

Crossing the psychological Rubicon: US-NATO risks nuclear war

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As NATO continues to recklessly escalate the war in Ukraine, it is high time that President Biden be asked two questions: 1) When in your campaign for the presidency did you state that you would risk a nuclear war with Russia? 2) Based on intelligence information provided to you by Pentagon and CIA advisers, how many hundreds of millions, or billions of people, do you expect will die in the United States, Europe and throughout the world in a nuclear exchange with Russia?

In the media and the discussions among capitalist politicians, it appears that not only a political, but also a psychological Rubicon has been crossed. The real danger that the NATO-Russia war may lead to the use of tactical nuclear weapons and, from there, develop into the firing off of strategic nuclear weapons is now acknowledged widely. But rather than warning that this must be avoided at all costs, the use of nuclear weapons is being openly viewed as a legitimate option.

Nuclear weapons have only been used once, and that was by the United States. In August 1945, President Harry Truman authorized the dropping of atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The combined loss of life is estimated to have been 200,000 people. Truman later stated that he didn't lose a night's sleep over his decision. This monstrous crime was justified—and is justified to this day by the US government—with the long-discredited claim that the dropping of atomic bombs was necessary to compel the surrender of Japan. But this claim aside, the significance of this act as an exposure of the ruthlessness and brutality of which American imperialism is capable was explained by the noted historian Gabriel Jackson:

In the specific circumstances of August 1945, the use of an atomic bomb showed that a psychologically very normal and democratically-elected chief executive could use the weapon just as the Nazi dictator would have used it. In this way, the United States—for anyone concerned with moral distinctions in the conduct of different types of government—blurred the difference between fascism and democracy.

In 1950 General Douglas MacArthur argued for the dropping

of atomic bombs on China during the Korean War. But by then the Soviet Union had developed its own nuclear bomb. Truman was not willing to risk escalating the war to the point that it could develop into a conflict with a nuclear-armed power.

Sections of the Washington establishment, represented most notoriously by Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, insisted that the United States' willingness to use strategic nuclear weapons was a critical element of foreign policy.

Throughout the 1950s and early 1960s the world was haunted by the specter of nuclear war. It provided the nightmarish background for countless novels and films. As both a novel and a film, Nevil Shute's *On the Beach*—the story about the last weeks of life in Australia after a nuclear war, which produces deadly radioactive fall-out that encircles the globe—had a profound impact on international public opinion.

The scale of the danger became all too clear during the Cuban Missile Crisis in October 1962. Two weeks of tense negotiations between Washington and Moscow narrowly averted disaster. In two important films that were released in the aftermath of the crisis, *Fail-Safe* and *Dr. Strangelove*, disaster was not averted.

The 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis was the closest the world came to a nuclear war during this period. It was followed by the signing of the Nuclear Test Ban Treaty in 1963 and a number of other arms control treaties, as the United States pursued a policy in relation to the Soviet Union of “détente.” The generally accepted doctrine was that of “mutually assured destruction,” that a nuclear war was unthinkable because it would involve the annihilation of the population of all countries involved. The uniquely appropriate acronym for this policy was MAD.

In recent years, the possibility of using nuclear weapons has emerged as a subject of debate among war planners in Washington. A central element of this debate is the counterpoising of “tactical” to “strategic” nuclear weapons, which is based on the assumption that “tactical” weapons are “low-yield” bombs whose effect is geographically limited (to a specific battlefield or industrial facility), and whose consequences can be controlled.

In 2017, the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments published a report declaring, “As opposed to the global

apocalypse envisioned in the wake of a superpower nuclear exchange during the Cold War, there will very likely be a functioning world after a war.” A separate report by the organization was titled “Rethinking Armageddon.”

This week, the *New York Times* wrote, “Today, both Russia and the United States have nuclear arms that are much less destructive — their power just fractions of the Hiroshima bomb’s force, their use perhaps less frightening and more thinkable.”

This dangerous assumption has been challenged even within the foreign policy establishment and military. In an article on tactical nuclear weapons published in 2019, the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* warned:

[T]he distinction between a strategic and non-strategic nuclear weapon or mission is inherently fuzzy and will probably remain so, given that strategic nuclear weapons can be used in a tactical manner and that any use of a nuclear weapon, no matter how small the yield or short the range, would have far-reaching strategic consequences. This sentiment was echoed by former Secretary of Defense James Mattis in February 2018, when he testified in front of the House Armed Services Committee that he does not believe that “there is any such thing as a tactical nuclear weapon. Any nuclear weapon used any time is a strategic game changer.”

Nevertheless, the outbreak of NATO-instigated war with Russia has witnessed the further erosion of restraints on the use of nuclear weapons.

Over the past week, the US and NATO powers have held a series of meetings that amount to war councils, organizing a vast further militarization of its “Eastern Flank,” including the deployment of tens of thousands of troops. They also discussed a proposal from Poland to send a NATO “peacekeeping force” into Ukraine, which Belarussian President Alexander Lukashenko, an ally of Putin, said Friday would “mean World War III.”

As the logic of the war unfolds, the possibility of a direct conflict between the two most heavily-armed nuclear powers is not taken as a warning for the necessity of bringing it to a conclusion as rapidly as possible. There are no proposals for organizing a cease fire, for emergency discussions and negotiations.

The statements of NATO leaders, and particularly Biden, are deliberately provocative and incendiary. Denunciations of Putin as a “thug” and a “war criminal” can only be understood by Putin as a personal threat. There is a strange contradiction to the Biden administration’s policy. On the one hand, they proclaim Putin to be the next Hitler, and on the other hand they assume that he will behave in a “rational” manner without

resorting to more extreme measures.

The world is being taken to the brink of a nuclear catastrophe by the US and other major NATO power governments whose leaders are making decisions in secret while concealing the real geopolitical and economic interests in whose behalf they are acting. The Russian capitalist government, having launched its desperate and reactionary invasion of Ukraine, has also engaged in provocative nuclear saber rattling.

The *New York Times*—which is leading the propaganda campaign for escalating the war—promoted an AP poll Thursday purporting to find that 56 percent of the population think that Biden’s response to the Russian invasion is “not tough enough.” The question was phrased by the pollster to produce the desired answer. A very different answer would have been given if those questioned had been asked: “Do you agree that Ukraine’s right to join NATO is worth nuclear incineration and the extinction of life on this planet?”

The staggering recklessness, the nonchalant way in which the ruling class risks nuclear war, can only be understood in relation to the environment created by the pandemic. All of the governments making decisions upon which the fate of mankind rests have demonstrated over the past two years their total disregard for human life.

UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson’s statement—“No more f**cking lockdowns, let the bodies pile high in their thousands”—only expressed in the most crude form the policy adopted by all the major capitalist countries, Russia included. The result has been the needless death of 20 million people. If 20 million deaths are an acceptable cost to advance the interests of the oligarchy, why not 200 million in war?

The extreme recklessness testifies not only to imperialist ruthlessness in the pursuit of its geostrategic interests, but also to the crisis and desperation of a ruling elite in confronting intractable domestic crises.

The American ruling class believes that it can blast its way out of every problem. In the 1990s and 2000s, it was the cult of precision guided munitions, which would supposedly ensure that the US could conquer the Middle East and Central Asia. With every one of these wars ending in catastrophe, the turn is to tactical nuclear weapons. It is a logic of a ruling class that has driven humanity to a dead end.

Whatever the immediate outcome of the current crisis, one conclusion is clear: Political and social control must be taken out of the hands of the capitalist oligarchy, and the future development of society placed in the hands of the international working class.



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