

Nuclear Bombs and Drones Over the Kremlin

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Global Research, May 19, 2023

[Antiwar.com](#) 18 May 2023

Region: [Europe](#), [Russia and FSU](#)

Theme: [Intelligence](#)

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History may one day show that two important events did not receive the attention they deserved. One may have led to the horrible way the war in Ukraine started; one may lead to the horrible way it ends.

Putin's decision to illegally invade Ukraine seems to have been the result of the confluence of two factors. The Ukrainian rejection of the Minsk agreement left it committed to a military solution in the Donbas. The decree to reintegrate Crimea by military force if necessary, the massing of elite Ukrainian troops and drones on the eastern border of Donbas and the dramatically increased Ukrainian shelling into the Donbas created genuine alarm in Russia that Ukraine was about to escalate the civil war. That threat of war with Ukraine combined with the simultaneous US refusal of Russia's request for a guarantee that Ukraine would not become a member of NATO, left Russia facing the possibility of being drawn into a war with NATO.

What has received very little attention is that that concern was in no way eased by Zelensky's [speech](#), made at the same time on February 19 at the Munich Security Conference, five days before the invasion, threatening Ukraine's reacquisition of nuclear weapons.

When the Soviet Union broke up, Ukraine broke away with the third largest nuclear arsenal in the world. In 1994, under the Budapest Memorandum, Ukraine agreed to give their nuclear weapons up and join the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty as a non-nuclear weapons state. They, of course, maintain the knowledge, the equipment and the technology.

In his speech to the Munich Security Conference, Zelensky said,

"I am initiating consultations in the framework of the Budapest Memorandum. The Minister of Foreign Affairs was commissioned to convene them. If they do not happen again or their results do not guarantee security for our country, Ukraine will have every right to believe that the Budapest Memorandum is not working and all the package

decisions of 1994 are in doubt.”

Richard Sakwa, Professor of Russian and European Politics at Kent, pointed out to me that the wording is ambiguous and open to interpretation. But he stressed that the threat to reacquire nuclear weapons was “the natural conclusion of his statement.”

Russia was now threatened not just with a conventional war with NATO but a nuclear war. Geoffrey Roberts, Professor of History at University College Cork, has argued in his essay “‘Now or Never’: The Immediate Origins of Putin’s Preventative War on Ukraine’ that “The final trigger for war might have been President Zelensky’s defiant speech to the Munich Security Conference on 19 February, in which he threatened Ukrainian re-acquisition of nuclear weapons.”

In a recent [interview](#), Roberts said that it is his “impression . . . that the nuclear factor was the straw that broke the camel’s back.”

Sakwa told me that he agrees that the Ukrainian threat to reacquire nuclear weapons was an important motivation for Putin. He added that “Putin certainly has said as much.”

The day after Zelensky’s speech, a Russian journalist asked Putin how seriously he took the threat. He [answered](#) that “We take it that these words were primarily addressed to us. I want to say that we have heard them.” He then stressed Ukraine’s “nuclear competencies” and how quickly they could reacquire the weapons. He closed with the words, “What is the threat to us? The appearance of tactical weapons in Ukraine is a strategic threat to us.”

On another occasion, Putin [worried](#) that “If Ukraine acquires weapons of mass destruction, the situation in the world and in Europe will drastically change, especially for us in Russia. We cannot but react to this real danger. . . .”

Zelensky’s words may be ambiguous, and Putin’s fear may be exaggerated, but Ukraine’s threat to reacquire nuclear weapons, when combined with its commitment to a military solution to the crisis in the Donbas and the West’s refusal to close the door to NATO to Ukraine, may have played a motivational role in beginning the war that deserves more attention than it has gotten.

A second event may play a larger role in ending the war than it has gotten. On May 3, Russia said that the two drones that it was forced to explode over the Kremlin were a Ukrainian attempt to assassinate President Vladimir Putin. “Last night,” the [message from the Russian Presidential Press Service](#) read, “the Kiev regime attempted a drone strike against the residence of the President of the Russian Federation at the Kremlin. . . . We view these actions as a planned terrorist attack and an assassination attempt targeting the President.” It then added that “Russia reserves the right to take countermeasures wherever and whenever it deems appropriate.”

It is not just the importance of a possible Ukrainian attack deep inside Russian territory and its threat of provoking Russia to escalate the war that is of concern. It is also the meaning of the closing promise of “countermeasures.”

The video showing two slow moving drones over the Kremlin bursting into flames fifteen minutes apart in the early hours of the morning has been [verified](#) by *The New York Times* [and](#) by Reuters. The event really happened, but there is no certainty about exactly what

happened. Russia says Ukraine attacked the Kremlin in an attempt to assassinate Putin. They cast the net wider than Ukraine. Kremlin Spokesman Dmitry Peskov [said](#) “We know very well that the decisions to carry out such actions, such terrorist attacks, are made not in Kiev. Rather, it is precisely in Washington [where the decision-making is done]. And, Kiev is already left to do what it is told to do.” Kiev and Washington have denied involvement – though Washington didn’t criticize it, [saying](#) “These are decisions for Ukraine to make about how it’s going to defend itself” – and suggested that the drone attack was a Russian false flag operation.

It is natural that the US should consider the possibility of a false flag operation in which Russia targets its own assets because the US has often considered false flag operations in which they target their own assets. And one does not have to go all the way back to remember the Maine. One can go back to Operation Northwoods in the 1960’s that considered blowing up a US ship in Guantanamo Bay and blaming Cuba. It also proposed the developing of a Cuban terror campaign in Miami and Washington, staging a false flag attack on the US military base in Guantanamo Bay and shooting down a US reconnaissance plane. Half a century later, the US would consider a similar false flag operation in Iran in which American soldiers in Iranian uniforms would attack a US ship.

Whatever happened, the significance of the event goes back to a promise made by Putin early in the war. **Former Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett** [says](#) that, while attempting to mediate between Russia and Ukraine, he received a promise from Putin that “I won’t kill Zelensky.”

The attempted assassination of Putin seems to have canceled that promise. Kremlin Spokesman **Dmitry Peskov** [says](#) that Russia will consider a “wide variety” of “well-thought-out steps that meet the interests of our country” when deciding how to respond. Russian Ambassador to the US **Anatoly Antonov** also [stressed](#) that the response would be calm and thought out: “We will answer when we consider it necessary. We will answer in accordance with the assessments of the threat that Kiev posed to the leadership of our country.” But he also asked, “How would Americans react if a drone hit the White House, the Capitol or the Pentagon? The answer is obvious for any politician as well as for the average citizen: the punishment would be harsh and inevitable.”

Former Russian President and current Deputy Chairman of the Security Council of Russia, **Dmitry Medvedev** [was more succinct](#): “After today’s terrorist attack, there are no options left except for the physical elimination of Zelensky and his clique.” The drone attack seems to have canceled the Putin promise: Russia could attempt to cut the war short and include killing Zelensky in its goals. The Speaker of the Russian parliament, **Vyacheslav Volodin**, seemed to [agree](#): “An attack on the president is an attack on Russia. There can be no negotiations. We will demand the use of weapons that are capable of stopping and destroying the Kyiv terrorist regime.”

These two events may deserve more attention than they have received. The first, Ukraine’s threat to reacquire nuclear weapons, was ignored; the second, the alleged assassination attempt on Putin, was dismissed. But one may have helped start this horrible war, and the other may horribly help to end it.

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