

# Biden sends a careful but chilling new nuclear message to Putin in CNN interview

Analysis by Stephen Collinson, CNN

Updated 6:57 AM EDT, Wed October 12, 2022

## **CNN —**

It's never going to feel normal to hear a president discussing the danger of "Armageddon" – especially now, on camera.

But Joe Biden used an exclusive CNN interview on Tuesday to send another careful, yet clear and chilling message to Russian President Vladimir Putin about the disastrous consequences of using nuclear weapons in the war in Ukraine.

The first president since the 1980s to really have to game out calculations about nuclear arsenals and deterrence, Biden was asked by Jake Tapper whether he thought that Putin – who has warned he is prepared to use every option in Russia's arsenal – might consider detonating one of the world's most heinous weapons as an act of desperation in a losing war.

Biden replied: "I don't think he will."



Biden says Putin 'totally miscalculated' by invading Ukraine but is a 'rational actor'

But the President, who first touched on this subject at an off-camera fundraiser in New York last week, made crystal clear he was sending a public message to Putin about the dangers of thinking that using a lower yield, tactical nuclear bomb would be an isolated event.

"What I am talking about, I am talking to Putin. He, in fact, cannot continue with impunity to talk about the use of a tactical nuclear weapon as if that's a rational thing to do," Biden said, before warning of dangerous consequences of such a move.

“The mistakes get made, the miscalculation could occur, no one could be sure what would happen and it could end in Armageddon,” he said, again stressing that a nuclear blast that kills thousands of people could lead to events barreling way out of control.

#### The danger of escalation

Biden is stating the fear of some strategists who warn about a ladder of escalation that could occur if a nuclear bomb is used and triggers reprisals by the West – even though any initial US response would certainly go no further than conventional military action.

He also appears to be trying to create a narrative of deterrence around the specific situation in Ukraine. The logic of the US and Russia’s long-range strategic nuclear arsenals is that the use of them is deterred because a conflict would be suicidal for both sides. That equation does not exist in Ukraine, since the country has no nuclear arsenal and it’s hard to conclude that it represents a vital national interest that would lead Washington to respond in kind to Putin going nuclear. By stressing that even a tactical device – which could be small enough to destroy an airbase or large enough to reduce a city to ruins – could lead to something worse, Biden seems to be almost seeking to create a new chain of calculations in Putin’s mind.



#### Biden confronted with Ukraine war escalation less than a month before the midterm elections

Two moments in Tapper’s interview brought home the burden now borne by the man who is followed everywhere he goes by a military officer carrying the nation’s nuclear codes.

First the CNN anchor asked the President to state the US red line for the US and NATO in Ukraine and what Washington would do if Putin bombed a nuclear plant in Ukraine or set off a tactical nuclear weapon.

“It would be irresponsible for me to talk about what we would or wouldn’t do,” Biden said.

Then, Tapper prodded the President over whether the Pentagon had gamed out scenarios. Biden soberly replied: “The Pentagon didn’t have to be asked.”

## Video Ad Feedback

15:20 - Source: [CNN](#)

Watch the full exclusive interview with President Joe Biden

Expert: nuclear use in Ukraine still 'not a probable event'

Most experts and strategists estimate that there are many reasons why Putin would stop short of using a nuclear weapon – among them the possible risk of radioactive fallout crossing into Russia or the fact that the use of a tactical nuclear weapon may not actually be a sensible strategic option in the war.

But the fact he's pushed himself into a corner, along with his obliviousness to civilian loss of life underscored again by his callous assaults on Ukrainian cities this week, suggests that a humanitarian impulse is unlikely to be part of his calculation. And Biden himself said in the interview that while he believed Putin was a "rational actor," he had made significant miscalculations and his objectives were not rational. That leaves open the possibility of even more decisions that appear irrational to the West but may seem reasonable in Putin's warped logic.



Putin's rage against civilians may herald a brutal new phase in the war

That is why Biden and experts who have dedicated their careers to staving off a nuclear apocalypse say the possibility that Putin may go nuclear must be taken so seriously – even if the chances remain very low and the US would likely be able to detect well ahead of time if Russia's atomic devices were on the move.

"It's not a probable event. It's not even likely," said Joseph Cirincione, a nuclear non-proliferation expert and former president of the Plowshares Fund, said on CNN's "Newsroom" on Tuesday.

"But this is a low probability, high consequence event. If he uses even one nuclear weapon, he's bringing us into a whole new world. He's causing massive damage.

And he's running the risk of escalation with exchanges from the West that could lead to further exchanges, et cetera."

Cirincione explained that even if Putin's saber rattling represented a political threat designed to scare the West, it cannot be discounted.

"He has the means. He has the doctrine that allows him to use it. And he has the motive. He is losing this war. He has to do something to try to turn the tide of battle in desperation. He might turn to a nuclear weapon."

While some critics have faulted the President for mentioning words like "Armageddon" and comparing his rhetoric to that of Putin, the motivations of the two men are very different. At a minimum, the Russian leader is boasting about nuclear weapons to scare the world. Biden is speaking publicly to stave off the possibility of disaster.

## Biden warns world would face 'Armageddon' if Putin uses a tactical nuclear weapon in Ukraine

**In his starkest assessment yet, US president says world is the closest it has come to nuclear catastrophe in sixty years**



Joe Biden has warned that the world is on the brink of a nuclear catastrophe Photograph: Lev Radin/Pacific Press/REX/Shutterstock

## **Julian Borger in Washington**

Fri 7 Oct 2022 03.08 BST

Joe Biden has warned the world could face “Armageddon” if **Vladimir Putin** uses a tactical nuclear weapon to try to win the war in Ukraine.

The US president made his most outspoken remarks to date about the threat of nuclear war, at a Democratic fundraiser in New York, saying it was the closest the world had come to nuclear catastrophe for sixty years.

“We have not faced the prospect of Armageddon since Kennedy and the Cuban missile crisis,” he said.

“We’ve got a guy I know fairly well,” Biden said, referring to the Russian president. “He’s not joking when he talks about potential use of tactical nuclear weapons or biological or chemical weapons because his military is, you might say, significantly underperforming.”

Putin and his officials have repeatedly threatened to use Russia’s nuclear arsenal in an effort to deter the US and its allies from supporting **Ukraine** and helping it resist the all-out Russian invasion launched in February. One fear is that he could use a short range “tactical” nuclear weapon to try to stop Ukraine’s counter-offensive in its tracks and force Kyiv to negotiate and cede territory.

If Russia did use a nuclear weapon, it would leave the US and its allies with the dilemma of how to respond, with most experts and former officials predicting that if Washington struck back militarily, it would most likely be with conventional weapons, to try to avert rapid escalation to an all-out nuclear war. But Biden said on Thursday night: “I don’t think there’s any such thing as the ability to easily (use) a tactical nuclear weapon and not end up with Armageddon.”

“First time since the Cuban missile crisis, we have the threat of a nuclear weapon if in fact things continue down the path they are going,” the president said. “We are trying to figure out what is Putin’s off-ramp? Where does he find a way out? Where does he find himself where he does not only lose face but significant power?”

US intelligence agencies believe that Putin has come to see defeat in Ukraine as an existential threat to his regime, which he associates with an existential threat to Russia, potentially justifying, according to his worldview, the use of nuclear weapons.

Biden's nuclear warning not based on new intelligence but opens a window into real worries inside the White House

By Phil Mattingly, Jeremy Diamond and Kevin Liptak, CNN

Updated 10:31 AM EDT, Fri October 7, 2022

'Exceedingly bad': Retired Lt. general on state of Russian forces in Ukraine

**CNN —**

President Joe Biden's stark warning Thursday night that the world faces the highest prospect of nuclear war in 60 years was not based on any new intelligence about Russian President Vladimir Putin's intentions or changes in Russia's nuclear posture, multiple US officials told CNN.

The US still has seen no evidence that Putin is moving toward using Russia's nuclear capability, nor is there any intelligence showing he's decided to do so. But Biden's comments – laid out in starker terms than other US officials have used to date – reflected heightened concerns inside his administration about the risk of Russia carrying out a nuclear strike in Ukraine, where Russian forces have recently faced a string of defeats.

Biden's blunt assessment caught several senior US officials by surprise, largely due to that lack of any new intelligence to drive them and the grim language Biden deployed.

One senior administration official said Biden was speaking “frankly” in his remarks at a Democratic fundraiser in New York, reflecting heightened concern based on Putin's recent nuclear threats.

The threat has long been high on the minds of the administration's national security officials, and the battlefield failures have only served to elevate regular discussions and contingency planning about the issue. But there was no moment, briefing or new information that Biden was privy to that signaled any actual shift in Russian posture.

And the morning after Biden's comments, administration officials said the US's nuclear stance has not changed.

“Our posture hasn't changed,” one official said of the US preparations. “If there was some new piece of alarming information, it obviously would.”

### The message

There simply isn't much – if any – precedent in the last six decades of a president so bluntly warning of looming catastrophe. The divergence in tone between Biden and his top national security officials is striking, with the President moving sharply away from the coordinated effort to calmly warn against saber rattling, but not rhetorically escalate anything.

Yet Biden's remarks, as one official noted, do reflect reality – a reality that may be difficult to grasp due to the combination of a far-off war and a post-Cold War era when nuclear threats have simply disappeared from daily risks. Those risks have grown acutely in the last eight months, even if there is no tangible evidence Putin has made concrete moves in that direction.

Putin's nuclear saber-rattling led US national security adviser Jake Sullivan to warn of "catastrophic consequences" late last month should Moscow move to use nuclear weapons – and Putin has only further ratcheted up his rhetoric since.

Biden's remarks serve as a window into a very real, very ongoing discussion inside his administration as they seek to calibrate the response to that environment.

CNN reported last week that the US is considering how to respond to a range of potential scenarios, including fears that Russians could use tactical nuclear weapons, according to three sources briefed on the latest intelligence. The US has since the start of the conflict been developing contingency plans to respond, including to the possibility that Putin could escalate via a step just short of a nuclear attack on Ukraine, through what one source described as a "nuclear display," such as a potential military strike on the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant, or the detonation of a nuclear device at high-altitude or away from populated areas.

The threat of Putin using nuclear weapons is certainly "elevated" compared to earlier in the year, multiple sources told CNN late last month. But multiple officials familiar with the latest intelligence said that the likelihood Putin will use a tactical nuclear weapon in Ukraine is still not probable. The intelligence community is closely watching for any signs that the Russian leader's calculus has changed.

### The setting

The comments were also the latest unguarded moment from Biden during an off-camera fundraiser, where the President has repeatedly deployed more candor and colorful rhetoric than he might in scripted remarks. Officials say his off-the-cuff remarks at fundraisers tend to be a brief and unvarnished window into real concerns or debates Biden is grappling with at the moment.

Typically held with only a few dozen donors, Biden's fundraisers are more intimate occasions where he often speaks from handwritten notes, only loosely following a script he's written for himself. Like at his public events, Biden speaks from a handheld microphone during his fundraisers and usually roams around the room while he's talking. Reporters are allowed to listen and report on the President's remarks but not film them, a convention that began during the Obama presidency.

His remarks are usually only slotted for 10 minutes but in the past he has stretched to half an hour or more, expounding on various topics. After the remarks, reporters are ushered out while Biden takes a few questions from the donors.

While most of what Biden says at the fundraisers is familiar, he has made comments previously that went beyond his remarks to larger audiences. It was a fundraiser in Maryland where Biden declared Trump-aligned Republicans “semi-fascist” and where he said the views of the Catholic Church on abortion had changed.

Biden’s comments about the prospect of nuclear Armageddon were not scripted and aides back in Washington first learned about his remarks through news reports and dispatches from the press pool in the room.

The comparison

Biden’s reference to the Cuban Missile Crisis was notable, both because it was the last time a US president spoke so overtly about the risks of a potentially impending catastrophe, but also because it’s 60th anniversary is just a few days away.

Implicit in Biden’s comments, however, was the risks posed by a critical difference. President John F. Kennedy and his team weighed a series of potential off-ramps and backchannel proposals that could head off the crisis. The Soviet leader at the time – Nikita Khrushchev, who had seen the horrors of World War II – always made clear he understood the stakes of a nuclear standoff, even if his strategic calculation in Cuba was woefully off-base. Mutually assured destruction was the baseline, and even at their worst moments and most bellicose threats, the dealings between Kennedy and Khrushchev reflected that reality.

In contrast, Biden’s comments about an inability to identify an off-ramp – particularly as Putin’s military flails – raises a very real concern that the long-standing mutual understanding may not be as assured as assumed. Putin’s at-times rambling and bellicose speech last Friday only served to exacerbate that concern inside the White House, one official said.

Biden’s use of the word “Armageddon” has drawn all the headlines, but the context of that remark is critically important. White House officials have stressed that the idea Russia could deploy “tactical” strikes, as per their doctrine, does not represent some kind of half measure or step below maximum escalation.

The President’s use of Armageddon served to illustrate that point – there’s no escalation ladder when it comes to nuclear weapons, tactical or otherwise. Any move in that direction sets off a cascading response that only has one outcome.

The mindset

Several officials pointed out that Putin’s nuclear saber rattling isn’t new, and US officials have been grappling with the threats and the potential for their use since the first days of the war.



But White House officials closely watched – and studied for clues – Putin’s speech last week – and much like his speech just prior to the invasion, it raised alarms. It’s been an element of several internal discussions in recent days, highlighting that while the world may brush off the latest in months of Putin statements seemingly detached from obvious reality, the Biden “doesn’t have that luxury,” one official said.

One official characterized the speech as “insane,” and while that bolstered the US view of Russian weakness and isolation, it also further increased concern about Putin’s willingness to escalate beyond the level of a rational actor.

That’s important context when thinking about Biden’s remarks, one official noted.

What’s next

White House officials decided not to say anything publicly Thursday night, and there are no plans to address the remarks in isolation so far on Friday morning. If Biden wants to address it himself, it will be apparent when he departs for his Maryland event later in the morning, one official said.

More broadly, the most important element remains that US officials have seen no change in posture or specific intelligence that raises the threat level above where it has been.

There have been direct communications to Moscow in the last several weeks detailing the scale of the US response should Putin decide to go down that path. Those details remain closely held, and officials say that won’t change any time soon.



A Russian Iskander-K missile launching during a training launch as part of the Grom-2022 Strategic Deterrence Force exercise at an undefined location in Russia. Photograph: Russian Defence Ministry/AFP/Getty Images

# Are Putin's nuclear threats really likely to lead to Armageddon?

The realities underlying the menacing vocabulary are a grey area – it is far from certain that Putin would be prepared to use nuclear weapons

by **Julian Borger** in Washington

Fri 7 Oct 2022 20.20 BST

•  
•  
•

# T

he past week has seen a rapid escalation in nuclear rhetoric, beginning with Vladimir Putin's threat to use "all forces and means" to defend newly seized

territory in Ukraine and ending with Joe Biden's warning of "Armageddon" if Russia crosses the nuclear Rubicon.

However, the realities underlying the menacing vocabulary are a far greyer area than the bluster suggests. It is far from certain that Putin would be prepared to be the first leader to use nuclear weapons in wartime since 1945, over his territorial ambitions in **Ukraine**. If his primary goal is to stay in power, that could be exactly the wrong way of going about it.

Even if he did issue the launch order, he has no guarantee it would be carried out. Nor can he be absolutely sure that the weapons and their delivery systems would work.

On the US side, **despite the US president's apocalyptic language** at a private fundraiser on Thursday night, it is not at all inevitable that Washington would respond to Putin's nuclear use with nuclear retaliation. Past wargaming suggests there would be vigorous debate within the administration to say the least.



All you wanted to know about nuclear war but were too afraid to ask  
[Read more](#)

Like US presidents, Putin is normally accompanied by an aide carrying a briefcase with codes used to authorise a nuclear launch. In the US it is called the football, in **Russia** it is the *cheget*. In the Russian system, the defence minister and the chief of the general staff have their own *chegets* but it is believed that Putin can order a launch without them.

However, the *cheget* is relevant for the strategic nuclear forces, the intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) launched from land or sea, or long-range bombers. Because they need to be launched within minutes in case of enemy attack, the warheads need to be deployed, mounted on the delivery systems.

Any nuclear use in Ukraine would be likely to involve non-strategic, or tactical, weapons with shorter-range delivery systems, and which are usually (but not necessarily) less powerful than strategic arms, though on average they are many times more powerful than the Hiroshima or Nagasaki bombs.

The US only has one kind of tactical weapon, the B61 gravity bomb, **of which there are about a hundred in Europe and a similar number in the US**, according to the Federation of American Scientists (FAS).

FAS estimates Russia has 2,000 tactical weapons, in very many shapes and sizes for use on land, sea and air. The weapons are not deployed on missiles or aircraft, but kept in bunkers in storage sites dotted around Russia. There are 12 national storage sites, known in Russian military parlance as “**Object S**”, one of which is in Belgorod, right on the Ukrainian border.

There are also 34 “base-level” sites, closer to the delivery systems. In a time of crisis, warheads would be moved from national to base-level sites – and up to now western intelligence agencies say no such movement has been observed.

Any such movement would be carried out by the 12th main directorate of the Russian armed forces, which has the job of storing and maintaining the warheads and then delivering them in specialised trains or trucks to base-level sites, or directly to the unit designated to launch them.

**01:58**

'I'm not bluffing': Putin warns the west over nuclear weapons – video

Pavel Baev, a military researcher who worked for the Soviet defence ministry, said that Putin cannot count on these weapons actually working.

“Most of these warheads stored there are very old,” Baev, now a professor at the Peace Research Institute Oslo, said. “Without testing it’s really hard to say how suitable they are because many of them are past their expiration date.”

Baev added that it was also far from clear that the Russian can successfully pair old warheads with the much newer delivery systems that would have to be used, possibly 9K720 Iskander or Kinzhal hypersonic missiles.



‘Someone will fall victim’: insiders reveal elite anguish as Russia’s war falters

[Read more](#)

Not all analysts have such a dim view of the state of the tactical arsenal. Pavel Podvig, who runs a research project called **Russian Nuclear Forces** and is a senior research fellow at the UN Institute for Disarmament Research, said: “There’s a maintenance protocol. There are ways of checking whether a weapon is in good health.”

What may be more likely to break down, however, is the chain of command if Putin gave such an alarming and extreme order.

“It’s one thing to follow the order to start a ‘special military operation’ that you understand will be over in three days,” Podvig said. “It’s another thing to accept the order to drop a nuclear bomb. There’s a sense that this kind of order would be universally considered as criminal. I think the calculation would change.”

The Russian leader is **already reported to be facing dissent from his inner circle**. Taking the leap to nuclear use could stretch his authority to breaking point.

“I think it would be prohibitively risky for any commander-in-chief to give this order because if you give the order and it’s not executed, it backfires,” Baev said.

If Putin decided to gamble everything and if his military officers went along with him and managed to detonate a weapon in or around Ukraine, then Biden and his team would be faced with choices that all modern US presidents have hoped they would never have to make.

**There’s a sense that this kind of order would be universally considered as criminal**

**Pavel Podvig**

US warnings to Russia in recent days have been vague on what the response would be, saying only that it would be “catastrophic”. The White House needs to keep its room for manoeuvre, depending on what Russia does, whether it is a “demonstration” blast over the Black Sea or the Arctic, or the bombing of a Ukrainian military target or – the worst-case scenario – a city.

In 2016, the Obama administration carried out war gaming exercises to test its communications channels and decision-making process in the event of a Russian use of a tactical nuclear weapon. There were deep disagreements that led on some occasions to heated arguments.

“The debate broke down along two pretty important lines,” said Jon Wolfsthal, who was Barack Obama’s special assistant and senior director at the national security council for arms control and non-proliferation.

The first question was whether “the US or Nato needed to respond militarily”.

“In the game, the answer was no. The US was winning the conventional war,” Wolfsthal, who writes a Substack column titled **BoomBoomBoom**, said.



‘15 minutes to save the world’: a terrifying VR journey into the nuclear bunker

[Read more](#)

The counter-argument was that the US could not afford not to respond with nuclear weapons.

“There were those who said if you don’t use nuclear weapons, two terrible things will happen. One is: all of our allies will doubt our commitment,” he said. “The second is: if you don’t use a nuclear weapon in response, how do you deter Putin from going nuclear again? You needed nukes to re-establish deterrence.

“We never answered that. We never settled that debate,” Wolfsthal said.

The 2016 war game – first reported in *The Bomb*, a book by Fred Kaplan – was played twice, at the level of cabinet secretary, the “principals” and by their deputies. The principals voted to respond with a nuclear strike, but not on Russia, in the hope of avoiding an all-out planet-ending nuclear exchange. Instead they struck Belarus, arguing it was a “belligerent non-combatant”.



Avril Haines in July 2021. Photograph: Susan Walsh/AP

The deputies voted not to respond with nuclear weapons, arguing that the US could win with conventional weapons and that nuclear use would make it much harder to isolate Putin internationally. Two of the officials who pushed that option are now in senior positions in the Biden administration: Colin Kahl is the Pentagon's policy chief, and Avril Haines is the director of national intelligence. After the war games were over, Haines suggested having T-shirts printed with the slogan "Deputies Should Run the World".

The 2016 war game was set in a Baltic nation, so inside Nato and under its protective nuclear umbrella. Ukraine stands outside that umbrella.

Ernest Moniz, Obama's energy secretary is reported to have voted for a nuclear response in 2016. He would not comment or even confirm the war game took place, but he said Ukraine was a very different case.

"I would say that if the line is crossed to nuclear use, there has to be a very, very strong response," he told the Guardian. "But that response doesn't have to be nuclear."

The key question is more likely to be whether the US and its allies should respond with devastating conventional firepower, **as Poland's foreign minister, Zbigniew Rau, and the former CIA director David Petraeus have suggested.** But



that would transform the war into one between Russia and Nato, in which escalation to a nuclear exchange could become hard to stop.

According to Eric Schlosser, the author of a book about the nuclear establishment, *Command and Control*, the Pentagon's Defence Threat Reduction Agency (DTRA) conducted another war game in 2019 focused on Russian nuclear use in Ukraine. That wargame appears to **have been updated**, suggesting it is in constant use. The results in 2019 are top secret, but as Schlosser wrote in **the Atlantic**, one of the participants told him: "There were no happy outcomes."