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Nuclear Chicken with the Kremlin

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There was a phenomenon especially prominent during the 1950s in which teenage males with a surplus of testosterone would play a game called “automobile chicken.” Two drivers on a deserted road, with friends and classmates watching and cheering, would send their cars hurtling toward each other at high speed. The assumption was that one of the drivers would swerve at the last moment, thereby avoiding a catastrophic collision, but that person would then be derided for being “chicken.” This perverted expression of masculinity was immortalised in James Dean’s iconic movie *Rebel Without a Cause*.

The popularity of automobile chicken faded quickly as too often neither driver would swerve, producing fatal head-on collisions. Unfortunately, Russian and US leaders are now playing a game of nuclear chicken regarding Ukraine, and the consequences could be similarly fatal for both countries. The key difference is that a miscalculation would cause not one or two deaths, but millions.

Russian officials have signalled on multiple occasions that while the Kremlin has no current plans to use even small, tactical nuclear weapons to end the military stalemate in Ukraine, Vladimir Putin’s government reserves the right to use nukes if Russia’s independence or territorial integrity is threatened. Putin has indicated on multiple occasions that the nuclear option remains intact to respond to such “existential threats.” Most recently, Putin stated in a September 21 speech that his “country also has various means of destruction, and for separate components and more modern than those of NATO countries, and when the territorial integrity of our country is threatened, to protect Russia and our people, we will certainly use all the means at our disposal.” He emphasised that his warning “was not a bluff.”

Joe Biden’s administration needs to take those signals seriously. But instead of backing away from its policy of supplying Ukraine with increasingly powerful weapons, Washington is doubling down on that approach despite Moscow’s rising anger. Worse, administration officials reportedly have sent “back channel” warnings to the Kremlin that any use of nuclear weapons in Ukraine would lead to “grave consequences,” suggesting a NATO military response. The conditions are now in place for a full-fledged game of nuclear chicken.

One might think that Biden’s policy team and its supporters in the foreign-policy blob would take Moscow’s latest warnings quite seriously and adopt a more cautious, prudent policy. But

these are many of the same people who dismissed or even scorned Putin's repeated statements since at least 2008 indicating that attempts to make Ukraine a NATO member or even an informal military asset would cross a "red line" and would not be tolerated. Hawks in the United States and Europe were astonishingly confident that Putin was bluffing. Russia's February 2022 invasion of Ukraine demonstrated conclusively that he was not.

One faction of hawks still insists that Moscow is bluffing when it warns it will consider the nuclear option if the Western threat grows sufficiently grave. Such individuals have apparently learned nothing from their previous miscalculations. Michael McFaul, a former U.S. ambassador to Russia, contends that warnings from Putin about using nuclear weapons in response to mounting Western military assistance to Kiev should be ignored. "The threat of escalation is cheap talk," McFaul states confidently. "Putin is bluffing." Other hawks urge the Biden administration not to give in to Russia's "nuclear blackmail." They seem oblivious to the probable consequences if their predictions are wrong.

A competing faction takes the possibility that Russia might use tactical nuclear weapons in Ukraine somewhat more seriously, but their "solution" is terrifying. Max Boot contends that President Biden needs to prevent that from happening by emphasizing that, while under current circumstances the United States will not fight Russia directly, all bets are off if Putin goes nuclear. Even without resorting to nuclear weapons of their own, NATO could launch airstrikes that would rapidly sink the entire Russian Black Sea fleet and destroy much of the Russian army in and around Ukraine. That would shake Putin's criminal regime to its foundations. We cannot stop Putin from a reckless escalation, but we need to convince him that the price would be too high to pay. We certainly should not allow his threats to deter us from providing Ukraine with every weapon it needs to win.

Boot apparently assumes that the Russian bear would simply slink away from such a confrontation and lick its wounds. Even for a fan of US military power and its promiscuous use, Boot's is an extraordinarily arrogant and irresponsible assumption. He does not even seem to consider the possibility that Russia might choose instead to escalate the confrontation. And escalation in this case would mean an outright nuclear war between Russia and NATO.

The Biden administration is trying to straddle the two positions taken by its hawkish allies in the foreign-policy blob. US officials contend that it is "unlikely" that Russia will use nuclear weapons, but concede that the threat of that scenario has "elevated" in recent weeks.

Some Russian leaders unfortunately seem as arrogant as their American counterparts and assume that Moscow's use of nuclear weapons would not trigger a NATO attack. Putin's trusted deputy, Dmitry Medvedev, epitomized that attitude in a September 27 statement. "Let's imagine that Russia is forced to use its most formidable weapons against the Ukrainian regime, which has committed a large-scale act of aggression that is endangering the very existence of our state. I believe that NATO will not directly interfere in the conflict even in this scenario," Medvedev contended. He added that the security of Washington, London, and Brussels was "much more important to NATO than the fate of a dying Ukraine."

One can almost visualise the two cars speeding toward each other, with both drivers confident that his rival will swerve at the last moment. The American people are now at greater risk of a nuclear war than at any time since the Cuban Missile Crisis. Then, Moscow retreated from the impending clash, recognising that Washington was determined to prevent the deployment of offensive missiles on America's doorstep. The Kremlin wisely concluded that the United States would not back down from even a nuclear confrontation, but would go to war to prevent such a threat to its vital interests.

This time, Washington is the party that needs to back away from a spiraling confrontation before it's too late. As I have written elsewhere, Russian leaders consider Ukraine to be a vital Russian security interest. The Kremlin will do whatever is necessary to prevent a humiliating military defeat and avoid the prospect of Western troops and missiles on its border with Ukraine—probably including the use of tactical nuclear weapons.

In short, Russia is not likely to be the driver who swerves in this game of nuclear chicken. If the United States does not do so—even at the cost of being labelled an appeasing “chicken”—the outcome promises to be a head-on collision and a catastrophe for Russia, the United States, and the world.

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