THE CUBAN MISSILE CRISIS IN REVERSE

In a rather ghastly 19th century experiment, a biologist by the name of Heinzmann found that if he placed a frog in boiling water, the frog immediately leapt out but that if he placed the frog in tepid water and then gradually heated it, the frog stayed put until he was scalded to death. Are we like the frog? I see disturbing elements of that process today as we watch events unfold in the Ukraine confrontation. They profoundly frighten me and I believe they should frighten everyone. But they are so gradual that we do not see a specific moment in which we must jump or perish. So here briefly, let me lay out the process of the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis and show how the process of that crisis compares with what we face today over the Ukraine.

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Three elements stand out in the Cuban Missile Crisis: 1) relations between the USSR and the US were already "on the edge" before they reached the crisis stage; each of us had huge numbers of weapons of mass destruction aimed at the other. 2) the USSR precipitated the Crisis by advancing into Cuba, a country the US had considered part of "area of dominance" since the promulgation of the 1823 Monroe Doctrine. 3) some military and civilian officials and influential private citizens in both countries argued that the other side would "blink" if sufficient pressure was put on it.

Allow me to point out that I had a (very uncomfortable) ringside seat in the Crisis. I was one of three members of the "Crisis Management Committee" that oversaw the unfolding events. On the Monday of the week of October 22, I sat with Secretary of State Dean Rusk, Under Secretary George Ball, Counselor and Chairman of the Policy Planning Council Walt Rostow and Under Secretary for Political Affairs U. Alexis Johnson and listened to President Kennedy's speech to which we all had contributed. The account Kennedy laid out was literally terrifying to those who understood what a nuclear confrontation meant. Those of us in that room obviously did. We were each "cleared" for everything America then knew. And we each knew what our government was seeking -- getting the Russian missiles out of Cuba. Finally, we were poised to do that by force if the Russians did not remove them.

Previous to that day, I had urged that we remove our "Jupiter" missiles from Turkey. This was important, I argued, because they were "offensive" rather than "defensive" weapons. The reason for this distinction was that they were obsolescent, liquid-fired rockets that required a relatively long time to fire; thus, they could only be used for a first strike. Otherwise they would be destroyed before they could be fired. The Russians rightly regarded them as a threat. Getting them out enabled Chairman Nikita Khrushchev to remove the Russian missiles without suffering an unacceptable degree of humiliation and risking a coup d'état.

Then, following the end of the crisis, I wrote the "talking paper" for a review of the crisis, held at the Council on Foreign Relations, with all the involved senior US officials in which we carefully reviewed the "lessons" of the crisis. What I write below in part derives from our consideration in that meeting. That is, it is essentially the consensus of those who were most deeply involved in the crisis.

Shortly thereafter, I participated in a Top Secret Department of Defense war game, designed by Professor Thomas Schelling of MIT in which he set out a scenario of a sequence of events -- ironically placed near the Ukraine -- to show that the USSR would accept an American nuclear attack without responding. It was, as he said, in our "post mortem" discussion of the game, a vindication of an extension of the theory of deterrence. It was to prove that we need not fear a reaction to a limited nuclear attack. Henry Kissinger had popularized this idea in his 1957 book *Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy*.[1]

In the post mortem discussion of the Game I argued, and my military, intelligence and diplomatic colleagues on our war game team agreed with me, that the idea of limited nuclear war was nonsense. No government could accept a devastating attack and survive. If it did not retaliate with a "victory-denying response,"[2] it would be overthrown and executed by its own military and security forces. And the original attacker would in turn have to avenge the retaliation or it would face a similar fate. Tit for tat would lead inevitably to "general war." Twenty years later, in 1983, a second Department of Defense war game (code named "Proud Prophet") in which I did not participate and which was heavily weighted to the military confirmed what I had argued in 1962: there was no such thing as a "limited" nuclear war if both sides were armed with nuclear weapons. Limited nuclear actions inevitably ended in all-out war.

So, to be realistic, forget "limited" war and consider general war.

Even the great advocate of thermonuclear weapons, Edward Teller, admitted that their use would "endanger the survival of man [kind]." The Russian nuclear scientist and Nobel Peace Prize laureate, Andrei Sakharov, laid out a view of the consequences in the Summer 1983 issue of *Foreign Affairs* as "a calamity of indescribable proportions." More detail was assembled by a scientific study group convened by Carl Sagan and reviewed by 100 scientists, A graphic summary of their findings was published in the Winter 1983 issue of *Foreign Affairs.* Sagan pointed out that since both major nuclear powers had targeted cities, casualties could reasonably be estimated at between "several hundred million to 1.1 billion people" with an additional 1.1 billion people seriously injured. Those figures related to the 1980s. Today, the cities have grown so the numbers would be far larger. Massive fires set off by the bombs would carry soot into the atmosphere, causing temperatures to fall to a level that would freeze ground to a depth of about 3 feet. Planting crops would be impossible and such food as was stored would probably be contaminated so the few survivors would starve. The hundreds of millions of bodies of the dead could not be buried and would spread contagion. As the soot settled and the sun again became again visible, the destruction of the ozone layer would remove the protection from ultraviolet rays and so promote the mutation of pyrotoxins. Diseases against which there were no immunities would spread. These would overwhelm not only the human survivors but, in the opinion of the expert panel of 40 distinguished biologists, would cause "species extinction" among both plants and animals. Indeed, there was a distinct possibility that "there might be no human survivors in the Northern Hemisphere...and the possibility of the extinction of *Homo sapiens..."*

So to summarize:

1) it is almost certain that neither the American nor the Russian government could accept even a limited attack without responding;

2) there is no reason to believe that a Russian government, faced with defeat in conventional weapons, would be able to avoid using nuclear weapons;

3) whatever attempts are made to limit escalation are likely to fail and in failing lead to all out war; and

4) the predictable consequences of a nuclear war are indeed an unimaginable catastrophe.

These dangers, even if today they seem remote, clearly demand that we do every thing we possibly can to avoid the fate of the frog. We can see that the "water" is beginning to heat up. We should not sit and wait for it to boil. We did not do so in the Cuban Missile Crisis. We and the Russians worked out a solution. So what will we, what should we do now?

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The first step is to "appreciate" the situation as it actually is and to see clearly the flow and direction of events. Of course, they are not precisely the same as in the Cuban Missile Crisis. History does not exactly repeat itself, but, as Mark Twain has pithily said, subsequent events sometimes "rhyme" with those that went before.

Consider these key elements:

1) Despite the implosion of the Soviet Union and the attempts to cut back on nuclear weapons, Russia and the United States remain parallel nuclear powers with each having the capacity to destroy the other -- and probably the whole world. Hundreds if not thousands of our weapons apparently remain on "hair trigger alert." I assume that theirs are similarly poised.

2) Both Russia and the United States are governed by men who are unlikely to be able to accept humiliation -- and almost certain murder by "super patriots" in their own entourages -- and would be forced to act even at the cost of massive destruction to their countries. So pressing the leadership of the opponent in this direction is literally playing with fire. As President Kennedy and the rest of us understood in the 1962 crisis, even if leaders want to avoid conflict, at a certain point in their mutual threats, events replace policy and leaders become bystanders.

3) Both the Russian and American people have demonstrated their resilience and determination. Neither is apt to be open to intimidation.

4) Both the Russians and the Americans are guided in their foreign policy by what they believe to be "core concerns." For the Americans, as the Cuban Missile Crisis and many previous events illustrate, this comes down to the assertion of a "zone of exclusion" of outsiders. America showed in the Cuban Missile Crisis that we would not tolerate, even at almost unimaginable danger, intrusion into our zone. Among the

Russians, as their history illustrates,[3] a similar code of action prevails. Having suffered, as fortunately we have not, horrifying costs of invasion throughout history but particularly in the 20th century, the Russians can be expected to block, by any means and up to any cost, intrusions into their zone.

5) We said we understood this fundamental policy objective of the Russians, and officially on behalf of our government Secretary of State James Baker, Jr. agreed not to push our military activities into their sphere. We have, however, violated this agreement and have added country by constituent country of the former Soviet Union and its satellites to our military alliance, NATO.

6) We are now at the final stage, just short of Russia itself in the Ukraine, and, as the Russians know, some influential Americans have suggested that we should push forward to "the gates of Moscow." Those who advocate what the British once called a "Forward Policy," now see the necessary first steps to be the arming of the Ukraine. And finally,

8) There is no way in which we or the European Union could arm the Ukraine to a level that it could balance Russia. Thus, they are likely both to give the Ukrainians unrealistic notions of what they can do vis-à-vis Russia and to be seen by the Russians as "offensive" moves to which they might feel compelled to respond. Consequently, they could lead us all into a war we do not want.

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So what to do?

In a word: stop. What we are now doing and what we contemplate doing is not in our interest or in the interests of the Ukrainians and is perceived as a threat by the Russians. We cannot deliver on the policy we would encourage the Ukrainians to adopt by arming them without a war. Economic sanctions are a form of that war, but they are unlikely to accomplish what we have been proclaiming. So, the logic of events could force the Russians and us to the next step and that step also to the next and so on. Our moves in this direction could cause massive death and destruction. We should stop doing what does not work and is not in our interests nor in the interests of either the Ukrainians or the Russians.

But stopping on what terms?

Having myself helped to negotiate two complex but successful ceasefires, I have learned two things: first, a ceasefire cannot be obtained unless both parties see it as less bad than the alternative and, second, a ceasefire is merely a necessary precondition to a settlement. So what might a settlement involve?

The elements of a general settlement, I believe, are these:

1) Russia will not tolerate the Ukraine becoming a hostile member of a rival military pact. We should understand this. Think how we would have reacted had Mexico tried to join the Warsaw Pact. Far-fetched?

Consider that even before the issue of nuclear weapons arose, we tried to overthrow the pro-Russian Cuban government in the Bay of Pigs invasion and tried on several occasions to murder Cuban Head of State Fidel Castro. We failed; so for two generations we have sought to isolate, impoverish and weaken that regime. We would be foolish to expect that the Russians will not react similarly when challenged by an anti-Russian Ukrainian government. Thus, to press for inclusion of the Ukraine into NATO is not only self-defeating; it risks overturning a generation of cautious moves to improve our security and increase our well-being and is pointing us toward at least a cold -- if not a hot -- war. We need to adopt a different course.

2) We must recognize that the Ukraine is not part of our sphere of influence or dominance. It is neither in the Western Hemisphere nor in the North Atlantic. On the Black Sea, the concept of a North Atlantic Treaty Organization is an oxymoron The Black Sea area is part of what the Russians call "the near abroad." The policy implications are clear: Just as the Russians realized that Cuba was part of our sphere of dominance and so backed down in the Missile Crisis, they will probably set their response to our actions on the belief that we will similarly back down because of our realization that the Ukraine is in their neighborhood and not in ours. The danger, of course is that, for domestic political reasons -- and particularly because of the urging of the neoconservatives and other hawks -- we may not accept this geostrategic fact. Then, conflict, with all the horror that could mean, would become virtually inevitable.

3) But conflict is not inevitable and can fairly easily be avoided if we wish to avoid it. This is because the Russians and Ukrainians share an objective which the United States also emotionally shares. The shared objective is that the Ukraine become a secure, prosperous and constructive member of the world community. Becoming such a member can be accomplished only by the Ukrainians themselves. But as all qualified observers have seen, Ukrainian society and political organization have far to go to reach our joint objective. This is true regardless of the Russian-American dispute. Its government is corrupt, tyrannical and weak. The best we can do is to remove outside deterrents to the growth of a healthy, secure and free society.

The way to do this is two fold: first we need to stop our military intrusion into Ukrainian-Russian affairs, so diminishing Russian fears of aggression, and, second, wherever possible and in whatever ways are acceptable to both parties to assist the growth of the Ukrainian economy and, indirectly, the stability and sanity of the Ukrainian governing system. A first step in this direction could be for the Ukraine to join the European Union. This, in general terms, should be and for our own sakes must be, our strategy.

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[1] Kissinger realized his mistake and partially repudiated what he had argued in a later, 1961, book, *The Necessity for Choice.*

[2] This was apparently embodied in Jimmy Carter's Presidential Directive 59. It was carried forward in President Reagan's Fiscal Year 1984-1988 Defense Guidance. And it was emphasized by Albert Wohlstetter, a former colleague of mine at the University of Chicago and one of the leading neoconservatives in the June 1983 issue of *Commentary.*

[3] I have laid out the Russian experience in a previous essay, "Shaping the Deep Memories of Russians and Ukrainians" which is available on my website, www:williampolk.com.