



Daniel Ellsberg on Nuclear War and Ukraine

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Daniel Ellsberg: The Russian invasion of Ukraine has made the world far more dangerous, not only in the short run, but in ways that may be irreversible. In just a number of ways it's a tragic and criminal attack, but actually, in terms of criminality, that is a violation of our obligations under the UN Charter. It is an aggressive war, and not the first. In fact, it's like the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, like the American invasion of Iraq in 2003, or even Afghanistan earlier than that, which persisted for 20 years. All of these were, including the Russian invasion of Ukraine now, have been criminal, murderous, stupid, unsuccessful and dangerous wars. So we see here humanity at its almost worst, not quite the worst, fortunately. And to go over this whole period of what we've been talking about, we haven't seen the worst. We've avoided the worst. I say we, I'll give credit even to little leaders that they're at their near worst. We haven't seen nuclear war, and really that was unexpected. When I was in my teens in the 40s or the 50s or early 60s, I think almost nobody that I knew expected that we would go 70 years after Hiroshima and Nagasaki without another explosion on humans. And that could well have happened. We've been very close to it, discredibly close to it. And yet something happened that was not easily foreseeable then. Each of the superpowers, the US and Russia, allowed themselves to be stalemated or defeated without reverting to nuclear weapons. I think almost nobody really foresaw that possibility. And of course, it's a possibility now. But there is this difference. In each of those cases, there was a stalemate confronting such a smaller power, whether it was Korea or Indo-China, Vietnam, Laos, or the Russians in Afghanistan. Even though their opponents were supplied by their adversaries' superpowers, and it was something of a proxy war, nevertheless, we were able to accept defeat in Vietnam, defeat in Afghanistan without using nuclear weapons; although they were considered at various points. Something of - essentially a defeat in Iraq, politically speaking, the Russians in Afghanistan and so forth. So that could persist unless we know the history of that period and know how close actually there was consideration of escalating to a nuclear war. That is currently a more imminent possibility than the world has seen since the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962, 60 years ago.

Actually, there was a very close, and for similar reasons, possibility of nuclear war in 1983, 20 years later, that most of the people don't know of. That was a time when the Russians, the Soviets, then felt under possible imminent attack and were preparing very dangerously and foolishly; but as we would have done in similar circumstances, for a pre-emptive attack against the United States. And there were false alarms during that crisis that could well have triggered it. Except for the prudence of individuals in the system, so that the world hung on the somewhat dangerous in career terms, decisions by people like Arkhipov in the Cuban Missile Crisis and Colonel Petrov in the 1983 crisis, not to alarm their superiors with their own belief that there might well be an imminent attack. That could occur in the current crisis and in various ways. For example, if the Ukrainians were to use the missile systems that we're now giving them, which have the capability of replying to Russian attacks on Ukrainian soil, with Ukrainian attacks on Russian soil, that would be a severe escalation; possibly out of our control. That happened again. If a possible defeat in Donbas of Russian forces caused Putin and or his commanders, or conceivably subordinates, to attack supply points in Poland, thus implicating NATO directly in this. We would get into a NATO - US war, which has so far been avoided. I am saying that each power here, Biden on the one hand and Putin on the other, have, actually as in the past, refrained from acts that would bring us into direct armed conflict together. They have shown a kind of prudence that we've seen before. And yet they're gambling with a clearcut risk by what they're doing, and the other side is doing by the interaction of getting into something that has not happened in the 70 years. And that is totally new so far. And that is the imminent possibility of armed conflict between the US or NATO and Russia, or the Soviet Union earlier.

Amazingly, in these 70 years, you might say each side has taken care, even in a proxy war, in each case against some, asymmetric, against some weaker power, has taken care to avoid direct armed conflict between the two. So something we have not seen. Yet tested is the willingness of a superpower leader to lose or be defeated or stalemated, I should say by the other superpower, because that involves a loss of prestige and a loss of influence in the world that has not occurred in these earlier wars. For the US to withdraw from Vietnam or Afghanistan is understood by others. It is not directly impinging on their ability to be a great power or a superpower in the world. To lose directly to Russia, or Russia to the US, is another matter, and that hasn't happened. It could easily come about now. So that's the gamble that's being taken by both sides at this point. Just as both sides were gambling in the Cuban Missile Crisis, in which I was involved at a high staff level, they were gambling that they would not go against their instincts not to get into armed conflict. I believe that both Khrushchev and Kennedy, I believe this after 50 years of study, after I had actually participated in that crisis, that neither of them, in fact, intended to carry out their threats of armed conflict. That they were both bluffing, but that each of them was taking moves and deployments, threats, and commitments to improve the terms of a negotiated settlement, which each of them expected to end with of some kind. In the course of that sparring, that deploying for better terms, they came within a hair's breadth of subordinates leading into directly armed conflict of American destroyers, causing a Soviet submarine to use a nuclear

torpedo, which we didn't. And the destroyers didn't even know they had a Soviet General in Cuba without the permission of Khrushchev, shooting down a U-2.

The one time, by the way, in 70 years when overtly an American or Soviet was actually killed by the other side. That was Major Anderson on Saturday morning, October 27th, when I was in the Pentagon. So we've been that close and in part because of the actions of subordinates or allies that were not under the control of the leaders. We came very close to blowing up not just the Northern Hemisphere, which our Joint Chiefs already estimated as the effect of our initiating nuclear war or responding to a single attack. In fact, we now know for the last 30 years it would have led to a smoke pall in the stratosphere, from burning cities, from soot from burning cities that would have cut out most sunlight and killed nearly all humans on Earth by starvation. In other words, we wouldn't be here if Vasili Arkhipov had not overridden the decision of the Soviet sub commander to launch his nuclear torpedo and again in Petrov.

Now, right now, it's not only the risk of nuclear war that we're seeing. The Russian action here, which was hardly foreseen by anyone outside the administration, which was thought to be exaggerating the situation wrongly by many people outside; that Russian has destroyed, and attacked against their Budapest Agreements to respect the sovereignty of Ukraine if it gave up its nuclear weapons to Russia. It was already violated by taking Crimea, but those were circumstances quite different from the present. This has destroyed, I think, the kind of trust not only in the US, but quite widely that could possibly lead to something like the treaty for the prevention of nuclear war, the elimination of nuclear weapons, or Article Six of the Non-Proliferation Treaty of good faith negotiations toward elimination of nuclear weapons. The US and other nuclear states have violated that in spirit and in action for half a century. And yet there was always the possibility, in part by this treaty, the so called TPNW, Treaty for the Prevention of Nuclear War, the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, pardon me; the Treaty for the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons. It was a possibility. Many nations have signed that. Even the US could sign it. I've been sceptical of that for reasons which we could go into. I think the idea of nuclear states signing that now is essentially dead. But more than that, I think Article Six is pretty dead; and the Non-Proliferation Treaty itself. Ironically, in this situation, even if nuclear weapons don't go off, the evident use of these weapons by threatening them and by preparations, especially in this case on the Russian side, I think will urge other countries to acquire their own deterrent forces and their own ability to exert their own influence outside their borders.

I think proliferation now is very likely. It's been predicted before, we've avoided it. As I say, the worst has been avoided. But I think the worst is now upon us, not certainly, and we can work against that struggle against it. But I think, in fact, we have an era of nuclear proliferation. If the Russians are led to use a nuclear weapon, it probably would be in the way that NATO was expected to use it in the case of a Soviet attack on West Europe. And that is not immediately by an all out use of strategic weapons or at all, or even an all out use, large use of tactical nuclear weapons. The NATO planning, in case of a new blockade of Berlin, got us into an armed conflict. It was always to fire demonstration shots first or warning shots. In other words, the alleged Russian doctrine of escalating to de-escalate, to stop the conflict,

is not a Russian invention. It was always the NATO idea. And after all, what else could it be? A large-scale use of tactical nuclear weapons in Europe has always been understood to lead to the annihilation of Europe, East and West, and probably to an all out war. So the countries that have relied on the so-called nuclear umbrella, have always contemplated that. First, you'll try to get the other side to back off if conventional means are not adequate for that. And even France, in its own independent force de frappe, has first thought not of hitting Moscow, that comes next for the French, but of a warning shot, a demonstration shot to get the other side to realise the seriousness of the situation, the willingness of the launching side to take risks, to accept risks and to draw back. And at the very least, to negotiate in a way that they had not been willing earlier and possibly to win, to accept the other side's terms. That's not impossible, though it's likely to happen. To have, in other words, a successful effect as an alternative to a decisive failure. And for that reason, by the way, it's extremely important, in my opinion and others, not to confront Putin and the Russians with the kind of military victory which a number of high level members of the Biden administration have said is necessary. Nancy Pelosi in the House has said victory is essential. Not defining exactly what that means, but it doesn't seem to encompass the kind of negotiated solution, which is least unlikely or most likely, which would not be really satisfactory to either side, but would be tolerable by both sides and hard for either to call victory. And for Biden to have said, and now repudiating it in words to some extent, but to have said that regime change is necessary, that Putin must not be allowed to serve, or that the war must go on, as Secretary of Defence Austin has said, to weaken Russia until it can't invade other countries the way it has invaded Ukraine. It can't invade Moldova or Georgia, which are actually the most likely other targets on this. That's absurd. That would not be achieved in 100 years. So they are both talking about very long wars.

As this war goes on, the possibility of escalation then continues, even grows to avoid stalemate; a costly stalemate and escalation. So the chance of a negotiated outcome to this, which I think ideally would happen as soon as possible, or at least within the next several months - and I'll come back to that - is very important. But it's not likely. As I say, the arguments I'm arguing against are at the very top of our leadership. And Putin has said similar things, as has Zelensky changing an earlier position in which he allowed the possibility of a negotiated outcome, which would give up some sovereignty over the Donbas and over for at least a long period of years, Crimea, along with neutrality and a willingness not to have any American bases or foreign bases on its soil. Earlier, he expressed an interest in that, and then he switched that in recent times. And he is now talking about what amounts to a determination to fight on until Russian soldiers have left the Donbas, the Eastern Ukraine, where they've been for eight years, and Crimea, which they've annexed. And it is extremely unlikely that they will give up control of that. So we're talking about a long war in which Ukrainian lives are destroyed enormously, hundreds of thousands more casualties on the Ukrainian side, as well as comparably on the Russian side.

Now, we face a terrific problem here in confronting this tragic situation for Ukraine and for that matter, for the Russian people with the sanctions and the rest of the world in terms of food supplies from Ukraine, which confronts people in Africa right now with the threat of

famine and starvation as this goes on. A real obstacle to that is that there are definite benefits and preferences in favour of a long war on both sides. The fact is that a stalemated war and even a lost war, as in Vietnam or Afghanistan or significantly Iraq, has been and is very profitable for the people who provide arms; and they are not marginal corporations here. These are quite influential corporations on our side and very possibly comparably on the Russian side as well. But here, Raytheon, Lockheed, Boeing, Northrop Grumman, making the new ICBMs, and General Dynamics are profiting hugely. Their stock has gone up, and reasonably so. If you have no scruples as to what you're investing in, Lockheed is a very good investment at this point because - and Raytheon- they are supplying the stingers and the javelins and many of the other weapons of war here. I think from their point of view, this war can't last too long. Quite fine with them for it to go on indefinitely.

From the US government's point of view, this Russian aggression has resuscitated NATO, which is Cosa Nostra, our thing for the American protectorate, the protection racket that we have run in NATO for a long time. It has resuscitated the US role in Europe; dominance, even enlarged NATO. And it created a Cold War atmosphere in which US leadership, even in Asia, is now greatly enhanced, and that again, can't go on too long.

On the Russian side, we're running into a very common, and this applies to the US as well, but more to the Russian side, the chance of an actual prestigious loss, a humiliating loss is what confronts Putin right now. In all our history, which I have been analysing as best I could in the last half century, having participated in some of the worst aspects of it before that tells me that rather than suffer that humiliating cost, a leader in the position of Putin is willing to raise the ante, escalate, back up previous failures, and double down in ways that are without consideration of the humans, like the Ukrainians in this case, Afghans in the case both of the Soviet invasion and the US invasion, and elsewhere with very little consideration of them just doesn't come in.

I said that the Russian aggression and the understandable and supportable - I would support - resistance to that in the way of arms aid and position without direct conflict by the US has some very serious impact on proliferation, on money, on starvation, right now. The worst of all, I think, is the destruction of the possibility of the kind of collaboration, cooperation, and common security that's between the US, China, India, Russia that is essential for dealing with the great existential problem facing civilization now; the climate catastrophe that's looming before us.

Let me be very specific. This war in the last few months, I think, has ruled out the possibility of keeping a ceiling on global warming to 1.5 degrees centigrade. That was the goal of past global summits on this subject; supposedly 1.5 then elevated possibly to 2.0, each of which represented very bad degradations of the world environment for humans. That's going to happen now. I think it's possible; and that's my best judgement, as I have tried to inform myself on this. The kind of cooperation we need with China, specifically, the two greatest emitters now in the world, the US and China, seems extremely unlikely. If somehow that could change, China could change its relation to Russia on this, that would be very good. But that is not the way events are going. And without that collaboration of climate, the world is going to get hotter in ways of producing floods, hurricanes, rising sea levels, toxicity in the

ocean, of disastrous effects for civilization, not extinction, just a world much less favourable to human existence. And that, I think, is going to be very hard to change. That's a catastrophe right now. It is tragic, as I see it.

Finally, the prospects for simply continuing at this level, even without escalation, this high level, I think, make that the most likely course of events that I see coming up and disastrously so. All experience of the past that I've studied and participated in says that men in power - and it's usually men; occasionally women, it applies for them too, if they're in power - will risk and even sacrifice almost any number of humans to avoid a short run, almost certain disaster for them personally, and a setback, a defeat, a humiliation which would cause them to lose office and to lose power and whatnot. And rather than do that, their incentives are to pursue possibilities of avoiding that, of staying in office, of avoiding the defeat at the cost of stalemate as the alternative or even very unlikely victory. But either of those with the risk or high likelihood of enormous loss of life almost without limit, and I say that because of my knowledge of the nuclear plans, the risk both sides are taking of a possible nuclear war now, disastrous nuclear war, even if it remained somewhat limited, still disastrous. The possibility of the ultimate catastrophe of nuclear winter is consciously being preserved, not reduced, if anything, increased by the actions of each side. It could be worse. They could be at this moment or tomorrow, attacking each side: Poland, Russia, NATO. Tactical nuclear weapons are definitely a possibility, each of which raises still higher, to a very high point, the possibility of an all out war between the US and Russia.