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Dangerous “War Scares” Of 1974, 1983, And 2021: What Needs To Be Done?



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The United States over the past five decades has had dangerous experiences with “war scares.” This demands an assessment of options for reducing the possibility of a war scare that could result in an actual war, particularly in the nuclear age. U.S. and allied military exercises are particularly dangerous because military doctrine, particularly in communist states, argues that military exercises are an effective way of hiding an actual first strike operation.

The current imbroglio involving the need for the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Mark Milley, to make two calls to his Chinese counterpart, General Li Zoucheng, marks a break in the civil-military chain of command. In actual fact, the U.S. chairman of

the JCS is not part of the chain of command for nuclear decisions, but Milley and other senior members of Donald Trump's national security team were so concerned about the obvious mental deterioration of the president that the calls were essential. Sensitive intelligence informed us even before the 2020 election that the Chinese leadership had become particularly concerned with Trump's anti-China rhetoric and the increasingly aggressive U.S. military exercises in the South China Sea.

In 1974, National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger had become so alarmed with the mental deterioration of President Richard Nixon brought on by a combination of alcohol and anti-depressants that Kissinger informed Secretary of Defense James Schlesinger to block any decision to use force that was communicated from the White House. Fortunately, Nixon was so overwhelmed with the threat of impeachment that he lacked the inclination or the time to concern himself with using military force to distract the U.S. public, the so-called "wag the dog" syndrome.

In 1983, the Soviet Union was in a downward spiral marked by the quagmire in Afghanistan; political and military setbacks throughout the Third World; and the increased cost of competing with the largest peacetime increases in the U.S. defense budget since the end of World War II. The Kremlin had become convinced that the U.S. government was in the hands of a dangerous anti-Soviet crowd (Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger, CIA director William Casey), led by the "evil empire" chants of President Ronald Reagan. The new Soviet general secretary, Yuri Andropov, the former KGB chief, believed that Reagan was insane and a liar, comparing the U.S. president to Adolf Hitler. Reagan's demonization of Soviet leaders was just as counter-productive as President Barack Obama's demonization of Russian President Vladimir Putin and Trump's demonization of Chinese leader Xi Jinping.

It's long past time for U.S. leaders to recognize the dangerous precedent of surprise attacks, which have involved China (the Japanese attack in 1937; Russia (the German attack in 1941); and of course the United States (Pearl Harbor as well as 9/11). Throughout the Cold War, the Pentagon conducted dangerous probes of Soviet borders with naval and air assets. In 1983, the annual mobilization exercise ("Able Archer") was conducted in a provocative fashion with high-level participation for the first time, including Reagan, Vice President George H.W. Bush, and Secretary of Defense Weinberger. "Able Archer" was particularly threatening because it tested the command and communications procedures for the release and use of nuclear weapons in case of war.

Even Reagan acknowledged that the exercise was a “scenario for a sequence of events that could lead to the end of civilization as we know it.” The following year after conceding that the “war scare” in the Kremlin was genuine, Reagan issued a radio warning into an open mike: “I’ve signed legislation that will outlaw Russia forever. We begin bombing in five minutes.” Those of us at the CIA who worked to convince CIA director Casey that the 1983 war scare was real were totally flummoxed.

Instead of debating whether General Milley went out of his policy lane in making calls to his Chinese counterpart, we should be debating what could be done to reduce the risk of accidental warfare as well as war scares. The leading nuclear weapons states must begin a dialogue to bolster the non-proliferation regime; to make greater use of notional military exercises; to stop challenging territorial waters and air space; and to sign a “no first use” pledge regarding the use of nuclear weapons. China is the only major nuclear weapons state that has made such an unconditional pledge.

The continued proliferation of nuclear technology, such as the U.S. decision to share nuclear submarine technology with Australia, is a major reason for toughening the non-proliferation regime. The U.S. decision to share nuclear submarine technology with Australia marks the first such move since the 1958 decision to share technology with Britain. The nuclear reactors that power U.S. and British submarines use bomb-grade, highly enriched uranium, which renders the agreement with Australia contrary to previous U.S. policy to eliminate reactors that use bomb-grade fuel.

Both North and South Korea tested sophisticated cruise missiles last week, another worrisome development. The North Koreans typically test their missiles in the wake of U.S.-South Korean military exercises; these aggressive military exercises threaten North Korea on a regular basis. South Korea’s missile tests will make that country the seventh in the world to launch ballistic missiles from submarines. Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi has been particularly critical of U.S.-South Korean military exercises.

The Biden administration should declare that it would not use nuclear weapons against any target that could be destroyed by conventional means. The United States must also forswear any intentional targeting of civilian populations or civilian targets.

There has never been a more compelling time for a U.S.-Russian-China dialogue to reduce nuclear weapons; to restrict military exercises; and to limit the conditions that could lead to possible war scares. The U.S. navy is already playing too many cat-and-mouse games with Russian and Chinese navies in the Black Sea and the Pacific Ocean, respectively. If the United States has any hope of reducing tensions between North and South Korea, then

China must be part of the essential dialogue. President Biden held a 90-minute conversation with Xi Jinping last week; hopefully, nuclear issues and the problem of “war scares” were on the agenda.

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