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OPINION | COMMENTARY

The Gathering Nuclear Storm

Lulled to believe nuclear catastrophe died with the Cold War, America is blind to rising dragons.



Iran's Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, China's Xi Jinping, Russia's Vladimir Putin and North Korea's Kim Jong Un. PHOTO: ZUMA PRESS(3)/GETTY IMAGES

By **MARK HELPRIN**

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Even should nuclear brinkmanship not result in Armageddon, it can lead to abject defeat and a complete reordering of the international system. The extraordinarily complicated and consequential management of American nuclear policy rests upon the shoulders of those we elevate to the highest offices. Unfortunately, President Obama's transparent hostility to America's foundational principles and defensive powers is coupled with a dim and faddish understanding of nuclear realities. His successor will be no less ill-equipped.

Hillary Clinton's robotic compulsion to power renders her immune to either respect for truth or clearheaded consideration of urgent problems. Theodore Roosevelt's secretary of state once said that he was "pure act" (meaning action). Hillary Clinton is "pure lie" (meaning lie), with whatever intellectual power she possesses hopelessly enslaved to reflexive deviousness.

Donald Trump, surprised that nuclear weapons are inappropriate to counterinsurgency, has a long history of irrepressible urges and

tropisms. Rather like the crazy boy-emperors after the fall of the Roman Republic, he may have problems with impulse control—and an uncontrolled, ill-formed, perpetually fragmented mind.

None of these perhaps three worst people in the Western Hemisphere, and few of their deplorable underlings, are alive to the gravest danger. Which is neither Islamic State, terrorism, the imprisoned economy, nor even the erosion of our national character, though all are of crucial importance.

The gravest danger we face is fast-approaching nuclear instability. Many believe it is possible safely to arrive at nuclear zero. It is not. Enough warheads to bring any country to its knees can fit in a space volumetrically equivalent to a Manhattan studio apartment. Try to find that in the vastness of Russia, China, or Iran. Even ICBMs and their transporter-erector-launchers can easily be concealed in warehouses, tunnels and caves. Nuclear weapons age out, but, thanks to supercomputing, reliable replacements can be manufactured with only minor physical testing. Unaccounted fissile material sloshing around the world can, with admitted difficulty, be fashioned into weapons. And when rogue states such as North Korea and Iran build their bombs, our response has been either impotence or a ticket to ride.

Nor do nuclear reductions lead to increased safety. Quite apart from encouraging proliferation by enabling every medium power in the world to aim for nuclear parity with the critically reduced U.S. arsenal, reductions create instability. The fewer targets, the more possible a (counter-force) first strike to eliminate an enemy’s retaliatory capacity. Nuclear stability depends, inter alia, upon deep reserves that make a successful first strike impossible to assure. The fewer warheads and the higher the ratio of warheads to delivery vehicles, the more dangerous and unstable.

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Consider two nations, each with 10 warheads on each of

10 missiles. One’s first strike with five warheads tasked per the other’s missiles would leave the aggressor with an arsenal sufficient for a (counter-value) strike against the now disarmed opponent’s cities. Our deterrent is not now as concentrated as in the illustration, but by placing up to two-thirds of our strategic warheads in just 14 submarines; consolidating bomber bases; and entertaining former Defense Secretary William Perry’s recommendation to do away with

the 450 missiles in the land-based leg of the Nuclear Triad, we are moving that way.

Supposedly salutary reductions are based upon an incorrect understanding of nuclear sufficiency: i.e., if X number of weapons is sufficient to inflict unacceptable costs upon an enemy, no more than X are needed. But we don't define sufficiency, the adversary does, and the definition varies according to culture; history; the temperament, sanity, or miscalculation of leadership; domestic politics; forms of government, and other factors, some unknown. For this reason, the much maligned concept of overkill is a major contributor to stability, in that, if we have it, an enemy is less likely to calculate that we lack sufficiency. Further, if our forces are calibrated to sufficiency, then presumably the most minor degradation will render them *insufficient*.

Nor is it safe to mirror-image willingness to go nuclear. Every nuclear state has its own threshold, and one cannot assume that concessions in strategic forces will obviate nuclear use in response to conventional warfare, which was Soviet doctrine for decades and is a Russian predilection now.

Ballistic missile defense is opposed and starved on the assumption that it would shield one's territory after striking first, and would therefore tempt an enemy to strike before the shield was deployed. As its opponents assert, hermetic shielding is impossible, and if only 10 of 1,500 warheads were to hit American cities, the cost would be unacceptable. But no competent nuclear strategist ever believed that, other than protecting cities from accidental launch or rogue states, ballistic missile defense is anything but a means of protecting our retaliatory capacity, making a counter-force first strike of no use, and thus increasing stability.

In a nuclear world, unsentimental and often counterintuitive analysis is necessary. As the genie will not be forced back into the lamp, the heart of the matter is balance and deterrence. But this successful dynamic of 70 years is about to be destroyed. Those whom the French call our "responsibles" have addressed the nuclear calculus—in terms of sufficiency, control regimes, and foreign policy—only toward Russia, as if China, a nuclear power for decades, did not exist. While it is true that to begin with its nuclear arsenal was *de minimis*, in the past 15 years China has increased its land-based ICBMs by more than 300%, its sea-based by more than 400%. Depending upon the configuration of its missiles, China can rain up to several hundred warheads upon the U.S.

As we shrink our nuclear forces and fail to introduce new types, China

is doing the opposite, increasing them numerically and forging ahead of us in various technologies (quantum communications, super computers, maneuverable hypersonic re-entry vehicles), some of which we have forsworn, such as road-mobile missiles, which in survivability and range put to shame our Minuteman IIIs.

Because China's nuclear weapons infrastructure is in part housed in 3,000 miles of tunnels opaque to American intelligence, we cannot know the exact velocity and extent of its buildup. Why does the Obama administration, worshipful of nuclear agreements, completely ignore the nuclear dimension of the world's fastest rising major power, with which the United States and allies engage in military jockeying almost every day on multiple fronts? Lulled to believe that nuclear catastrophe died with the Cold War, America is blind to rising dragons.

And then we have Russia, which ignores limitations the Obama administration strives to exceed. According to its own careless or defiant admissions, Russia cheats in virtually every area of nuclear weapons: deploying missiles that by treaty supposedly no longer exist; illegally converting anti-aircraft and ballistic missile defense systems to dual-capable nuclear strike; developing new types of nuclear cruise missiles for ships and aircraft; keeping more missiles on alert than allowed; and retaining battlefield tactical nukes.

Further, in the almost complete absence of its own "soft power," Russia frequently hints at nuclear first use. All this comports with historical Soviet/Russian doctrine and conduct; is an important element of Putinesque tactics for reclaiming the Near Abroad; and dovetails perfectly with Mr. Obama's advocacy of no first use, unreciprocated U.S. reductions and abandonment of nuclear modernization. Which in turn pair nicely with Donald Trump's declaration that he would defend NATO countries only if they made good on decades of burden-sharing delinquency.

Russia deploys about 150 more nuclear warheads than the U.S. Intensively modernizing, it finds ways to augment its totals via undisguised cheating. Bound by no numerical or qualitative limits, China speeds its strategic development. To cripple U.S. retaliatory capability, an enemy would have to destroy only four or five submarines at sea, two sub bases, half a dozen bomber bases, and 450 missile silos.

Russia has 49 attack submarines, China 65, with which to track and kill American nuclear missile subs under way. Were either to build or cheat to 5,000 warheads (the U.S. once had more than 30,000) and two-thirds reached their targets, four warheads could strike each aim point, with 2,000 left to hold hostage American cities and industry. China and Russia are far less dense and developed than the U.S., and it

would take more strikes for us to hold them at risk than vice versa, a further indictment of reliance upon sufficiency calculations and symmetrical reductions.

Russia dreams publicly of its former hold on Eastern Europe and cannot but see opportunity in a disintegrating European Union and faltering NATO. China annexes the South China Sea and looks to South Korea, Japan and Australasia as future subordinates. Given the degradation of U.S. and allied conventional forces previously able to hold such ambitions in check, critical confrontations are bound to occur. When they do occur, and if without American reaction, China or Russia have continued to augment their strategic forces to the point of vast superiority where one or both consider a first strike feasible, we may see nuclear brinkmanship (or worse) in which the United States—startled from sleep and suddenly disabused of the myth of sufficiency—might have to capitulate, allowing totalitarian dictatorships to dominate the world.

Current trajectories point in exactly this direction, but in regard to such things Donald Trump hasn't the foggiest, and, frankly, Hillary Clinton, like the president, doesn't give a damn.

The way to avoid such a tragedy is to bring China into a nuclear control regime or answer its refusal with our own proportional increases and modernization. And to make sure that both our nuclear and conventional forces are strong, up-to-date, and survivable enough to deter the militant ambitions of the two great powers rising with daring vengeance from what they regard as the shame of their oppression.

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