

Pugwash Conferences on Science and World Affairs

1995 Nobel Peace Prize

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Comments* by Paolo Cotta Ramusino, Secretary General,
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*the views expressed are solely those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the organization

Nuclear weapons have been used in war only twice – in 1945 against Hiroshima and Nagasaki. And shortly afterwards it became clear that any use of nuclear weapons in war, especially on a large scale, would create catastrophic problems for mankind. There are now more than 12,500 nuclear weapons in the hands of nine states (USA, Russia, China, France, UK, India, Pakistan, Israel and North Korea). And while it is fortunate that these states – despite having been involved many times, directly or indirectly, in various conflicts – have refrained from the use of nuclear weapons in war, it is obvious that direct confrontations between states possessing nuclear weapons are raising very serious concerns. It is also clear that the international community at large should help in trying to lower tensions between those states in order to help keep the situation and relevant risks under control. In 1955 the Russell-Einstein Manifesto was published, highlighting the risks of nuclear weapons. The Pugwash movement of scientists originated from this.

The well-known Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962 lasted 13 days, and represented a dramatic period where nuclear dangers reached an unprecedented level; that it ended without serious consequences is due to many factors, including the particularly responsible attitude of Khrushchev and Kennedy and, all together, a serious private high-level interaction between Russians and Americans.

The present crisis between Ukraine and Russia is somehow more complicated and possibly, in some aspects, more dangerous than the Cuban Missile Crisis. Russia and Ukraine have been in a direct military confrontation for more than 15 months. NATO countries have been indirectly confronting Russia by providing large

quantities of weapons to Ukraine; but to avoid that this confrontation become a direct one, NATO has requested that any weapons provided by NATO countries, including the US, not be used against Russia proper. However, the fulfillment of this request is somehow fading away.

In these circumstances, the possible use of nuclear weapons has occasionally been mentioned, although in a vague way, with some reference made to the possible use of so-called "tactical nuclear weapons".

When speaking about the possible use of nuclear weapons, we should consider the possibility that things may "get out of hand." A "limited" use of tactical nuclear weapons could at some point generate a larger use of nukes. The limitations imposed on Ukraine regarding the non-use of Western weapons against Russian territory could fail with serious consequences.

On the other hand, if weapons given to Ukraine are used only on Ukrainian territory, then it will be mainly the Ukrainian population to be killed and the Ukrainian cities to be destroyed. And if Russian territory were to be attacked directly on a massive scale, then the escalation of the conflict is a certainty.

And finally, amid this climate of growing conflict and armed antagonism, other conflicts could be heightened; take, for instance, the cases of China, Taiwan and the US. The Korean peninsula, India, and Pakistan are regions where antagonisms, conflicts and nuclear weapons co-exist. China-US antagonism over the issue of Taiwan is now front-page news.

In conclusion, to avoid a more dangerous situation, it is important that the war in Ukraine be stopped and space given back to dialogue and compromise. A full victory of either side in the war in Ukraine is really impossible, so we need some, perhaps complicated, form of mediation and compromise. But an immediate ceasefire is the most productive initiative that could be taken now, followed by negotiations to restore a climate of reciprocal tolerance and respect between people of different languages and traditions. Economic and cultural cooperation amongst European countries should be enhanced.....certainly a long process, but there are no constructive alternatives.

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