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Nuclear Hypocrisy

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The Russo-Ukraine conflict took an ominous turn with Vladimir Putin’s nuclear threats. The possibility of nuclear war particularly shocked Europeans, who assumed that the U.S. would always protect them from all that is bad in the world. That Putin would contemplate use of nuclear weapons was seen as additional evidence of outrageous criminality. Nevertheless, optimistic observers insisted that nuclear weapons would be of little use and recommended ignoring his pronouncements.

Other allied officials were more pessimistic, leading some to threaten retaliation. For instance, National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan warned of unspecified “catastrophic consequences.” Less reputable analysts, such as David Petraeus, advocated risking Armageddon by attacking Moscow’s forces, apparently assuming that Putin—whose personal survival literally may depend on the war’s outcome—would meekly retreat and concede defeat. Thankfully, President Joe Biden has been more responsible and sought to prevent a nuclear conflagration.

At the conclusion of the Second World War, the USSR had a large quantitative advantage in conventional forces in Europe. The U.S. feared a Soviet invasion and threatened Moscow with nuclear weapons. In January 1954, Secretary of State John Foster Dulles declared against relying on large U.S. conventional forces and placing permanent garrisons in other countries. Instead, he advocated “for ourselves and the other free nations, a maximum deterrent at a bearable cost.” That meant relying on a “deterrent of massive retaliatory power,” which was understood to mean nuclear weapons.

In November 1950, President Harry Truman said that use of nuclear weapons was under “active consideration” in Korea. He also indicated that “We will take whatever steps are necessary to meet the military situation, just as we always have” and, when asked whether that included nuclear weapons, replied “That includes every weapon we have.” President Dwight Eisenhower said in his memoirs that he was willing to use nuclear weapons against both North Korea and China, neither of which possessed nukes, to end the war. Moreover, after the signing of the armistice, he said he would use nuclear weapons against the People’s Republic of China if it renewed the war. Moreover, National Security Council minutes stated: “The President expressed with great emphasis the opinion that if the Chinese Communists attacked us again, we should certainly respond by hitting them hard and wherever it would hurt most, including [Beijing] itself.”

In 1955, Beijing launched a military operation to seize Yijiangshan Island, about ten miles from China. The PRC threatened to invade Taiwan, upon which the Nationalist government had relocated after fleeing the mainland. After the Yijiangshan attack, “the U.S. Congress passed the Formosa Resolution, pledging to defend the Republic of China from further attack. Then...the United States warned that it was considering using nuclear weapons to defend the Nationalist government.” Eisenhower said he saw no reason why nukes “shouldn’t be used exactly as you would use a bullet or anything else.” Vice President Richard Nixon declared: “Tactical atomic weapons are now conventional and will be used against the targets of any aggressive force.”

The Taiwan crisis recurred three years later, this time threatening Kinmen Island. Reported the *New York Times*: “When Communist Chinese forces began shelling islands controlled by Taiwan in 1958, the United States rushed to back up its ally with military force—including drawing up plans to carry out nuclear strikes on mainland China, according to an apparently still-classified document that sheds new light on how dangerous that crisis was. American military leaders pushed for a first-use nuclear strike on China, accepting the risk that the Soviet Union would retaliate in kind on behalf of its ally and millions of people would die.”

The U.S. military prepared for use of nuclear weapons in Vietnam. The *New York Times* reported on newly declassified diplomatic materials: “In one of the darkest moments of the Vietnam War, the top American military commander in Saigon activated a plan in 1968 to move nuclear weapons to South Vietnam until he was overruled by President Lyndon B. Johnson, according to recently declassified documents cited in a new history of wartime presidential decisions. The documents reveal a long-secret set of preparations by the commander, Gen. William C. Westmoreland, to have nuclear weapons at hand should American forces find themselves on the brink of defeat at Khe Sanh, one of the fiercest battles of the war.” Also advanced, though ultimately rejected, were proposals to use nuclear weapons by the Eisenhower administration to back the French army at Dien Bien Phu, the Johnson administration to strike the North, and the Nixon administration to compel North Vietnam to reach agreement in the ongoing peace talks.

In 1973, just six years after its stunning victory in the Six-Day War, Israel was caught off guard by its neighbors and teetered on the edge of defeat, before rebounding, backed by a substantial airlift of weapons from the U.S. Washington also implicitly threatened to go nuclear against the Soviet Union if it intervened. Per *Foreign Policy*:

In the war’s febrile final days, the United States detected what appeared to be radiation from a Soviet freighter headed for Egypt and concluded—almost certainly incorrectly—that Moscow was transferring nuclear warheads to Cairo. Partly in response, on Oct. 24, Washington placed its nuclear forces on a global alert for only the fourth time in history—a step it has taken only twice since. The U.S. alert prompted the Soviet Union to reportedly issue a preliminary order to begin the alerting of its own nuclear forces.

The Bushes also had their nuclear moments. The George H.W. Bush administration warned Iraqi officials: “God forbid...chemical or biological weapons are used against our forces—the American people would demand revenge.” Secretary of State James Baker explained that he “purposely left the impression that the use of chemical or biological agents by Iraq would invite tactical nuclear retaliation.” The second Bush scored a dubious trifecta: invading based on fake

evidence, violating international law, and threatening to use nuclear weapons. In 2002, President George W. Bush echoed his father. The administration also added the warning to its national security strategy, which held: “The United States will continue to make clear that it reserves the right to respond with overwhelming force—including through resort to all of our options—to the use of WMD (weapons of mass destruction) against the United States, our forces and friends and allies.”

The latter Bush also said that “all options are on the table” regarding Iran. When asked if that included nuclear weapons, he reiterated: “all options are on the table.” That was widely understood to mean yes. Bush’s successor, President Barack Obama, used the same formulation. In 2015, he explained: “I made clear that Iran would not be allowed to acquire a nuclear weapon on my watch, and it’s been my policy throughout my presidency to keep all options—including possible military options—on the table to achieve that objective.”

The U.S. also threatened use of nuclear weapons in connection with the Berlin blockade early during the Cold War, the 1958 U.S. intervention in Lebanon, and Libya’s storage of chemical weapons in 1996. Pentagon planners likely drafted additional plans to use nuclear weapons elsewhere, which remain classified and ready for a related crisis. The U.S. continues to issue nuclear warnings regarding its allies almost daily. Famous were Donald Trump’s imprecations against North Korea, that he would meet Pyongyang’s threats “with fire and fury like the world has never seen” and possessed “a much bigger & more powerful” nuclear button than the North’s Kim Jong-un. Just last week while speaking of South Korea and Japan, Deputy Secretary Wendy Sherman stated that “we will use the full range of U.S. defense capabilities to defend our allies, including nuclear, conventional and missile defense capabilities.” Also last week, *Politico* reported that “The United States has accelerated the fielding of a more accurate version of its mainstay nuclear bomb to NATO bases in Europe,” which are deployed to defend America’s NATO allies from whatever enemy might appear.

No doubt, Washington officials believed that America was justified in making these many threats. However, Putin’s warnings look less outrageous when compared to those issued by a succession of U.S. presidents apparently prepared to use nuclear weapons. If Washington can do so without consequence, why is anyone surprised when other nuclear powers follow suit? Isn’t Russia’s current situation—involving potential defeat and territorial loss—as serious as any faced by America?

Of course, this doesn’t justify Putin’s behavior. He is in the wrong. Russia’s invasion was unjustified. Moscow should halt its brutal invasion rather than threaten the use of nuclear weapons. However, the U.S. has no credibility when criticizing Russia for threatening to go nuclear. If Washington wants to lead the world on this issue, it must live by the principles that it advocates for others.

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