**The nuclear threat**

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At the height of the Cold War in 1955, a top secret assessment produced by Sir William Strath for the British government concluded that a Soviet nuclear attack would kill or injure sixteen million people.

The Strath report, considered so sensitive that it was not declassified until 2002, said that ten 10-megaton bombs on the main British population centres would kill twelve million and injure four million people. “This would mean the loss of one third of the population,” it stated. “Blast and heat would be the dominant hazard, accounting for nine million fatal casualties, against less than three million from radiation. Four of the sixteen million casualties would be caused by a single bomb on London.”

The fate of survivors would be bleak. Strath, who was head of the cabinet office central war plans secretariat, said that they would suffer from “disease, starvation, and the unimaginable psychological effects of nuclear bombardment.”

He was not entirely pessimistic about long term recovery. “The standard of living of the reduced population, although substantially lower than at present, would still be well above that of the greater part of the world.” The cabinet rejected most of his recommendations for reducing casualties, such as mass evacuation and basement shelters in all new buildings, on the ground of cost. It did, however, build a secret underground headquarters in the Cotswolds for cabinet members together with top military, civilian and intelligence officials.

In the following decades, the apocalyptic consequences of a nuclear conflict were not seriously doubted by either government or public. As late as 1983, civil servants prepared a draft speech for the Queen to deliver on the eve of an all-out nuclear exchange with the Soviet Union. She would speak of “the madness of war” and “the deadly power of abused technology”, while asking everybody to pull together as in the Second World War.

By then the premise of Stanley Kubrick’s film Dr Strangelove, which is that nuclear war meant mutual destruction was widely accepted. A repeat of Hiroshima and Nagasaki was regarded with general dread, despite an initial US government bid to play down the horror. Documents released by the National Security Archive in Washington this month reveals that General Leslie Groves, head of the Manhattan project that produced the atomic bomb, had claimed that there was “no radioactive residue” in the two devastated cities and those exposed to radiation from the explosion would “not face undue suffering. In fact, they say it is a very pleasant way to die.”

The idea that nuclear power could be used safely never recovered from the accident at the nuclear plant at Chernobyl in Ukraine. At the time, I was living as a foreign correspondent in Moscow where we become obsessively interested in the wind direction as a contaminated cloud rose over Chernobyl.

Fast forward almost 40 years and something remarkable and very dangerous has occurred. The risk of nuclear exchange between NATO and Russia is far greater now than at any time since the height of the Cold War. But even this is eclipsed by the chance of an accidental catastrophe at the Russian-occupied nuclear power station at Zaporizhzhia where shells are exploding around the plant which is in the heart of the battle zone. Ukraine accused the Russians on Friday of planning to take the plant, the largest nuclear plant in Europe, offline so it no longer provides power to the Ukrainian electric grid.

The dangerous situation at Zaporizhzhia is one more sign that the nuclear issue is becoming central to the Ukraine crisis. Some persuade themselves that President Putin would not dare launch a nuclear strike, though he was foolish enough to start the most disastrous war in Russian history. The Russian army has been exposed as a shambolic and poorly-led organisation, incapable of providing fuel for its convoys a few miles from the Russian frontier. If it suffers a defeat in south Ukraine, how sure are we that it will not be tempted to use tactical nuclear weapons?

Civil and military nuclear accidents happened in the USSR and US during the Cold War, but then there were processes to avert or contain disaster. But these have since either disappeared or function fitfully. This point was made by Sir Stephen Lovegrove, the UK’s national security adviser, in an insightful speech to the Centre for Strategic and International Studies in Washington in July.

He said that the risk of nuclear conflict had increased because of “the breakdown of communications” between the West and Russia and China. “The Cold War’s two monolithic blocks of the USSR and NATO – though not without alarming bumps – were able to reach a shared understanding of doctrine [about the potential use of nuclear weapons] that is today absent.”

During the Cold War, there were well-understood “escalatory ladders” that could be monitored, making crises easier to identify and defuse. But today there are more of what Lovegrove calls “escalation wormholes – sudden, unpredictable failures in the fabric of deterrence causing rapid escalation to strategic conflict.” Changes in the nature of war – such as the potential use of tactical nuclear weapons on the battlefield – enhances these risks.

Other new factors are at play here that may be even more menacing. It is said that the risk of a nuclear conflict is greater now than at any time since the Cuban missile crisis in 1962. But this misses an important point about modern wars that has nothing to do with new technologies or tactics. It is simply that modern wars tend to go on for years, as happened in Syria, and may happen in Ukraine. Countries are turned into arenas for international rivalries and proxy war and there are too many players with conflicting interests to bring the fighting to an end.

If the war in Ukraine produces neither a winner nor a loser then there is plenty of time for something to go catastrophically wrong, as may now be happening Zaporizhzhia, or for Russia to fend off defeat by falling back on the nuclear option.

The US and USSR are no longer sole superpowers capable of controlling their proxies and allies. Political and military power is more fragmented than it used to be. The US failed to win wars in Iraq and Afghanistan; Russia is failing even more spectacularly in Ukraine. Lovegrove cites the International Institute for Strategic Studies as assessing that in 2001 only three states had land-attack cruise missiles, while today the number possessing them is 23 states and one non-state actor.

Excerpted: ‘The Nuclear Threat is Now at the Center of the Ukraine Crisis’.

Courtesy: Counterpunch.org