

The Economist

Ernest Moniz on Vladimir Putin's reckless nuclear threats

Barack Obama's energy secretary says the Russian leader needs to back away from the nuclear button

By Ernest Moniz

Ten weeks ago, I joined European and Russian colleagues to [praise](#) the [joint statement](#) of the leaders of America, Russia, China, France and Britain. It affirmed that “a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought” and committed those countries to work towards disarmament and the reduction of nuclear risks. Nearly two months later, Russia's president Vladimir Putin unleashed a brutal, unjustified attack on Ukraine unlike anything in Europe since the second world war.

Mr Putin's forces have used conventional weapons fired by tanks, artillery and aircraft as well as cyber-attacks. Four days into the assault, he ordered his generals to put Russia's nuclear weapons on a higher state of alert in response to what he called “unfriendly economic actions” and “aggressive statements” by NATO countries. This sounds like the script for an academic simulation about crisis management, but it is not. This is the reality of a determined autocrat with a nuclear arsenal who has brought large-scale conventional war back to the European continent. He has created a truly dangerous moment in global affairs, that United Nations secretary general, António Guterres on March 14th called “a bone-chilling development.” The prospect of

nuclear conflict, which was once unthinkable, he said, “is now back within the realm of possibility.”

Russia faces no threat of attack, let alone nuclear attack from America, Britain, France, or NATO. While President Joe Biden and NATO have made clear that they would respond to any Russian attack on a NATO member, Ukraine is not a member of the alliance. And America and NATO have stated flatly that they will not engage Russia on Ukrainian territory. Neither America nor its allies want a war—conventional or nuclear—with Russia. Indeed, the sober American reaction to Putin's nuclear alert order further underscored the commitment of the United States and NATO to seek de-escalation of the current crisis. But this does not mean the West would not strongly oppose Russia's aggression. It poses a fundamental challenge to the global system that has underpinned international security and prosperity for decades. Mr Putin badly underestimated the global reaction and the effectiveness of Ukrainian resistance.

Mr Putin's nuclear threats increase uncertainty and risks as questions grow around how far he will go to achieve his ultimate aims in Ukraine and Europe. In the

fog of war, things happen that are not part of any plan and can lead to miscalculation or blunder. With tensions soaring and threats of Russian nuclear forces on higher alert, a military plane that strays over the Poland-Ukraine border or a military encounter in the Baltic or Black Sea regions could trigger escalating and potentially catastrophic events. There have been far too many close encounters between NATO and Russian military forces in those regions in recent years. The risk of unintended escalation points to the wisdom of American restraint in the face of Putin's nuclear bluster. The West must continue to signal that it has no intention of using nuclear threats to resolve the current crisis and that any attempts by Russia to do so are unacceptable.

Mr Putin's frustration is reportedly growing with Ukraine's resistance. The West is supporting Ukraine with military and humanitarian assistance while pressuring Russia with unprecedented economic sanctions. As Mr Putin grows angry and impatient, the risks of a broader conflict grow. Failing to achieve a quick or decisive victory, Mr Putin may escalate atrocities against Ukrainian civil society and continue his nuclear sabre rattling. This dangerous moment requires the international community to use diplomacy to demand an immediate cease fire and facilitate Russian withdrawal from Ukrainian territory. They must help develop a longer-term diplomatic settlement on issues related to Ukraine and the broader European security architecture, taking into account Russian concerns.

More broadly, this crisis brings home the fundamental truth that nuclear weapons are neither legitimate nor practical weapons of limited war or political coercion. They have no useful role other than to deter the use of nuclear weapons by others. Since no country is threatening Russia with nuclear weapons—indeed, no country is threatening Russian territory at all—Mr Putin has no business raising the nuclear stakes. The fire at the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant and military activity around the Chernobyl site

reminds that nuclear catastrophe cannot be ruled out in the fog of war.

When America and the Soviet Union were “eyeball to eyeball” opposing one another with nuclear threats during the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962, Presidents Khrushchev and Kennedy emerged with an even greater understanding of the risks of nuclear use, particularly during a crisis. Following their agreement to resolve the crisis by withdrawing Russian nuclear weapons from Cuba and American nuclear missiles from Turkey, they applied that lesson by pursuing meaningful actions—including the America-Russia “hotline” and the Limited Nuclear Test Ban Treaty—to reduce the risk that nuclear weapons ever would be used.

While not an acute nuclear crisis like the one in 1962, perhaps this once unthinkable war in Ukraine will eventually motivate American, Russian and European leaders to embrace the necessity of co-operating to reduce nuclear risks, whether by agreeing to ban land-based intermediate-range missile systems in the Euro-Atlantic region, finding a way to reduce the role of Russian and American non-strategic nuclear weapons in European security, or agreeing to NATO-Russia restrictions on conventional force deployments and military exercises close to European-Russian borders.

It will not be easy to return to the negotiating table. Russia has crossed a line of perpetrating humanitarian disaster and disregarding international laws and norms that will be impossible to forgive or forget. We do not know if current and future world leaders will have the vision and will to reduce and ultimately eliminate nuclear risks. But Mr Putin's invasion of Ukraine has taken the world back in time to a much more dangerous era.

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