Virtual Event | Thinking About the Unthinkable in Ukraine: Could Putin Use Weapons of Mass Destruction?

TRANSCRIPT

Discussion

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• Rebecca L. Heinrichs, Senior Fellow, Hudson Institute
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A video of the event is available: https://www.hudson.org/events/2098-virtual-event-thinking-about-the-unthinkable-in-ukraine-could-putin-use-weapons-of-mass-destruction-32022

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Ken Weinstein:

Good afternoon and welcome to Hudson Institute. I'm Ken Weinstein, the Walter P. Stern Distinguished Fellow at Hudson. And this is a special live Hudson Institute event. It's Tuesday, March 29th. It's good to see our colleagues in person for an in person panel. First time I've done one of these with so many people since COVID, but the subject is a very ominous one. Thinking about the unthinkable in Ukraine, could Vladimir Putin use weapons of mass destruction?

Now we've seen in recent days, policy makers, most notably President Biden in public, but many more behind closed doors, and journalists as well speculating about the potential use of nuclear, chemical, or biological weapons by Russian forces who have faced surprising setbacks in their invasion of Ukraine. This past Saturday, for instance, former Russian President Medvedev, the deputy chair of the Russian National Security Council, said Russia reserve the right to use nuclear weapons against an enemy that only used conventional weapons, building on Vladimir Putin's pronouncements about putting nuclear forces on readiness.

And this statement, of course, comes in the midst of numerous and contradictory public statements from the Russians about their changing war aims. Accordingly, while the use of weapons of mass destruction might not be likely, it is a possibility that policy makers in the U.S. and Europe need to grapple with, as The Economist noted in an ominous editorial entitled, "What's the Worst That Can Happen: The risk that the war in Ukraine escalates past the nuclear threshold," but it does seem disturbingly possible. Now like The Economist, which cited Hudson Institute founder Herman Kahn and his 44-step Ladder of Nuclear Escalation, we're also following in Herman's footsteps. Herman, of course, was famous for thinking about the unthinkable in his classic 1962 book in which he made a very simple but controversial case.

Thermonuclear war may seem unthinkable, immoral, insane, hideous, or highly unlikely, but it is not impossible. To act intelligently, we must learn as much as we can about the risks. We may therefore be able to avoid nuclear war. We may even be able to avoid the crises that bring us to the brink of nuclear war.

And on that note, I'm delighted to turn to a distinguished panel of Hudson Institute experts who will help us expand the imagination, as Herman would've put it, think about the unthinkable, and examine possible scenarios about the use of weapons of mass destruction and what might be done to prevent their usage.

I will first turn to Bill Schneider. Bill is a Hudson senior fellow, former Undersecretary of State, former chair of the Defense Science Board. We'll then hear from Bryan Clark, who is senior fellow and who directs the Center for Defense Concepts and Technology here at Hudson Institute, who's a specialist on electronic warfare next generation systems. We'll then hear from Rebeccah Heinrichs, who is of course a noted Capitol Hill aide and has written widely on missile defense deterrents and on nuclear force posture. And lastly, we'll turn to David Asher. David served, of course, at DOD and at the Department of State, focus on money laundering efforts, stopping money laundering efforts, attempts to stop the use of weapons of mass destruction, and also the economic implications of geo strategy among other areas.

So let me first turn it over to Bill for his opening thoughts. I'll ask our panelists to keep it brief, five minutes or so, so we can have a discussion back and forth. Thank you, Bill.
Bill Schneider:

Thanks, Ken. This is indeed a moment to reflect on some of the work that Herman has done. And in thinking about the circumstances that we currently face, seem to me there's a few things we should keep in mind as we try to affect the behavior of the Russian state.

First, as we need to think about how the state is governed. In the case of Russia, it's no longer a communist state as it was during the past 70 years or so, it's now a kleptocracy. The governance model is closer to that of a mafia than of a communist state. Communist state has a politburo. They can expel the unwanted members. They did in 1964 when they got rid of Krushchev.

Second is, in thinking about how to deter, we have to remember that we have to deter an individual, not a country. The individual is the one that makes the decision or the group that makes the decision. And we don't have to deter in a like for like way. That is, we don't necessarily have to use nuclear weapons as a means of deterring adversary behavior.

Third, the way in which we have to deter needs to take into account the fact that modern warfare has gone from strictly a kinetic affair of land, sea, air, and space, to involve non-kinetic and even human factors. Cyber and electronic warfare are illustrations of non-kinetic. And the introduction of the technologies of information have created many more ways in which conflict will take place. And these cases, many of these instruments of conflict, cyber for example, may coexist with kinetic, which may also coexist with electronic and information operations and other forms of warfare. So we need to take into account all of these things, in order to deter the behavior of the individual.

Bryan Clark:

Yeah. To build on Bill's points a little bit, I think we see in Ukraine an example of the limits of our traditional approaches to deterrence. Rebeccah's obviously the expert here, but it seems like we clearly didn't deter Russian aggression against Ukraine, and we seemed to take some approach that was a variation on our traditional denial of the benefits of the aggression or punishment in the wake of aggression. Those are the two approaches we generally have relied on. Neither of which worked here. Russia pursued their aggression, no matter what threats of sanctions we imposed on them.

And I think what it's showing is that we need to think about deterrence maybe more in the form of dissuasion. How do we take a country off the path it's on? And that's something that has to happen in the lead up to the conflict or confrontation, not at the moment of conflict or confrontation. So the time to dissuade Putin from pursuing aggression would've been in the years leading up to now, between maybe even the annexation of Crimea and what happened most recently. Trying to basically set the conditions for understanding that we're going to continue to confront and push back on every provocation, every gray zone action, every set of hybrid warfare operations they conduct. We're not going to wait till the very end and say, "Well, we're going to try to defeat you at the goal line at Ukraine. We're going to be pushing back on you all the time."

And you can see now, from the Russian perspective, this is the approach they take against us. So dissuasion or the persistent engagement is what Russia has been doing against the United States. And it's set up the conditions for WMD use, in the case of the current conflict.
So over the last several years, Putin and the Russians have supported Syria using chemical weapons against their own people. So clearly showing that they're willing to employ those kinds of weapons, if necessary, to instill terror in the population or to get a gain in the battlefield. They've used biological weapons in individual basis against particular people. And they've also threatened the use and deployed new nuclear weapons and operated them far afield, showing their willingness to do demonstrations of nuclear capabilities.

That's all been part of their dissuasion efforts to constrain our options and prevent the United States and the allies from being a little bit more aggressive in terms of responding to their actions in Ukraine and elsewhere.

We need to be thinking along the same lines. The United States and its allies need to think of more persistently engaging and pushing back on these confrontations that Russia and China present day to day, instead of waiting for this to be a goal line stand, where we just say, "Well, we're going to deny you the benefits of the aggression, or we're going to come and punish you after the fact." It's a different way of thinking about it, and it incurs risk. We have to think about the fact that's going to mean that we are now confronting Chinese or Russian forces day to day in ways that we did during the Cold War, but we have not in the years since.

But I think that's where we are now is, okay, that's failed. Deterrence has failed. We need to think about dissuasion going forward. But now faced with this threat of WMD use, we have to understand that there's a willingness to employ those systems on the part of the Russians, and we need to understand how would we push back if they begin to start using them? And we can talk about that as we go forward today.

Rebeccah Heinrichs:

Sure. Thanks. I'll just piggyback on a couple of different things that both Bill and Bryan have already said. One, I think that President Biden has made the whole scenario a situation where he has repeatedly talked about trying to prevent World War III. And of course, what he means by that is what's implied, is an all-out war in which nuclear weapons would be employed. And because he has made that, we're not going to do this because therefore World War II could ensue, or so we're not going to do this because of that, he has precluded the ability of the United States to engage in these lower levels of escalation.

And so, in a major crisis, if one person is not willing to escalate and the other person is, the other person's going to continue to escalate. And that's what we're seeing on the part of the Russians. And that has essentially just eliminated all of these other elements that the United States could be using to engage the Russians. So I think that's the first big mistake. It's worse than a gaff because the President's not doing it by accident. He has made this, he has set the table with this.

And the other thing that I think has been a major mistake in the way the Biden administration has engaged with this crisis is by continually saying that this will necessarily result in World War III, because Russia is a nuclear power, that they have sent the message out loud and clear that the United States will not even engage, conventionally or even in lower levels, of nonnuclear, of course, warfare, if the adversarial power has a nuclear weapon.

So the message has been, if you don't want the United States to engage you, get a nuclear weapon. It's worse than anything that people have been concerned about. You think about the Libya model, when
people have said that, or the overthrowing of Kadafi after he got rid of his nuclear weapons. That is small potatoes relative to the message that continues to be sent out from this administration on the value of having a nuclear weapon and how that will prevent the United States from engaging on these lower levels of escalation.

And then with that, I think that we're watching the unraveling of the nonproliferation regime, and we are entering into an era in which the value of nuclear weapons, nuclear coercion, and brinkmanship, I think has up.

A couple other points on that point that I think are just worth putting on the table. It was just January 3rd of '22, this past year, where the United States led this joint statement of the leaders of the five nuclear weapons states on preventing nuclear war and avoiding arms races. This statement, it was a mistake because it basically acknowledged or gave credence to this idea that either the Chinese or the Russians are in good standing with... We remain committed to our nuclear nonproliferation treaty obligations, including article six, obligation to pursue negotiations in good faith, in effective measures, relating to cessation of the nuclear arms race at an early date and to nuclear disarmament. On and on it goes. We know that, of course, the Chinese are engaged in a major strategic break of nuclear weapons development and we know that the Russians, just looking at the kinds of nuclear weapons that they're investing in are theater ranged nuclear weapons that they will not even permit the United States to negotiate with. So they're completely unconstrained by treaty, and so we can look at the capabilities, look at some of the rhetoric that comes out of Russian generals and we know that this wasn't true. So this was a mistake and I think that this is a time of serious reflection from the Biden administration who might be well intentioned on the desire for the United States to move away from nuclear weapons in our own military strategy but understanding that it hasn't had the effect of removing the consideration and the importance that our adversaries place on nuclear weapons as they carry out their military strategies and military aims.

I'm going to go ahead and leave it there I've got other things to say but I'll go ahead and let... We'll turn it over and I look forward to the discussion.

Ken Weinstein:
Thank you David is going to look at this from a slightly different perspective, what the international economic implications might be of such an attack.

David Asher:
Well first yeah just to say that we have unprecedented sanctions on the Russians but they're not all encompassing. As you can see on the slide behind me they account for about 12% of all global Oil output, 16.6% of Natural gas, 5.2% in Coal on and on some of the more exotics like Palladium they're absolutely dominant in the world market. Okay so the question is, are we shutting the Russians really out of the world market effectively and the things that add the most economic value added and the answer is no.

So and then the another thing to countenance is are they really suffering just in terms of the amount of flow? You can see behind me the amount of Gas being pumped out of Russia since the war began has
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skyrocketed. Okay so that’s all going to Gazprombank as well as a few others but it’s money that’s controlled by Vladimir Putin and his inner circle Ozero Dacha network.

So they call Ozero Dacha, we can see how dependent the Europeans are in Natural gas. We're afraid of sliding them into a recession or even something worse but at the same time it’s starting to warm up in Europe. We better lift our fears and anxieties there's still enough alternative supply. What we do need to be concerned about is the impact on the world Oil market. The world Oil market is unfortunately the swing producer right now is Russia in most regards even if the Iranians do come back online so much of their supply is already sort of allocated to the Chinese that I don't really see that becoming as significant as Russia being turned off, and if Russia is turned off on Gas we're going to... The only way we're going to see alleviation that is just total demand destruction which is going to be the perception in Europe and on oil it's going to be a price effect, and when we talk about prices.

This is a simulation I did back when Oil was at $80 a barrel so forgive me but it's still relatively accurate. If you were to go from $80 to let's say $175 in a barrel for oil and it happened in let's say three months and it lasted for three months. You could see massive demand destruction on the order of nearly 4% of GDP globally. If it went on for longer than that, you could see it even go up to 7-8% GDP. I mean we're talking about... We're already gone through a COVID depression. We could enter back into one and Oil and consumer prices are highly correlated, so one of the biggest problem with consumer prices right now is they're rising and only recently has Oil started to rise is the first time in American history since we've had Oil that consumer prices have risen well ahead of an Oil shock.

So the problem is now you get an Oil shock, it's going to be far worse and that will just lead to demand destruction and when prices go up, GDP goes down. It's a very simple almost identity in economics, but I want to just bring out a couple last things. Is Putin really losing money on this trade, I was a former Macro strategist for five hedge funds so I'll think like a trader here. Somebody somehow made a gigantic forward bet in the future's market for national gas in London back in December... Late November began it pushed up prices on the order of more than double.

It was the biggest spike in Natural gas future's in history until the invasion occurred. It happened before the invasion, now there was a supply demand in-balance but the rumor of course is in the markets that somebody from a Russian sovereign wealth fund related actor placed a big bet in gas future's and also Oil futures at the time and that led to this huge shock in the market.

The final thing is I'm just going to point out here. The Bancor Sia Network which is Vladimir Putin's financial network more than anyone else from by a guy named Yury Kovalchuk is in many places intact. It has been sanctioned, it has been actioned, it has been demanded to be shut. If you go look in Cyprus right now, you'll see a huge number of Bancor Sia related companies moving money like crazy all the world. It's not some secret you can see it in the corporate registry. The point is this, that network also has existed in places like the Netherlands and [inaudible 00:18:32], Cayman islands as the Pandora papers pointed out. If we don't crack the whip and shut down these finance conduits, we're not going to really have a value based in impact on Putin's own thinking.

Okay I do think he cares about money, he was a business intelligence officer in the KGB, so were many of his colleagues by the way that he's closest to. That is a very unusual assignment in the Russian intelligence service. There weren't that many of those guys, so he's sensitive to economic and economic factors but if he can get away with economic murder and then use nuclear weapons to increase the
chances of escalation including to the point that he could trigger a worldwide depression, a worldwide crisis of unity. I would not rule it out from an economic warfare standpoint that Vladimir Putin is willing under certain circumstances to pull the... Hit the button and trigger some sort of tactical nuclear attack. Just from an economic standpoint he could cause us more damage than it would cause him in his calculations especially if he were to escalate to deescalate. So I put aside the normal Herman Kahn view of this but I go back to Herman's views on economics and try to connect them with security. Thank you.

Ken Weinstein:

These have been excellent presentations and your presentation David actually brings us back to where Bill Schneider talked about Putin being a Kleptocracy understanding that the challenges we face in trying to come up with a model of the deterrence which extraordinarily well articulated by the panel here. Let me ask each of you A is this scenario possible? Or how likely a scenario do you think it is, this notion and how much the tactical nukes do they change the game and is there any way to deterrent? I know those were three different questions but let's start out with those Bill why don't you start and we'll go down the line here

Bill Schneider:

Okay yeah it's a very pertinent question and one of the points that has emerged in the past week or so is that well there's a high level of unity and outrage among the NATO members that it's not there isn't the same unity across the board on dealing with taking the pain of these sanctions. Germany and Italy for example are look forward to a time when they won't have to buy Russian Oil but not now and as a consequence, Russia is cognizant of the fact that they have very substantial economic leverage over both the EU and NATO countries and indirectly over the U.S. because the public policy is made lifting Oil and gas, something that the country doesn't want so why should an investor try and increase Oil and gas production now when six months ago the government was trying to shut them down.

So you have these reinforcing very destructive trends that increase the leverage that Putin has and as David was suggesting until you start going after things that the leadership who make the decisions value, you are not going to affect their behavior. So I think we have... It's time for a harder think about how to do this.

Bryan Clark:

Yeah so for it comes to the tactical nuclear weapons, they've made this sort of evolution from being actual battlefield weapons during the cold war to then becoming messaging tools and the U.S. chose not to use that as a messaging tool but the Russians continue to employ them and as Rebecca said, they've now deployed a large array, a variety of tactical weapons that are in this small scale whatever I guess sub 30 Megaton or again sorry 30 Kiloton regime where they could be employed as part of a small scale military endeavor but their messaging was mostly just in terms of how you moved them around, it was we had some submarine launched nuclear weapons on the Tomahawk that could be employed as part of a messaging campaign.

The B61 bomb is employed as part of that as well. The difference is now we've sort of both the us and the Russians have it's been nobody's used them. So they've been just used as a messaging tool now we've gotten to the point where they're not really taking that seriously. So the expectation is well you
move these tactical weapons around but you're never going to use them. So maybe they've lost some of the value as a message and I think maybe Putin could look at this as an opportunity to restore that ability of tactical weapons to really influence enemy's decision making, because right now they don't influence it that much but-

Bill Schneider:
They have three systems in the theatre-

Bryan Clark:
Right they [crosstalk 00:23:25] have three systems in the theatre but because nobody's used a nuclear weapon since 1945 in anger, we've gotten to the point where they don't have that much deterrent value or that much influence on the decision making. So he could employ one as a message not employed in the battle per se but maybe employed in a place like Chernobyl where there's a depopulated area that you could do a demonstration in but demonstrating a tactical nuclear weapon. I think in the context of this confrontation would be a way to restore their value as a messaging tool for the Russians and it's one of their few tools to really influence U.S. and allied decision making, so I to me that's the risk is this sort of demonstration employment not so much an employment that's going to have any real military value.

Rebeccah Heinrichs:
Yeah a couple of points. One, I think that chemical weapons are much more likely to be employed by the Russians. I mean I can go through the different U.S. officials that have discussed them I think this administration deserves credit for using intelligence to call out a potential false flag scenario in which the Russians employ chemical weapon and then blame the Ukrainians. I know Bill can talk a little bit more about how they might go about doing that and who they might pin it on specifically and so I mean of course that would be ridiculous. It would be the Russians that would be employing a chemical weapon, should it horrifically occur. The United States would not of course, we do not use chemical weapons and so there was this gaffe the president made unfortunately that we would respond but the White House did a good job I think clarifying that's not true and secretary Lincoln clarified that we would not do that as well.

So what would we do? That's the big question I wanted to foot stamp something bill said, which is we would not necessarily I mean obviously in this case we would not do something specifically in kind because we would not use chemical weapons but I do think that would be we might want to talk about some. I know there's a tiger team looking at this inside the National Security Council and I think that would... Should elicit something new and different from the United States. I think it's a mistake for the administration to always require every NATO member to be on board before we act.

I think that gives too much power to those who are even more risk averse than president Biden. I would be looking at the countries like the Brits, the Polls, the Romanians, the Bolts, the Czechs kind of just and but I would definitely be talking. We should be in very close consultation because these are the countries that are most at risk and they're the ones that obviously have assurances that we provide them and they're nearest to the problem and so it should be extremely important that the United States is walking shoulder to shoulder with those countries that are vulnerable of even having a secondary impact from something like this occurring in Ukraine. And another thing I think is important to note is
that the Russians are still is in good standing with the Chemical Weapons Convention. That's ridiculous. I think if the Russians obviously were to do that, they should no longer be in good standing with the OPCW. They've provided cover for the assault regime for the employment of nuclear weapons. Of course, the Russians use nuclear weapons too in these nerve agents for assassination attempts, and even recently supposedly reportedly used them possibly to poison negotiators.

The tactical weapons, if I can just say a couple things just real quick... I think that the Russians, they're using nuclear coercion because I think it is working on us. I think it's working on us in terms of how unwilling or how risk averse it's making this administration for doing anything in the conventional context. That's what I mean by it works. They're signaling, they're engaging in nuclear signaling, they moved one of their massive strategic military exercises that used nuclear delivery systems to coincide right before the invasion. And then when the United States had a long planned Minuteman III test, this administration rather than, "The Russians would have known about that, it would not be a surprise. We can't plan it to be happening during the invasion.", the administration decided to not move forward with that test because the message they wanted to convey was that they did not want to signal that we are going back and forth with these nuclear threats.

Unfortunately, I think that what that did was it affirmed in the Russians mind that we are intimidated by the thought of nuclear employment, such that we wouldn't even go forward with a planned and necessary ICBM test. And so all of those things, I think, have not worked to our advantage and unfortunately increases the power that the threats of nuclear weapons has over the United States and how we might respond in Ukraine. I think it would be a game changer. If a nuclear weapon was used where there was nobody located, I think that would require a response from the United States that would be such that it would cause the Russians to regret that employment.

**Ken Weinstein:**

David.

**David Asher:**

Well, I'm not as sure about that, actually. I was a nuclear arms negotiator several times in my career, most notably with the North Koreans and the Russians in the six-party talks and the Chinese, but Japan and Korea, but I spent enough time in the last stages of the Trump administration working on nuclear arms control as well to know... Have some appreciation with the Russians. At least I've been talking about with my colleagues, and they've been talking about tactical nuclear weapons and their value. They've been more willing to think about taking some of their intermediate range missile delivery capabilities away, but not their tactical nukes. And tactical has gotten very strategic, actually, in the way it could be employed. We're talking about deep bunker busting type tactical nuclear weapons, some of which we've never really seen.

Now, one thing we have to realize here is there are a lot of weapons systems being employed that have never been seen visibly before, the hypersonic being delivered. Bryan could tell us how much of a show that was. But it's sending a message, it certainly showed that it could make a big bang. The question is, how much is this an existential crisis? Peskov, the spokesperson for Putin, said recently that if this becomes an existential crisis for Vladimir Putin, nuclear weapons are on the table in terms of their use, fair use. What does that mean? How many times have Russians talked about nuclear weapons since the
beginning of the Cold War? Almost never. Pretty much never, actually, in public. This is the first we've had 4, 5, 6 times this Putin regime has talked about. Why? Everything else they've talked about, they've delivered on. Let's not forget that.

So, have they delivered well? No, they delivered badly, but because they've done such a bad job and because we've gone to economic war with them, obviously in my mind, justifiably, what do they have to lose? Well, they still have a lot to lose and we need to make that clear. All their gas exports for the next decade, all their oil exports. But are really the Europeans going to cooperate with that? Are they really going to be able to stand for it? Are they going to accept the economic cost? If he used a nuclear weapon to take out Zelenskyy, who obviously has a personal deep grudge with, because he's being showed up, which it interferes with his whole tsarist, "I'm the great Peter the Great successor" mojo, if he uses it, does it vindicate him? In his mind of history, is he really playing for us? Does he really care, or does he actually think he might be able to succeed?

My fear is that, first, he's not suffering economically at this stage to really deter him. We're not putting physical forces in the theater, at least overtly. Invisible deterrents in my mind is not deterrents. I worked on some of the third offset programs and high tech stuff with Bill and others in the past. Great. We have all sorts of great stuff, but what the F-117, the B2 in the 80s, didn't necessarily know about it.

So the problem is this. We are in the riskiest situation probably since World War II in many ways, riskier in many ways than the Cuban missile crisis, and we are not putting some of our cards on the table. We're not putting military forces really armed with nuclear weapons overtly on their borders. We've given up deterrence with nuclear saying we're going to avoid World War III at all costs. Of course, we are going to do that. But if he doesn't feel the damn that is over his head, my fear is that Putin decides to do something ahistorical, atypical, but in his mind, great. And that could be the use of something that would try to decapitate the Zelenskyy regime.

Ken Weinstein:

Can you give us a little bit more on that scenario? We've discussed it, but for the audience. And then I want to get reactions.

David Asher:

I mean, it's not that I want the scenarios.

Ken Weinstein:

No, of course not.

David Asher:

It's not even that I think it's likely. But is it possible? I'd say certainly it's possible because right now he's bogged down. Now, one other thing that a certain four-star general I spoke to just the other day told me, is he finds it unusual, as an army general, that Putin's forces essentially surrounding Kyiv but they haven't withdrawn even though they're getting pummeled with these retaliatory attacks. So what are they waiting for? Are they in a position because they might be outside of the blast zone? I mean, Bryan, Bill, you guys know much more about this than I do. Obviously, my general friend knows something too
since he's commanded a lot of armies around the world. But the question is this, what's he going for? Now, he says now he's going to withdraw and he's going to focus on Donbass. He's already got Donbass, so what does this mean?

I mean, he's perfectly capable of being a guy when his lips are moving, he's lying. So to me, I would assume in his classic Russian doctrine, and I'm not an expert in Russia the way I'm in China and East Asia, but dealt with him enough to know, especially on the economic intelligence and clandestine operations level, that these guys will just play as dirty as they come. And we got to understand that just because nobody's used a nuclear weapon doesn't mean that he thinks it's verboten in his mind. I mean, he might do it just because he thinks it's going to shift the entire power balance, and then he immediately opens negotiations and says it'll never ever happen again, or will say, "Oh, it was a mistake." Some general went off and did it, shoots the guy in the head.

I mean, there's obviously some mental issues going on with Putin, maybe not in terms of his sanity, but he's certainly in a level of irritability, and it's not necessarily irrationality, but he has a certain cognitive dissonance function which we've seen in other leaders who've escalated into unimaginable lengths in the past. My own view is he may not be... The North Koreans wouldn't go this far, they act like it. But Putin's not... The things that he's doing but not saying disturb me more than even what he's saying. And what he said is he's mentioned the potential use of nuclear weapons repeatedly.

**Ken Weinstein:**

So you've talked about the potential use of a bunker buster tactical nuke to decapitate the Ukrainian regime. Let me get the reaction. What's the sense of likelihood of this? What can be done, if anything, to deter against it? How reliable are the Russian tactical nukes moreover?

**Rebeccah Heinrichs:**

I would still just say that's still in the realm of very unlikely, because I think that there will be... I think that the Russians would be seriously miscalculating what the response would be from the United States and allies. I still think that it's possible. It's always been possible. I think it's more possible the longer this war goes on. I think in the scenario, though, that we're talking about now, again, what is more likely is the employment of chemical weapons because you still get the shock and the horror. And the goal for the Russians is to get the Zelensky government to throw in the towel. I mean, that's the goal. And if you get to the point where you're in a stalemate, which in the fog of war it's hard to keep track of what's the most credible explanation for who's winning and who's gaining these military objectives and how successful Ukrainians have been at preventing the Russians from taking theirs, but it does seem to be stuck right now.

And so I think that's when the likelihood of a chemical weapons... And I wanted to correct. I didn't mean to say that the Russians were in good standing of the Chemical Weapons Convention, they're not. The state department said that they were not. But they are with the OPCW, and so that would be a mistake. But again, I don't want to downplay it as an impossibility. I think it's a mistake anytime somebody says it could never have happen.
Ken Weinstein:

Yeah.

Rebeccah Heinrichs:

I think we should take it seriously. And my hope is that the administration is communicating what kinds of things we are willing to do. I think if that were to occur, I... And again, I think all of these conversations need to be happening with our allies. I am concerned that Secretary Austin and General Milley have not been able to get the Russians to pick up the phone when it comes to talking about this particular scenario, which is very worrying.

Ken Weinstein:

Yeah. And this is exactly the point of this exercise, which is to look at possible things, not necessarily likely things, and to say, "This is what we need to focus on in order to prevent what might be likely or what might be possible from happening." So, yeah.

Bill Schneider:

The use of a bunker buster is, I think, probably less likely use of nuclear weapons than... The Russian have air defense with nuclear weapons on them. So intercepting, say, one of our Global Hawk unmanned aerial systems that's flying in the area, no one's killed, but the readiness to use nuclear weapons to achieve a military purpose would be apparent. I think that may be a way in which nuclear use comes into view that the Russians take responsibility for.

The chemicals seems, as Rebeccah suggested, it's emerged in the false flag thing, where there is a neo-Nazi battalion that the Russians maintains called the Sparta Brigade. In fact, the commander was killed early in the war. In the Ukraine side, there's Azov battalion, which is also described as a neo-Nazi group. Both sides use this Nazi symbology for various purposes, but it gives opportunities for false flag operations in ways in which chemical weapons might be used. And of course, Russia has made it possible for Syria to have sarin gas, they didn't invent sarin themselves. And so I think the Russian inhibitions on sharing lethal chemical agents and not just toxic industrial chemicals like chlorine, which also is used in Syria, is probably an appealing alternative for them if they want to escalate.

Ken Weinstein:

Bryan.

Bryan Clark:

Yeah. So it seems like chemical weapons won't give you the kind of battlefield advantage that I think the Russians are looking to try to gain right now because they... Looks like they're trying to consolidate their lines, focus on regions in the east that they can hold onto. And if they want to break through in a place like Kyiv chemical weapons aren't going to really help you do that just because of the way the Ukrainian forces are dispersed. The problem right now is the Russians present a very nice target, because they're relatively concentrated and channelized. The Ukrainian forces are offering none of that. So chemical weapons aren't going to really be effective in a dispersed area that, aren't that useful. They're useful
though to terrorize the population, which is how they were employed primarily in Syria, but it was not to get a battlefield advantage, but to terrorize. And then eventually get, in the case of Zelenskyy to step down, to say, "Well, I can't take the carnage anymore. I'm going to turn over to a Russian-friendly government and we'll be done with it."

I've seen nuclear weapons in a similar vein, obviously the level of destruction can be high enough that it could give you a military advantage. But the problem is then an advantage in what? A contaminated area that your forces will not be able to deploy into? And I also think the bunker buster idea is probably not very effective. A bunker buster nuclear weapon is effective in a relatively small area and you have to know where the bunker is. So those weapons are useful when you're going after a fixed target that's well identified. And for all we know, President Zelenskyy is in the Western Ukraine and moves around pretty frequently. So it's unlikely that you'd be able to really decapitate the regime with a tactical nuclear weapon.

But I think as Bill said, it's more likely that you would see a nuclear weapon being used in a demonstration of some sort, whether it's an air defense demonstration or you go after some ancillary target off to the side that maybe induces some casualties, but is not a mass casualty event. But it shows that you've broken the nuclear taboo. And that the tactical weapons you have, they're on the table. They could be used. And to Rebeccah's point, I mean, I think the nuclear coercion that's been successful thus far has been nuclear coercion in general. It was not necessarily related to tactical weapons, per se. And I think for Russia, breaking the nuclear taboo with a tactical weapon opens up this whole set of options that they might employ in the future. So it's very useful from a messaging perspective.

Ken Weinstein:
Sure. Rebeccah, yeah.

Rebeccah Heinrichs:
If I could say quick too, I know that the Biden administration is right now, I think the classified version of their nuclear posture review is done and is being briefed to members and then the unclass will be coming out too. I mean, now is the time that because I think we agreed that it is possible even if not likely that it is in our interest to be engaging in trying to shore up and to convince the Russians that would be a mistake, and that the United States does have the resolve to defend our vital interests. So I think the administration really needs to take a whole new look at this and take a completely different approach to this. A couple things that I've heard that could be in the nuclear posture review is the removal of the nuclear, this SLCM-N, which was suggested by the previous administration in response to this particular problem. Which is that the Russians might escalate to deescalate in a purely conventional conflict in order to get the United States and NATO-

Ken Weinstein:
Let's explain that for our audience. SLCM-N.
Rebeccah Heinrichs:

Sea launch, cruise missile with the nuclear one in order to provide to the United States has a proportional response in theater, ready to go at the ready. In order to lower the threshold of nuclear or to raise the nuclear threshold, because the Russians are the ones that are lowering the nuclear threshold. It would be a mistake just from right now, when what's going on to remove that particular weapon system. I've heard people say, "Well, we've got other things that we could use, but I think right now, that's just not the message we want to be conveying." Also heard that they might be removing the W76 low yield warhead from the submarine launch ballistic missile, which was at added back during the previous administration and sent out to sea. Also that would be a mistake. And then the declaratory policy.

Thankfully, I've heard it's not going to be first use or even a sole purpose, but anything that moves away, the seem as though the United States, isn't willing to employ nuclear weapons in any kind of strategic attack, nuclear or not, I think is a mistake. And so, again, I think that it's this paradox about deterrence. You actually have to not only have the capability to defend your vital interest, but you have to convey your willingness to employ it. And I think that's where we've got some work to do, some shoring up to do, and some messaging that needs to happen to convince them. And the French foreign minister came out right after the Russian started nuclear saber rattling. The French foreign minister came out and said that he wanted to remind the Russians that NATO is a nuclear alliance as well, which I thought was a nice way to put it. But more of those sort of calm demonstrations of resolve and will from the United States government would be very helpful.

Ken Weinstein:

Great. And we have-

David Asher:

Can I say one thing, because I know we have no time with left almost. There needs to be a Biden doctrine related to Russia and its future. In 1982, as Bill will personally remember, Ronald Reagan started a program to economically, politically and culturally defeat the Soviet Union. Okay. It was very well planned. It was very well executed and it was successful. Putin vividly remembers that. The one time, well, twice I was in the room with the guy, but one time his recollections of what happened beginning in the early stages of the 1980s to the Russian economy, I remember he was the economic officer. Let's not forget it. He got sort of emotional about it. It was an interesting encounter, not with me, but my boss Colin Powell at the time. And it was just very, very interesting because he doesn't want to see greater Russia, the Russian empire fail again. And he saw it happen once.

And I have to say the threat failure is important. I think our Biden doctrine should say, "If you're going to use nuclear weapons, we're going to go after you." The president sort of said it, but he's got to sort of mean it. He's got to be willing... We're going to do economic, political, cultural, strategic containment. We're going to surround you. We're going to put you in a box, and we're not going to be fearful of you. And frankly, in that context, it might be easier to engage with Vladimir Putin than it is right now. I mean, we've been way too, almost condescending and way too, just unwillingness to deploy any spears in reaction to his aggressive threats. And I think it's a mistake.
Ken Weinstein:

[inaudible 00:45:27] they set the high bar. Wrap up remarks, thoughts?

Bill Schneider:

Yeah. I think it's very important for us to bear in mind what Putin's aims are. They are not to produce a neutral Ukraine. They are not to keep Ukraine out of NATO. It is to absorb NATO. And his vision of a so-called Russian world, which would be a Eurasian, Russian empire that unlike the Soviet Union, which was shaped by Stalin to be a multinational empire led by the communist ideology. Putin sees it as an oil Russian empire. That would be based on Russian ethnicity. And as the late Brzezinski said, "Ukraine is the key to preventing the reemergence of the effects simile of the former Soviet Union." So I think we need to keep the war aims in mind. And as David suggested, going after the core of those aims and disrupting it is almost certainly part of the dimension of deterrence that we need to bring back.

Ken Weinstein:

Right.

Bryan Clark:

Yeah. And I think we could see that in this fight, WMD is going to be a limited battlefield utility, but it's useful to terrorize the population, get the Zelenskyy regime to step down, which is ultimately what Russia wants rather than absorbing the country in a military confrontation that takes months or years to play out. To that end though, they've done a great job up till now, messaging their willingness to use WMD as part of the set of tools available to them and some of the options that they have at their disposal. And I think while the U.S. does not want to mount a similar campaign to use WMD. But I think the U.S. needs to learn from this experience and say, we need to be thinking more carefully about how do we persistently engage our opponents or adversaries, and show our willingness to do things at lower levels of escalation and maybe even at higher ones. But take some small risks that allow us to convey that resolve that Rebeccah talked about, to a much greater degree than we have up till now.

Ken Weinstein:

Great. Look, I want to thank each of you. Bill Schneider, Bryan Clark, Rebeccah Heinrichs, David Asher. This has been a superb conversation, a very enlightening one, looking at the possibilities of the use of WMD and thinking about what we need to prevent this in the future. Thank you very much. I also want to thank the Hudson Institute public affairs team for all their work to pull this event off. Thank you.

Bill Schneider:

Thank you.

Bryan Clark:

Thank you.