

# “Mutually Assured Destruction”(MAD): The Nuclear Debate America Should be Having

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*M.A.D. The concept of ‘Mutually Assured Destruction’ which posited the prospect of a global catastrophe in the event of a nuclear exchange between the United States and the Soviet Union was one which permeated the popular consciousness of the people of both nations as indeed it did the rest of the world during the era of the Cold War.*

*The realisation of Armageddon beckoning, replete with apocalyptic imagery of modern cities being turned into vast swathes of wasteland and of mass human annihilation, informed the policies of the respective superpowers.*

Although severely divided by diametrically opposed ideological standpoints and ranged against each other via the military alliances respectively of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) and the Warsaw Pact, the leaders of America and the Soviet Union were nonetheless consistently united in the idea of diffusing tension.

While they may have fought proxy wars in far-flung theatres such as Vietnam, Angola and the Ogaden region of the Horn of Africa, the desire to maintain a state of coexistence as well as the prolongation of human existence spurred them to making a succession of treaties which sought to ban or reduce forms of nuclear testing, weapon capabilities and stockpiles of arsenal. Deterrent strategies such as related to ‘first-strike’ and ‘massive retaliation’ doctrines became modified by a flexible response doctrine. However, since the ending of the Cold War, there appears to be little by way of public debate about a clear departure from the modus operandi of the past. Battlefield doctrines of both United States and Russian militaries now permit the deployment of nuclear munitions. Contrary to public perception and even the words uttered during a recent debate between the present contestants for the US presidency, both countries refute a ‘No First Use’ policy and reserve the right to initiate a pre-emptive strike using nuclear weapons.

The period elapsed since the ending of the Cold War has witnessed significant developments that have had an impact on nuclear policy: the expansion of NATO towards the borders of Russia, the abrogation of anti-ballistic missile treaties as well as the development and deployment of so called ‘missile shields’ by the United States around Russia. Yet, these matters have not been made issues of public concern and subjected to a level of scrutiny which they arguably should be. The American public, it appears, remains blissfully unaware or unconcerned about the possibility of nuclear warfare even as tensions between the United States, seemingly resolute in its policy of preserving the unipolar world which succeeded the Cold War, and a resurgent Russia, have steadily increased. This is an unsatisfactory state of affairs; one which given the current tensions between the US and Russia over Ukraine and Syria surely invokes the cautionary adage of death being always

present wherever ignorance dominates.

The recent presidential debate held in New York between Democratic Party candidate Hillary Clinton and her Republican opponent Donald Trump contained an interesting exchange which followed Clinton's expressing her concerns about Trump's judgement and temperament in being able to deal with the pressures incumbent on any serving president.

"A man who can be provoked by a tweet should not have his fingers anywhere near the nuclear codes" said Clinton. She claimed that Trump's public statements on the matter had indicated that he was unconcerned about the proliferation of nuclear weapons among nations in the Middle East and Asia. Trump denied this and at one point replied that "nuclear is the single greatest threat that this country has."

Then turning to the last segment of the debate which he referred to as "securing America", the moderator, Lester Holt, a news anchor for NBC News, said the following:

"On nuclear weapons, President Obama reportedly considered changing the nation's longstanding policy on first use. Do you support the current policy? Mr. Trump, you have two minutes on that."



What followed was a rambling response with references to old B-52 bombers, China's potential influence on North Korea and a criticism of President Obama's nuclear deal with Iran. Still, Trump did manage to assure the audience that he "would certainly not do first strike".

For her part Clinton's response, which contained reassurances to Japan and South Korea on America's continued commitment to mutual defence treaties and critique of Trump's allege

lack of strategic thinking, did not directly answer Holt's question. She did however end with the statement that "we cannot let those who would try to destabilize the world to interfere with American interests and security to be given any opportunities at all."

What was striking in the first place was the limited period of discussion given to both candidates to discuss the matter of nuclear policy. The question lacked the proper degree of scope for an issue of such importance. Further, Holt's query did not have sufficient clarity. It assumed that the American public was aware of the specificities of the present doctrine on nuclear strategy.



In a 2010 survey conducted by the Chicago Council on Foreign Relations (CCFR), just over half -55%- responded that the United States should only use nuclear weapons in response to a nuclear attack. Those who felt that in certain circumstances their country should use nuclear weapons even if it has not suffered a nuclear attack amounted to 21%.

America's new B61-12 tactical nuclear weapon

A 'first strike' may be defined as the initiation of a preemptive surprise attack by one nation upon another by a concentrated and comprehensive utilisation of nuclear weapons. The object of such an action is to destroy the nuclear offensive capability of the opponent to the extent that a response would be either impossible or ineffective. The attacker would thus be put in the position of surviving a war.

It is important to note that the American-led NATO alliance has never adopted a 'No First Use' policy. The 'massive retaliation' doctrine developed in the 1950s under the administration of Dwight D. Eisenhower, allowed for the use of nuclear weapons as a response to any form of military aggression including that of a relatively minor attack using conventional forces. The doctrine succeeding it, namely that predicated on 'flexible response', although a modification, did not preclude the United States-NATO from being the first to introduce nuclear weapons into a conflict including one initiated by the use of conventional weapons.

This has continued to be the state of affairs. President Kennedy, who in March of 1961 had raised the issue of a 'No First Use' strategic doctrine, dropped the idea after the Cuban Missile Crisis. A call on the eve of NATO's 50th anniversary summit in 1999 by Germany, Canada and the Netherlands for the alliance to consider a 'No First Use' policy was roundly rejected by the administration of Bill Clinton. And when President Obama announced in 2016 that he was considering making good on a pre-election promise in 2008 of adopting the policy, he was met with vociferous opposition by his national security advisers who persuaded him to nix the idea.

On the Russian side, Vladimir Putin in 2000 announced a new military doctrine that replaced the previous one devised in the Soviet era which was committed to 'No First Use'. This has since been modified. Russia's official military doctrine published in the latter part of 2014 states that it will not use nuclear weapons in a first strike. Some in the West are quick to doubt the sincerity of the doctrine much in the manner that many refused to believe similar no first strike doctrines announced by China in the 1960s and by the old Soviet Union.

Nonetheless, it is clear that there is much more involved in reassuring national populations than the mere enumeration of nuclear military doctrine. For if the nuanced distinction between having a 'first strike' capability and a 'no first use' policy may not be readily appreciated by the layperson, what should be apparent to anyone whether of the political classes or of the masses is the importance of the tone of the relations between competing nuclear powers. Mutual security for both is ensured not merely by the expression of doctrine but critically, through the words and deeds of the political and military leaders of the potential antagonists. The quality of diplomacy together with the strategy employed both in the development and the deployment of nuclear weapons is the ultimate guarantor of peace no matter how severe the differences existing between both.

Using this as a standard, it is clear that the contemporary circumstances of the relationship between the United States and the Russian Federation falls short. And dangerously so.

This state of affairs, so markedly different to that which existed during the Cold War, is largely the doing of the policies undertaken by successive administrations of the United States since the fall of the Berlin Wall and the subsequent dismantling of the Soviet system in Eastern Europe. But before providing the reasons for this shift, it is useful first to explain the position which previously existed.

Starting with the administration of President John F. Kennedy, and lasting up until the ending of the Cold War, successive American governments consistently sought to achieve the means by which tensions with the nuclear armed Soviet Union could be lessened if not totally diffused.

The potential global catastrophe which could have ensued from the Cuban Missile Crisis of October 1962 served as a catalyst in enabling years of talks to finally conclude with the signing of the Limited Nuclear Test Ban Treaty the following year. A secret protocol accompanying the withdrawal of Soviet missiles from Cuba was the withdrawal of US Jupiter ballistic missiles from Turkey. The United States also gave an undertaking not to attempt to invade Cuba in the future.

The following decade, Richard Nixon signed the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty (ABMT) as well as the Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty (SALT) in 1972. In 1979, Jimmy Carter signed the SALT II treaty. Although not ratified by Congress because of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the United States nonetheless abided by its terms until its expiration. The next major agreement was the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF) of 1987 signed by President Ronald Reagan just before the Cold War came to an end.

However, there came a shift. The Clinton administration decided on pursuing a policy of absorbing former Soviet satellite states into NATO. Starting in 1997 with Poland, Hungary and the former Czechoslovakia, NATO inaugurated a policy of expansion into eastern Europe, reneging on an agreement, the Russians allege, that had been reached by American



and Soviet leaders at the end of the Cold War. This was that in return for allowing a reunified Germany to join NATO, the American-led alliance would not extend itself “an inch” towards the east.

Then in 2002, the Bush administration withdrew from the ABM treaty and adopted a missile shields policy. It was under President Barack Obama that the first of the anti-ballistic missiles began to be deployed in countries close to the Russian border. The result has been a consistent ratcheting of tension between the Russians and NATO.

To understand the basis of these developments and the attendant antagonisms developed between the United States and the Russian Federation, recourse needs to be made to understanding the guiding canons which have shaped American foreign policy since the ending of the Cold War. These are, respectively, known as the Wolfowitz and Brzezinski doctrines. Each is the creature of the belief that American political and economic global hegemony must remain unassailable.

In 1992, the then secretary of the US Department of Defence, Paul Wolfowitz authored a policy document named the ‘Defense Planning Guidance’, which was to cover the fiscal years of 1994 to 1999. It explicitly called on the present and future political leadership to enforce a global American imperium which would if necessary involve the abrogation of international treaty obligations. It was a call to embrace a new age of American militarism.

Earlier in 1988, Zbigniew Brzezinski’s work, ‘The Grand Chessboard’ theorized in detail a geo-strategy fixated on preventing the rise of a Eurasian power or combination of powers which could challenge the global dominance of the United States. The focus of this doctrine when applied is that the United States needed to militarily intimidate a post-Cold War Russia while working to dismantle it for the purpose of using it as a pliant source of Western energy needs.

Both doctrines reflect a hybrid of the thinking behind the neoconservative philosophy which has been consistently influential on the policies of successive American administrations dating back to that of Bill Clinton.

The notion that the ending of the Cold War was the ‘end of history’, the resultant synthesis of a Hegelian-like dialectical chain, through which the American system had emerged victorious and thus anointed as a nation to impose its will on the rest of humanity resonated with those already imbued with a belief in the messianic aspect of ‘American Exceptionalism’ as well as those of the neoconservative stripe who believe in the aggressive export of American ideas and values.

Thus, America’s embrace of militarism which has been the major stimulant in destroying countries such as Iraq, Libya and Syria, has also put it on a confrontational course with the nuclear armed China. China, with whom Richard Nixon sought a rapprochement in the early 1970s is today being challenged by the United States through its military and diplomatic pivot to Asia. One aspect of this is its insistence on what it terms “freedom of navigation” which the Chinese not unreasonably interpret as a euphemism for American control of the sea lanes which are vital to its trade.

Added to the aforementioned expansion of NATO as well as the withdrawal from the ABM treaty have been the conflicts the United States has encouraged or fomented on Russia’s borders. In Chechnya, NATO provided covert support to Chechen rebels as part of a strategy

geared towards controlling the pipeline corridors transporting oil and gas out of the Caspian Sea region. NATO also encouraged Georgia under former president Mikheil Saakashvili to attack South Ossetia which prompted the Russo-Georgian War of 2008. The United States was also behind the coup of February 2014 in the Ukraine using far-Right militias to depose the democratically elected leader under the guise of a popular people's uprising. Russia's reaction in annexing the Crimea after a plebiscite, an invocation of its 'Black Sea doctrine', was a measured response to the threat posed by NATO encroaching on its only warm sea port which grants part of its naval fleet access to the Mediterranean Sea.

The coup in Ukraine and the belligerence of the succeeding regime whose leaders were handpicked by the United States has provided a means by which tensions between both powers have been escalated. The United States installed a nationalist government which was quick to demonstrate its antipathy to the Russian-speaking eastern part of the country. It is worth reminding how the United States felt threatened by a Soviet backed regime in Cuba and how this led to a crisis which brought both superpowers to the brink of a nuclear showdown. The question then is how would an objective observer appraise the Russian view about a rival power installing a hostile regime right on its border? A useful analogy may be of the Russians or the Chinese instigating a coup in Quebec and installing an FLQ-type regime which was hostile both to English-speaking Canadians and the United States.

While the ongoing conflict in Ukraine has provided the basis for a potential conflict between Russia and NATO, the present Syrian Civil War, the fruits of an American-initiated insurrection to overthrow the government of Bashar al-Assad currently presents the basis through which an all out war between the United States and Russia may ensue.

The formal Russian intervention that commenced in September of 2015 is based on Russian interests in preserving its naval base in the sea coast town of Tartus and also in putting down the American-sponsored Jihadi militias that are being used as proxies to effect Assad's overthrow. Russia has a vested interest in preventing the spread of Jihadi militias such as Islamic State and Jabhat al Nusra to the Muslim populations within it and in neighboring states. The Russian action which has enabled the Syrian government to reconquer swathes of territory from Jihadi militias exposed the United States the insincerity behind America's professed actions against these Islamist groups some of which it disingenuously refers to as 'moderate' rebels.

The breakdown of the US-Russian ceasefire over the besieged town of Aleppo as a result of an attack on September 17th by United States and NATO forces on Syrian Army placements in the eastern province of Deir al-Zour has presented another deliberate provocation to the Russians. It is doubtful that the quality of United States intelligence could be so poor as have mistaken Syrian soldiers for Islamic State guerrillas. Rather, it is more believable that the attacks were deliberately carried out to put Islamic State insurgents in a position to mount a ground offensive against the Syrian Army and was aimed at sabotaging the ceasefire worked out by United States Secretary of State John Kerry and the Russian foreign minister Sergey Lavrov on the 9th of September.

It fits into the pattern of the United States covert support for Jihadi militias. It also, raises the question of whether high-ranking civilian and military officials within the American government are keen to start a war with Russia and risk the full weight of the consequences that may ensue. Recent developments point to what effectively is a mutiny on the part of Ash Carter, the US Secretary of State for Defence, and senior generals including General Joseph Dunford, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Chief of Army Staff, Mark

Milley. The fatal attack on Syrian Army positions which lasted for over an hour could only have been sanctioned at the highest echelons of the Pentagon.

Russian air power has been instrumental in enabling the Syrian Arab Army to reclaim Syrian territory lost to jihadi groups such as Islamic state and Jabhat al Nusra. Therefore calls by administration figures such as Carter and politicians such as Senator John McCain, Hillary Clinton, Tim Kaine and Donald Trump's running mate Mike Pence for a 'No Fly Zone' are an invitation to war with Russia. On September 22nd, while giving evidence under oath to the [Senate Armed Services Committee hearing on US strategy in the Middle East](#), General Durnford explicitly stated that the imposition of a 'No Fly Zone' in Syria "will mean war with Russia."

But while the general mentioned that the actions of the US military would depend on the instructions they received, he gave an extraordinary reply to a question put to him by a senator. Asked if he would support the proposal on intelligence sharing which Russia agreed upon by John Kerry and Sergey Lavrov on the 9th of September, Dunford responded "We don't have any intention of having any intelligence sharing arrangement with the Russians." Durnford did not stop at stating that it would be "unwise" to share intelligence with Russia. He stressed that it would not be one of the military's missions if Washington and Moscow were to ever work together against Islamist militants in Syria.

The threat of a war between the United States and Russia can only be increased if a disobedient faction of the military and government is acting independently of instructions of a serving president. Such a situation is not unheard of in American history. Arthur Schlesinger Jr., a member of the Kennedy administration, would once admit ["we did not control the joint chiefs of staff"](#). It was in the prevailing atmosphere of fervent anti-communism that a group of Right-wing, high-ranking military officers at the Pentagon openly defied Kennedy and constantly called for war against the Soviet Union. Most notable among them were Army General Lyman Lemnitzer, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and Air Force Generals Curtis LeMay and Tommy Power. All called for the invasion of Cuba at the height of the missile crisis - a decision which would have almost certainly led to a war and a nuclear catastrophe.

If army generals such as Durnford and Milley are wilfully acting against the instructions of the White House, this would amount to mutinous conduct as defined under the United States Uniform Code of Justice. Barack Obama has in the past removed generals who disagreed with him; General Stanley McChrystal being a case in point. However, it is uncertain as to whether his inaction is due to the 'lame duck' status all presidents acquire in the last months of their time in office or if he tacitly approves of this aggressive course while maintaining a facade of wishing to reach an accommodation with Russia in Syria.

The aggressive tone being struck by senior American military figures is worrisome. On October 4th, General Milley issued a warning that the United States would "destroy any enemy, anywhere and anytime". His reference to a belligerent statement made by a London-based Russian official along as well as his mentioning of China, Iran and South Korea identified the presumptive foes while his references to tackling enemies both possessing large conventional capabilities or using guerrilla tactics in dense urban populated areas indicate that the United States is preparing for a large scale war.

The Russian leader has raised the issue of the danger of a nuclear conflict in several interviews over the past months. In an impassioned monologue delivered to a gathering of

various world news agencies in July of this year, Putin referred to the prevailing mood of insouciance in the Western media and public.

Your people...do not feel a sense of impending danger -this is what worries me. How do you not understand that the world is being pulled in an irreversible direction? While they pretend that nothing is going on. I don't know how to get through to you anymore.

Putin had reminded the gathered of the expansion of NATO to Russia's borders, the positioning of missile shields in Europe under the pretext of being a defensive shield to an attack from Iran.

But while Russia's actions have been demonstrably reactive, it has shown that it is prepared to go on the offensive. While John McCain has suggested a "new strategy" in Syria with a "necessary military component" which would involve attacking the Syrian military and shooting down Russian aircraft, Major General Igor Konashenkov, the spokesman for the Russian Ministry of Defence, warned in early October that Russia will shoot down NATO jets over Syria if airstrikes are launched against the Syrian Arab Army.

Syria currently presents the greatest danger of a full blown conflict developing between the United States and Russia. But the security challenge presented by Ukraine is still ongoing as indeed are the policies respectively of an expanding NATO and encircling Russia with missile shields from Eastern Europe through to Asia and Alaska. Meanwhile, there has been no thorough public examination of the legality of American military involvement in Syria, no public debate on the reasonableness of NATO expansion or the efficacy of the development of a missile shield system.

Those who dispute the veracity of an undertaking by US leaders not to expand its military alliance eastwards because of the absence of an official written document forget that many important bilateral international agreements of the past were undertaken orally and respected by successor governments. For example, the United States undertaking not to mount an invasion of Cuba was never officially reduced to writing. Yet it was respected by succeeding American administrations.

So far as missile defence systems are concerned, the [American Union of Concerned Scientists](#), a non-profit science advocacy organisation, argue that they are "fundamentally ineffective". Their development, it is further argued, "may actually undermine national security by impeding deep cuts in nuclear weapons, complicating important international relationships and engendering a false sense of security among policy makers."

Again those who think nothing untoward about the expansion of America's network of nuclear missile shields should be aware of what it implies. It is sending out a message to potential adversaries that the shield will insulate the owner from nuclear attack thus presenting the United States with a viable first strike option while removing the balance of terror guaranteed by mutual assured destruction. This is why the Soviet Union reacted with alarm at the Reagan administration's announcement of its Strategic Defence Initiative.

At the same time, a country which is increasingly surrounded by missile defence systems is likely to feel 'locked in'. And the more it feels that it is reaching the point where its own arsenal will no longer be able to serve as a deterrent to an attack, the more likely that such a country would feel compelled to use a first strike option during an episode of crisis.



This was alluded to back in 2012 by the then Russian Chief of General Staff Nikolay Marakov who stated that Russia would consider a preemptive strike under certain circumstances:

Considering the destabilising nature of the (American) ABM system, namely the creation of an illusion of inflicting a disarming (nuclear) strike with impunity, a decision on preemptive deployment of assault weapons could be taken when the situation gets harder.

The Russians are responding by a programme of modernizing their weapons delivery systems. It is developing a new generation of long-range nuclear bombers and truck-mounted ballistic missiles. Missiles have been placed closer to NATO countries accepting United States shield technology and its ageing Pacific nuclear submarine fleet which is mostly stationed at the Rybachiy Nuclear Submarine Base near Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky is being upgraded with the addition of the new Borei-class submarines.

While the role of its Asian fleet is part of what the Russians refer to as one of 'strategic deterrence', soldiers on the Western alliance are prone to interpret these measures as evidence of aggressive intent. Arguing against any modification of NATO's doctrine to one of 'No First Use', General Sir Richard Shirreff, a British former deputy supreme allied commander, told the BBC in 2014 that Russia has hardwired "nuclear thinking and capability to every aspect of their defence capability".

Comments such as Shirreff's as well as those by United State's government officials chiding Russia for allegedly being in violation of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty fail to take into account Russian grievances related to the United States abrogation of the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty by NATO's development and deployment of missile shields. At a meeting in November 2015 with high-ranking generals, Vladimir Putin accused the United States of attempting to "neutralize" Russia's nuclear arsenal through its missile shield project. Russia's response, he said, would be to "strengthen the potential of its strategic nuclear forces", including the deployment of "attack systems" capable of nullifying any missile shield.

The global management of nuclear arsenals has always been played as a game of sorts. Within it are strategies and counter-strategies that have taken into account matters such as political gamesmanship, shifting international alliances, geo-political developments and advances in technology. But while the American-Soviet Cold War has long ended and statistics such as those released by the [Peace Research Institute Oslo](#) indicate a steady and marked decline since the end of the Second World War in the overall number of deaths sustained globally through wars, the world is a more dangerous place when there are rising tensions between the nuclear armed superpowers.

The recent acrimonious breakdown in US-Russian efforts at cooperating in Syria as well as Russia's withdrawal from a nuclear security pact offer clear illustrations of this drift as do the planned extensive troop buildups and massive military exercises on NATO's eastern flank. Meanwhile in Russia, where public opinion polls suggest the average person believes that a war with the West is inevitable, the government has launched a nationwide civil defence training exercise involving 200,000 emergency personnel and the co-operation of 40 million civilians to ensure that the country is prepared in the event of a nuclear, chemical and biological attack from the West.

Unlike during the Cold War, there are no large, vocal anti-nuclear campaign groups organising demonstrations and making public appeals. While there is a press, the American

mainstream media has failed to put these issues squarely into the public domain. The coverage of dangerous Russo-American confrontations such as Ukraine and Syria which ultimately should bring the wider issue of nuclear strategy to the fore is edited, biased and highly compartmentalized. Among America's political leadership there is silence and incoherence. This state of affairs has resulted in a misdirected discourse and a cruelly misinformed public.

It is a debate which America continues to bypass at its own peril.

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