

NATO leaders fail to acknowledge nuclear war danger

4 June—One of the most dangerous factors in the current world situation is the refusal of some major countries' leaders to recognise the security interests of other major countries, and their commitment to defend them. This syndrome has been starkly clear regarding Russia in the past two weeks. Two events dramatised it: the attack, claimed by Ukrainian military intelligence, on Russia's strategic early-warning radars at Armavir and Orsk, using drones supplied by NATO members Portugal and the UK ("[Nuclear war danger escalates: Kiev, NATO's catspaw, claims attack on Russian strategic radars](#)", AAS, 29 May); and the cascade of NATO member countries publicly giving the go-ahead for Kiev to use NATO-supplied weapons for attacks on undisputedly Russian territory.

"Putin is bluffing" is a refrain throughout mainstream media and Anglo-American establishment commentators, in response to the Russian leader's warnings that the current course increases the danger of nuclear war.

Yesterday Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov put it this way: "I'd like to warn American actors against miscalculations that can lead to fatal consequences. For some unclear reason, they underestimate how serious a response they could face." Ryabkov advised, according to RIA Novosti, that American policymakers need to "spend some of their time, which they probably waste on computer games, judging by their air-headed approach to serious issues", on considering what Putin has said. A diplomat with years of experience negotiating complex issues of nuclear weapons and missile defence with the USA, Ryabkov in an earlier interview said of the Biden Administration, "They live in a bubble, and do not perceive outside signals that go against their preconceptions."

Putin made the remarks Ryabkov referred to, at a press conference in Tashkent, Uzbekistan on 28 May. Russian state television asked him about the public "permission" from NATO officials that "Kiev should be allowed to strike deep into Russian territory with Western weapons" such as NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg's saying that "We are giving weapons to Kiev and consider them Ukrainian from this moment, so Ukraine can ... strike at Russian territory where it deems necessary."

Here is Putin's reply, largely ignored in international media:

"Frankly, I am not sure what the NATO Secretary General is talking about. When he was the Prime Minister of Norway, we communicated and addressed challenging issues concerning the Barents Sea and other issues, and generally, we were able to come to terms, and I am positive he was not suffering from dementia back then. If he is talking about potentially attacking Russia's territory with long-range precision weapons, he, as a person who heads a military-political organisation, ... should be aware of the fact that long-range precision weapons cannot be used without space-based reconnaissance.

"My second point is that the final target selection and what is known as launch mission can only be made by highly skilled specialists who rely on this technical reconnaissance data. For some attack systems, such as [the UK missiles] Storm Shadow, these launch missions can be put in automatically, without the need to use the Ukrainian military. Who does it? Those who manufacture and those who allegedly supply these attack systems to Ukraine do. This can and does happen without the participation of the Ukrainian military.

"Launching other systems, such as [US-made] ATACMS, for example, also relies on space reconnaissance data; targets are identified and automatically communicated to the relevant crews.... A crew, maybe even a Ukrainian crew, then puts in the corresponding launch mission. However, the mission is put together by representatives of NATO countries, not the Ukrainian military.

"So, these officials from NATO countries, especially the ones based in Europe, particularly in small European countries, should be fully aware of what is at stake. They should keep in mind that theirs are small and densely populated countries, which is a factor to reckon with before they start talking about striking deep into the Russian territory. It is a serious matter and, without a doubt, we are watching this very carefully."

Putin noted the current attention to Russian forces' having crossed the border to occupy positions north of Kharkov in northeastern Ukraine, something he had said months ago that Russia would do "to create a security area" if the Ukrainian Armed Forces "continued to target residential neighbourhoods in Russia's adjacent Belgorod Region.

But, he continued, "No one is talking about shelling Belgorod or other adjacent territories. The only thing they are talking about is Russia opening a new front and attacking Kharkov. Not a word. Why is that? They did it with their own hands. Well, let them reap the fruits of their ingenuity. The same thing can happen in case the long-range precision weapons which you asked about are used.

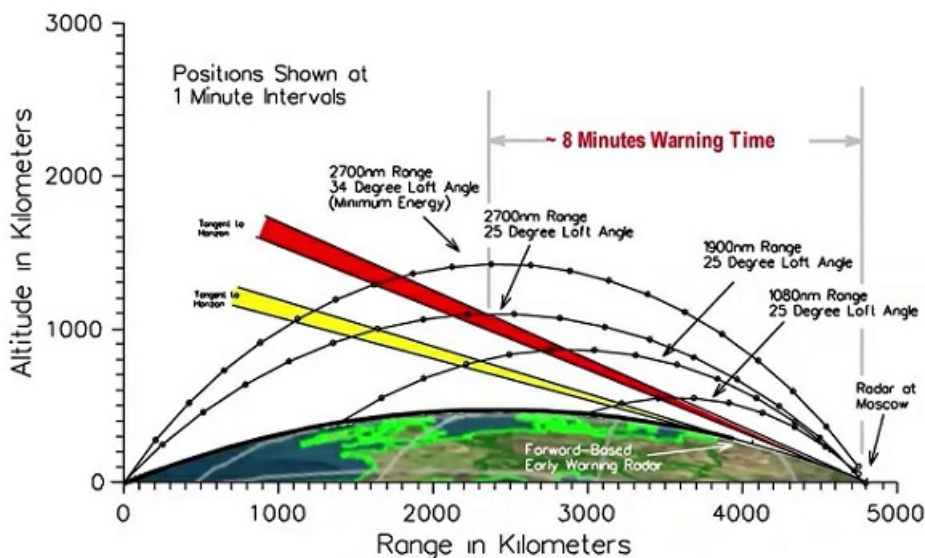
"More broadly, this unending escalation can lead to serious consequences. If Europe were to face those serious consequences, what will the United States do, considering our strategic arms parity? It is hard to tell."

Attacks on early-warning radar

Ryabkov also became the highest-ranking Russian official yet to acknowledge the 23-29 May attacks on Russia's early-warning radars, mentioned above. He stated that Moscow would hold the USA responsible for attacks on components of its nuclear deterrence capability (nuclear weapons and the warning systems that allow them to be launched before a "first strike" nuclear attack by the United States could destroy them), and may react "asymmetrically". Washington officials, he said, "have given Kiev a permit for any crimes, any action, and do nothing to curb provocations by their clients... But the USA does not get this for free and will feel consequences."

A 31 May online meeting of the International Peace Coalition, initiated by the international Schiller Institute, heard from top military specialists on this topic, under the title "How Close Is Nuclear War After the Attack on Russia's Strategic Defence System?" Highlights of the proceedings, posted on [YouTube](#), include presentations by Dr Theodore Postol, Professor Emeritus of Science, Technology and National Security at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology; Lt. Col. (ret.) Ralph Bosshard of the Swiss Armed Forces; former Amb. Chas Freeman, US-China diplomat and scholar; and others. Nuclear weapons expert Postol demonstrated graphically how the inoperability of one of Russia's 10 ground-based early-warning radars shortens the warning time for Russia to respond to a perceived nuclear missile attack to less than eight minutes—including as little as two to four minutes to determine whether or not the attack is real and decide on launching Russia's missiles in response. He explained why he hopes the damage to Armavir "can be repaired quickly, so those radars can be brought back into operation."

Russian Leadership Has 1/3 to 1/4 the Warning Time Compared to That of US Leaders



In this diagram from Dr Theodore Postol's presentation, Russia's capital Moscow is at far right. The other ends of the black arcs are possible launch sites of nuclear missiles targeting Moscow from various distances. The yellow belt is a cross-section of the "radar fan" in which a missile would become visible to early-warning radars. The red fan represents radars based in Moscow itself, which would pick up the incoming missiles two or three minutes later.

Postol: "If the United States had lost an early warning radar that performs the function that the radars at Armavir perform, we in the United States would be able to look down from space with satellites we have, and we could see if there were missiles being launched from anywhere in the world that would be taking advantage of the radar being lost at that moment. Unfortunately, the Russians do not have such capability. I want to underscore that the lack of the Russian capability in this area jeopardises the security of the whole world." The graphic at right is Dr Postol's slide, showing the reduction of warning time.

Decision-makers out to lunch

In discussion, Dr Postol turned to the failure of Western leaders to recognise this reality.

"Let me add one very, very important point", he said. "You should not assume that the political decision-makers understand this serious problem with the Russian early warning system. It has been my experience, with people in the White House, that they do not know about these details. They are almost completely focused on politics, and they typically have limited technical training. There's a real problem between the intelligence community, and communicating with people at the highest levels in the White House. Every time there's a change of administration or people change their jobs, anything that someone might have actually learned in their office gets lost. I'm quite sure this is the situation in Europe as well. So, you should not assume that these supposedly wise and well-informed people actually know anything about this. This is an extremely important point that I emphasise with the

strongest concern.”

Amb. Freeman, in video-recorded remarks played at the meeting, concurred. Speaking from his government experience, which included a stint as assistant secretary of defence for international security affairs, he said:

“I think there is a basic rule of statecraft in the nuclear age, and that is that no great nuclear power can afford to appear to be undermining the nuclear deterrent, or the strategic defence, of a rival. And yet, that is exactly what Ukraine, apparently acting as a proxy for the United States, is doing. It is attacking the Russian early warning system, which is an integral part of Russia’s nuclear deterrent. This is a strategic assault on Russia, and it will probably draw a strategic reaction. The fact that we have not seen a particular action from the Russians to date is not reassuring. It probably represents the deliberations in Moscow about how to respond without starting World War Three, which is not an impossible outcome, if this strategic rivalry continues uncontrolled. So this is a very serious development....

“The net effect of eliminating these is to reduce warning time very substantially, leaving the Russian leadership with almost no time to make a decision about how to respond to a detected possible attack. This is particularly alarming because there have been in the past mistaken detections of such attacks, and it has only been the actions of responsible officials on the Russian side, given the time to deliberate, that has prevented them from responding to a perceived nuclear attack with their own counterattack on the United States and other targets.

“The most remarkable thing, reflecting the strategic complacency and lack of intelligence of much of the West, is the extent to which this danger has not been identified in the mainstream media, ... which suggests a level of military and strategic illiteracy on the part of the current crop of journalists that is quite frightening.”

In summing up, Dr Postol said that, knowing all he does about the technicalities of nuclear weapons and the many times of high tension between the United States and the Soviet Union in the Cold War decades, “I would have concluded that the chances of not having a nuclear war were very low, because the possibilities are so great. The reason I think—of course I don’t know—we haven’t had a nuclear war is because every politician I have ever dealt with, every political leader or militarily responsible individual—I’m talking about Russians, Americans, Chinese, because I’ve worked with the Chinese—has been just tremendously afraid of what could happen if nuclear weapons were used. I think that these people who were in various decision-making roles had such a reaction against the consequence of a nuclear war, that their level of caution skewed the probability-of-an-accident curve well away from decisions that could have led to accidents and escalation....

“What I am tremendously concerned about—and I must say, I’m beside myself over this—is the almost dismissive attitude certain people in leadership roles have, when the possibility of a nuclear use, followed by escalation, is brought up. It’s like they’re not thinking about it. It’s like they’re not thinking at all! And that is different from what I have seen in the decades up to now.”

By Rachel Douglas, Australian Alert Service, 5 June 2024