Full of Sound and Fury, Signifying… What Exactly?: Russian Nuclear Noise in the Ukraine War

[00:00:00] Speaker 1: For those of you who have previously attended the Carnegie International Nuclear Policy Conference before, welcome back. For newbies, a little bit of history. This is a long-running gathering of the nuclear policy field, dating back to the first conference organized by Sandy Specter in 1987. What began as a small annual non-proliferation conference is now a mostly biennial event covering the breadth of nuclear policy issues, aiming to gather experts, officials, journalists, and students from around the world.

[00:00:39] Speaker 2: While many of the faces have changed since that first conference in 1987, the reason that we continue to gather remains the same, to share ideas and perspectives. To debate, to brainstorm, to network, and together, try to solve some of the world's thorniest problems. This is meant to be a community gathering, and we're glad to see so many of you here, despite the challenges. Our function today, happily, is primarily to hand off the baton. After organizing this conference together for the last ten years, James and I think it's time for some new leadership. And so, to that end... We're very pleased to introduce our colleague and friend, a fellow with the nuclear policy program at Carnegie, and the director of this conference, Jane Darby Menton.

[00:01:40] Speaker 3: You're typing a lot of paper coordination there. Thank you. Sorry about that. Thank you, and thank you all for being here today. It's my great pleasure to welcome everyone to the Carnegie International Nuclear Policy Conference. In 1946, the journalist John Hersey was instrumental in bringing the bomb to public attention with his searing account of what happened in Hiroshima. Revisiting it recently, I was struck by how the editors of the New Yorker justified the unorthodox decision to devote an entire magazine to a singular article. Quote, In the conviction that few of us have yet to see the world, we must not be afraid to say that the world is not our own. We must not be afraid to say that the world is not our own. We must not be afraid to say the world is not our own. We have not yet comprehended the all but incredible destructive power of this weapon, and that everyone might well take time to consider the terrible implications of its use. Nearly 80 years later, that time is still worth taking. And whether you're a specialist in deterrence, arms control, nuclear energy, or nonproliferation, I doubt you'd be here this morning if you didn't agree. Yet if the task of managing the destructive potential of nuclear technology and an awareness of the catastrophic consequences of failure imbues our work and this conference with a kind of continuity, we are also gathering in a moment of transition, as concurrent shifts in technology, geopolitics, and domestic politics unsettle many of the assumptions that have long underpinned policy and scholarship in the nuclear field. These shifts inform the challenges and opportunities, and yes, there are opportunities, that define the contemporary nuclear landscape and which we'll dig into over the next two days, from the current talks over Iran's nuclear program to China's evolving nuclear arsenal to booming interest in the peaceful uses of nuclear technologies and in particular nuclear energy. All of these issues are important, but at Carnegie we think that the way we address them matters too, critically, rigorously, but with a spirit of communication and collegiality, and a sense of community. In that regard, the breaks, meals, and receptions are just as important as the panels and the keynotes, and I am not only saying that because of my crippling caffeine addiction. During the breaks, you should also be sure to visit our exhibitors, which are conveniently located in the foyer, near the registration desk

and near the snacks. I also want to strongly encourage you to download the conference app, if you haven't already. I think you should be able to see instructions behind me. Whether you're here in person or tuning in online, that's the only way to participate, in the Q&A, so I strongly encourage you to do that. If you need any help with the app, you can visit the information desk, which is also located in the foyer, and more broadly, if you have questions about anything throughout the day, we have a fleet of keen volunteers who will be very happy to help. They're wearing red lanyards, and so should be easy to recognize. Indeed, as this armada of red lanyards implies, it takes a lot to put on this conference, and it is a significant financial commitment for Carnegie. We would not be able to do it without substantial support from the Carnegie Endowment's actual endowment, as well as the generous support of partner governments and foundations. And so thank you to the Carnegie Corporation of New York, the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, the David and Lucille Packard Foundation, the German Federal Foreign Office, the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Korea Hydro and Nuclear Power, Fidelity Charitable Pentacles Fund, Nagasaki University, and Longview Philanthropy. We know that a strong agenda, dynamic speakers, and an opportunity for community engagement and intergenerational mentorship keeps people coming back every year, and we want to thank you all for being here, especially on the tail end of a holiday weekend. As compensation, I promise that you will soon stop receiving emails from us about this conference. And on a more serious note, I think in times that are undeniably eventful, it really means a lot that you've all decided to give your time to us and to each other. So with that, I think as many of you now realize, we've had late-breaking changes to the agenda. And so to give some context on that and to introduce our first session of the day, I'm going to turn the stage over to George Perkovich, the Japan Chair for a World Without Nuclear Weapons here at the Carnegie Endowment.

[00:05:54] Speaker 4: Thanks, Jane Darby, and thank all of you for being here. On Saturday, the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace announced that the economist Steve Cole, author of The Achilles Trap, would moderate a virtual conversation with Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araqchi, followed by audience questions to open our conference. Unfortunately, the Iranian Foreign Minister's team subsequently requested changes to the previously agreed format, and these changes would have severely curtailed the ability of the moderator and you, the audience, to ask questions of the foreign minister. As a result, Carnegie has decided not to proceed with the session, and we will turn now to the panel on Ukraine. So I want to invite the colleagues to come up to begin that panel. I realize I'm supposed to stand here and introduce them, and then I sit down. So, seated closest to me is Maryana Bujaran, who's a senior researcher at the Harvard Kennedy School and Belfer Center at Harvard, and author of the outstanding book, Inheriting the Bomb. And then Colin Call, who is the Hazy Senior Fellow at CSEC at Stanford, and had a distinguished term as Under Secretary of Defense in the Biden administration. And then my friend Paul Zasek, from France, who's the Director of the, sorry, Director for Strategy and Planning at the French Atomic Energy Commission. And with that, let me join them. Wow, that was seamless how the mic worked. So I want to start with Maryana, and I want to ask you, when you hear an expression that's often heard, which is, if Ukraine had kept its nuclear weapons, this war would not have happened, what comes to mind for you?

[00:08:08] Speaker 5: Well, first of all, thank you, George, and thank you to all of the organizers for inviting me to this panel, putting it together, this conference, which

could not be an easy task under the circumstances. And to turn to your question, just to hear it now, I'm kind of thinking how remarkable it is, that a question about the nuclear history of a country about which just a few years ago, few knew little, it's a country far away, should be the first question of a major international nuclear conference. And it makes me think that history, history's chickens come to roost still years, 30 years now after the date of this Ukraine's decision to disarm Ukraine. When I hear this question, normally people expect one of two answers, right? One is yes, Ukraine should have kept nuclear weapons, the third largest nuclear arsenal it had inherited from the Soviet Union and hence deterrence would have worked and Russia would not have invaded. And certainly that has many built-in assumptions in that kind of answer that's expected. And that is, that it was somehow an easy decision or an easy feat to accomplish, to establish, to turn this inheritance into a deterrent for Ukraine that could serve this purpose. But the other answer that people normally expect is that under no circumstances, Ukraine could have done anything with these weapons or capabilities it had inherited and that the decision was over determined, it was a non-decision to begin with. And that answer also has to be qualified by pointing out that Ukraine actually had some options, that U.S. fears of proliferation had good costs, they were justified. The policies that were put in place back then were there for a reason, right? If it was a non-decision, that U.S. probably shouldn't have been so concerned about a proliferation in Ukraine. And so now looking back, with the knowledge that we have today, we have to be conscious about not projecting the things that we know today back on that context, on that historical context, and recognize that Ukraine made, in my opinion, the right decision at the time, given the circumstances and given what the decision makers knew and could anticipate. Now, today we see a very different world. And I suppose I'll kind of wrap up by saying that in addition to pondering this counterfactual, if Ukraine kept or, you know, kept some kind of nuclear option, would this war happen? I call on you to ponder this other counterfactual. If Russia were not a nuclear power, would it have still invaded? Would it have, you know, relied on these nuclear threats, which we will discuss today, to induce caution and restraint on the part of partners, potential partners and strategic allies of Ukraine? Thank you, Mariana.

[00:11:42] Speaker 4: That's a great segue to a question I want to ask Paul. You know, Paul, some say that Russia's perceived aggressive nuclear intimidation from before February 21st to February 22, but after that, has made the West excessively cautious. So that goes to Mariana's question in a way. And that this may encourage similar aggression in the future, that you can commit aggression behind a nuclear shield. So when you look back over the three years, when a leader of a nuclear-armed state is trying to take and occupy someone else's territory, what are the guidelines that you would now kind of proffer that people should follow when you face that kind of potential intimidation, aggression? And how can you assess where the tripwires or triggers of escalation might be?

[00:12:36] Speaker 6: Thank you. Thank you, George. Thank you first for this invitation. Again, I'm very glad to be with you today. And thank you for the organizers for setting this great conference. Your question is really a crucial one that has been very central to our thinking from the beginning of the war and even before. As you said, Russia has been waging a war and a nuclear intimidation strategy, which some French strategists had coined as a strategy of aggressive centralization, which is really a sort of deviation from nuclear deterrence, understood as a strictly defensive strategy. It is really putting nuclear deterrence to use in an aggressive fashion. And as such, it cannot be allowed to stand and to become a template for others, as you

said. And so actually countering this strategy, which is at the core of the Russian theory, of victory, in a sense, in the war against Ukraine, is really a central objective and has been. So in fact, we want to be in a situation where we don't need to answer your question on what's our template for responding to this, because we don't want this strategy to become a template in the first place. And so when managing this, of course you have to balance, basically, countering this strategy, proving it to be wrong and a failure, against the risk of actual nuclear escalation. But there is also a very strong risk of actually overestimating nuclear escalation, which would in turn lead you to validate the intimidation approach and to cover to nuclear blackmail. So it's a fine line to walk, and that's the line we've tried to walk all along to respond to the Russian strategy. The first thing, of course, is to actually uphold your freedom of action. And that is what we did in asserting also nuclear deterrents, to be able to resist nuclear blackmail, and to preserve both unity and cohesion within the alliance, as well as the ability to respond. But then you have to challenge the underpinning of the whole strategy from the Russian side, which actually rests on a fundamental assumption of an asymmetry of interests in the security of Ukraine. This is the underpinning of the nuclear intimidation strategy. Russia has taken the bet that Europe and the US did not have strong enough interests in the security of Ukraine and could be therefore blackmailed out of the conflict. So it is actually paramount to challenge this core assumption that underpins the strategy to demonstrate that the asymmetry of interests is not such as Russia thought in the first place. And there are actually a number of ways to do this. Which are not necessarily linked to nuclear policy. I think extending a European perspective and opening up accession talks to Ukraine is a way to demonstrate resolve, commitment and determination to Ukraine's security. Another way has been to establish bilateral security assurances with Ukraine, which a number of allied countries did at the Washington summit. That is also a way to demonstrate commitment over the long run. And in a sense, you could also say that European interests in the security of Ukraine actually increased over time as the conflict went on through the political commitment, the military commitment, the economic commitment to Ukraine's security. So that whole calculus from Russia really backfired. And then from there, of course, you have to engage in a competition risk-taking, as Shelley would have said, by supporting Ukraine militarily, politically, economically. And of course, as you said, there's a debate about whether we've been too slow and cautious when providing military support to Ukraine in particular. I think you've seen France, along with the UK, trying to move the needle at some points over the past years when it comes to long-range weapons, for instance. But I will also say that it is easy to pass judgments with the benefit of hindsight when you're no longer in the uncertainty of the moment. I would also note that there is, in a sense, a kind of symmetrical debate that's been happening on the Russian side last year with some Russian experts publicly debating whether the intimidation strategy had been successful at all, which is maybe a hallmark of a conflict that is waged with a nuclear dimension that neither side is really happy with the result.

[00:18:29] Speaker 4: Thanks. Colin, let me pick up a little bit on what Paul was saying. You were involved in, especially the early years of the war, directly. And it occurs to me, on this question of how to interpret or judge the balance of interest, the stakes and resolve involved, it seems to me that the worse the situation of Russia would look on the ground for Russians, the higher the stakes for them. So in terms of interpreting signals, as Bob Woodward has written about and you've talked about, the moment or the weeks in October of 2022 when the Russians were retreating, to many people's surprise, the Ukrainians were advancing, how did you think that

Russian statements and signals then should be interpreted perhaps compared at the beginning of the war or in 2024? Like at that moment, what's different about the way as a policymaker you're looking and responding to these things?

[00:19:41] Speaker 7: Sure. Well, first, thanks to Carnegie. Thanks to you, George. Carnegie is a national treasure and conferences like this that focus on nuclear weapons at a time when the salience of nuclear weapons is going up, when many of us hope it would be going down, is more important than ever. So thanks also to all of you for taking time out of your busy schedules to join this gathering. Look, we were very concerned in the fall of 2022. I think, you know, President Biden at a fundraiser made the comment that we were at the most perilous moment since the Cuban Missile Crisis in terms of the possibility of nuclear Armageddon. When I worked around Joe Biden when he was vice president, he would sometimes say, Colin, my problem is not that I say what I mean, it's that I say everything that I mean. So as president, he meant what he said, that we were at a perilous moment. And that is because, and this has all been reported, the intelligence community had revised its assessment from a baseline of around five or 10% of a probability that the Russians might use tactical nuclear weapons in Ukraine to a set of circumstances that elevated that to a coin flip, 50%. And I don't care who you are, if the intelligence community walks into the presidential daily brief and says, hey boss, there's a 50% chance that nuclear weapons are gonna be used somewhere in the world, you're gonna pay attention to that, especially when that same intelligence community had the goods on the Russians. If you think about how much more the US intelligence community knew about Russian plans and intentions than most Russian generals did, then the president of the United States had to take that seriously. Now, why was that judgment changed? I think in large part because there are actually two asymmetries that you have to confront when dealing with the Russian nuclear program. One is the asymmetry of stake. Let me come back to that a second. But the first is the asymmetry in capabilities. The Russians, during the Cold War, the United States offset its perceived conventional inferiority by relying more on nuclear weapons, especially in the first half of the Cold War. Russia now, the situation is reversed, where Russia understands that were it to fight the United States and or NATO as a combined force, they'd lose conventionally, which means they envision a lower threshold for the use of nuclear weapons and more battlefield contingencies for using nuclear weapons in conditions where the Russian army might be in considerable trouble. So that actually gives a certain degree of credibility to their threats because one can imagine a certain set of circumstances in which Russia might actually, according to its own doctrine, use nuclear weapons. And there were, was this period in the fall of 2022 where some of those circumstances might be coming to a head. You'll recall that the Ukrainians made a rapid series of successes in the northern part of the country in a place called Kharkiv, where the Russian army imploded in a way that nobody expected to include the Russians, and that induced a degree of panic, especially, among the Russian leadership, that a similar circumstance could happen in the south, which would create, if the Russian army imploded in the south, it could open up the ability of the Ukrainians to drive on Crimea, which is Ukraine, unless you're Vladimir Putin and then you think of it as Russian holy land. It's just as much Russia as St. Petersburg in Putin's mindset. And it would also mean, essentially, the implosion of the Russian army. And we know from Putin's later statements during the Prigozhin mutiny that he had in his brain this kind of scenario of a 1917 moment where the Russian military collapses and it leads to the collapse of the regime. So again, you don't have to agree with the assessment, but it's inside his head. So there appeared to be this moment that if

Russian forces in the south collapsed like they collapsed in the north, that the Russians would be, desperate times beat desperate measures, and that they might resort to the battlefield use of nuclear weapons. And again, I'm not gonna speak to the sources of that intelligence, I'll just say that given that the intelligence community knew a lot about Russian military plans and intentions and actions, you had to take that 50-50 coin flip scenario seriously. So that's the, you know, one asymmetry is this asymmetry in capabilities, the other is this asymmetry in stakes, which is that there was the presumption that Russia cared more about Ukraine than the United States did and then Europe did. And that's true, I think. So, yeah. Thank you. Certainly at the outset of the war, I think it continues to be true today. That doesn't mean that the United States and Europe don't see Ukraine as central to their national interest, but they are not vitally linked to the national interest of the United States in the same way that they are inside Putin's head. And the reason why that matters is it can incline him to believe he can take risks, manipulate risks, in a way that the United States would not be willing to reciprocate. And if you combine these two things, of the asymmetry of capabilities and the asymmetry of stakes, then you get a situation in which you have to take Russian threats seriously while, as Paul said, not cowing to them. And so the conversations we were having in the fall of 2022 was, okay, in a scenario in which the Russians would conceive of using battlefield nuclear weapons in Ukraine, they would only do that based on a series of calculations and assumptions. So how do we message to them that those calculations and assumptions are wrong? Right? Because to deter them, you can't just promise to do the things they already think you're gonna do. You have to threaten to deter them and threaten to do things and make those threats credible that they don't think you might do. So, you know, I was privy to staffing the Secretary of Defense for a pair of phone calls with Minister Shoigu, the Defense Minister in Russia, in late October. One was on October 21st, on a Friday, and then one happened 36 hours later on a Sunday morning. And the messaging on that was aimed at trying to challenge Russian assumptions and calculations. So the first was that if Russia thought that using nuclear weapons was a pathway to victory in Ukraine, they were wrong. It wouldn't back us off from supporting Ukraine. In fact, we signaled to the Russians that we had been operating in the war under a considerable degree of restraint and that all of those restraints, up to including direct intervention, would be reconsidered in the event that Russia used nuclear weapons. So thing one. Thing two is that if they believed that nuclear escalation could be controlled, they were being foolish. That the P5 had put out a statement that a nuclear war cannot be won, it should never be fought, and that was in recognition that once you stepped on that very slippery of slopes, a kind of cruel logic of its own, a tit-for-tat escalation, could have us all sliding into Armageddon, and as much as Ukraine might matter to Russia, one would think the survival of Russia would matter more, and that this situation was not inherently controllable. Third, if the United... If Russia believed that the United States would not take risks because Ukraine mattered more to Russia than to the United States, the, say, symmetry of stakes issue, they were thinking about it the wrong way. That basically what we said was, look, what is a vital national interest of the United States is not living in a world where nuclear powers use nuclear weapons with impunity. We can't live in that world. That is a world that would give the green light to endless aggression and endless use of nuclear weapons. That is a vital national threat to... That is a threat to the vital national interest of the United States that actually has nothing to do with Ukraine. It's about the principle, the norm of it, and therefore, you may think you care more about this than us, but not in this context. You do not. The other assumption was that Russia had experienced all the pain that they could have... So there was nowhere to go. And what we said is, look,

you have no idea how the world would respond to the first use of nuclear weapons since Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and that we would make sure that Russia became a permanent pariah of Ukraine. We would make sure that Russia was on the world stage and that all your buddies in Beijing or fence-sitters in India or Saudi Arabia or Turkey or elsewhere would isolate you to a degree that you have not been isolated. And to hammer that point home, we were making simultaneous calls to China and India and Turkey and Saudi Arabia and Israel and others, and we know that those messages got to the Kremlin, and I think that they sunk in. Last point. You can't have deterrence without a degree of reassurance. If the adversary believes that no matter what they do, they're going to suffer the cost, then they're going to be willing to use that threat. And so we also had to make the argument, look, we are willing to move up the escalation ladder. In fact, we think we can dominate the escalation ladder, but if you don't move up the ladder, neither will we. That there's a degree of restraint involved if they don't use force. And so ultimately, was it those messages that prevented the use of nuclear weapons, or was it the fact that the Russian army actually didn't collapse in the South? We want to know and we won't know. I think that the messaging had some impact for sure, but the question really wasn't called because the Russian army didn't collapse.

[00:28:40] Speaker 4: I want to build on that a little bit, and then we'll open it up. But I think these last points that you were mentioning about mobilizing India, China, international opinion on this may have registered, and it leads to a question about whether this whole episode has weakened the taboo of the Russian army in terms of its nuclear use or strengthened it. But I'm mindful at the time that Defense Minister Shoigu, right after the calls that you referred to in October, when there was a lot of coverage about this dirty bomb scare, and people here were interpreting it as this is a pretext for the Russian use of nuclear weapons, to say the Ukrainians are going to use a dirty bomb and that'll open the way for Russia to use a nuclear weapon. But when you see what Shoigu said on Telegram at the time, it goes to your point, I think, Colin. I'd love comments on it. He said that Ukrainians would use a dirty bomb in order to accuse Russia of using weapons of mass destruction, and this would, quote, make countries react extremely harshly, and as a result, Moscow will lose support of many of its key partners. That was him at the time of the crisis. And so I'm wondering if there have been subsequent statements since then by Russians saying, no, no, no, we wouldn't use nuclear weapons. This was always something the West was accusing us of. We wouldn't do that. And so I'm curious what you all think and then what our colleagues think about whether this whole experience thus far has strengthened the taboo against the threat or use of nuclear weapons or weakened it.

[00:30:25] Speaker 7: Well, there's a lot to unpack there. I'll just say this. I mentioned that we had that first call between Austin and Shoigu on a Friday. They hadn't spoken since the war broke out, so it took us a long time to get Shoigu on the phone. We were calling everybody else in the government, too. Every counterpart was calling their counterpart. Then Shoigu asked for another call 36 hours later, and it made no sense. And this is on a weekend, and we all had to get to our classified systems. We weren't on signal chat or anything. And people were... Well played. Hypothetically, I mean. So the question was, why was Shoigu calling back? And there was nothing in the intelligence or anything else to suggest why they were. And in a back and forth with my friend and NSC colleague, Tom Wright, he suggested that he had been seeing some things on Telegram and elsewhere of the Russians talking about dirty bombs, and that triggered, you know, kind of my spider sense got tingling about triggering that this could be a pretext for the conflict. So I went into my

SCIF, not signaling my SCIF, and revised talking points for Austin about how to, if Shoigu raised this dirty bomb point, how to deal with it. And we basically made the argument that this isn't real, that Russia had a long history of blaming others, to include Ukraine, of doing things that they planned themselves, that all the false flag stuff that we had outed at the beginning of the conflict that the world would see through this. And then Austin reiterated all of the deterrence talking points that I mentioned. So Shoigu did not frame the issue in this way in those conversations. They basically were, I mean, my interpretation is they were planting this as a possible pretext, because the argument was if the Ukrainians did this, it would be an act of nuclear terrorism, and the Russians would have no option but to answer that. And so that seemed to be laying the predicate, right? But the fact that Shoigu then afterwards after all of these warnings comes out and says, oh, no, no, no, no, we didn't plan it. In fact, this would be a terrible thing. Why would we plan it? This would mobilize the world against us, I think is reflective of the messaging we were sent, but it is basically part of their climb down. It was not part of the initial argument, which I, to this day, believe was at least laying the predicate for possibly doing this.

[00:32:47] Speaker 4: Mary Ann, do you have a thought on that?

[00:32:49] Speaker 5: So a couple of thoughts. One is that, you know, from Ukraine, from Ukraine's vantage point, some of these events looked rather differently, right? Because the restraint that was induced by this messaging, still, I mean, as Colin has pointed out, there was a reassurance part, right? If you do not use nuclear weapons, there are certain things that we're willing to restrain ourselves in relations with Ukrainians. In that sense, you know, Russia's nuclear coercion, in a sense, worked. Partially, it did. It induced a caution, very justifiable, on the part of the United States and other strategic partners. It affected the timing of military assistance, the kinds of systems that were considered. Every one of them was, again, rather justifiably considered, examined for its escalatory potential, right? All of it took time. All of it cost lives on the Ukrainian battlefield. Again, these are, you know, this is not finger-pointing. This is the actual situation of waging a major conventional war with a nuclear adversary, nuclear-armed adversary. From the Ukrainian standpoint, though, if you think about it, there was one party in that whole picture that was not deterred by the Russians, and those were the Ukrainians, because their stakes were the highest of all in all of this, right? And for them, it was, well, pick your way to die. You can die over a longer period of time, you know, in the trenches, you know, attrited by Russian, incessant Russian bombing and artillery and so forth, or you can die in one go in a tactical nuclear blast. And if you look at what has been done to Mariupol, Mariinka, Bakhmut, all of that is the, you know, could be achieved by a single tactical nuclear weapon, less the contamination and radiation. So the scale of destruction and the stakes for Ukrainians are such that Russian nuclear threats have not had their purchase in Ukraine. And that, I mean, broadly raises questions, well, how does nuclear deterrence work? How do nuclear threats work? On whom do they have an effect? And how? This is not to say that somehow Ukrainians are flippant about all of this or dismissive, but just that the stakes are very different in Kyiv.

[00:35:32] Speaker 4: Well, it was, right, I mean, it was always an existential threat to Ukraine, whichever way you went, whereas the question, and Paul raised this, about what Europe tries to bring about in convincing Russia of the stakes, it's hard to make it existential to voters in, far from Ukraine. I mean, so how do you think about that, Paul? And the question in part about, you know, whether this ultimately is strengthening the taboo or weakening the taboo?

[00:36:05] Speaker 6: So I think it's very hard to draw general conclusions from this particular set of circumstances, and it's hard to say that because Russia did not use it a nuclear weapon, the threshold is higher or the taboo has been strengthened. I think it's a bit of a leap to say this. However, and to look at the whole past years in a slightly different way, I think also shows how difficult it is to use nuclear deterrence in a way that is, that goes beyond the protection of existential interests and to put it to use in a, to support, in this case, a war of aggression. That is, that can be challenged, that should be challenged, and it is actually extremely hard, and I think the good news in a sense is that Russia has found out how hard it can be to manipulate nuclear risks in a way that is not compatible with a strictly defensive approach of nuclear deterrence. So I think that is in a sense somewhat positive, but however, the jury is still out as to whether Russia itself or others would judge that the Russian strategy has worked or not, and ultimately the answer will come from how the war ends, and whether it is synonymous with a victory for Russia and as a vindication of its strategy. So it is still very much an open question in the end to me.

[00:37:55] Speaker 7: Colin, please. Just on this, I think, so first, obviously there are a number of nuclear powers in the world, but the United States and Russia have a special responsibility. They are not just nuclear powers. They are the world's only two nuclear superpowers. China will become one in the not too distant future. There are only two men on planet Earth who can blow up the world, and end the human race for all time, which is effectively an infinite harm. Okay? The President of the United States and the President of Russia. So there is a special responsibility on both sides to exercise a degree of caution, not just for national survival, but for the survival of the human race that no other leader in no other country has. And so I think that people need to keep that in mind. The second is, you know, I signed off, for the two and a half years I was there, you know, the year and a half of the war that I was overseeing policy at the Pentagon, I signed off on every single security assistance package for Ukraine. At the time I left, it was $43 billion. I can't remember very many decisions that were based on nuclear escalation risks. I think there were some conversations early in the war over, say, a U.S. no-fly zone, which would have required attacking Russian forces and air defense units to include in Russian territory. That obviously had implications. There were some questions about direct NATO involvement perceived by transferring NATO aircraft flying into Ukraine. There was some consideration about that. There was a long-running conversation about long-range missiles because of Russia's neuralgia around long-range missiles. But in almost every other circumstance, the decisions were mostly based on a judgment about what did Ukraine need, how much money did we need, what were the trade-offs, what were the readiness implications. They were not us hand-wringing about nuclear escalation. I know there's this mythology out there, but it's just that. It's a mythology. I think the third point I would make is that both sides showed restraint. Everybody says, oh, the Biden administration was so slow, they were so incremental, they were so, why couldn't they just have a firmer spine and seen all of this as a nuclear bluff, blah, blah, blah, blah. Putin also showed enormous restraint. The United States enabled the Ukrainians to kill or maim 750,000 Russians and destroy a huge proportion of the military that Russia built up to fight NATO. And the Russians knew where every base was that provided the intelligence, where every base was where the transshipments of arms came through. They didn't strike a single one of those. Why? Because they feared nuclear war too. So let's get the story straight. This wasn't a one-way story of restraint. Both nuclear powers were exercising restraint, and I'm glad they did, because the world would be worse if they didn't. The last point I will make, the United States actually showed a lot less restraint

in the Cold War. Think of how the United States supported the Mujahideen in Afghanistan, a war that cost the Russians a fraction of what the war in Ukraine has cost them, but how much care the United States took to avoid escalation by doing things covertly. Now juxtapose that to what the United States did in Ukraine alongside our allies to support the Ukrainians. And so I just think the United States played this about as well as you could play it. And for people who believe that these things weren't taken seriously by serious people, I think history will reflect differently.

[00:41:19] Speaker 4: And Paul made a point earlier about, you know, there are a number of commentators in Russia and in the Russian kind of nuclear cognoscenti debating in the last couple of years the failure of Russian deterrence, and precisely for the reasons that Colin mentioned, and so that Russia has to do more to make its nuclear signaling and threats be taken more seriously to deter after the war after, you know, the supply of, whether it was a long-range missiles or other capabilities. So you have this debate kind of on both sides saying, you know, people alleging that there was too much restraint and others saying there was not enough. I'm going to questions from participants. So Anya Fink asks, did the Russian military generate nuclear forces in concerning ways in Ukraine in October 2022 or in February earlier, 22, and was the U.S. intelligence assumption that they would go straight to nuclear weapons employment as opposed to nuclear signaling via force generation or a demonstration? And she's asking because in thinking about manipulations and signaling, there are these questions of the different stages and whether there are illusions and gestures versus real threats and preparations. And so how would you describe how Russia pursued manipulations in this way?

[00:42:52] Speaker 7: Yeah, I mean, I'm just not going to speak to the underlying intelligence. I'll just say that throughout the war, the Biden administration was pretty clear that they did not see fundamental changes in the posturing of Russia's strategic nuclear arsenal. Their tactical nuclear weapons are a different matter. They, and hypothetically, you can do things that are harder to see in preparation that can be concealed within conventional moves. All I will say is, without speaking to the underlying intelligence, that we had lots of ways in the analytic community to discern just chatter with things that were more real. And there was, I'll just say, there was something that made the intelligence community jump from 5% to 50%. And it probably wasn't just some folks talking on the phone.

[00:43:52] Speaker 4: Thanks. Paul, Mariana, on this.

[00:43:55] Speaker 5: I didn't get the special intelligence of the time, so I can't speak to that.

[00:44:01] Speaker 4: Well, let me ask a variation on kind of manipulations. I'm writing a book on this, and doing the research, I find that in most instances, when media were reporting that Putin especially was making nuclear threats and people were getting spun up on that, usually within 48 hours, he or the foreign ministry spokesperson would come out and deny that they were and say, no, this is the West saying we're making nuclear threats. We're not doing it. They're the ones that are threatening. And so you see the pattern, and so it looks like this desire to be able to have it both ways and manipulate multiple audiences. So to try to reassure some audiences, we're the reasonable ones. We're not the bad guys here. They're the bad guys there. But then when you're anxious to try to back off the bad guys. And so when you think about it, Mariana, the question of did this play on Ukrainians at all, or

was they just full tilt no matter what was being done? But then, Paul, within the European discussions, was it really working in terms of body politics in different parts of Europe where these manipulations were making those governments come in and say, well, wait a minute, or were the governments pretty much determined to do it on the basis of strategy and less on politics?

[00:45:24] Speaker 5: Well, let me just say that, you know, there are different uses of these nuclear threats, and some of them were very clearly simply coercive rhetorical use that could be called out right away, right, that was not taken as an indication of a preparation for a nuclear strike. And I think that was visible from Ukraine as well as from Washington and Paris and elsewhere. And it's this coercive rhetorical use, the constant sort of wielding of the signaling that was, I think, the bulk of this nuclear speak from Russia, specifically from Kremlin, that's discounting all the other nuclear banter that has been going on in the public sphere and elsewhere, or even from, you know, former President Dmitry Medvedev, who's more Catholic than the pope in that sense. And, you know, Colin and I could disagree the extent to which this worked or didn't work, but that's somewhat of a different set of questions than the actual sort of overt warning for nuclear use, which I think would happen possibly in a different way, Russia would not come out and say, you know, we're just gonna, you know, lob off a tactical nuclear weapon in October 2022. You'd have to see something more than that, which is, you know, the movement of weapons around central storage facilities or some kind of preparation of the troops and what Anya has been asking for. And then there was other types of manipulation of nuclear risk. So, you know, Russia has been doing that, manipulating nuclear risk. You know, let's remember the Parisian nuclear power plant, the seizure of the plant and the constant, you know, use of it as a military base, right, that's shielded by the threat or the risk of, you know, a major nuclear accident should Ukraine retaliate or... So this has been the game. Now, it's not... The signaling and the coercive part is not to be discounted because to your previous question, I think it does erode the nuclear taboo. The more nuclear banter out there, the harder it is to read the actual signs and to read the actual serious signaling. It's the constant story of a boy who cried wolf. And that combined with what's going on in the Russian public sphere where every political talk show with everyone and their uncle is nuking Ukraine or Europe or both every single day, I think it does a number on the psyche and on the actual political culture at least within Russia to lower that threshold mentally as much as it might not be lowered, you know, by the doctrine and even the amended one we might observe that it's not been lowered as drastically as some would have it, would state. But I think we are in that precarious situation.

[00:48:29] Speaker 6: Yeah, I think Marina made a very important point in underlining the mix of noise and signal that has come out of Russia in terms of nuclear rhetoric. I don't know if this was a deliberate strategy to mix the noise with the signal. If it was, maybe then the noise that we have heard from commentators on PRV Canal and other media was really aimed or framed as a sort of information strategy, disinformation strategy directed at European public opinion, for instance. And then there was also the signal, which, as you said, George, was always displaying more restraint than what we've heard from others. And so the question then for us is really how to protect ourselves from nuclear noise as a disinformation strategy, and really build the resilience within our population against that kind of nuclear manipulation. And then how we differentiate from the signal, which was really not that hard to do, but really putting that out as well is important.

[00:49:58] Speaker 4: Well, and it's a challenge for everybody here. By definition, you're interested in nuclear policy, and you're interested in the impact of nuclear technology on the world, and you're interested in the impact of nuclear technology on the world. So, you know, I think the question is, what are the challenges that we have to deal with in the world? And I think that's a really important question, because I think that's where we're at right now, is, you know, since the Cold War, it's not like we have highly educated publics and, in most cases, media, to the extent that there is media that is fairly centralized now, so you've got this fragmented media environment. So we're talking about things that are quite complicated, the manipulation process, and you're in a democracy or quasi-democracy, and people are trying to do disinformation or manipulate publics. What are the antidotes for that? I mean, I don't know. They're probably reading your book, because your book is great. They're not reading my books. And, you know, other kind of long-form, serious things isn't kind of going into this educational process, or you go up on Capitol Hill here just to pick one democracy. There's very few people who, you know, are interested in this kind of long-form, serious thing. And so, you know, there's very few people who follow this in any depth. So, when you all think about this experience, for example, and what might be learned from it, or if we're gonna face another experience with another country in five years, you know, and if you were a king, or... How would you think about educating people or preparing people to interpret the manipulation of risk and respond to it? It's a hard question, I know, but I'm just curious. I mean, I think

[00:51:31] Speaker 7: there's a lot of people who think that we live in an odd moment in all sorts of ways. Everything and its opposite all the time. The degree of authoritarian gaslighting by authoritarians of all stripes is pretty overwhelming. It's hard for any of us to understand what's real and not, and especially since we all live in our own information bubbles where the messages that we hear are one of many, but they're the ones that are constantly reinforced. So, it's very hard to get the story straight. First, it's hard to talk about nuclear issues because they don't, the nuclear shadow doesn't dominate our understanding of world politics in the way that it did in the Cold War, especially from the Cuban Missile Crisis onward. I mean, I'm 53 years old, I can remember in the Reagan administration moments where the movie The Day After and the Terminator movies which were about nuclear apocalypse, it was impossible to be a kid and not constantly think about the end of the world, you might think of it in terms of COVID or climate change or AI or whatever. And nuclear is only one of the existential consideration and it's not the dominant frame. So, it's hard to focus the mind on these considerations. Although frankly, I do think it mattered for a portion of the electorate that voted for Donald Trump because after all, he made the argument that the Biden administration was too forward leaning in supporting Ukraine and therefore risked World War III. We all saw him lecture Zelensky to that effect in the Oval Office on live TV. He was part of the zeitgeist at least in a portion of the United States that was attuned to the World War III pieces of it. And actually, I think Russian propaganda leaned into that in social media spaces and other things too. So, one problem is just that we just aren't as obsessed with nuclear weapons in the way that we were during the Cold War. The second is that how seriously to take these threats is something you can't discern from the public record because an analyst puts a bunch of things together. How similar or not similar is that to what they are saying to each other in private, in places and spaces when they think nobody can hear them? Is it the same or is it different? Then, what are we observing them doing? And only some of that can be made public. And some of it, if it's made public, people won't believe you. A lot of our European friends did not believe us that Russia

was going to invade Ukraine in the way that I'm not sure the Ukrainians believed it for the most part. They certainly were telling us they didn't. They didn't believe it. So there's all of that. And then, the final layer is that analytic judgment about given what you know, what they're saying in public, what you can see in private and what you can see them doing from all sources, then, how does that fit with your analytic frame of how you understand their decision-making? Their decision-making cycle, their doctrine, all of that, that's a very political science-y way of thinking about it, but the CIA does that too. And only pieces of that can be persuasively presented in public and that is a really, really hard thing for decision-makers to deal with. Let me just add

[00:54:35] Speaker 5: that for us in the analytical sort of academic community, I think one of the challenges is that, you know, some of this great, amazing literature that has been written throughout the Cold War era about nuclear strategy and all of that really focused on a relation, deterrence relationship between two nuclear-armed adversaries, right? How to make it stable and secure a second strike and all of that. I mean, trees and trees and trees and trees and trees have been felt to write the books about this. And here we see a situation where we haven't spent enough time thinking about a nuclear use, not a nuclear war between two, you know, an exchange between two nuclear-armed adversaries and the implications of that, right? So what is the situation when you have a major nuclear power waging a war against a non-nuclear power that are, you know, both, you know, both, that are, you know, battling it out in a major industrial-scale conventional war? A nuclear is an aspect of it, right? How do we handle that? What are the implications of, you know, restraint or escalation or an actual use on the battlefield one way, right? What would follow next? And I think that's upon us to give it a lot more thought and bring in these non-nuclear great powers into the picture.

[00:56:05] Speaker 4: I think that's a great point and one of the things I've noticed in doing this research for the last three years is that in almost every case the best, most informed critics who were saying that the US in particular but allies were too restrained in helping Ukraine, none of them were saying that Russia was going to be able to do what it was supposed to do. And I think that's one of the reasons why I think that Russia is not going to be able to do what it was supposed to do. And I think that's one of the reasons why I think that's one of the reasons why I think that the US is not going to be able to do what it was supposed to do. And I think that's one of the reasons why I think that Russia is not going to

[00:57:27] Speaker 5: do what it does. Thank you. Thank you very much. Thank you very much. Thank you very much. Thank you very much. And let me Just said that you know Colin correctly pointed out that in Ukraine, and the world going up in a pile of smoke.

[00:58:01] Speaker 7: Yeah, I mean, look, I think as this was gamed out in the fall of 2022, in broad strokes, I think people had to understand, A, there was no expectation that this is a one-move game. They would use it, you would respond, they would respond to the response, you would have to respond to the response to the response, and so on and so on and so on, and at what point, you are constantly trying to do this delicate balancing act of demonstrating that they miscalculated in the cost that would be imposed on them for doing what they're doing, while also suggesting that if they move up the escalation ladder, you can dominate that escalation ladder, so there's no path to victory for them, but also offer them an off-ramp if they choose restraint for restraint, and that you have to do that not just once,

but you're doing it iteratively, and you're trying to keep everything below the threshold of a global nuclear war, right? And so, you know, I have no idea what the President of the United States ultimately would have decided. I know that he was presented with a wide range of options that would have allowed him to do a bunch of different things under the assumption that this wouldn't be a one-off, that this would be something, this would be an escalating crisis, maybe even an escalating military conflict that would have to be managed iteratively, right? And I think that I give the planners on the joint staff, in particular, an extraordinary, an extraordinary amount of credit for being thoughtful about that. The second thing to recognize is it's not just, it's not a one-move game. It's not only happening in one place, right? So it wouldn't just be, like, what would you do against Russia? And what does that mean, by the way? Russian forces who launched the weapons, Russian forces in Ukraine, Russian forces in Crimea, which is Ukraine, but Russia doesn't think it's Ukraine. Like, how does the Kaliningrad, so there's like a geography of the battlefield question, but then there's also what are you doing globally to signal? What are you doing to reinforce the Eastern flank? What are you doing to generate your strategic nuclear forces? Not because you plan a bolt out of the blue nuclear strike, but because you want the Russians to understand they can't catch us with our pants down. So the, and then there's, what are you doing in the diplomatic venues to mobilize global opinion? And honestly, we don't, in these war games, we almost never think about what the global response would be. We think about it as usually a dyadic relationship between who uses them and what you do in response. Sometimes we bank, bring in, you know, bring in green, our allies, but we almost never think about the world reaction. And I will tell you, the world would have freaked out if Russia used nuclear weapons and that there would have been calls to do something, but there would have been just as many calls to stop. Everybody stop before we all go off the cliff. And I think, and we've talked a lot in the Situation Room about how to manage that diplomatic moment in a way that didn't paralyze us, but also within a way that we could leverage to put pressure on the Russians. Who knows whether any of that would work, but I think the team deserves a lot of credit for thinking about it beyond the tactical battlefield tit for tat to this global strategic environment. And I would hope that the current team if faced with a similar crisis would be just as contemplative and do it in the Sit Room.

[01:01:14] Speaker 4: Can I bring Paul in on this? Because France has, as I understand it, when France thinks about its own nuclear capability and doctrine, it's not just about nuclear power. And it doesn't envision that many stages and steps. We've talked in the past about a demonstration and so on. So when you think about the possibility in this context or a future context of a very limited, if you can say that, initial use by, let's say, Russia, and then you think about how to work through responses and ways to manage that kind of risk, and at the same time, try to deter, there's less of a range in possibilities. And so is that thought about? Or is it basically relying on the deterrent effect? And if that doesn't work, then kind of a NATO-wide response? I'm just curious how you.

[01:02:16] Speaker 6: So it's important to, as Colin said, to have a sort of global planning, but planning is not prediction. And I don't think anyone would be able to foresee, predict, let alone control the aftermath of any nuclear use, even limited nuclear use. And even the state that has decided to resort to nuclear weapons wouldn't be able to predict or control. And so I think that's the key thinking in France, that actually you, there's no, it is a delusion to think that you can actually control even a limited nuclear war. And that this, it is important to actually stress that,

because that is the core of the deterrents. And I think that's the key. Thank you. And I think that's the key to the measure that we're actually prevented in the first place. So it's really about insisting on that aspect of unpredictability and inability to control what comes next.

[01:03:36] Speaker 4: And that's a form of counter manipulation. And I don't mean manipulation in a bad word, but it's a counter manipulation of risk in a sense that, you know, one could argue people should be more prepared to do and understand.

[01:03:50] Speaker 6: And I think it is also a statement of fact. It's just something that is, everyone would be in the same situation. And it would be very hard to control what would come next.

[01:04:07] Speaker 4: We've got a couple minutes left. Any final thoughts from you all? There were some other questions I didn't get to, several of them about possible attacks on nuclear power installations. And I guess I'm tempted to, you know, think that could be a form of manipulation, too, that it's like, is it less escalatory than using a tactical nuclear weapon to blow up a nuclear power plant with a conventional weapon, for example. And I don't know if people thought about it. It's a little different than our topic. But I'm curious when you think about signaling and.

[01:04:44] Speaker 7: Yeah, I mean, I would just say this, that, you know, we framed a lot of this conversation around deterrence and nuclear coercion. What we haven't talked about explicitly was the conversation during the Cold War around the stability-instability paradox, that in the condition of mutually assured destruction, how safe is every other form of warfare below the strategic use of nuclear weapons? And we had huge debates in the Cold War about where that threshold was. Like, you know, Glenn Snyder, when he initially introduced this concept, basically said, well, in theory, it's all the way up to the, you know, tactical or limited use of strategic nuclear weapons, that everything below all-out nuclear war was made safe. It's safe by strategic deterrence. Other people like Bob Jervis pushed back against that notion. But we had no idea where, like, what level of violence between nuclear powers is safe. And the reality is it might not be the same for every nuclear actor, because they have different doctrines. They have different interests. They have different capabilities. And so I think we need a lot of thinking, because this world of a stability-instability paradox is not going away. More countries will have more nuclear weapons, not fewer countries with fewer nuclear weapons. Yeah. And there's more scenarios for conventional aggression by nuclear powers, which means we have to think about all of the ways, and I think Paul made this, about how a world in which the manipulation of nuclear risk and uses of force below the nuclear threshold but edging close to it are just much more conceivable in the next decade or two than they were before. And so shame on us if we don't do some thinking around that. And I'm good on you for hosting conferences like that to do exactly that.

[01:06:20] Speaker 4: Thanks. I can't help, and I'm being serious, but I took some solace, even though it was a horrible situation when India and China were skirmishing a few years ago along their disputed border, and they were using rocks and sticks. The soldiers were two nuclear-armed states in their first actual conflict since 1962, but they started with sticks and rocks. OK, good. We're far down the escalation ladder. I'm not going to worry about it. People exaggerate that threat. But I think you've all alerted us to work that we all have to do, because this isn't going

away. And we have Taiwan Straits. We have lots of other places where you can imagine these kinds of scenarios.

[01:07:09] Speaker 5: Let me just add regarding the use of nuclear facilities, civilian nuclear facilities. And again, it's kind of an unprecedented set of circumstances in Ukraine that gives us an opportunity to learn what kinds of other nuclear risks that could be manipulated in this large-scale war. And one of the things that we're realizing is just how interconnected everything is, right? And it's not just the threat of lobbing off a missile against an operating nuclear reactor, for instance. You know, possibly a very low likelihood of that happening, but of threats to critical infrastructure, to the grid that powers and cools nine operating reactors on Ukraine's control on the territory, that your nuclear security and safety is intricately connected to all these other different systems statewide. And in the planning and in thinking of how to defend against that, I think, I think it's very important. Thank you. I think we need to take a much broader aperture.

[01:08:26] Speaker 4: I want to close on that note, because it's an invitation for even harder work for people, but more comprehensively. I mean, these things are all integrated. And I think it's important to alert ourselves to that. So let me ask you all to thank these three wonderful participants. Am I supposed to say anything about what's happening next? All right, I will. Thank you. Thank you all. That'd be terrific. Thank you for listening. We'll find out right after the be Lands. . Subtitles by the Amara.org community