

Are We Sleepwalking into Nuclear War?

Description

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This October marks the 60th anniversary of the Cuban missile crisis, which drew Moscow and Washington into a nuclear showdown that threatened the immediate annihilation of the world.

Luckily, the leaders of the time – Nikita Khrushchev and John F. Kennedy – had the wisdom to step back from the brink, and then engage with each other on first steps toward jointly managing adversity in the nuclear era. Given the current conflict in Ukraine, which is steadily escalating toward a direct military collision between Russia and the United States, there is a hope that the lessons of the past can also help to end the present confrontation on a peaceful note.

However, we should also be mindful of the major differences between the two crises.

On the surface the root cause of both confrontations has been acute feelings of insecurity created by the expansion of the rival power's political influence and military presence right to the doorstep of one's own country: Cuba then, Ukraine now.

This similarity, however, is almost as far as it goes. The salient feature of the Ukraine crisis is the vast asymmetry not only between the relevant capabilities of Russia and the United States, but even more importantly between the stakes involved. To the Kremlin, the issue is literally existential.

Essentially, it is not only the future of Ukraine, but that of Russia itself that is on the table. To the White House, the issue is definitely important, but far less critical. What is in question is clearly US global leadership (which will not collapse within the Western world, whatever happens in Ukraine), its credibility (which can be dented but hardly destroyed), and the administration's standing with the American people (for whom Ukraine is hardly a top concern).

The 1962 Cuban missile crisis broke out in the atmosphere of a pervasive fear of World War III, which rose to its highest pitch during the 13 days in October. The 2022 Ukraine crisis is unfolding virtually in the absence of such fear. Russia's actions over the past seven months have been taken in the West more as evidence of its weakness and indecision than its strength.

Moreover, the war in Ukraine is seen as an historic opportunity to defeat Russia, weakening it to a point when it can no longer pose a threat even to its smallest neighbors. A temptation emerges to finally solve the 'Russian Question', permanently neutering the country by seizing its nuclear arsenal, and possibly breaking it into many pieces that would likely bicker and war among themselves. Among other things, this would rob China of a major ally and resource base, and create favorable conditions for Washington to prevail in its conflict with Beijing, thus sealing its global dominance for many more decades.

The Western public is being prepared for the eventuality of nuclear weapons being used in the Ukraine crisis. Russian warnings to NATO countries, with reference to Moscow's nuclear status, to stay away from direct involvement in the war, which are meant as deterrence rather than an intention to widen the conflict, are dismissed as blackmail. Indeed, a number of Western experts actually expect Russia to use its tactical nukes if its forces face a rout in Ukraine.

Rather than seeing this as a catastrophe to be absolutely averted, they seem to view this as an opportunity to hit Russia very hard, make it an international outlaw, and press the Kremlin to surrender unconditionally. At a practical level, the US nuclear posture and its modernization programs focus on lowering the atomic threshold and deploying small-yield weapons for use on the battlefield.

This does not suggest that the administration of US President Joe Biden wants a nuclear war with Russia. The problem is that its highly pro-active policy on Ukraine is based on a flawed premise that Russia can indeed accept being 'strategically defeated' and, should nuclear weapons be used, their use would be limited to Ukraine or, at worst, to Europe. Americans have a long tradition of ascribing their own strategic logic to their Russian opponents, but this can be fatally misleading. Ukraine, parts of Russia and Europe being hit by nuclear strikes – while the US emerges from the conflict unscathed – might be considered a tolerable outcome in Washington, but hardly in Moscow.

So many of Russia's so-called red lines being breached without consequence from the start of the Ukraine war have created an impression that Moscow is bluffing, so that when President Vladimir Putin recently issued another warning to Washington, saying that "it is not a bluff," some people concluded that it was precisely that. Yet, as recent experience demonstrates, Putin's words deserve to be taken more seriously. In a 2018 interview he said, "Why do we need a world in which there is no Russia?"

The problem is that Moscow's strategic defeat, which the US is aiming for in Ukraine, would probably ultimately result in "a world without Russia." This probably suggests that if – God forbid! – the Kremlin will face what the Russian military doctrine calls "a threat to the existence of the Russian Federation," its nuclear weapons will not point to some location on the European continent, but more likely across the Atlantic.

This is a chilling thought, but it may be salutary. Any use of nuclear weapons must be prevented, not just the use of strategic ones. It is cruel but true that peace between adversaries is based not on solemn pledges and pious wishes, but, in the final count, on mutual fear. We came to call this deterrence and "mutually assured destruction." That fear should not paralyze our will, but it should ensure that neither side loses its senses. On the contrary, the erosion of deterrence and its dismissal as bluff would leave us sleepwalking into big trouble.

Unfortunately, this is precisely where we are heading now. It is telling that the constant shelling, over

many weeks, of Europe's largest nuclear power station is tolerated by Western – including, incredibly, European – public opinion, because it is Ukrainian forces seeking to dislodge the Russians who have occupied the station.

If there are lessons to be learned from the Cuban missile crisis, these are basically two. One is that testing nuclear deterrence is fraught with fatal consequences for all of humanity. The second is that the resolution of a crisis between major nuclear powers can only be based on understanding, and not either side's victory.

There is still time and room for that, even if the former is running out and the latter is getting narrower. Right now, it is still too early even to discuss a potential settlement in Ukraine, but those Russians and Americans who like me spent the last three decades in a failed effort to help create a partnership between their two countries need to come together now to think about how to avert a fatal clash. In 1962, after all, it was informal human contact that saved the world.

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