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Statement

On the debate about the use of nuclear weapons in the Ukraine war: Cuba crisis in slow motion?

Statement of the Federation of German Scientists (VDW) based on the work of the study group "European Security and Peace"

Nuclear weapons use has been a taboo for 77 years that is now being drawn into question. As with the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962, we are again facing a dangerous risk of nuclear weapons use. Today, Europe is directly affected by such a threat. In the Cuban crisis, a nuclear catastrophe was prevented by a combination of publicly communicated steadfastness on the one hand, and, on the other, personal communication and the signalling of the parties' willingness to negotiate. All are necessary today as well.

Since the beginning of the war, President Putin has repeatedly threatened the use of nuclear weapons. This rhetoric is presumably intended to deter the West from providing effective support to Ukraine, to dissuade Ukraine from resolute military resistance, and to appease nationalist extremists in Russia. In the meantime, the reciprocal irresponsible rhetoric has increased U.S. President Biden is issuing stern warnings to Russia of an Armageddon, and Ukrainian President Zelenskyy is bringing up preemptive strikes to make Russian use nuclear weapons impossible.

Militarily, Russian forces have recently suffered setbacks in the territories they occupy. There is a real danger that, due to miscalculations or intention, nuclear weapons will be employed by Russia to prevent war-decisive military setbacks. Also significant in this context is the dangerous situation around Ukraine's largest nuclear power plant, Zaporizhzhya, which is occupied by Russian forces and whose area has been repeatedly hit by missiles. The antagonists bear responsibility here for preventing a nuclear accident.

The West should not refrain from responsibly supporting Ukraine as the victim of a war of aggression in violation of international law, because this would give further impetus to nuclear blackmail. The cavalier view of some supporters of unlimited arms deliveries, that Putin's rhetoric is "a bluff," is dangerous. It cannot be ruled out that Putin (also under pressure from his political-military environment) might use tactical nuclear weapons as a last resort before Russian forces are defeated in Ukraine or as a stop signal to the West to dissuade it from its military support for Ukraine. The West might feel compelled to respond in some way to a Russian nuclear weapons deployment. But a NATO use of nuclear weapons would result in an uncontrollable escalation. The Biden administration appears to be focusing its thinking on massive conventional counterstrikes against Russian forces that would last longer. This, however, would draw NATO directly into the war. Putin might then be left with only a choice between defeat and further nuclear escalation in the face of Western conventional superiority. A possible nuclear war in Europe would not only cost millions of lives but would also make large parts of Europe uninhabitable in the long term. Nuclear weapons deployments would also have incalculable effects on the global weather, ecological, and climate system.

The beginning and course of the Russian invasion of Ukraine indicate that such contexts seem to play a minor role in Russian decision-making so far. All the more reason for them to play a role in Western policy. The precautionary principle dictates that an escalation of the Ukraine war into a nuclear war must be prevented at all costs. The risk of escalation must be the impetus to end the hostilities as quickly as possible and to initiate diplomatic solutions for the restoration of Ukraine's territorial integrity.

This will take time. Without ignoring the limits of the comparability of the historic Cuban missile crisis with the current situation, it can be stated that in the Cuban missile crisis, i.e. in a confrontation that could hardly be surpassed in terms of real dangers, it was possible not only to prevent a further escalation of the conflict, but also to develop a set of instruments for confidence-building and understanding between the parties to the conflict that went beyond the immediate crisis. To a considerable extent, the Cuban Missile Crisis furthered efforts to achieve stability through nuclear arms control. A key element is limiting the risk of nuclear war due to misperceptions and miscalculations. From this perspective, the following requirements for a responsible approach to the current confrontation emerge:

- Establishment and intensification of direct crisis communication between the nuclear weapon states, in particular between Russia, the USA, and NATO, in order to rule out the danger of a use of nuclear weapons. To this end, the German government should use its influence with Washington.
- Decisive action for a rapid end to the war by Russia. The U.S. has a special role and responsibility in this regard, since Russia wants to be perceived as being on an equal footing with the U.S. Ukraine must be involved in all steps.
- The intensification of international efforts to bring about a diplomatic end to the war in Ukraine while respecting Ukraine's sovereignty. The German government should declare its readiness to provide goal-oriented support for such an initiative.
- Resumption of the U.S.-Russian dialogue on strategic stability and on cooperative security with Russia (including special consideration of the expiration of the New START treaty in 2026). This includes renouncing the deployment of new nuclear and nuclear-capable delivery systems in Europe as a negotiating offer and an immediate renunciation of the deployment of new INF systems (land-based intermediate-range) and negotiations of a ban on the deployment of short-range systems.
- Cooperation on global nuclear non-proliferation must be resolutely pursued, in particular by working toward a revival of the nuclear agreement with Iran (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action) to prevent an Iranian nuclear weapons program that would have significant proliferation effects in the Middle East and beyond, including those relevant to European security. In addition, the situation in East Asia must be defused by containing and reining in North Korea's nuclear weapons programs and nuclear ambitions.

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On the origin and history of the Federation of German Scientists (VDW, Vereinigung Deutscher Wissenschaftler e.V.)

The Federation of German Scientists (VDW) is a network of scientists from all disciplines who critically reflect on their responsibility for the consequences of scientific research and technical development and actively participate in the social debate with differentiated expertise, especially in the fields of peace, climate, biodiversity, and economics. Since its foundation in 1959, the association has always expressed its views on central issues of European security, for example in the Göttingen Declaration in 1957, before the Bundestag vote on medium-range missiles in October 1983, and on the INF issue in 2019. When the VDW was founded, issues of nuclear disarmament, non-proliferation, and arms control were always at the forefront, as reflected, among other things, in its participation in the international Pugwash movement.