

The Financial Times and the nuclear gamble over Kaliningrad

David North
6 October 2026

There was a time when Gideon Rachman, senior columnist of the *Financial Times*, was widely viewed as one of the more intelligent and historically informed bourgeois journalists. While firmly committed to the defense of capitalist interests, he was mindful of the catastrophes of the twentieth century. Rachman frequently drew upon the lessons of two world wars to caution political leaders against reckless miscalculations.

One of Rachman's best-known essays, published in *FT* on February 4, 2013, was titled "The Shadow of 1914 falls over the Pacific." It began:

"The flickering black and white films of men going 'over the top' in the first world war seem impossibly distant. Yet the idea that the great powers of today could never again stumble into a war, as they did in 1914, is far too complacent. The rising tensions between China, Japan and the US have echoes of the terrible conflict that broke out almost a century ago."

Rachman warned against forgetting the consequences of miscalculation and expressed hope that "The fact that we are living in a nuclear age also makes the 1914 crisis much less likely to be replayed."

But the outbreak of the Ukraine war in 2022 produced a dramatic change in the outlook of Rachman. His capacity for historically informed analysis is one of the casualties of the conflict. The journalist who once cautioned against disastrous miscalculations now elevates recklessness to the level of a strategic principle.

On October 5 the *Financial Times* published a column by Rachman, under the headline "Putin's nuclear threats no longer work." Days earlier, the Russian government had delivered a note to NATO declaring that it would use "the entire arsenal of forces and capabilities at its disposal, including nuclear weapons," if the alliance attempted to isolate the Kaliningrad region. The note warned that a conflict could open with strikes on "decision-making centers" in NATO countries. On October 1, at the Valdai Discussion Club, Vladimir Putin confirmed that the note meant what it said.

Rachman's response is to reassure his readers. Since February 2022, he writes, Putin has repeatedly used the nuclear arsenal to intimidate the West without acting on his threats. Tanks, fighter planes and long-range missiles, "all once off the menu," have been supplied to Ukraine. Ukraine attacked

Russia's strategic bombers in June 2025, and nothing happened. The taboo against nuclear use, he concludes, has proven "very powerful," and the decline of Russian deterrence is "mainly good news."

The column merits a reply because it states with unusual frankness the premise on which the governments of Britain, Germany, France, Poland and the Baltic states are conducting the war against Russia: since Russia has not used nuclear weapons, it never will, whatever NATO does.

This is an inference from conduct under conditions that no longer exist. For most of the war the fighting was confined to Ukraine, Russia was not yet confronted with open NATO treats of intervention, and no part of the Russian Federation was attacked and threatened with severance. On the one occasion when Russia did suffer a serious military reverse, in the autumn of 2022, American officials reported that Russian commanders had discussed the use of tactical nuclear weapons, and President Biden spoke publicly of the danger of "Armageddon." The record shows only that the threshold had not yet been reached.

But that, as indicated by Putin's speech, may no longer be the case. Kaliningrad, Russian territory with about a million inhabitants, lies between Poland and Lithuania on a Baltic Sea that the accession of Finland and Sweden has turned into a NATO lake. Throughout the summer NATO staged air and amphibious exercises around the exclave. In September the Polish foreign minister, Radosław Sikorski, noted that Russia had stripped Kaliningrad of troops for the war in Ukraine and called for NATO exercises so aggressive that the Kremlin could not be sure what the alliance intended. Russia's nuclear doctrine, revised in November 2024, permits nuclear use in response to a conventional attack that threatens the country's territorial integrity. That provision was written for Kaliningrad.

Let us recall the history that Rachman has chosen to forget. Before 1914 the European powers passed through a succession of crises—Morocco, Bosnia, Agadir, the Balkan wars—each of which ended short of general war. In 1909 a weakened Russia gave way before a German ultimatum over Bosnia. In July 1914 Berlin acted on the expectation that Russia would retreat again. It did not. The tsar's ministers concluded that a second capitulation would finish Russia as a great power. Rachman

observes that in Britain “the travails of Manchester City football club were bigger news” than Putin’s warnings. In the last days of July 1914 the French public was absorbed by the trial of Madame Caillaux, acquitted of murder on the day Austria-Hungary declared war on Serbia.

Seen from the Kremlin and the Russian General Staff, the record Rachman cites points to the opposite conclusion. Every non-nuclear means of halting NATO’s escalation has failed. As Rachman himself notes, “Nato’s stance on the war in Ukraine remains unaltered.” Russia is far weaker than the alliance in conventional forces, and Kaliningrad cannot be defended by conventional means. A nuclear guarantee publicly given and abandoned at its first test would lose its value on every other front. European governments declare that their rearmament must be complete by 2029 or 2030, which tells a Russian planner that the balance of forces will shift steadily against him. That was the reasoning that persuaded the German General Staff in 1914 that war was better sooner than later. A war with NATO would open with attacks on the command structure of Russia’s nuclear forces, creating pressure to use the weapons before they are lost. Sergei Karaganov, who sits on a scientific council attached to Russia’s Security Council, has publicly advocated a nuclear strike on Europe to restore the credibility of Russian deterrence. Rachman dismisses such voices as pundits who “fulminate and fantasise.”

The Putin government, which represents the oligarchy that emerged from the restoration of capitalism in the former Soviet Union, cannot appeal to the workers of Europe and America against their own governments. Its only instrument is military force, and defeat in a war with NATO would mean its end. None of this makes Russian nuclear use certain. Each step NATO takes, however, increases the pressure on Moscow to demonstrate that at least one of its red lines is real.

Rachman also takes for granted that a war with Russia would remain conventional. On a single night in February, Russia fired more than 70 missiles and some 450 drones at Ukraine’s energy system. Western Europe has no air defenses capable of stopping such attacks. To the targets named in the Russian note would be added the ports through which American reinforcements must pass, rail junctions, power stations, refineries and chemical works. Europe would experience in weeks what Ukraine has endured for four years.

Is Rachman certain that NATO’s governments would submit to such “conventional” devastation without resorting to the weapons in their possession? NATO has never renounced the first use of nuclear weapons. French doctrine provides for a “final warning,” a limited nuclear strike to demonstrate resolve, and in March President Macron extended France’s deterrent to Europe with Chancellor Merz’s endorsement. Governments that have escalated the war at every stage would face a choice between defeat and the nuclear option. Russian doctrine leaves no doubt about the answer to a nuclear attack. Once the threshold is crossed, the theory of a limited exchange has

nothing to support it. A 2019 Princeton University simulation that began with a single Russian warning shot projected more than 90 million dead and wounded within hours.

Rachman ends his column with a statement that shatters his entire complacent argument: “Since the Ukraine war began, both Russia and Nato have had to adapt their ideas about how nuclear deterrence works. The taboo against the use of nuclear weapons is clearly very strong. But is it absolute? Nobody can be sure. That kind of uncertainty is dangerous.”

What, precisely, is the level of uncertainty? Is there a 10 percent, 20 percent or 50 percent chance that the nuclear taboo will be broken? At what point does the confrontation with Russia become a game of Russian roulette with four chambers loaded with nuclear-tipped bullets? When the consequence of being wrong may be the destruction of the European continent, what level of risk is Rachman comfortable with?

He does not say. Nor does he call for negotiations, or for NATO to pull back from Kaliningrad. The only lesson he offers his readers is that Moscow’s warnings can be ignored.

Rachman speaks for a ruling class that needs to believe Russia is bluffing. Its policy—rearmament to 5 percent of gross domestic product, the revival of German military power, the subjugation of Russia and the seizure of its resources—cannot be pursued on any other assumption. Its cost is being imposed through the destruction of social programs, which is provoking growing resistance. As in 1914, governments confronting social upheaval at home do not calculate the risks of war soberly.

The people of Europe have not been asked whether they accept the gamble being taken in their name. The working class of Europe, Russia, Ukraine and the United States must answer by building an international movement against war, directed against the capitalist system that produces it.



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