

Bill Kaplan: Escalation in Ukraine could lead to nuclear war

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The carnage and rising casualties from the inexcusable Russian invasion of Ukraine are horrifying. The world is at a very dangerous moment. Washington Post columnist David Ignatius astutely said: “Our hearts tell us to intervene, whatever the danger But our heads should counsel caution. The Ukraine crisis carries a genuine risk of direct military conflict between the United States and Russia. And that, in turn could escalate into a catastrophic nuclear confrontation. The West needs cool heads, not hot ones, to successfully navigate what could become the most dangerous nuclear standoff in history – riskier even than the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis, because it is taking place against the backdrop of a hot shooting war.”

In 1962, the Soviet Union had provocatively placed nuclear missiles in Cuba. As the crisis escalated it almost spiraled out of control, to the brink of Armageddon. In 2002, a conference was held in Cuba to mark the 40th anniversary. JFK’s Secretary of Defense, Robert McNamara, released a statement: “I now conclude that, however astutely the crisis may have been managed, luck also played a significant role in the avoidance of nuclear war by a hair’s breadth.”

President Biden, mindful of the lessons of history, has prudently responded to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. Economic sanctions have had a devastating impact on Russia. The ruble has plunged and the Russian stock market closed. The U.S. and NATO also supplied defensive weapons to the Ukrainians. However, armchair generals want the U.S. take riskier measures such as establishing a no-fly zone over Ukraine, enforced by U.S. planes. Biden wisely responded: “We will not fight a war against Russia in Ukraine. Direct conflict between NATO and Russia is World War III, something we must strive to prevent.”

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Putin has recklessly put Russian nuclear forces on “special combat readiness” and threatened “ominous consequences”. Moreover, Russian troops attacked a Ukrainian nuclear plant. Damage could have sent radiation across Europe. And, their occupation of Chernobyl could lead to a repeat of the 1986 reactor meltdown. However, some U.S. politicians are reacting in kind. Mississippi GOP Senator Roger Wicker said the U.S. should not “rule out first use nuclear action.” And, South Carolina GOP Senator Lindsey Graham called for the assassination of Putin. Then the Washington Post published a conservative op-ed advocating a tactical nuclear weapons arms race for a “limited nuclear battlefield”

Wisconsin GOP Representative Mike Gallagher, a nuclear intellectual hawk, has supported escalation: send U.S. troops to Ukraine and place conventional medium range missiles in Eastern Europe. Frighteningly, he opposes a nuclear arms policy limited to deterrence (National Review). Gallagher ought to heed U.S. Catholic Bishops. They said: “Deterrence is not an adequate strategy ... for peace; it is a transitional strategy justifiable only in conjunction ... to pursue arms control and disarmament.” The Bishops also sharply rejected the “speculative” concept of “limited nuclear war” as completely implausible.

What’s needed is not escalation, but an off-ramp to end Putin’s war of aggression and avoid the apocalypse.

— Kaplan wrote a guest column from Washington, D.C., for the Wisconsin State Journal from 1995 – 2009.