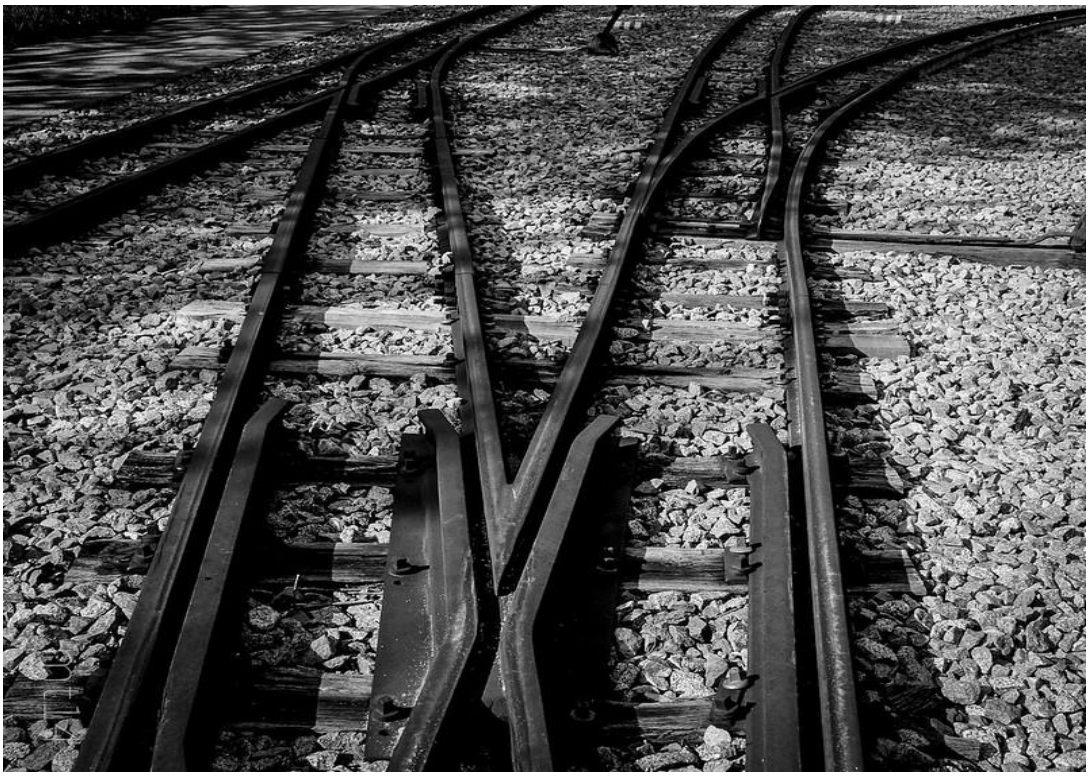
In addition, under the US nuclear-sharing arrangements with five of its allies—Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium, Italy and Turkey—the US stores about 100 B61 gravity bombs in

those countries and their aircrews are trained to fly planes carrying them in the event of nuclear war. Russia has previously argued that this is a violation of the NPT. NATO and member government officials have always argued, however, that these arrangements were "fully consistent and compliant"' with the NPT and "seamlessly integrated" into it (largely on the grounds that they predate the treaty and because the stored weapons are not formally transferred to the host government until a war begins). For most non-nuclear weapon states and arms control advocates, however, that is a contemptuous sleight of hand that runs "against the letter and the spirit of the NPT" (see, for example, the statement by Malaysia at the NPT 10th Review Conference in August 2022).

Putin has repeatedly made nuclear threats or escalatory nuclear rhetoric since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, but this is the first time he has announced a plan to station nuclear weapons in another country. Four days earlier, Putin had threatened a response to Britain's announcement that it would supply Ukraine with armour-piercing tank shells made with depleted uranium. Putin mentioned the shells again in his remarks on 25 March, but his justification mainly rested on the NATO nuclear sharing arrangements: "the United States has been doing this for decades…. We agreed that we will do the same…. without violating our international obligations on the non-proliferation of nuclear weapons".

The Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko staged a referendum in February 2022, revoking Belarus's non-nuclear zone status, but the opposition rejected the vote as meaningless under conditions of political repression and following the rigged 2020 presidential election. "Russia's deployment of tactical nuclear weapons in Belarus directly violates the constitution of Belarus and grossly contradicts the will of the Belarusian people to assume the non-nuclear state status expressed in the Declaration of State Sovereignty of Belarus of 1990,", the country's opposition leader in exile, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, said.

The International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons called Putin's announcement an extremely dangerous escalation. "In the context of the war in Ukraine, the likelihood of miscalculation or misinterpretation is extremely high. Sharing nuclear weapons makes the situation much worse and risks catastrophic humanitarian consequences," it said on Twitter.



President Putin has already shown that statements and actual deployment are two different things. Veteran observer of nuclear weapons, Hans Kristensen of the Federation of American Scientists, expresses scepticism that Russia will be in a position to physically deploy these weapons to Belaras at any time in the near future. It may be that this will be a bargaining chip for future negotiations, but making the announcement, and worse following through, normalises the practice of nuclear sharing and reduces the pressures for change.

The British decision

The UK acknowledged (in response to a written parliamentary question) on 20 March that it will send "armour piercing rounds which contain depleted uranium" to Ukraine, for use with the 14 Challenger 2 main battle tanks donated by the British army. Defence minister Baroness Goldie said: "Such rounds are highly effective in defeating modern tanks and armoured vehicles". The UK is the first country to openly send the controversial shells to Ukraine. Although Washington refused in January to say whether it plans to provide Kyiv with the ammunition, the US has pledged at least one type of armoured vehicle that is known to use such weapons.

As noted above, on the 21 March Russian President Vladimir Putin threatened to "respond accordingly" while his defence minister Sergei Shoigu said it put the world "fewer and fewer" steps away from "nuclear collision".

The UK Ministry of Defence responded by accusing Russia of "deliberately trying to disinform". Depleted uranium "has nothing to do with nuclear weapons and capabilities", the statement said, adding it was "a standard component" used by militaries including Russia itself. However, while such shells are designated as conventional rather than nuclear weapons, they are by no means a "standard component", given that they are toxic enough to require special handling and pose an environmental threat having been linked to cancer and birth defects among civilian and soldiers alike.

Similar munitions were used by the UK and the US in the Iraq and Gulf wars in 1991 and 2003, and in Kosovo in 1999. The United States has also reportedly deployed them in Syria against the Islamic State. Russia also has depleted uranium ammunition, but it remains unclear if it has been used in Ukraine. The UN General Assembly ordered a review into the health effects of depleted uranium weapons in 2007, and international bodies have carried out several further reviews. The United Nations Scientific Committee on the Effects of Atomic Radiation (UNSCEAR) found no significant poisoning was caused by exposure to depleted uranium. Similarly, an overview by the International Atomic Energy Agency says there is a "lack of evidence for a definite cancer risk in studies over many decades", while a 2001 Royal Society study concluded the most significant cancer risk was faced by soldiers in a tank who survived it being hit by a depleted uranium munition.

Other reports, however, raise more significant concerns. A 2001 study by the World Health Organization concluded that "in some instances the levels of contamination in food and groundwater could rise after some years" and should be monitored, and recommends clean-up actions be taken where "depleted uranium contamination levels are deemed unacceptable by qualified experts". A study published in the journal Environmental Pollution in 2019 suggested there may be links between the use of depleted uranium weapons and birth defects in Nasiriyah, in Iraq, while a recent review of studies in BMJ Global Health highlighted "possible associations" of long-term health problems among Iraqis linked to depleted uranium use on the battlefield. A 2022 UN Environment Programme (UNEP) report said it was concerned about possible depleted uranium use in Ukraine, warning it can cause "skin irritation, kidney failure and increase the risks of cancer".

Although the depleted uranium shells the UK is sending to Ukraine are not prohibited by any current international agreement, the UN

Secretary General's deputy spokesman, Farhan Haq, told a press conference on 21 March of "the concerns we've expressed over the years about any use of depleted uranium, given the consequences of such usage, and those would apply to anyone who provides such armaments". Haq added: "We have made clear including through our Office of Disarmament Affairs concerns about any use of depleted uranium anywhere".

In addition, a global coalition of 160 groups in 33 countries, the International Coalition to Ban Uranium Weapons (ICBUW), has been advocating for a global ban on the weapons and has prepared a draft Convention for a such a ban. So far, however, a measure of consensus has only been obtained in a regular UN General Assembly (UNGA) resolution on the issue. The resolution, A/77/49, 'Effects of the use of armaments and ammunitions containing depleted uranium', while not calling for a global ban, places the emphasis on the importance of transparency and cooperation among states and calls on states to share information and best practices in order to better understand the health and environmental impacts of depleted uranium weapons. The UNGA adopted the latest iteration of the resolution by a recorded vote of 145 in favour to 5 against (France, Israel, Liberia, United Kingdom, United States), with 23 abstentions, on 7 December 2022. Although the vast majority of countries continue to express their concerns regarding depleted uranium weapons, the UK, Israel, France and the United States have consistently voted against the resolution, while other NATO states have abstained.

What should happen next?

Both these decisions, whether or not connected, represent political and technical escalation and are dangerous, even if their direct threat may be ambiguous. The use of depleted uranium ammunition in Ukraine will only increase the environmental damage and long-term suffering of the civilians caught up in the conflict. Rather than supplying these dangerous munitions into a scorched earth battlefield, the UK should place an immediate moratorium on the transfer and use of depleted uranium weapons and work towards their ban. Similarly, Russia should reconsider its decision to 'share' nuclear weapons with Belarus and instead redouble its efforts to hold NATO's feet to the fire on its nuclear sharing practices that undermine non-proliferation. It should also take up China's tacit offer to mediate a ceasefire in the war. As part of post-war security arrangements, Russian and NATO need to address the issue of tactical nuclear weapons in Europe within a broader discussion around European security in a manner that respects everyone's need for security.