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Fondation Pierre du Bois
pour l'histoire du temps présent

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The Unrecognisable Weightness of Imprudence: Mistaking Miscalculation for Rational Behaviour in War Forecasting

“Indeed, according to a crass physical calculation it seemed foolish for Germany to take up arms against the Triple Entente in 1914. She was outnumbered about four to one. With the Russian steamroller to the East and the British navy in the West, the odds makers predicted that Germany would not last long. But the odds makers all through history have been materialist, realists, and pragmatists, like the British, petty men who calculate the percentages and play the averages. They never reckon with the spirit, or the will, or faith, or the unseen factors in a struggle.”ⁱ Turning a hundred years pages of history, with the formerly heralded Russian steamroller losing, well, steam in the current war against Ukraine, Arlie J. Hoover’s harsh words above confront us with the same dilemma.

The Russian military aggression against Ukraine, and especially its scale, has taken many tried and tested analysts and even the intelligence services of some countries by surprise. The general opinion in professional circles was based on a rational assessment of the consequences of the war (preferring the economic ones), and since they seemed to be contrary to Russian interests, the conclusion could not have been different: Russia was bluffing, not actually planning to attack. Many argued after the outbreak of the war that they were not, in fact, wrong, because the rational calculations that had been used to prove that Russia had no interest in starting a war had proved valid: the imposition of Western sanctions and the increasing international isolation of Moscow, among others, had all occurred. True, but humans do not operate on the basis of mechanical calculations, therefore the job of a forecaster is not merely to state the facts, but to draw the right conclusions as to their influence on decisions to come. One could say, of course: after the outbreak of war, to dwell on this dilemma is to turn a blind eye to rain. Yet let us look ahead, because the next question is equally serious and equally difficult to answer: how far will Russia go in its confrontation with the West, and what potential extreme directions of escalation are on the horizon?

Although the Russian nuclear exercise before the outbreak of war was still unanimously considered a bluff, the US National Security Council recently commissioned the relevant US bodies to draw up forecasts for a scenario in which Russian nuclear forces would be deployed. The possible deployment of nuclear weapons as an extreme



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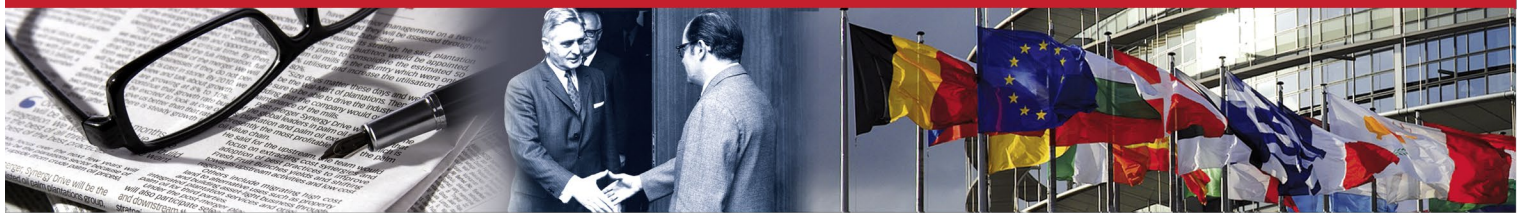
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scenario for a possible escalation of the war is being discussed in many quarters in a similar vein to the arguments that were put forward a couple of months ago about the outbreak of war itself: namely, that such a scenario is not realistic, since a rational assessment of the consequences would not be in Moscow's interest. Perhaps that is indeed what the hard facts suggest. However, we have recently seen that the 'hard facts' approach has not exactly delivered results with 100% certainty. The confident exclusion of the nuclear option, or any extreme escalation for that matter, is problematic because it is based on a flawed approach and does not face up to the potential systemic flaws in our forecasting methods. This is not to suggest that a nuclear strike by Russia is imminent, but that our arguments for ruling out a nuclear strike are typical evidence of the persistence of illusions that have led many to rule out the possibility of war in the first place. This is a dangerous state of affairs, regardless of whether we fail to predict the realisation of a nuclear threat or 'merely' conventional or even chemical escalation on the same basis.

One of the most important - usually overlooked - variables that plays a decisive role in the outbreak of war is the mutual misjudgement of the parties involved, of their own and their opponent's capabilities and, in particular, of the latter's intentions. The resulting miscalculations lead to a misreading of the opponent's so-called 'threshold for war', i.e. his readiness to engage in a war. The problem is made particularly serious by the fact that this miscalculation on the part of the initiator of the conflict is in turn misjudged by the attacked party, which does not expect the attack, on the basis that, according to rational calculations, it would not be in the aggressor's interest to attack, since it will be met by a strong counterattack by the attacked party. In other words, the analyst makes the mistake of seeing the aggressor as a party being in possession of perfect information about itself and its opponent, weighing up the situation on entirely rational grounds. The issue is endemic. As Stephen Van Evera argues, "At least some false optimism about relative power preceded every major war since 1740, as well as many lesser and ancient wars."ⁱⁱ

Returning to the current conflict, it is clear from the pace of the Russian army's advance that the Russian leadership misjudged the Ukrainian side's threshold for war in its operational and intelligence planning. It also turned out that they had misjudged the West's threshold for reaction. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, for example, [literally admitted at a recent forum](#) that "no one could have predicted" that the Russian Central Bank would be targeted in the Western sanctions. The minister added: "When the reserves of the Central Bank were frozen, no one would think, out of those who made predictions, what sanctions the West might apply." One critical question is whether, at this stage of the war, when the incumbent Russian leadership has no option but to step up military pressure (even if this is done through tactical retreats), will they not misjudge the possible reactions of the West? And is the West not again miscalculating Russia's intentions based on what Moscow should do on the basis of rational calculations in the interests of its own power?

Russia's original intention in launching the conflict [went beyond bringing Ukraine under Russian influence](#): the main purpose of deploying its military potential was to use it as a bluff to scare the Western countries and thus drive a wedge between the European members of NATO and the United States. The calculation was that the European members of the military alliance would not be united against the Russian military threat: many of them would not be prepared to take on a potential military confrontation on the European stage. They would confront the US and the conflict would escalate to the point where Washington would eventually be ousted from the European security architecture.



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Russia had definitely some basis to come to this conclusion. NATO and the EU are known to be bleeding from many wounds - French President Emmanuel Macron not so long ago called the military alliance 'brain dead' - while European societies are far from united even today in assigning blame for the war. It can be argued that the backlash of sanctions against Russia, i.e. the adverse effects on Western countries (rising prices of energy and other raw materials, etc.), could yet contribute to a major change in public sentiment in favour of Russian interests. For example, ["with energy prices rising, EU solidarity with Ukraine may start to wane"](#), but of course there are many other factors that could contribute to exacerbating this problem. Also in the words of the Carnegie Europe staff member quoted above: "When EU countries were confronted with this war scenario, they were already exhausted by the economic, social, and political costs of the pandemic. A fragile EU will have to cope with an increase in defense spending, while reducing energy dependency and dealing with high inflation." [In the words of the analysts](#) of the Centre for European Reform, the EU "must now mitigate the economic, social and political consequences, which will hit ordinary citizens and challenge Western cohesion."

At the same time, of course, it must be admitted that Moscow has so far misjudged the state of the unity of the West. This is a common mistake, to which Hitler himself fell victim, oblivious to a political cultural community which, despite all its previous antagonisms and difficulties, was able to bring together in an emergency situation parties who were otherwise divided or indifferent to each other's fate. The question is how much pressure this unity can withstand and whether Putin, rather than retreating, is not seeking to disrupt it by increasing this pressure.

In anticipation of the negative impact of sanctions - a Russian society under an authoritarian regime is presumably more resilient (has to bear more) in this respect than welfare societies in the West - this pressure can obviously be achieved by increasing the military threat. In this case, the fatal risk could emerge if the Russian increase in pressure does not ultimately lead to the disintegration of the Western alliance, but to the assumption of a belligerent confrontation. (Think again of Hitler's fatally flawed calculation.) In other words, in this case Russia would again be miscalculating the threshold for war.

These are far from mere theoretical speculations. We are talking about the principle of "escalation for de-escalation" in Russian military nuclear doctrine and its potential failure. The principle, which explicitly governs the deployment of nuclear weapons, is that Russia may order the deployment of a nuclear weapon if it would deter the enemy from escalating the confrontation. However, this principle also works without the use of nuclear weapons - in fact, that is what we are witnessing at the moment. In the meantime, however, the principle that Russia may decide to launch a nuclear strike even if its 'existence' is threatened is also part of the Russian nuclear doctrine. Russian President Vladimir Putin, among others, [has justified the invasion of Ukraine by saying](#) that "it is a matter of life and death, a matter of our historical future as a nation," in order to contain a "very real threat" to "the very existence of our state." The impact of Western sanctions against Russia and the arms supplies to Ukraine could very easily lead to the application of this rather flexible principle. In any case, Dmitry Peskov, the Russian President's spokesman, [did not fail to draw attention to this](#) in a recent interview with CNN: Russia will not renounce the use of nuclear weapons if it feels its existence is threatened. Dmitry Medvedev, former Russian President and current Deputy Chairman of the Russian Security Council, [has also raised the prospect of a Russian nuclear arsenal](#) in the event of a NATO no-fly zone over Ukraine or an attack on the infrastructure needed to operate a Russian nuclear deterrent. In other words, the principle of 'escalation for de-escalation' is already in use today (through the use of conventional warfare) and the stage is set at the communication level for it to lead to the use of nuclear weapons



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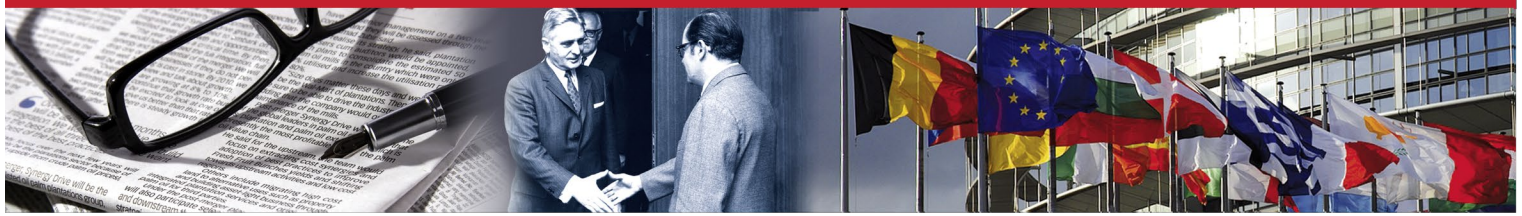
at any time: it has been announced that Russia's very existence is at stake. The only question now is whether Moscow is correctly assessing - or miscalculating - the reaction of its adversary in the event of a limited nuclear strike or the prospect of one. The situation is far from clear, and the world has already gotten to the brink of a nuclear war once because of a mutual miscalculation in this regard.

It is exactly 60 years since the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962, the closest humanity has ever come to a nuclear war. Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev unknowingly [pulled out just 48-72 hours before the US military launched an attack](#) on Soviet nuclear weapons secretly deployed in Cuba. In other words, humanity was 2-3 days away from the outbreak of a nuclear war. In fact, in the decades of the Cold War that followed, Moscow did not indulge in such provocative moves. Today, however, when [the Russian leadership is threatening](#), sometimes openly, sometimes implicitly, [not to rule out the use of its nuclear potential](#), and when the seriousness of this threat is not even ruled out [by the Director of the US Central Intelligence Agency \(CIA\)](#) or [the US Deputy Secretary of State](#) either, not to mention the leadership of the attacked country, Ukraine, it is worth recalling what a mistake once led both sides to confront human civilisation with the horror of self-destruction. Yes, it was a mistake, and there is a good chance that a similar confrontation today could be based on a mistake as well, only in a much more complex situation, which would be more difficult to unravel, or perhaps not at all.

US President John F. Kennedy did not mince words following the Cuban Missile Crisis: "I don't think we expected that he [Nikita Khrushchev] would put the missiles in Cuba," he said, "because it would have seemed such an imprudent action for him to take."ⁱⁱⁱ Against the backdrop of various cinematic fantasies and myths about 'know-it-all' secret services engaged in 'world conspiracies', it may seem particularly incomprehensible to many how on earth a war threatening the very existence of human civilisation was avoided only by a hair's breadth as the opposing sides simply "didn't expect" what the other side would eventually do. Given that not many people would have "expected" Russia attacking Ukraine, just as not many people in Moscow would have "expected" the strong reactions coming from both the Ukrainian and Western sides, it is worth delving a little deeper into the history of how our mental dispositions can completely determine and turn upside down our interpretation of rational facts. There are an ominous number of analogies between the current crisis and the crisis of 60 years ago from which we might learn something.

The analysis, published by the US Army's Institute for Strategic Studies, reveals that, under the status quo, US intelligence did not anticipate the deployment of Soviet missiles to Cuba because Moscow had never deployed missiles outside the Soviet Union and Warsaw Pact states and clearly not considered to risk a violent US response. ["Khrushchev, however, did not see it the way we thought he would, or the way we thought he should."](#) So the US assessments were rational, but did they take the right approach? Furthermore, what could have led Khrushchev to trust that Washington would not opt for open confrontation?

Some of the reasons were of a topical political nature. In the years leading up to the events, US and Western dithering could be inferred, for example, from the lack of any meaningful response to the building of the Berlin Wall, the open violation of the Soviet promise to freeze certain nuclear tests at the June 1961 Vienna US-Soviet summit, while the failed US intelligence operation in the Bay of Pigs in Cuba clearly seemed to have discouraged Washington's experimentalism. All this may be familiar against the background of contemporary events: a more restrained US foreign policy against the background of the negative repercussions of military interventions in the



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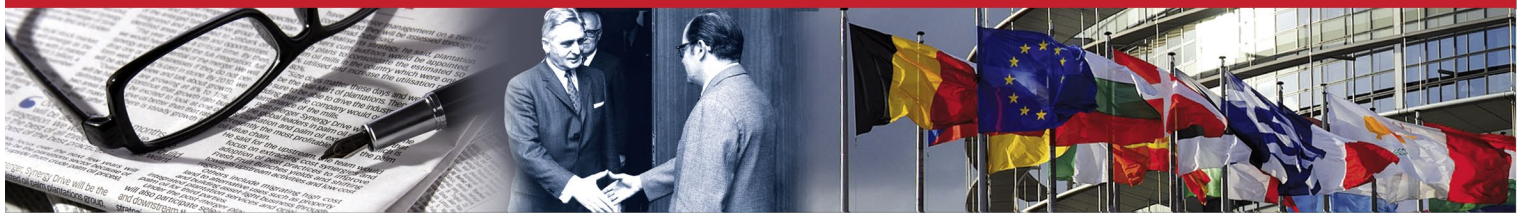
Bush administration, in many cases at least on dubious grounds, and the successful Russian expansionism that built on this (the seizure of Crimea, interference in US elections, destabilisation of the European Union, etc., all without any meaningful counter-measures). And that's not even mentioning Trump.

However, there was another reason for Moscow's miscalculation, [as the analysis cited above points out](#): "Khrushchev also had an ideological mind-set that believed history was on the side of socialism and communism, and that capitalism and constitutional democracy were weak and would ultimately be defeated by communism and the Soviet Union. In Khrushchev's mind-set, the extra-human forces of 'history' were major drivers of political, economic, and foreign policy decisions, and he demonstrated that he was prepared to be an obedient agent of these forces, regardless of the risk of war and bloodshed." The Soviet leadership expected the deployment of nuclear weapons in Cuba - in close proximity to the US - bringing about a rapid and effective change in the global strategic balance of power and a fundamental transformation of the security architecture. If we have said that there are strong analogies between then and now in the context of a misappraisal of the current political situation, perhaps this is even more the case regarding this issue.

Paradoxical as it may seem, the Russian leadership and its allies, who now claim to be deeply religious, think and claim the same about the West today as their officially declared atheist predecessors sixty years ago, with the difference that today communism has been replaced by a particular interpretation of "Christianity" as an imperial ideology: "The Kremlin seeks to establish a brand for Russia that depicts it as a torchbearer of European traditions and as a power challenging the post war liberal-democratic status quo."iv The war with Ukraine is also seen in this light as a kind of culture war, a "holy war", aimed at a showdown with the decadent, decaying, liberal West, in which Moscow has already declared itself the moral victor. [In the words of Cyril Hoyorun](#), a Russian Orthodox theologian opposed to the official Church leadership: "Any war has to have guns and ideas. In this war, the Kremlin has provided the guns, and I believe the church is providing the ideas." Feel free to replace the Russian Orthodox Church with the Communist Party and the historical analogy is instantly perfect. This conviction of Putin's was (is?) shared - or reinforced - by those Western political forces that saw the main supporter of their 'Christian' religious nationalism, or the Eurosceptic populist ideology invoking it, in the very willing Russian leader, who considers the support of opponents of mainstream political trends a great opportunity for political destabilisation of the West.

[Only Khrushchev made a miscalculation](#): "the United States had not only been prepared to attack Cuba despite the presence of Soviet weapons, but precisely because the weapons had been brought in." The Soviet move, which directly threatened the security of the United States, provoked a very different reaction from what Soviet analysts had previously modelled for themselves in the absence of such a threat. Ultimately, they misread the American mentality, just as the Americans misread the mentality of the Soviet leadership. The Americans expected rational deliberation from the Soviets, but the Soviets were not capable of rational deliberation. Both sides fell into the trap summarized by a contemporary analysis of the crisis as follows: "we may go wrong in an intelligence estimate, not because our operational set of expectations is faulty, but because we do not know the information (and perhaps the basic values) on which an opponent acts, or because we simply assume that he acts on approximately the same information (and basic values) which we have and that he will not make any technical mistakes in his calculations."v

The Cuban crisis, which lasted for a month, was finally resolved as a result of very decisive US action, which took the Soviet leadership by surprise, on the verge of the outbreak of a nuclear war. But the current nuclear threat is



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embedded in a much more complex geopolitical conflict (no longer a bipolar world order, Western societies are far from unanimous in their positions on Russia, etc.) and, not least, in a war that has been going on for three months. A war the like of which has not been fought in Europe since the Second World War, and in which the world's two greatest nuclear powers are indirectly pitted against each other.

Undoubtedly, Russia would not have entered this war if it had not been sure that the “declining West” would not be an adversary and would not engage in a military confrontation. These calculations, at the current, indirect level of the conflict have clearly proved wrong. The question, however, is whether the Russian leadership is not of the opinion that there is still room to increase the risk of direct armed conflict. Or whether there is any other option for Moscow, apart from the nuclear threat, to get off the track without strategic defeat. Paradoxically, the fact that the performance of their conventional military has so far proved less than convincing should not reassure us, as this only increases the danger of using the unconventional option as the only remaining tool.

Let us not rule out this option simply because it would be, in President Kennedy's words, 'imprudent' on Russia's part or because it has not been done before. It is worth studying the historical role of mental dispositions in leading to fatal miscalculations, in order to anticipate the instances in which 'imprudence' could bring humanity to the brink of a great war. Especially when this question arises in the midst of a war that is already the result of such 'imprudence'. As we have been told, “it seemed” - and indeed it was - “foolish for Germany to take up arms in 1914”. Now it would equally be foolish on our part to forget that they actually did.

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- i Arlie J. Hoover, *God, Germany, and Britain in the Great War* (New York: Praeger, 1989). 12.
 - ii Stephen Van Evera, *Causes of War: Power and the Roots of Conflict* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999) 10.
 - iii *Washington Post*, December 18, 1962, as quoted in: Arnold L. Horelick, „The Cuban Missile Crisis: An Analysis of Soviet Calculations and Behavior,” *World Politics* 16, no. 3 (1964): 363–89. 363.
 - iv Marlène Laruelle (ed.), *Eurasianism and the European Far Right: Reshaping the Europe-Russia Relationship* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2015. Kindle) 803.
 - v Klaus Knorr, “Failures in National Intelligence Estimates: The Case of the Cuban Missiles.” *World Politics* 16, no. 3 (1964): 455–67. 464.