



Sixty years after Cuban Missile Crisis, on the brink again

By Rachel Douglas

The thirteen days of the Cuban Missile Crisis, when the USA and the Soviet Union went to the brink of war over Soviet nuclear-armed missiles in Cuba and there were near-launch incidents with nuclear weapons, were sixty years ago—16 to 29 October 1962 (Back page). Today's showdown between the nuclear superpowers is even more dangerous, as the missile threat is part of a larger, "hybrid" mix of economic, informational, and irregular warfare, and there are fewer government and private diplomatic channels active in 2022 than there were then.

"The doomsday clock is literally one second to midnight and we in the West have only ourselves to blame", observed former UN weapons inspector Scott Ritter in a commentary for *Consortium News* on 22 September, the day after Russian President Vladimir Putin upgraded Russia's deployment of forces in Ukraine and issued stark warnings of the danger of an escalation to the use of weapons of mass destruction. "If NATO continues to pretend that this [the US/UK/NATO incitement and arming of Ukraine to fight Russia] is some game designed to weaken Russia", Ritter elaborated in an interview the next day, "Russia just changed the game."

Ritter is right about the escalated danger, but if you have heard about it in the media, the reporting was likely distorted along these lines: that Russia launched an "expansionist" war in Ukraine, which it is "losing", and therefore Putin's 21 September speech ([text here](#)) showed that he is desperate, and "threatened" to attack Ukraine with nuclear weapons.

Two distortions are circulating. One is that when Putin said, "In the event of a threat to the territorial integrity of our country and to defend Russia and our people, we will certainly make use of all weapon systems available to us", he was bluffing, even though the next words he uttered were, "This is not a bluff." Moscow has shown, most recently by launching its "special military operation" (SMO) in Ukraine after several years of warning that NATO's militarisation of that country on Russia's border was approaching a "red line", that such warnings are not bluff.

The other false line is that Russia is threatening to make a nuclear strike in a scheme—attributed to Russia by Western think tanks—called "escalate to de-escalate": to terrorise Ukraine into surrender. Ukraine's Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces Gen. Valery Zaluzhny pumped this scenario in a 7 September article for the Ukrinform Agency. Motivating a demand for more weapons from NATO, Zaluzhny and co-author General Mykhailo Zabrodsky, an MP, declared that "*any attempts at practical steps [by Russia] to use tactical nuclear weapons must be stopped using the entire arsenal of means at the disposal of the countries of the world*".

In an interview with CBS News released 16 September, US President Joe Biden showed that he has bought into this analysis: "Don't. Don't. Don't. You will change the face of war unlike anything since World War II". The *Washington Post* reported 22 September, that the Biden Administration has been sending secret messages to Moscow to warn of the consequences of using nuclear weapons in Ukraine. National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan, speaking on CBS's Face the Nation 25 September, confirmed that the Kremlin has been told "that any use of nuclear weapons will be met

with catastrophic consequences for Russia, that the United States and our allies will respond decisively".

NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg chimed in on 21 September, telling Reuters that Putin's words were a "thinly veiled threat" to use nuclear weapons, and were "dangerous and reckless rhetoric".

Back to Brzezinski

What's really going on here? Russian officials, from Kremlin spokesman Dmitri Peskov to Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov, hastened to say that there has been no change in Russia's guidelines for the use of nuclear weapons. What *has* changed, is that Moscow sees that a long-term, publicly stated plan to engineer a break-up of the Russian Federation, just as the Soviet Union disintegrated in 1991, is advancing with Ukraine as its tool, and huge NATO support.

In recent decades, that geopolitical plan can be traced to a 1997 book by former US national security adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski *The Grand Chessboard*, although its roots are older. Brzezinski had been a key author of the 1970s scheme to sponsor Islamic radicals to attack the "soft underbelly" of the USSR in Central Asia, which led to the 1980s Soviet War in Afghanistan and, ultimately, the creation of al-Qaeda and ISIS terrorism. After the break-up of the USSR, he persisted: Ukraine must be permanently separated from Russia, to end any Russian "empire". Then, Russia should be cut down to size, as shown in **Map (p. 13)**, an illustration for an article by Brzezinski the same year: a small, "European" Russia, with the resource-rich Russian Far East and Siberia hived off into loosely confederated or even completely independent entities.

At a 16 September press conference in Samarkand, Uzbekistan after the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation summit there, Putin traced the plans to splinter Russia back even farther, to the era of British geopoliticians like Halford Mackinder ("*Geopolitics: The deadly legacy of Halford Mackinder*", Australian Almanac, AAS, 13 and 20 April 2022). "Western countries have cultivated the idea of the collapse of the Soviet Union, and historical Russia, and Russia as such, its nucleus", he said. "I have cited these statements and studies by some figures in Great Britain during World War I... I have cited excerpts from Mr Brzezinski's writings, in which he divided the entire territory of our country into specific parts. True, later he changed his position a bit in the belief that it was better to keep Russia in opposition to China and use it as a tool to combat China."

In his 21 September address to the nation, Putin described the goal of "some Western elites ... to weaken, divide and ultimately destroy our country. They are saying openly now, that in 1991 they managed to split up the Soviet Union and now is the time to do the same to Russia, which must be divided into numerous regions that would be at deadly feud with each other.

"They devised these plans long ago. They encouraged groups of international terrorists in the Caucasus and moved NATO's offensive infrastructure close to our borders. They used indiscriminate Russophobia as a weapon, including by nurturing the hatred of Russia for decades, primarily in Ukraine, which was designed to become an anti-Russia bridgehead. They turned the Ukrainian people into



This map showing Russia broken into three pieces and Ukraine firmly within "Atlanticist Europe" illustrated an article by Zbigniew Brzezinski in the Council on Foreign Relations journal *Foreign Affairs* in 1997, the year his book *The Grand Chessboard* came out.

cannon fodder and pushed them into a war with Russia, which they unleashed back in 2014."

Olexiy Danilov, secretary of Ukraine's National Security and Defence Council, provided an illustration of what Putin was talking about, when he told a 23 September forum in Lviv that "the collapse of the Russian Federation" was the first and foremost requirement for victory in Ukraine's war against Russia. He declared, "Victory is when the fragmentation of the Russian Federation takes place, it will disappear from the map within the existing borders".

'Do it with nukes', says ... not Putin

Also long-standing in Anglo-American strategy circles is the idea that the results desired by Brzezinski and Danilov may be achieved by making Russia back down in a nuclear-weapons confrontation. In March 2007, the City of London's flagship weekly *The Economist* published a piece of futurology for the 50th anniversary of the European Union (its precursors), which depicted a British-led EU vanquishing both the USA and Russia, following a US financial collapse and an EU-instigated Russian-American nuclear confrontation over Ukraine.

That was a pre-Brexit scenario, but London and other British-sponsored think tanks have been churning out new ones for the 21st century. We reported on one of them, in effect a keynote for the nuclear war drive, earlier this year ("[Anglo-American war party on steroids](#)", AAS, 25 May 2022): "Malcolm Chalmers, deputy director general of the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) in the UK, proposes that a nuclear-weapons showdown with Russia over a Ukrainian attempt to seize the Crimean Peninsula militarily—a 'Cuban Missile Crisis on steroids', in his words—would make it 'easier' to settle the Russia-Ukraine war." His 20 May paper, "This War Still Presents Nuclear Risks—Especially in Relation to Crimea", offered a step-by-step scenario for a nuclear confrontation, from which, he assumes, Russia would back down.

This month the Atlantic Council, the British government-funded Washington organisation known as NATO's think tank, followed up with "Memo to the President: How to deter Russian nuclear use in Ukraine—and respond if deterrence fails". Author Matthew Kroenig's summary is the flat statement, "Russia might use nuclear weapons to achieve its goals". He recommends "a clearer US deterrent threat".

Chatham House, the UK's Royal Institute of

International Affairs, issued a 22 September commentary that claimed Putin had "moved the goalposts under which Russia would launch a first nuclear strike", making "ambiguous and dangerous" threats. Authors Julia Cournoyer and Marion Messmer claimed that "until now, Russian nuclear doctrine consistently stated Russia would only use nuclear weapons first should the existence of the state be threatened, rather than its 'territorial integrity'."

What they wrote, however, is not true. More than two years ago, on 2 June 2020 the Kremlin published a decree by Putin to clarify Russia's nuclear deterrence policy in the face (already then) of false depictions of its posture as allowing for an aggressive "first strike". The language that "Russia's nuclear deterrence is defensive in nature, to protect the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Russia and those of its allies" was in that decree. Russian strategic relations expert Dmitri Trenin, then of the Moscow Carnegie Center, in an analysis titled "[Decoding Russia's Official Nuclear Deterrence Paper](#)", explained that "Western interpretations" of Russian doctrine as implying "escalation for de-escalation" were false, and that "the notion of a limited nuclear war has always been alien to Russian strategic thinking", unlike the USA's.

There are no targets in Ukraine that would warrant the use of nuclear weapons, Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu said in August. On 17 September Peskov told reporters who were badgering him about nuclear first use, "Read the [nuclear] doctrine. Everything is written there". Ryabkov on 26 September remarked about Jake Sullivan's hyping of a nuclear-launch threat from Russia, "We tell our American partners again and again, ... that they should cool down".

That Chatham House lied about Russian military doctrine, does not erase the threat of nuclear war. The constant official talk about imminent aggressive Russian "first use" pushes the situation towards provoking an all-out clash, including with nuclear weapons. There is also a technical problem, pointed out by weapons expert, Massachusetts Institute of Technology emeritus Prof. Ted Postol, at an American Committee for US-Russian Accord forum last March, namely that shortcomings in Russia's space-based warning systems could force Russia "into a doomsday posture where, under certain conditions, its nuclear forces will be launched automatically". In an atmosphere of hype about looming nuclear exchanges, Russia could erroneously assess that it was under nuclear attack, and there would be no time to double-check before retaliating against the UK and the USA.

Ryabkov told the Russian Foreign Ministry journal *International Affairs* 7 September, "The seriousness of the current period shouldn't be underestimated. A total war has been declared against us. It's being waged in hybrid forms, in all areas. The degree of animosity of our opponents—of our enemies—is enormous, extraordinary."

What's happening in Ukraine?

Putin's 21 September address was an announcement of the first mobilisation of the Russian population into military service since the beginning of the operation in Ukraine. The "partial mobilisation" is calling up men from the military reserve, "primarily those who have served in the Armed Forces and have specific military occupational specialties", who will be trained and deployed. Shoigu later said that the number of people mobilised will be 300,000.

Putin cited Ukrainian's ongoing shelling of civilians in the independent Donetsk and Lugansk People's Republics, as well as Kiev's "nuclear blackmail" in the form of shelling

the Zaporozhye Nuclear Power Plant, “which poses a threat of a nuclear disaster”.

He revealed “for the first time today”, that back in March, Kiev had responded positively to Russia’s proposals in negotiations, which “concerned above all ensuring Russia’s security and interests”. That meant Ukraine’s giving up aspirations to join NATO. “But a peaceful settlement obviously did not suit the West”, Putin continued, and “Kiev was actually ordered to wreck all these agreements”.

As Russian and other military experts have pointed out, the announced Russian goal of “demilitarising” Ukraine was achieved months ago, with regard to Kiev’s forces at the outset. But the constant influx of arms from NATO countries created a situation where Russian forces are fighting “not only against neo-Nazi units, but actually the entire military machine of the collective West”.

With insufficient forces deployed to cover a front line that had stretched to 1,000 km in length, Russia in early September abandoned, under Ukrainian Armed Forces attacks in which foreign field commanders were reportedly a heavy presence, several towns in the north-eastern Kharkov Region. At the same time, the Donbass Republics and the Civilian-Military Administrations in two additional regions in southern Ukraine, Zaporozhye and Kherson, have moved to hold referendums on fully joining the Russian Federation.

The expected “yes” outcome of the votes raises the stakes

in the Ukraine conflict, as Russia will defend against further attacks on the populations and cities of those territories as attacks on Russia. Ritter, in his 22 September commentary, drew out the implications: “Putin’s decision to order a partial mobilisation of the Russian military, when combined with the decision to conduct the referendums in the Donbass and occupied Ukraine, radically transforms the SMO from a limited-scope operation to one linked to the existential survival of Russia.”

Sober-minded analysts in Europe, like Prof. Gilbert Doctorow in a 9 September blog post, believe that Moscow was driven to take these measures now, in part by the meeting held 8 September in Ramstein, Germany—the latest in a series of sessions among NATO countries on arming Ukraine. Of special concern to Russia is the increased talk about the USA supplying longer-range missiles to Kiev. Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova warned 15 September, “Should Washington decide to supply longer-range missiles to Kiev, by doing so it will cross a red line and become a direct party to the conflict. Under such a scenario, we will be forced to respond appropriately. We reserve the right to defend our territory by all available means.”

Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and Ambassador to Washington Anatoly Antonov also have warned, in recent weeks, that the USA is being increasingly drawn into the conflict in Ukraine.

Cuban Missile Crisis: A lesson in diplomacy

Anatoly Antonov, Russia's Ambassador to the USA, speaking at an event on the 60th anniversary of the Cuban Missile Crisis (16-29 October 1962), emphasised the enormous danger we face today, lamenting the lack of connections that allowed for a peaceful resolution at that time.

"Both Premier Nikita Khrushchov and President John Kennedy flinched", he said of the October 1962 showdown regarding the placement of Soviet nuclear missiles on Cuba. "They looked into the eyes of the nuclear peril and were frightened by it emotionally." Antonov quoted Kennedy advisor Arthur Schlesinger Jr. as saying, "Cuba made vivid the sense that all humanity had a common interest in the prevention of nuclear war—an interest far above those national and ideological interests which had once seemed ultimate."

The ability to resolve the situation "teaches a good lesson in diplomacy—maintaining the continuous, including covert, contacts between opposing parties is of great value", he said, pointing to discussions between Soviet Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin and President Kennedy's brother Robert.

Writing in a 2017 AAS report, "[The coup, then and now](#)", American historian Anton Chaitkin, author of *Who We Are: America's Fight for Universal Progress, from Franklin to Kennedy*, noted the following details of the crisis.

"A US spy plane over Cuba took photographs showing that the Soviets had brought in ballistic missiles capable of striking the United States with nuclear weapons. The President kept the situation secret until he could reach a firm decision on what to do, to get the missiles out of Cuba without starting World War III. The sacked Joint Chiefs chairman, Lemnitzer [Lyman Lemnitzer, Joint Chiefs of Staff, 1960-62, see below], attended the meetings of the special 'Executive Committee' (Excomm) which Kennedy had created to deliberate on the correct path to take.

"A battle of wills went on day after day. The President and his loyal staff wanted to give the Russians a way to back down without being crushed or humiliated. The Dulles-Lemnitzer faction wanted to bomb the missile sites, and follow that action with an all-out US invasion of Cuba. They claimed that even if Russian soldiers were killed, the Russians would do nothing; and that even if the Russians struck back in Berlin (then divided East-West), the United States could easily defeat them in a nuclear conflict.

"Kennedy raised the possibility that the USA might remove its missiles from Turkey in exchange for the Soviets taking theirs out of Cuba. Lemnitzer reacted angrily that the missiles in Turkey were not ours to withdraw—they belonged to NATO!

"A partly fictionalised film about the Cuban Missile Crisis—*13 Days*, starring Kevin Costner—omits Lemnitzer from its depiction of those secret strategy meetings. Nonetheless, the film provides a sense of the Lemnitzer faction's attempt to bully the President into a catastrophic war.

"Kennedy decided to impose a naval blockade around Cuba, which could interdict any ships transporting offensive weapons. As both the United States and the Soviets continued testing nuclear weapons throughout the crisis, the entire world awaited the outcome, and the likely death of humanity.

"Kennedy said that if the Soviets removed the missiles, he would pledge never to invade Cuba. He kept



US President John F. Kennedy with British Lord Louis Mountbatten and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Lyman Lemnitzer. JFK tried to fire Lemnitzer for his plans to provoke nuclear war over Cuba, but the British intervened to have him appointed Commander of NATO. Photo: Wikipedia

in touch with Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchov through private channels, and sent his brother Robert to meet in strict secrecy with Soviet Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin. The crisis ended with the successful offer to take the missiles out of Turkey, the removal to occur quietly six months later on."

Kennedy's mortal enemy

Chaitkin reports that Lyman Lemnitzer had been a mortal opponent of President Kennedy. Lemnitzer was US liaison with the British Mediterranean commander during World War II, from July 1943. As the war drew to a close, then-President Franklin D. Roosevelt insisted that the coming peace should be the end of the failed system of "exclusive alliances, the spheres of influence, the balances of power", but was betrayed in this ambition by Lemnitzer, who was working secretly with the British for a continuation of war—now against Russia. It didn't come to pass, but as Chaitkin reported, "a great deal of evil had been set in motion". Lemnitzer went on to play a key role in deliberations leading to the formation of NATO.

As Chaitkin documents, Lemnitzer not only presented to Kennedy a plan for a surprise, pre-emptive nuclear attack on the Soviet Union, to take place in 1963, he also gave Secretary of Defence Robert McNamara a plan for the United States to carry out terror attacks against its own armed forces and civilians, to be blamed on the Castro regime as "pretexts which would provide justification for US military intervention in Cuba". Known as Operation Northwoods, the plan would remain secret until declassified in the 1990s.

Kennedy dismissed the Northwoods proposal. About a month later, Lemnitzer simply demanded that the United States stage a full-scale military invasion of Cuba, without provocation, on the presumption that the Soviets would not react. The President ordered that Lemnitzer be ousted as chairman of the Joint Chiefs when his term expired in October 1962, six months hence. Kennedy designated General Maxwell Taylor to replace Lemnitzer as chairman at that time, and to supervise Lemnitzer as long as he remained the chief. Lemnitzer's British sponsors intervened at this crucial stage to keep him in a position of power, proposing he move into the role of NATO supreme Allied Commander Europe, a position he held from 1963 to 1969.