



Ukraine & Russia - Risking Nuclear War to Avoid Humiliation

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Paul Jay (PJ): Hi. Welcome to *theAnalysis.news*. I'm Paul Jay. In a few seconds, I'll be back with Daniel Ellsberg to talk about perhaps the most dangerous moment, at least that we're aware of so far, since the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Please don't forget there's a donate button at the top of the website, and we can't do this if you don't do that. Be back in just a few seconds.

Many people have said that the Russian invasion of Ukraine is perhaps the most dangerous moment in terms of the possibility or threat of nuclear war since the Cuban Missile Crisis. And that's mostly true, although there's been at least a few moments of miscalculation and misjudgments that could have ended everything but didn't because of some extraordinary efforts by some individuals who were manning radar stations and such. But certainly, in terms of confrontation between the two big powers, this is the most dangerous since 1962.

Within the context of the most dangerous, the missile that hit Poland on November 15th and killed, I believe it was two farmers. Perhaps that was or could have been the most dangerous moment within the most dangerous context. If President [Volodymyr] Zelensky of Ukraine had been listened to and AP, *Associated Press*, which both came out within minutes, practically, of blaming the Russians for this. As it turned out, not too much longer— in fact, the Polish government, NATO, and President Biden reported or stated that, in fact, this was not a Russian missile; it came from Ukraine. Biden actually distanced himself from Zelensky by saying, “he's saying that without evidence,” which is creating a little more space between Biden and Zelensky than we've heard previously.

But at any rate, there are some parallels between the Cuban Missile Crisis and what's taking place now. I don't know anyone better to talk about that than Daniel Ellsberg, who lived and played a role in 1962 during the Cuban Missile Crisis. Dan joins us now from Berkeley.

Thanks for joining us, Dan.

Daniel Ellsberg (DE): I agree with you, Paul, that there is a parallel between what's happening today and over the last seven months, as President Biden has indicated, that there really is a parallel between the dangers of the Cuban Missile Crisis and today. Perhaps nothing really like it in between. But those dangers we could learn from. The Cuban Missile Crisis has been looked at differently over time, year by year, decade by decade, because new information comes out.

I would say the crisis, to this day, is not understood in crucial ways. This is 60 years later, particularly in ways that indicate what the dangers really were and what dangers various leaders were prepared to accept, which is very important to try to understand what's going on now.

Now, as you say, just two days ago, we saw headlines that a red line had been crossed, basically, that there was an attack on Polish territory. The headlines from AP said 'By a Russian Missile'. Well, actually, that was right. They didn't mention that both sides, Ukraine and Russia, are equipped with Russian missiles. Ukraine is still using mainly Soviet-supplied missiles.

So, where did this one come from? Initially, the assumption was that it was, as it said, from outside Ukraine- not right- and it was from Russia. Now that brings in immediately, then, Article Five of NATO. An attack on Poland from Russia would be an attack on all members of NATO, including the United States, calling for all necessary means. As a matter of fact, President Zelensky invoked that and said there must be a retaliation now, and, in fact, called on NATO to be involved by this direct attack.

Right away, actually, the Poles that had been hit cast doubt on the question of whether it had come from Russia. Let me give you a clue that I haven't seen in the paper. I noticed that, I think, a Polish aircraft or a non-Ukrainian aircraft was flying high over Poland and Ukraine and saw the missile track down below it. Which would suggest, since they could tell where it came from, probably pretty well, that they probably knew right away that it had come from Ukraine. But that's just speculation on my part.

Anyway, Poland has been, right away, saying they called for an Article Four conference, that is, consultation among the main members of NATO as to what to do in this situation. There were, in fact, emergency sessions of ministers, including President Biden, as to what to do. Fairly quickly, they said, "no, this is a Russian-made anti-aircraft that was fired by the Ukrainians, and indeed the blame is not on Ukraine; it's on Russia because they were firing lots of missiles at Ukraine. Ukraine was forced to fire anti-aircraft missiles at the Russian missiles. The Russians are to blame in this situation."

Let me just say, by the way, the way I see this, Russian aggression is occurring. As far as I understand, the Russians have no right to be firing any missiles at Ukraine. They have no right to be killing any Ukrainian, military, or civilian. I'll even add one thing to that. As I'm still not a complete pacifist, certainly, I wasn't in the Marines or in the Defense Department, but I would still say, in my opinion, the Ukrainians have a right to be shooting at Russians in their territory. I have friends who feel a non-violent meeting challenge would be better. I

actually can't agree with that. Of course, if the world blows up, we will regret that this was not an easy takeover by Russia, as in Crimea, which is what they expected.

PJ: Dan. Can I interrupt? I don't think we will be here to regret it.

DE: You're right, and no one will be blamed, either. There'll be no courts, no problem, so that's a wonderful thing. As John F. Kennedy used to say about the Joint Chiefs of Staff in the context I'm talking about, "these military people have an advantage. If we carry out their recommendations and they're wrong, there will be no one to blame. They won't be blamed." And really, that's the context we're talking about right now.

Interestingly, in this fog of war situation, Zelensky is currently, two days later, sticking by his original estimate, which calls for recommendations of war with NATO and Russia. He says, as he said yesterday, "I have no doubt that this did not come from Ukraine", because his military commanders have assured him that it did not.

Well, let me jump right back to the Cuban Missile Crisis. We were the protector and manager of the foreign, of the old western hemisphere. It was a sphere of ours, not just the Caribbean and not just Mexico. It was the whole western hemisphere, which was a sphere where we could exclude foreign bases or alliances and influence as much as we could. It had no legal standing, which is our policy.

Well, of course, leap ahead to the present setting. That's the issue in both Ukraine right now and Taiwan. [Vladimir] Putin is claiming, at least, eastern Ukraine, if not all of Ukraine, is part of Russia, let alone its sphere of influence. All of Ukraine, he said, "for 20 years and more was recognized by everyone, as is the Russian tradition." If we are a great power, we have a sphere of influence where we can keep others out, where it's our influence, not others. Where people around us, contiguous, do not have the full sovereign freedom to align themselves or to allow foreign weapons in, next to our borders. We are a great power. We want to be a great power. Putin, despite the end of the Cold War, is speaking for Russia now, not the USSR anymore. And that means that we can say we don't want foreigners on our bases, just as on our borders, just the way you did in Cuba.

Well, that was in our tradition. In Cuba, it had no legal standard. NATO, of course, is insisting on the point, "oh, no, Ukraine is a sovereign nation. They can ally with us. They can even put bases in Ukraine, if they want, on their border. That's the nature of being a sovereign nation." In other words, they're saying, "you don't have a sphere of influence. The U.S. does. Others do. You don't. Even in Ukraine." So that's actually the fundamental conflict that's going on right now.

Now, there's also another point. What about national security? Hardly anybody really questions that missile bases, which we have not proposed to put, as of yet, in Ukraine or even a NATO base, hardly anybody questions that would endanger Russian national security. As Putin said, "we have a national security program here." Strictly speaking, it does not change the military situation he's in. Yes, he does have anti-ballistic missile bases in Poland and Ukraine, which he complains about, just as we would because they can be converted into cruise missile launching sites that would threaten Moscow, and we certainly wouldn't like

that. He didn't like that Pershing II was there. Strictly speaking, he hasn't claimed that he had a right to attack those in Poland and Romania. Legally, he doesn't. Naturally, could that be a subject for negotiation? Sure. Do we have a right or a need to put those missiles there? No. They shouldn't be there as a matter of fact. By any standards, it's reasonable to call them a major provocation to the Russians.

In terms of missiles in Ukraine, I would say the Russian military would not agree with me on the whole; if they don't change the situation from Poland to Romania or elsewhere, the truth is, it has been true from the mid-50s that a major conventional war between the U.S. and Russia, which would be very likely—remember it's never happened— which would be likely to go nuclear rather than either power being willing to lose to the other superpower without using all its weapons. Such a war would be a total catastrophe for both sides. No matter who started it, or how it started, or what the circumstances, or what the tactics were, or whether there were 1,000 more missiles on one side than there are now, or the 6,000 like there used to be, or 10,000 or 20,000 or 100,000, it really doesn't make any difference. That's especially true because of nuclear winter, which I won't go into. Even when we didn't understand that smoke in the stratosphere would kill all harvests around the world, we didn't know that until 40 years ago. Even before that, we knew we were talking about killing a third of the Earth's population, then 3 billion, in a war.

Just as then, 40 missiles in Cuba could kill Americans, but they did not change the situation of total catastrophe if they were used because they would be used in the context of others, including our own, which would kill hundreds of millions.

PJ: You've made this point before both about Cuba, but I think it's worth making it again about Ukraine is that even if there were nuclear weapons in Ukraine, the fact that Russia has submarines that have second-strike capability to the point where they can destroy most of the United States, that being a little closer to the border in Ukraine doesn't make much of a difference. If they really want to put weapons somewhere, they can put them in Estonia already, which is closer to Moscow. But that wouldn't change anything either.

DE: Let me take this as a point of view, which is not universally held, especially by the military and especially by the missile forces of the military, who want to believe that what they're doing is very essential, that more weapons are essential, better weapons are essential, and that when the other side gets weapons we don't have, that's very serious and we've got to do something about it. I have little doubt that Putin hears from his military that military bases in Ukraine would somehow be very different from the bases in Poland or Romania that can hit Moscow just as quickly. This would be an addition, and it would be terrible.

Just as in America, there are always people to tell the president and others that slight changes in the Soviet or Russian posture are terribly serious, and we've got to do something about them. Always involves, always involves spending more money and having more forces on our side. Never, "oh, this change there really allows us..." I'll take that back a little. When the Russians enormously reduced their forces as we did after the Cold War, we did lower and take the number of targets down somewhat, did that result in an agreed lessening of our

forces or reduction of forces? No, no, no. Plans changed a little. I'm saying that with 1,500 warheads now on alert on both sides, many of which are in submarines that can't be counted, the reduction that has occurred of more than 80% in the number of warheads in the last 20 years makes no difference and another having of these courses would make no difference. That's the way it is.

The notion that's different from that is a myth, which is a very profitable myth and very supportive of the Air Forces and the Navy on both sides. But building the forces to make a difference won't make any difference, but it's very profitable. I've been saying that about Ukraine, and that's just my opinion. I'm just saying I have enough background in this that my opinion is now, of course, only mine, but it shouldn't be swept off the table and ignored. Will there be people who say that's all wrong? Yes, there will be countless.

Going back now— but it is interesting to know who agreed with my opinion in 1962. Because when I came into the Pentagon right after the president's speech, I was asked and I gave my judgment of how much difference 38 or 40 missiles would make and I won't go through the whole thing. It was my judgment on October 23, 1962, well, there, yes, they can hit Moscow. They can hit Washington and [inaudible 00:17:19], and so forth, as can Russian submarines with no warning offshore right now. So it's not as though they're not threatening. All of these weapons are threatening on both sides. But does it change the situation? No, it doesn't. Now that was my judgment.

I didn't know then, actually, I heard indications of it a little later. McNamara had made that same judgment to the President a week earlier. As he said, "these do not constitute a military problem. They do constitute a political problem." And that was very obvious. It was disastrous, potentially, from the point of view of the 1962 election and, above all, the 1964 election. Had, in fact, he done nothing, he probably could not have run in 1964, and there would have been a wipeout of the kind that was expected this year, in '62, instead of which, thanks to his generally regarded as courageous, old, measured, prudent, wonderful, miraculous words of Arthur Schlesinger, "matchless, matchless bearing." There wasn't a wipeout. In fact, that was one of the last times that there had not been a midterm wipeout. The Democrats gained senators instead of losing them, but that's what he was facing. Also, Paul, as you've suggested, there were external aspects to this. Above all, for the U.S. to back down in the face of [Nikita] Khrushchev's defiance of Kennedy's warnings not to do this, which were, in fact, being made in September as the missiles were being installed, so it was a little late for those ones. But in the face of that, the humiliation of that, of our credibility, our courage, the mere fact that it was happening all the more if we didn't do anything about it, did have the possibility of destroying our leadership in NATO, whether it would have happened or not. George Ball, for example, the number two man in the state, said, "no, it won't have that effect. What happens in Cuba, it's a matter of judgment." But it could have happened.

What would that mean? Well, that would mean that the French and Germans would have the leadership instead of the U.S. Who knows, they might even make deals with the Russians, which is something we've tried to prevent since the end of World War II. It would be serious, potentially, that it was a matter of judgment over which there were countries.

PJ: Here's the question: Does what happened in the last few days where the Poles, NATO, and the Americans, instead of allowing what was essentially misinformation that these were Russian missiles, they could have let that be understood even if they knew it was B.S.

DE: That's true.

PJ: Does it give you some hope that there's actually some rationality there, at least enough to step back from the possibility of World War III here?

DE: Well, you don't have to have hope because, of course, that's what's happened so far. The Poles contradicting Zelensky and Biden contradicting Zelensky for the first time in public does show prudence, rationale, reasonableness, realism, and has preserved us from being today at war with Russia as a member of NATO, having NATO as Russia. So, yes, and that kind of reasonableness was shown by the president especially, and in the end by Khrushchev, but not by their subordinates.

I wanted finally to put this in context. As I said, it's been totally understood that given the political— see, McNamara did not say there was no danger here. He said, “the danger is political,” and he meant both domestic. As he said, “it would be bad if the Democrats lost.” That's bad for the world, right? Not only the Democrats as Democrats but as partisans; partisans always see that. The world is at stake here if we lose office because we're not perfect, but we're better than the other guys, and if they get in, everybody's endangered. Everybody feels that in office and the county people too. But the question was there are dangers, both alliances, not from a Russian surprise attack. Nobody believed that. Only the American people were shuttering about that. Not knowing the Russians had only a dozen or so or a couple of dozen ICBMs at that point that had not gotten through to the American public. Everybody in the government knew that. So they weren't expecting a surprise attack. But there were real stakes. The question was, were they worth— what risk were they worth? Were they worth going to war? Did they compel us to go to war? The answer to that, in almost every discussion for the last 60 years, has been, in their eyes, right or wrong- these are smart guys, conscientious, and patriotic. That's all true. They thought it was compulsive and had no choice.

Here's what [Assistant Secretary of Defense Paul] Nitze told me. This is the top secret that he's concealed for the rest of his life. “Invasion looked bad...” this is the night of the 15 while talking to [Dean] Rusk. “It would be a bloody mess, and an air strike looked better, but that, too, didn't look good.” Especially a surprise attack with the political repercussions of the Japanese Pearl Harbor. He thought we would just have to eat it. That's Nitze's talk for “accepted”. I can say, as a supporter of Nitze, it came up all the time. “They'll have to eat it. We have to eat it.” It means we can't do anything about it. It's fate, and you got to accept it. He thought we would just have to eat it. Rusk felt about the same way. The secretary of state... he wouldn't. Nitze would not have necessarily predicted this reaction. Nitze told me, we both agreed, “it was a hideous prospect.”

In other words, you were saying it's terrible politically. It's terrible in NATO. But what can we do? We can't go to war over this. That's aggression, and it is risky, terribly risky. The risk of it is not worth it. The missiles are there. It's not a question of shall we keep them from getting there. They are there, and they have a right to be there. To attack them is dangerous. No one disagreed with that except LeMay and the Joint Chiefs, who felt that until they were operational, not to worry about it. Although the CIA said, "one might already be operational," which is almost surely not the case, but they would be operational within days. So you had to do something fast, the JCS [Joint Chief of Staff] thought. Once they were operational, no one in the process disagreed. You can't attack them. It's too dangerous. Alright, that's Rusk and Nitze, not two doves we're talking about.

[Robert] McNamara, I learned from his assistant, known as the assistant to the Secretary of Defense, he always insisted on that. Adam Yarmolinsky, when I talked to him about it, and who I knew very well, he said that when he discussed it with McNamara the next day, the 16th, McNamara says— this is another top secret. Sorry, guys, but I didn't use to stamp my own drafts, my own notes, "top secret". Not many people did, actually, and I took them with me when I left RAND.

McNamara's reaction then was— it was top secret at the time, and it hasn't been declassified. This shows how stupid it was to draw that line, which was when Kennedy said on September 4th and again on the 13th, "there are not offensive missiles there, and if they were, that would raise the gravest issues, meaning war. It's a vital interest." He said, "I advised against saying that," said McNamara. McNamara thought; his assistant told me who really knew what he was thinking, "there might not have had to be a crisis if [inaudible 00:26:48] hadn't drawn the line."

Yarmolinsky thinks it's unlikely that John F. Kennedy would have made the firm, precise commitment he did if he had thought there was much chance it might be called. He made it publicly, only public, only for political reasons, meaning the Republicans are saying invade, and he wanted to say, "I don't want to invade now because I don't have a reason. There are no offensive missiles there." If there were offensive missiles, if he had thought there would be offensive missiles and Khrushchev had assured him that there wouldn't be, he wouldn't have said that. That's what his speech fighter and, again, confidant, Ted Sorensen said later at conferences. He wouldn't have made those statements if he hadn't believed Khrushchev that there wouldn't be any missiles there. So he was excusing himself for not doing anything now that the Republicans wanted.

Moreover, the commitment had not been made. The whole thing would not have been that crucial. It would not have had the ominous significance it did of calling us, of challenging us, of humiliating the president by putting presidential quote, "and U.S. prestige so clearly at stake." In short, he was in the process of humiliating John F. Kennedy very severely just before a midterm election.

Now, what do you do when that happens? Nitze and Rusk the night before, saw all that, and they thought, "sorry, what can you do about it?" But they weren't thinking politically about that. John F. Kennedy, when he learned about it on the 16th, said right away, first of all, "he can't do this to me. He fucked me. He can't do this." Bobby's reaction, I learned from the guy

who showed him the photographs. “Shit, shit, shit.” He said the reaction was entirely political, and Kennedy said to McGeorge Bundy when he showed the photographs “this made Senator [Kenneth] Keating president in 1964.”

Keating was a well-respected Republican senator, much more respectful than [Barry] Goldwater, for example, who had said on October 10th that there were six missile bases in Cuba. This is four days before the U-2 discovers them.

PJ: What lessons do you draw in terms of what U.S. policy should be in regard to Ukraine?

DE: I am sure that president Biden not only does not desire nuclear war, and let me say I believe Putin does not desire a two-sided nuclear war. Not only do they not desire it, but I’m also sure that I feel they are probably determined not to have a two-sided nuclear war. That does not rule out some limited nuclear attacks by Putin. That does not— if he feels that the alternative is humiliation. Because the Berlin crisis of ’61, the Cuban crisis of ’62, and a number of others have shown, and I believe this one could be an example, the alternative of serious humiliation to the leader of a nuclear weapon state is seen as even worse than the dangers of an all-out nuclear war.

PJ: So what you’re saying here is that to avoid humiliation, knowing the missiles in Cuba were not a real national security threat, Kennedy was willing to risk the possibility of this heading to nuclear war and that it could be the same thing. If Putin is willing and so fears humiliation, this could also get out of control. If Biden phones you tonight and says, “what do you think I should do?” What do you say to him?

DE: I would say there must not arise either direct fighting, direct armed conflict between the U.S. and Russia, or Russia and any NATO country like Poland, such as was rumored to have happened, believed to have happened two days ago. That can happen anytime and by accident, as in this case, on either side. When that gets started, values and priorities change very quickly by the leaders in power because that confronts the possibility that it will escalate and both sides believing in the myth that it is less bad, as [Fidel] Castro put it, to strike first than second. Castro was wrong then and is wrong now, but both sides are entirely modeled on that belief. Each will believe this may blow up. Shall I wait, or shall I go first?

Besides that case, something that isn’t going to happen in the next week or so, but if Putin does face what Zelensky promises to give him, which is to drive every Russian out of not only the eastern Donbass, but out of Crimea, which almost every Russian regards as Russian, and Putin has defined the Donbass as Russian right now, if Zelensky achieves— is coming close to achieving his aims of depriving Russia of that part of its own territory, as the U.S. is so far supporting, that would be— Putin would be facing a humiliation of enormous strength. Incredibly more than the Bay of Pigs, let’s say, or Vienna or the other things that Kennedy feared could, if they added up, give him a coup. And, yes, Putin could definitely be facing a coup. A coup, as he said; in effect, he’s acting like other leaders. “Russia is me. Russia c’est moi. You can’t take Russia, or you are taking me.” There’s political truth to that. And if he

did say otherwise, “without Russia, why does the rest of the world matter?” What I’m saying is that if you face him with humiliation, which he deserves from his aggression, however provoked, it’s aggression. He deserves humiliation. You can say condemnation, but he has a lot of nuclear weapons left to use, and I would say, don’t confront him with that. Don’t try to go beyond Kherson and achieve total expulsion of Crimea– this is me talking now– or the eastern Donbass. It’s too dangerous for the world and for Ukraine. Whatever Zelensky, however conscientiously and patriotically, he thinks, that’s called for.

So I would say negotiations which are being talked about, which others say would be shameful and appeasement and intolerable and all that. I would say the incident just two days ago is a very good symbol. Get this shooting over as fast as you can. It won’t happen quickly. There’s no way to make it quickly. But to go on all winter pressing on this and into the spring pressing on this is most dangerous if it actually achieves what Zelensky claims to want to achieve and what the Ukrainians want. So that’s dangerous, sorry. The whole world is at stake on that. There are people on all sides, like Castro in Cuba, Zelensky in Ukraine, the way he talks, and other Ukrainians. I don’t doubt that there are people telling Putin, and maybe Putin himself, who feel this is an intolerable humiliation and not that he will then press the button to hit Washington. That’s not the issue. We’ve got to do something that will shock and set aside into accepting our terms, which may or may not correspond to the terms I just described here. Maybe they’re more ambitious. Maybe they’re in Russia’s terms. I doubt very much if he still wants to do what he expected to do at the beginning. Take Kyiv. Is he going to move to that? No, I don’t think so. But at what point?

PJ: One never knows in the context of such tension the next time a missile goes astray and gets completely misinterpreted.

DE: Look, that happened on the Ukrainian side. Of course, that could happen on the Russian side, anytime. They are sending missiles, why shouldn’t one of their missiles go astray into Poland? Is it impossible that somebody would actually deliberately do that under Putin? Is it impossible that Putin would do it? And what I’m saying is no, it is not impossible. That is not because Putin is crazier than Kennedy, Khrushchev, McNamara, or any of our past leaders. It’s because I think he’s not less crazy.

PJ: Well, let me end on a slightly, little positive note, which is at least it’s something that the head of Russian intelligence and the head of the CIA just met a few days ago in Turkey and discussed how to reduce the risk of nuclear war. President Xi of China made it clear that he does not want the Russians to even keep threatening nuclear war. In fact, Lavrov and some other officials have said, “well, we’re not threatening that.” So maybe there is some real attempt to reduce at least the nuclear tension. So there’s a little bit of positive light here.

DE: I have no doubt there are attempts. Right now, I am certain that neither side wants a nuclear war. What I learned from Cuba is that determination is far from guaranteeing that there will not be a nuclear war. They do not have as much control as they think.

PJ: Thanks very much for joining me, Dan.

DE: Thank you, Paul, for having me.

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