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A Close Call on Doomsday

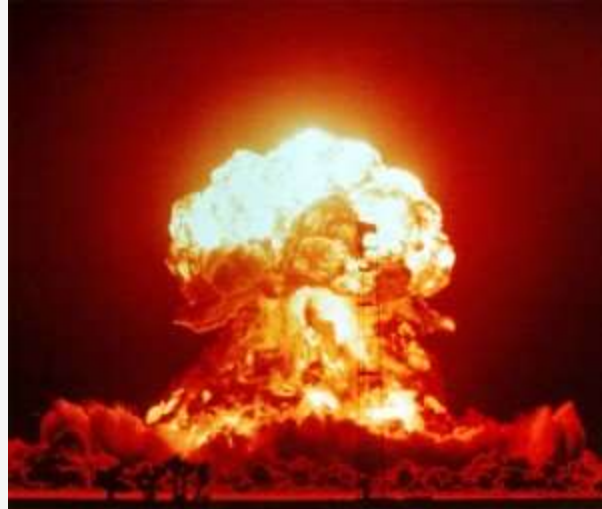
By Melvin A. Goodman

October 27, 2015

The risk of nuclear extermination is real, especially at times of revved-up tensions between the U.S. and Russia, when a political miscalculation or a technical mistake could prove disastrous, a danger that pushed the two sides to the brink of war in 1983, as ex-CIA analyst Melvin A. Goodman recalls.

The *Washington Post* on Oct. 25 published an important story based on a recently-published U.S. intelligence review from 1990 that confirmed Soviet leaders in 1983 believed the Reagan administration was using a mobilization exercise to prepare a nuclear surprise attack. In response, the KGB instituted a sensitive collection effort, Operation RYAN, to determine if the United States was indeed planning such an attack.

I was a CIA analyst at the time, and the incident was known to me and several colleagues as the “war scare” in the Kremlin. There are lessons from the “war scare” that can be applied to the unnecessary escalation of tension between Washington and Moscow now taking place.



A nuclear test detonation carried out in Nevada on April 18, 1953.

The year 1983 was the most dangerous year in the Soviet-American Cold War confrontation since the 1962 Cuban missile crisis. President Ronald Reagan declared a political and military campaign against the “evil empire,” although Soviet leaders were looking to break the Gordian knot that was hurting the Kremlin. The intelligence indicated that the Soviet Union was in a downward spiral marked by the quagmire in Afghanistan; the drain of funds in the Third World, particularly in Cuba; the political and military setbacks in Angola and Nicaragua; and the increased cost of competing with the largest peacetime increases in the U.S. defense budget since the end of World War II.

Soviet leaders believed that the “correlation of world forces,” Soviet terminology for weighing the international balance, was working against the interests of Moscow and that the U.S. government was in the hands of a dangerous anti-Soviet crowd.

In response to Reagan’s references to the Soviet Union as the “focus of evil in the world” and as an “evil empire,” the new Soviet general secretary, Yuri Andropov, the former KGB chief, suggested that Reagan was insane and a liar. U.S. media paid close attention to Reagan’s sensational charges, and Soviet media launched a verbal offensive that matched Reagan’s rhetoric. Reagan was compared to Hitler and accused of “fanning the flames of war.” Andropov was portrayed in the U.S. press as a Red Darth Vader. Reagan’s demonization of Soviet leaders was counter-productive just as Barack Obama’s demonization of Vladimir Putin has been counter-productive.

In addition to the Able Archer mobilization exercise that alarmed the Kremlin, the Reagan administration authorized unusually aggressive military exercises near the Soviet border that, in some cases, violated Soviet territorial sovereignty. The Pentagon’s risky measures included sending U.S. strategic bombers over the North Pole to test Soviet radar, and naval exercises in wartime approaches to the USSR where U.S. warships had previously not entered. Additional secret operations simulated surprise naval attacks on Soviet targets.

One of the great similarities between Russia and the United States was that both sides feared surprise attack. The United States suffered psychologically from the Japanese attack at Pearl Harbor; it has still not recovered from 9/11. Yet, the United States has never appreciated that Moscow has similar fears due to Operation Barbarossa, the German invasion in the same year as Pearl Harbor, a far greater nightmare.

Russia's fear of surprise attack was accentuated in 1983, when the United States deployed the Army's Pershing-II missile and land-based cruise missiles in West Europe as a counter to the Soviet Union's SS-20 missiles.

The SS-20 was not a "strategic" weapon because of a limited range (3,000 miles) well short of the United States. The P-II, however, could not only reach the Soviet Union, but it could destroy Moscow's command and control systems with incredible accuracy. Since the Soviets would have limited warning time – less than five minutes – the P-II was viewed as a first-strike weapon that could destroy the Soviet early warning system.

In addition to the huge strategic advantage from the deployment of P-II and numerous cruise missiles, the U.S. deployment of the MX missile and the D-5 Trident submarine placed the Soviets in an inferior position with regard to strategic modernization. Overall, the United States held a huge strategic advantage in political, economic, and military policy.

The Pentagon's psychological warfare program to intimidate the Kremlin, including dangerous probes of Soviet borders by the Navy and Air Force, was unknown to CIA analysts. Thus, the CIA was at a disadvantage in trying to analyze the war scare because the Pentagon refused to share information on military maneuvers and weapons deployments.

In 1983, the CIA had no idea that the annual Able Archer exercise would be conducted in a provocative fashion with high-level participation. The exercise was a test of U.S. command-and-communications procedures, including procedures for the release and use of nuclear weapons in case of war.

Nevertheless, CIA deputy director for intelligence Robert Gates and National Intelligence Officer for Soviet strategic weapons Larry Gershwin turned out several national intelligence estimates that dismissed "Soviet fear of conflict with the United States." They believed that any notion of a Soviet fear of an American attack was risible, and it wasn't until 1990 that the President's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board concluded that there had been a "serious concern" in the Kremlin over a possible U.S. attack. Gershwin, who politicized intelligence on strategic matters throughout the 1980s, is still at the CIA as a national intelligence officer.

I believed that Soviet fears were genuine at the time, and Reagan's national security advisor Robert McFarlane was even known to remark, "We got their attention" but "maybe we overdid it."

For the only time during William Casey's stewardship as CIA director, he believed his intelligence analysts who argued the "war scare" was genuine, and ignored the views of Gates

and Gershwin. Casey took our analysis to the White House, and Reagan made sure that the exercises were toned down.

For the first time, the Able Archer exercise was going to include President Reagan, Vice President George H.W. Bush, and Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger, but when the White House understood the extent of Soviet anxiety regarding U.S. intentions, the major principals bowed out.

In his memoirs, Reagan recorded his surprise that Soviet leaders were afraid of an American first strike. One of the reasons why Secretary of State George Shultz was able to convince Reagan of the need for summitry with later Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev was Reagan's belief that it was necessary to convince Moscow that the United States had no plans for an attack.

Ironically, Soviet military doctrine had long held that a possible U.S. *modus operandi* for launching an attack would be to convert an exercise into the real thing.

Nevertheless, one year after President Reagan conceded that the "war scare" was genuine, he 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 who worked on the war scare were stunned.

Three decades later, history seems to be repeating itself. Washington and Moscow are once again exchanging ugly broadsides over the confrontations in Ukraine and Syria. The Russian-American arms control and disarmament dialogue has been pushed to the background, and the possibilities of superpower conflict into the foreground.

Pentagon briefers are using the language of the Cold War in their congressional briefings, referring to Putin's regime as an "existential threat." Presidential candidates in the United States are using confrontational language, and promising to go on the offensive to knock Putin on his heels. President Obama seems to recognize the false security of military power, but he needs to act on his suppositions.