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**Nuclear Dimensions of the War in Ukraine**

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*(Talk given at 8/7/2022 Lanterns for Peace event, Madison, WI)*

* I want to say thank you to Wisconsin PSR for organizing this event to remember the victims of the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagaski 77 years ago. I’m honored to be here.
* Unfortunately, more than three quarters of a century since those tragic bombings, the world is still very much at risk because of nuclear weapons. A lot of the time, we go through our day without thinking about that risk.
* But sometimes current events bring that reality back to us. The posturing between the US and China over Taiwan is one example. And the war in Ukraine is another example.
* The fact of the matter is, along with the fall of the Soviet Union, Russia’s war in Ukraine is probably the most consequential event having to do with nuclear weapons in my lifetime.
* So, I want to talk about this risk and the nuclear dimensions of the war in Ukraine in three parts. (1) Let’s talk plainly about the risk, (2) Let’s talk about solutions and ways to reduce the risk in this present moment, and (3) Let’s talk about the future

**Talking plainly about the risk:**

* So first, we have to be realistic about the risks if we are to make real progress.
* From day 1 of this conflict, Putin has hidden behind his nuclear weapons in order to carry out a conventional war in Ukraine.
* Early in the conflict, he announced a decision to raise the readiness level of Russian nuclear weapons.
* Russian ally Belarus changed its constitution to allowing hosting of nuclear weapons on its territory and there are recent reports that Belarus may receive some short-range, tactical nukes from Russia.
* And Russia continues to make veiled threats of nuclear use. Just last month Dmitry Medvedev, Russia's deputy Security Council chairman, warned that punishing Russia for war crimes threatened the "existence of mankind." He said that the idea of ​​punishing the country that has the largest nuclear potential is absurd in itself.
* Given this dangerous rhetoric and the Russian nuclear doctrine that calls for using nuclear weapons when the existential security of Russia is at risk, it is conceivable that Putin might choose to use tactical nuclear weapons in Ukraine.
* A frustrated, nuclear-armed Putin might do enormous harm, very quickly. Russia has a large, highly diverse nuclear arsenal, including as many as 2,000 short-range missiles that could lay waste to Ukraine, the Baltic states, Finland. And – if these short-range missiles were deployed to Kaliningrad or Belarus—then Putin could also threaten Poland, Slovakia, and Sweden. Russia’s long-range, land-based and sea-based nuclear-armed missiles threaten most of the rest of globe, including all of Europe and the United States.
* So, let’s be clear. This is a dangerous situation. The possibility that a conflict could escalate to nuclear war – through misunderstanding, miscalculation, or poor judgement – is real.
* But, as bad as this situation is, the world has been here before. In fact, I think we were closer to nuclear war during the Cuban Missile Crisis.
* There’s an incident that took place during the naval blockade of Cuba that we only learned about within the last decade or so. The Soviets sent 4 submarines out to Cuba, and while they were enroute, the US instituted a blockade of Cuba, refusing to let any Soviet ships through. Those Soviet submarines had orders to protect incoming Soviet vessels. Unbeknownst to the Americans, each submarine carried 15 kT nuclear torpedoes. AND, they had authorization to launch those torpedoes without having to contact the Kremlin first. The US navy ships, not knowing about the nukes on board or the predelegated launch authority, were trying get Soviet submarines to surface, so they were dropping practice depth charges on the subs. These practice charges were not actually destructive, but the Soviet sub commanders assumed they were under attack and they debated launching their nuclear torpedoes. Thankfully, they decided not to launch. If they had, things might have escalated to full-scale nuclear war.
* This incident really shows the peril of tensions and conflict between nuclear-armed states. The risks of miscalculation and misunderstanding. And it shows that we have been lucky. Very lucky.
* Over the years, we’ve had a disturbing number of close-calls and accidents. We’ve had early warning radars mistake natural phenomena for missile launches. There have been technical glitches that caused operators to lose contact with our early warning radars or with other parts of the US military complex involved in nuclear strikes. In one incident a training tape was inserted into a NORAD computer and a simulated large-scale Soviet attack appeared real to operators. In that incident, the US ICBM force was placed on its highest alert and nuclear bombers prepared for take-off.
* Russia has also had some close calls that we know about. In 1995, Norway launched a scientific rocket to study the Aurora Borealis. To Russian early warning radars, it looked like it could have been a launch from a nuclear submarine. Apparently, the Russian president was notified and presented with the means to authorize a retaliatory strike. But, when their radars didn’t show any additional launches, the incident was declared a false-alarm. This incident took place during a time of low-tension between the US and Russia. If something like that were to occur now, the outcome might be very different.
* Thankfully, none of these close calls led to an accidental nuclear war. In times of tension, like we have right now, mistakes like these can lead to unintentional escalation.
* Beyond the immediate risk of nuclear war, we should also be concerned about risk to the global international order.
* This war has already put an end to the strategic stability talks that the US and Russia were engaging in before the war. The US and Russia have just one remaining treaty that limits their nuclear arsenals. It expires in 2026, just 4 short years from now. When it goes, there will be no legal constraint on the number and type of nuclear weapons each country can build.
* And while it may seem inconceivable to dialogue with Russia in the midst of an active conflict, it is something we need to be planning for if we do not want a repeat of Cold War arms build-ups.
* But US policy-makers are already focusing on more military and nuclear spending as a result of this war in Ukraine. The Congress is about to pass the largest military budget ever. And they have refused to cancel an unneeded and unnecessary nuclear weapon, the Nuclear Sea Launched Cruise Missile that the Navy doesn’t even want. This larger budget and retention of the Nuclear Sea Launched Cruise Missile are direct results of the war in Ukraine.
* The US Congress is looking at the war in Ukraine and drawing the wrong lessons from it.
* It is also conceivable that other countries will take lessons from this war that are counterproductive to achieving a future free of nuclear weapons. Some states might see what is happening to Ukraine and decide they need their own nuclear weapons. We have all heard the misguided assertion that if only Ukraine had kept the nuclear weapons left on its territory after the fall of the Soviet Union, Ukraine wouldn’t be in this situation. There are real risks to the nonproliferation regime because of this war.
* This is all very sobering, but it doesn’t mean that we are without hope. Even in the midst of this perilous situation, there are still tangible things that we can do to reduce nuclear risk.

**Solutions and reducing nuclear risk**

* The war in Ukraine, and the threats of nuclear use are exactly why we need to eliminate nuclear weapons.
* Some work that gives me the most hope on this is the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons. This Treaty prohibits participating in any sort of nuclear weapon activities-- development, testing, production, acquisition, possession, stockpiling, use or threats of use. All prohibited. The Treaty also prohibits the deployment of nuclear weapons on national territory and the provision of assistance to any State in the conduct of prohibited activities.
* It entered into force in January of 2021, and it is the ultimate solution, the one that brings true safety and security. The one we need to be striving for. Because the fate of all of humanity should not hang in the balance just because an aggrieved, despotic ruler is nostalgic for the days of Soviet Empire. That is utterly ridiculous, and we don’t have to endure it.
* And while we wait for nuclear powers to arrive at the obvious conclusion about nuclear weapons abolition, there ARE things we can do to reduce the risk of nuclear war.
* So far, the U.S. and NATO allies have mostly resisted further escalation. They did not respond in kind by raising the alert level of US nuclear weapons at the beginning of the war. They cancelled a minuteman missile test and have been very clear rhetorically that they do not want a nuclear conflict with Russia.
* Right now, we need the focus to continue to be on de-escalating the situation, ensuring nuclear weapons are off the table, and ending the violence against the Ukrainian people.
* We can also turn to implementing policies that reduce the risk of nuclear escalation now and in any future confrontations like this one.
* We don’t have to be resigned to this danger. There are things the US could do to reduce the risk of misunderstanding and miscalculation. We could (1) declare a No First Use Policy. Meaning that, the US would commit to never be the first to use nuclear weapons in a conflict. This would assure other countries, like Russia, in the event of tensions that we are not going to be the ones to start a nuclear war. (2) We could end the President’s sole authority to launch nuclear weapons and involve other officials in the decision to launch. Right now, the decision to launch nuclear weapons lies with the President, and with our policy of launching on warning of a nuclear attack, the President has to make a decision to launch in just a few minutes. If either of these policies were currently in place, our risk of misunderstanding and miscalculation right now would be lower. (3) We could cancel specific nuclear weapons programs to signal that we do not feel it is necessary to engage in a tit for tat arms race. Right now, the Nuclear Sea Launched Cruise Missile is being kept on life support in the US Congress because the defense establishment has an entrenched belief that we have to match adversaries’ nuclear capabilities on a one-for-one basis. It’s a dangerous mindset that fuels arms races and feeds the ever-increasing military budget.
* These are things we can do in the present to make the world a safer place.

**Future**

* But, let’s talk about what impact the war in Ukraine might have for the future of nuclear weapons, arms control, disarmament and nonproliferation.
* I’ll be honest, it’s possible that the immediate future will look like a step backward. As I mentioned, there are very real risks to the arms control and nonproliferation regimes that we have relied on for more than 50 years.
* But, I think the future is not without hope.
* I take hope in the fact that nonnuclear weapons states continue to make headway in stigmatizing nuclear weapons. Ratifications to the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons continue to roll in.
* And, very optimistically, the war in Ukraine could be a catalyst for future conversations between nuclear weapons states about more arms control and more nuclear risk reduction.
* U.S. and Russian leaders understand that a full-scale nuclear war would be a civilization-ending event. That is why just before this war started, leaders of five nuclear weapons states, including the United States and Russia, called the avoidance of war between nuclear powers their ‘foremost responsibilities,’ and affirmed that a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought.
* If both the US and Russia have been unnerved enough by a war on NATO’s border and by the very real risk of nuclear escalation perhaps we can find a way to make some progress together.
* It’s also possible these events might cause some re-examination of whether deterrence theory is the security paradigm we want to live under. Do we want to live in a world where we risk annihilation and the end of all civilization, or can we figure out how to manage or international relationships without that threat hanging over our heads?
* I do see some cracks opening up in the armor of deterrence theorists. The nongovernmental and advocacy groups that work on nuclear weapons are becoming more bold in their challenges to US reliance on it.
* And I take hope because all of you are here tonight. It’s going to take all of us, working together to move us to a better more peaceful future. So, thank you for being here. And, thank you for your commitment to a safer more peaceful world.