

Jake Sullivan: US will act ‘decisively’ if Russia uses nuclear weapons in Ukraine

US national security adviser says: ‘Any use of nuclear weapons will be met with catastrophic consequences for Russia’



US national security adviser Jake Sullivan speaks to the media during the daily press briefing at the White House on 20 September. Photograph: Ron Sachs/EPA

Edward Helmore

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America and its allies will act “decisively” if Russia uses a tactical nuclear weapon in Ukraine, US national security adviser **Jake Sullivan** said on Sunday, reaffirming the Joe Biden White House’s previous response to mounting concerns that Vladimir Putin’s threats are in increased danger of being realized.

“We have communicated directly, privately and at very high levels to the Kremlin that any use of nuclear weapons will be met with catastrophic consequences for **Russia**, that the US and our allies will respond decisively, and

we have been clear and specific about what that will entail,” Sullivan told CBS’s Face The Nation.

Sullivan said that the Russian leader Putin had been “waving around the nuclear card at various points through this conflict”, and it was a matter that Biden’s administration has “to take deadly seriously because it is a matter of paramount seriousness – the possible use of nuclear weapons for the first time since the second world war”.

In a separate interview with CBS, **Ukraine** president Volodymyr Zelenskiy said he was not certain that Putin was bluffing with nuclear threats. “Maybe yesterday it was bluff. Now, it could be a reality,” he said. “He wants to scare the whole world.”

The administration’s security chief said that Russia’s nuclear threat against Ukraine, including extending its nuclear umbrella over eastern parts of the country that are still being contested seven months after its invasion, would not deflect the US and its allies.

“We will continue to support Ukraine in its efforts to defend its country and defend its democracy,” Sullivan said, pointing to more than \$15bn in weapons, including air defense systems, hundreds of artillery pieces and rounds of artillery, that the US has supplied to Ukraine.

He said that Moscow’s mobilization of troops was a “sham referenda in the occupied regions” that would not deter the US. “What Putin has done is not exactly a sign of strength or confidence – frankly, it’s a sign that they’re struggling badly on the Russian side,” Sullivan said.

But, Sullivan added, it is “too soon to make comprehensive predictions” about a collapse of Russian forces.

“I think what we are seeing are signs of unbelievable struggle among the Russians – you’ve got low morale, where the soldiers don’t want to fight. And who can blame them because they want no part of Putin’s war of conquest in their neighboring country?”

Sullivan continued: “Russia is struggling, but Russia still remains a dangerous foe, and capable of great brutality.” He alluded to mass burial sites containing hundreds of graves that Ukrainian forces found after recapturing **Izium** from Russia and said, “We continue to take that threat seriously.”

He added that the US, the International Atomic Agency and Ukraine nuclear regulators are working together to ensure there is no “melt-down” at the Zaporizhzhia nuclear plant in eastern Ukraine.

The Russians, he said, had been “consistently implying that there may be some kind of accident at this plant”.

Reactors at the plant, Sullivan said, had been put into “cold storage” to “try to make sure there is no threat posed by a melt-down or something else at the plant. But it’s something we all have to keep a close eye on.”

Separately, Sullivan said US criticism of a crackdown on **mounting protests in Iran** after the death in police custody of 22-year-old Mahsa Amini would not affect the administration’s offer to lift sanctions on Iran as part of the effort to reach a deal on nuclear enrichment.

“The fact that we are in negotiations with **Iran** on its nuclear program is in no way impacting our willingness and our vehemence in speaking out about what has been happening on the streets of Iran,” he said.

Last week, Biden told the General Assembly of the United Nations in New York that “we stand with the brave citizens and the brave women of Iran who right now are demonstrating to secure their basic rights”. The US president’s remarks came shortly after a defiant speech by Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi.

In his remarks on Sunday, Sullivan said the US had taken “tangible steps” to sanction the morality police who caused the death of Mahsa Amini.

“We’ve taken steps to make it easier for Iranians to be able to get access to the internet and communications technologies to talk to one another and talk to the world and we will do all that we can to support the brave people, the brave women, of Iran,” Sullivan said.

But Sullivan refused to be drawn out on whether the US would change its policy on lifting sanctions in exchange for a nuclear deal in light of the protests.

“We’re talking about diplomacy to prevent Iran from ever getting a nuclear weapon,” he said. “If we ... succeed ..., the world, America and its allies will be safer.”

But the pursuit of a nuclear deal, Sullivan said, “would not stop us in any way from pushing back and speaking out on Iran’s brutal repression of its citizens and its women. We can and will do both.”

Petraeus: US would destroy Russia’s troops if Putin uses nuclear weapons in Ukraine

Former CIA director and retired army general says Moscow’s leader is ‘desperate’ and ‘battlefield reality he faces is irreversible’



Former CIA director and retired army general David Petraeus in 2015. Photograph: Chris Keane/REUTERS

Edward Helmore

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The US and its allies would destroy Russia's troops and equipment in Ukraine – as well as sink its Black sea fleet – if Russian president **Vladimir Putin** uses nuclear weapons in the country, former CIA director and retired four-star army general David Petraeus warned on Sunday.

Petraeus said that he had not spoken to national security adviser Jake Sullivan on the likely US response to nuclear escalation from **Russia**, which administration officials have said has been repeatedly communicated to Moscow.

He told ABC News: “Just to give you a hypothetical, we would respond by leading a Nato – a collective – effort that would take out every Russian conventional force that we can see and identify on the battlefield in **Ukraine** and also in Crimea and every ship in the Black sea.”

The warning comes days after Putin expressed views that many have interpreted as a threat of a larger war between Russia and the west.

Asked if the use of nuclear weapons by Russia in Ukraine would bring America and Nato into the war, Petraeus said that it would not be a situation triggering the alliance's Article 5, which calls for a collective defense. That is because Ukraine is not part of Nato – nonetheless, a “US and Nato response” would be in order, Petraeus said.

Petraeus acknowledged that the likelihood that radiation would extend to Nato countries under the Article 5 umbrella could perhaps be construed as an attack on a Nato member.

“Perhaps you can make that case,” he said. “The other case is that this is so horrific that there has to be a response – it cannot go unanswered.”

Yet, Petraeus added, “You don't want to, again, get into a nuclear escalation here. But you have to show that this cannot be accepted in any way.”

Nonetheless, with pressure mounting on Putin after Ukrainian gains in the east of the country under last week's annexation declaration and resistance to mobilization efforts within Russia mounting, Petraeus said Moscow's leader was “desperate”.

“The battlefield reality he faces is, I think, irreversible,” he said. “No amount of shambolic mobilization, which is the only way to describe it; no amount of annexation; no amount of even veiled nuclear threats can actually get him out of this particular situation.

“At some point there’s going to have to be recognition of that. At some point there’s going to have to be some kind of beginning of negotiations, as [Ukrainian] President [Volodymyr] Zelenskiy has said, will be the ultimate end.”

But, Petraeus warned, “It can still get worse for Putin and for Russia. And even the use of tactical nuclear weapons on the battlefield won’t change this at all.” Still, he added, “You have to take the threat seriously.”

Senator Marco Rubio, the ranking Republican member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee told CNN that Putin was down to two choices: established defensive lines or withdraw and lose territory.

Rubio said he believed it “quite possible” that Putin could strike distribution points where US and allied supplies are entering Ukraine, including inside Poland. The senator acknowledged the nuclear threat, but he said most worries about “a Russian attack inside Nato territory, for example, aiming at the airport in Poland or some other distribution point”.

“Nato will have to respond to it,” he said. “How it will respond, I think a lot of it will depend on the nature of the attack and the scale and scope of it.”

But as a senator privy to Pentagon briefings, Rubio resisted being drawn on whether he’d seen evidence that Russia is preparing to use nuclear weapons against Ukraine.

“Certainly, the risk is probably higher today than it was a month ago,” Rubio said, predicting that Russia would probably take an intermediate step.

“He may strike one of these logistical points. And that logistical point may not be inside ... Ukraine. To me, that is the area that I focus on the most, because it has a tactical aspect to it. And I think he probably views it as less escalatory. Nato may not.”

US President Joe Biden sends secret nuclear strike warning to Russia's Vladimir Putin

Joe Barnes and Nick Allen

13:22, Sep 24 2022

The United States has been sending secret warnings to the Kremlin for months about the grave consequences of using [nuclear weapons in Ukraine](#), it has emerged.

Washington has not spelled out to Moscow exactly what its response would be, maintaining a position of “strategic ambiguity”.

The US has kept the warnings vague in the hope of inducing panic and uncertainty in the Kremlin.

Despite the warnings Vladimir Putin, in a televised national address on Wednesday, [implicitly threatened a nuclear strike](#). It was unclear how, or by whom, the US messages were delivered, or whether any further communications had been sent since Putin's speech.

READ MORE:

* [Jacinda Ardern decries Russia's war on Ukraine, urges ban on nuclear weapons in UN address](#)

US intelligence officials have indicated there is currently no sign Russia is moving its nuclear weapons to get ready for a strike.

There has been concern Russia could opt to use a [small tactical nuclear weapon](#), sometimes referred to as a "battlefield nuke".

Analysts believe Putin could do so if he believed his own position is under threat.

His intention would be to "escalate to de-escalate", ending the war having secured some gains, but [causing devastation in the process](#).

The existence of the US warnings over nuclear weapons emerged as [voting began in referendums on whether Russian-held regions of Ukraine should become part of Russia](#).

Ukrainian and Western officials have condemned the votes as an illegitimate attempt by Moscow to annex areas its forces have occupied during nearly seven months of war.

The [sham referenda](#) were taking place in occupied Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson and Zaporizhzhia regions. The US has also been warning Russia publicly against making nuclear threats.

At the United Nations General Assembly in New York on Thursday, Antony Blinken, the US secretary of state, condemned Russia's "reckless nuclear threats" and said they "must stop immediately".

But Dmitry Medvedev, deputy head of the Russian security council, suggested nuclear weapons could be used to defend occupied territories in Ukraine once they had been illegally annexed by Moscow.

He said any Russian weapons "including strategic nuclear weapons and weapons based on new principles" could be used. That was taken to be a reference to hypersonic weapons.

US warnings to Putin 'should be more defined'

In a recent interview Joe Biden publicly warned Russia against using nuclear weapons, saying: "Don't. Don't. Don't. You will change the face of war unlike anything since World War II."

EVAN VUCCI/AP

President Joe Biden at the United Nations General Assembly said Moscow was making threats to use nuclear weapons.

He said there would be a "consequential" response from the US but the sale of it would be dependent on "the extent of what they [Russia] do."

Richard Haass, president of the Council on Foreign Relations, said the US warnings to Putin should be more defined.

He said: "History suggests Mr Putin responds better to specific, credible threats rather than general talk of serious consequences.

"We should tell the Russians now if they were to use nuclear weapons, however, America and Nato air power would be made available to Ukraine and, essentially, the entire Russian military presence in Ukraine would be decimated.

"There's got to be a specific credible threat [to Putin] that we are willing and able to follow through on."

The Telegraph

US warnings against Putin's nuclear threats mark a sobering moment for the world

Analysis by Stephen Collinson, CNN

Updated 2:37 AM EDT, Mon September 26, 2022

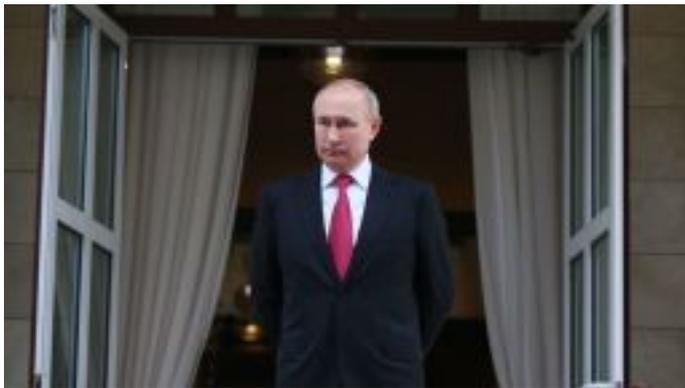
CNN —

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.

But White House national security adviser Jake Sullivan issued an ominous public caution to Putin on Sunday.



Reports of Putin's problems are mounting

“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.”

Secretary of State Antony Blinken reinforced that message on CBS’ “60 Minutes” in another sign that Washington is increasingly adding a public element to its private pressure on the Kremlin on this issue.

“It’s very important that Moscow hear from us and know from us that the consequences would be horrific,” Blinken said.

Putin’s rhetoric was a reminder that the better the war goes for Ukraine, the more the West will need to keep its nerve, especially if the Russian leader becomes more boxed in and tries to scare his foes with Russia’s best leverage – its nuclear arsenal.

Many Western observers believe Putin is bluffing and that there are strategic reasons for Moscow to stop short of this fateful step. There are no public reports that the Kremlin is readying its stock of battlefield nuclear weapons for use or that it has changed the posture of its international strategic missiles. And Putin has played the nuclear card before in the conflict in an apparent effort to frighten Western publics and to fracture support for Kyiv in the transatlantic alliance.

But at the same time, the Russian leader has gone all in on a war that he cannot afford to lose but that is going increasingly badly for Russia, as last week's partial national mobilization showed. He is in a corner, a reality that may explain his return to nuclear scare tactics. And while Putin's political position doesn't seem immediately threatened, he's facing increasing dissent at home and appears consumed by fury against the US and the West that is vehement even for him.

Putin is led by a sense of historic mission rooted in a desire to restore respect for Russia as a great civilization. He has already shown callous indifference to human and civilian life in Ukraine. Such conditions mean clear strategic thinking and rational decisions cannot be taken for granted, especially since the ruthless Russian leader's sense of caution deserted him with his reckless leadership of the war in Ukraine.

And worryingly, Blinken admitted that it remains to be seen whether Russia's nuclear chain of command would work if top military officers wanted to forestall any effort by Putin to use nuclear weapons.

"That is the Achilles' heel of autocracies anywhere – there is usually not anyone who has the capacity or the will to speak truth to power. And part of the reason, I think, Russia has gotten itself into the mess that it's in is because there is no one in the system to effectively tell Putin he's doing the wrong thing."

A stark US message

It is in this dangerous atmosphere that Washington issued its warning, designed to deter Putin from a cycle of escalation that could raise the risk he might consider, or at least threaten the use, of a limited yield tactical nuclear weapon in Ukraine to compensate for his military's failure in a conventional conflict. The US message also seemed destined for those around the Russian leader, in high-level positions in the military or intelligence agencies, for instance, who may be in a position to influence his thinking or to block his capacity to carry out his threats.



US has privately warned Russia against using nuclear weapons in Ukraine for several months

CNN has reported that the US has privately been warning Russia against any use of a nuclear device for several months. The State Department was involved and

Washington has also used intelligence channels to communicate with Moscow during the war, one source said.

What the catastrophic consequences that Sullivan mentioned would actually be has not been spelled out. But given the magnitude of any use of nuclear weapons, many military and diplomatic experts argue that a response would have to be far stiffer than another round of sanctions on the already debilitated Russian economy. The humanitarian and environmental impact of using even a limited yield nuclear device would surpass the horror and civilian carnage already unleashed on Ukraine. And its usage would also take the world across a dangerous strategic threshold and establish a precedent for the use of nuclear arms to change the equation in conventional conflicts, which could cause a rush by other rogue states to get such a capacity.

Watch Biden direct response to Putin's words of escalation

Given these stakes, some Western observers believe that NATO would have no choice but to consider the direct intervention in the Ukraine conflict that President Joe Biden has always desperately tried to avoid, perhaps by using air power against Russia's forces. Such a move would be one of the most dangerous moments ever in the history of America's standoffs with Moscow. It would risk setting off another dangerous cycle of escalation that could lead to a disastrous conflict between the US and Russia, the world's top nuclear powers, which was mercifully held at bay for the entire Cold War – a 40-year period in which the world lived under the shadow of Armageddon.

That possibility, for now, seems a long way away and would need a lot of things to go wrong and for many off-ramps to be missed. One potential goal of US diplomacy in the immediate term might also be to press on nations like China and India, which still have workable relations with Russia, to convey the kind of global ostracism that Moscow might face if it used its nuclear arsenal.

Still, the spectacle of the President's top foreign policy adviser warning Moscow of the consequences of the use of nuclear weapons amid what is effectively a proxy war in Europe between the West and the Kremlin is a sobering sign of the gravity of the situation.

Reading Putin's mind

Putin's warning that he wasn't bluffing about his willingness to use nuclear weapons if, in his perception, Russia was under attack has set off public and private speculation of what is driving his thinking.

The holding of what the West considers sham referendums in captured areas of Ukraine raises the possibility that Putin could consider Ukrainian attacks using Western-provided weapons on such areas as an attack greater Russia itself.

Partly as a result, CNN's Chief Law Enforcement and Intelligence Analyst John Miller reported last week that no one in the US intelligence community is putting the possibility that Putin could use a nuclear weapon at zero. Intelligence analysts have

spent years assessing how the psychological forces working on Putin would play out if a leader obsessed with looking strong began to come across as weak, Miller reported. French President Emmanuel Macron, meanwhile, told CNN's Jake Tapper last week that the effects of Covid-19 isolation and deep resentment toward the West were influencing Putin's erratic decision making in Ukraine.

But new British Prime Minister Liz Truss was dismissive of Putin's warnings in an interview with Tapper on CNN's "State of the Union" on Sunday. Truss, who has used a tough stance against Putin as a vehicle to build her own political credibility, almost goaded the Russian president, saying he had been "outsmarted" by the Ukrainians. And she warned the West must continue "to be resolute," adding, "We don't listen to the saber-rattling that we're hearing from Putin, and we continue to back the Ukrainians to the hilt."

But another European leader who knows Putin well, President Sauli Niinistö of Finland, warned Sunday of a dangerous moment since the Russian leader had now invested so much credibility in a war that has turned against him in recent weeks.

"He has put all in," Niinistö told CNN's Fareed Zakaria.

"He is a fighter, so it is very difficult seeing him accepting any kind of defeat and this surely makes the situation very critical."

The impossibility that Putin – for historic, personal and political reasons – would admit he failed in Ukraine has brought the world to a potentially perilous moment.