

The Nuclear 9/11 In Our Future

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In my report *Surprise Attack: ICBMs and the Real Nuclear Threat* (2020), I warned that U.S. strategic cultural aversion to “thinking about the unthinkable” and intelligence community biases would virtually guarantee failure to warn of an adversary potential or actual surprise nuclear attack.

The Intelligence Community “Worldwide Threat Assessment” to Congress on March 8, 2022, once again proves my case.

See No Evil

America’s top spy, Avril Haines, Director of National Intelligence, testified to Congress on March 8 that there is no heightened nuclear threat from Russia, despite Russian dictator Vladimir Putin on February 27 self-deploying to a nuclear command post and publicly declaring a “high alert” and “special mode of combat duty” for Russia’s nuclear forces.

DNI Haines admits these actions by Putin are “extremely unusual” but reassured Congress: “We are watching very closely for movement of anything related to strategic forces” such as deployment of Russian mobile ICBMs, missile submarines, and strategic bombers.

According to DNI Haines: “We also have not observed force-wide nuclear posture changes that go beyond what we have seen in prior moments of heightened tensions during the last two decades.”

DNI Haines essentially agreed with other Biden Administration officials and their media allies that Putin’s nuclear threats are merely “bluster” and “nuclear saber rattling.” Haines: “He is effectively signaling that he is attempting to deter NATO from intervening in Ukraine.”

White House and Pentagon officials claim that, despite Putin’s nuclear threats, there is no increased danger of nuclear war with Russia, so U.S. nuclear forces remain at DEFCON 5—their lowest readiness level.

If they are wrong, then the U.S. nuclear posture would invite and reward a Russian surprise nuclear attack, adding a nuclear 9/11 or nuclear Pearl Harbor to the long and recent list of spectacular intelligence failures.

And they are wrong.

Russia Postured For Nuclear Surprise Attack

The above erroneous “happy face” analysis by DNI Haines—a lawyer, not a specialist in nuclear forces and operations—exemplifies why someday, perhaps soon, there is a nuclear 9/11 in our future:

--“Indications and Warning 101” for elevated risk of nuclear attack is a big war in Europe involving the superpowers, happening now.

--Vladimir Putin is Russia's Nuclear Command Authority, a former KGB thug, megalomaniac, and ruthless killer. Credible nuclear threats from Putin (or from China's Xi or North Korea's Kim Jong-un) warrant raising the DEFCON level of U.S. nuclear forces to deter surprise attack.

--Putin's nuclear threats are credible because his strategic forces are postured for surprise attack all the time, in a perpetual alert status called "Constant Combat Readiness" which does not require highly visible force-wide mobilization, which is what DNI Haines is looking for.

--Under Constant Combat Readiness, Russia's silo-based and mobile ICBMs are always over 95% ready to launch in minutes, and can be ordered to launch secretly, using highly secure command-control-communications (C3).

--DNI Haines is looking for Russia's mobile ICBMs deploying to field, but they do not have to deploy for surprise attack, because their garages have rapidly retractable roofs to allow launching without field deployment. Mobile ICBMs, garaged or in the field, all have highly secure C3 for receiving and executing launch orders secretly.

--Russia's ICBMs, if Moscow is not cheating on New START, has at least 800 warheads, more than enough for a surprise nuclear attack against all U.S. strategic force targets: 400 ICBM silos, 3 nuclear bomber bases, 2 missile submarine ports, and key C3I nodes.

--DNI Haines is looking for Russia's missile submarines to deploy to sea. But Russian missile submarines carry intercontinental-range missiles that can strike the U.S. launching from port, and they too have highly secure C3 enabling secret preparation and execution of a surprise attack.

--Russian submarines normally at sea could participate in a surprise attack by receiving authorization and unlocking codes before leaving port and/or by connecting to undersea C3 cables in their protected bastion areas, like the White Sea or Sea of Okhotsk. This undersea C3 network for missile submarines is unique to Russia, and would betray no signs of preparation for surprise attack to DNI Haines.

--Adding Russian SLBMs to their ICBMs would increase the forces secretly mobilizing for surprise nuclear attack to at least 1,500 warheads, with few or no indicators visible to DNI Haines.

--Russia's 50 strategic bombers, the least important of their strategic forces, would be very "noisy" and visible when mobilizing, which is why Moscow would probably not mobilize bombers for a surprise attack. Indeed, Moscow hopes DNI Haines will notice the non-mobilization of bombers, and draw the wrong conclusion.

--DNI Haines and the press suggest that Putin's declared "special mode of combat duty" for nuclear forces, because it corresponds to no known Russian defense condition, is "just bluffing." On the contrary, use by Russia of a special readiness condition unknown to the U.S. intelligence community should be very worrisome.

--The intelligence community accurately assessed Russia's "exercise" of tank armies and other conventional forces on Ukraine's border was really disguising an invasion. Strangely and inconsistently, DNI Haines does not even consider that Russia's nuclear forces exercise "Grom"

(Thunder), conducted just prior to invading Ukraine, probably disguised Russian mobilization for possible nuclear war.

Much to his credit, at the same hearing where DNI Haines testified, Defense Intelligence Agency Director, Lt. General D. Scott Berrier, warned: “I also believe that when he [Putin] says something, we should listen very, very carefully and take him at his word.”

Unfortunately, General Berrier is not the Director of National Intelligence.

Failure To Warn: Cultural and Institutional Biases

Despite my critique of DNI Haines above, her failure to adequately warn Congress during the ongoing Ukrainian crisis about an elevated threat of Russian surprise nuclear attack is less a personal failure, and much more due to cultural and institutional biases that may be insurmountable:

U.S. and Western Strategic Culture is so conditioned to fear nuclear war as “unthinkable” and so averse to appearing to be a nuclear “alarmist” that even the defense and intelligence communities will probably fail to warn—as now.

Confirmation Bias, telling political leaders what they want to hear, is a lot easier and far more rewarding than “speaking truth to power.” President Biden does not want to hear from his own DNI that his Ukraine policies have brought the U.S. to the verge of a nuclear war.

Political Bias, termed “politicization of intelligence” can be driven by external political pressure or internal political views of intelligence community analysts. The increased nuclear threat from Russia during the Ukraine War is an “inconvenient truth” for downsizing and diminishing U.S. nuclear deterrence as many in and out of the Biden Administration would like to do in the new Nuclear Posture Review.

Omniscience Bias is the intelligence community pretense that they know everything, often manifest in the phrase “there is no evidence for” in this case Russian preparedness for a surprise nuclear attack. They prefer to forget “absence of evidence is not proof of absence” and often ignore evidence contradicting their preferred narrative, as in this case where there is substantial evidence for an increased Russian nuclear threat. Intelligence community credibility would profit if they would more often admit how little they really know: “Putin’s declaration of a special alert for nuclear forces is impossible for us to confirm or deny. We do not even know what ‘a special mode of combat duty’ for Russian nuclear forces is. We do know Russian ICBMs are capable of launching within minutes a surprise nuclear attack, and their preparations could be unknown to us.”

Mirror Imaging is the assumption that Russia and other adversaries share the Western view that, as President Biden jointly declared at the 2021 Geneva Summit with Putin: “A nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought.” Yet Russia, China, and North Korea do not believe this, as manifest in their military doctrines and nuclear warfighting capabilities. Assessing

adversary threats by the Western worldview, by Western values, by Western “rational actor” models, and by Western “nuclear redlines” is dangerous.

Service Bias results from the U.S. intelligence community being top-heavy with analysts from the military services that reinforces “mirror imaging” about how Russia would prepare to fight a nuclear war. Submariners naturally think their service is most important so Russia would surely deploy its subs to sea, as the U.S. plans to do. The U.S. Air Force and its officers have had a long love affair with strategic bombers. U.S. ICBM missileers are least numerous in the services and the intelligence community, are subordinate to the Air Force, and are not indoctrinated or trained to make surprise nuclear attacks against anyone. In contrast, Russia’s Strategic Rocket Forces, comprising ICBMs and their missileers, are the dominant military service, given preference over all other military services in budgets, material, personnel, and are training constantly for nuclear warfighting. U.S. intelligence community analysts deeply proficient in Russian or other adversary nuclear doctrine, nuclear force capabilities, and nuclear operations, are a minority voice.

History Lessons

History suggests the intelligence community will fail to provide strategic warning and be surprised, even amidst a crisis or major war, as in Japan’s surprise attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941, North Korea’s surprise invasion of South Korea in 1950, North Vietnam’s surprise Tet Offensive in 1968, and the surprise terrorist attacks of 9/11/2001.

The U.S. has never fully generated strategic forces, not even during the 1962 Cuban missile crisis.

While ICBMs are on high-alert and so always generated, generating bombers and SSBNs is highly visible and potentially provocative, which probably explains why the Triad has never fully generated.

Despite the best laid plans of defense and intelligence community professionals to provide strategic warning “indicators” that are supposed to generate U.S. forces to a survivable posture, countervailing views within these communities will counsel against force generation—and often even against strategic warning—fearing these will escalate a crisis.

Failures To Warn And Generate The Nuclear Triad

Perhaps most importantly, because U.S. strategic culture is conditioned to regard nuclear war as “unthinkable”—and most “unthinkable” a nuclear surprise attack—U.S. intelligence and defense communities will almost certainly not believe even clear indicators of a possible impending surprise attack:

--During the NATO theater nuclear exercise ABLE ARCHER-83, the USSR prepared Soviet nuclear forces to preempt what Moscow mistakenly believed was an impending U.S. nuclear surprise attack. Despite clear indicators, the U.S. intelligence community failed to warn and the

Triad did not generate. Subsequently, a great debate raged within the intelligence community over the failure to warn that lasted seven (7) years, but did nothing, could do little, to correct a strategic culture blind to the threat of nuclear surprise attack.

--During the August 1991 failed coup d'etat against Soviet Premier Mikhail Gorbachev, led by the General Staff and KGB chief Vladimir Kryuchkov, who were true believers in the Surprise Nuclear Missile Attack (VRYAN) program, the General Staff put Soviet nuclear forces on Increased Combat Readiness to detect and preempt an impending U.S. surprise attack. The U.S. intelligence community failed to warn. I personally witnessed a senior CIA officer breakdown in tears during the crisis, defending the failure to warn the President and Joint Chiefs as a "higher duty" to avoid U.S. Triad generation of ICBMs, missile submarines, and bombers, because this might escalate into nuclear war.

--During the October 1993 failed coup d'etat against Russian President Boris Yeltsin, while fighting raged in the streets of Moscow, the General Staff launched a major nuclear strategic forces "exercise" that included, for the first time, generating all of their dozen Airborne Nuclear Command Posts. Simultaneously, Russia disclosed to the New York Times their secret "Dead Hand" (officially "PERIMETR") system that would automatically launch Russian ICBMs to defeat a U.S. nuclear surprise attack. I was at Peterson AFB at the time, briefing a NORAD/SPACECOMMAND audience comprising hundreds of analysts on nuclear scenarios. Some of us thought these alarming developments warranted Triad generation, but most dismissed the generated Russian posture as "nuclear saber rattling" and mere "bluster." The U.S. nuclear Triad remained at DEFCON 5, its lowest readiness level.

--On January 25, 1995, in response to false warning that a Norwegian meteorological rocket was a U.S. SLBM, the leading edge of a nuclear surprise attack on Russia, for the first time all three Chegets (Russia's equivalent of the U.S. presidential "football" for authorizing nuclear strikes) activated for President Yeltsin, General Pavel Grachev (Defense Minister), and General Mikhail Kolesnikov (Chief of the General Staff). It was the most dangerous moment in the nuclear missile age, an accidental nuclear war averted only because President Yeltsin refused to "push the button" and waited until the rocket fell harmlessly into the sea. The U.S. intelligence community was unaware of these perilous events until President Yeltsin publicly disclosed them afterwards. Many in the U.S. defense and intelligence communities drew exactly the wrong conclusion, complacently arguing that Russia's "system worked" for avoiding nuclear war.

--In 2017, North Korea successfully demonstrated ICBMs that could strike the United States, detonated an H-bomb they described as capable of "super-powerful EMP attack" and displayed an H-bomb ICBM warhead, flew missiles over Japan, and made repeated unprovoked threats to strike the U.S. and allies. Reportedly, General James Mattis (then Defense Secretary) self-mobilized for a North Korean nuclear attack by having emergency communications available in his car, in his bedroom, and sleeping dressed to go. But the press and policymakers were allowed to believe that the North Korean nuclear threats were mere "bluster." The U.S. nuclear Triad of ICBMs, submarines, and bombers remained at DEFCON 5, as if there was no threat.

Is A Nuclear 9/11 Inevitable?

If Russia or North Korea struck the United States during any of the nuclear close calls described above, or during any of many other incidents, some described in my book *War Scare: Russia and America on the Nuclear Brink*, they would have caught the U.S. Triad unmobilized in a “bolt from the blue” surprise attack. *It matters not that U.S. intelligence and defense communities are aware of rising tensions, nuclear indicators, or even if a major European war is raging (as today in Ukraine). If despite these warnings, the U.S. nuclear Triad is not mobilized to a survivable posture, the enemy can successfully execute a nuclear surprise attack that will have the same destructive effect as if a “bolt from the blue.”*

The men and women of the U.S. intelligence and defense communities are human beings, not unthinking and unfeeling machines who can be hard-wired to react to “nuclear indicators” and robotlike unquestioningly follow protocols that might lead to nuclear Armageddon. They are products of a free society and strategic culture conditioned to fear nuclear war as they would the Apocalypse. Even in the intelligence and defense communities, at least as many would lean toward the anti-nuclear views of the Union of Concerned Scientists as others who would imbibe the wisdom of Colin Gray.

Nuclear victory is “unthinkable” to most Americans, but not to Russia, China, and North Korea, whose totalitarian strategic cultures celebrate their nuclear weapons, parade mobile ICBMs, and play with nuclear fire in their diplomacy, brinkmanship, and plans for winning wars.

Therefore, the “nuclear 9/11” in our future may be inevitable.

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