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Going Out With a Bang? Biden Plays Nuclear Chicken with Russia



Photograph Source: The White House – Public Domain

There is no justifiable explanation for lame duck President Joe Biden’s sudden turnabout decision to okay Ukraine’s use of longer-range US ATACMS ballistic missiles that which can hit targets as much as 200 miles inside Russia.

Biden and his ironically-dubbed national security “brain trust” of Secretary of State Antony Blinken and National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan have for most of this year been nixing Kiev’s request for such missiles as well as permission for Ukraine use

Britain's Storm Shadow stand-off air-launched long-range cruise missiles to hit Russian targets. They did this arguing that such attacks on the Russian heartland could lead to a spiraling escalation of that war — an escalation that could quickly go nuclear.

Now those two out-of-their-depth but supremely over-confident advisors and the doddering outgoing president they serve are claiming the US “has to respond” to Russia's supposed escalation of the war. They are referring to Vladimir Putin's acceptance of North Korean leader Kim Jong Un's offer of over 10,000 North Korean troops to assist Russia in driving invading Ukrainian forces out of its Kursk region north of Ukraine.

But the Ukrainian invasion of the Kursk Oblast itself was a significant escalation of this conflict and the US had made it worse by providing shorter range missiles, called HIMARs, which were already being launched from Ukraine into Russian territory.

Basically, the Ukrainian-Russian war, now 1000-days running, has been following an all-too-common pattern of tit-for-tat escalation of the kind that led to WWI, the US Civil War, the Korean War and the Spanish-American War. The problem is that at some point one of those tits or tats is likely to lead to a situation where Russia, feeling hard-pressed by a more powerful adversary in the US and its NATO allies, will feel sufficiently threatened to resort to a nuclear response. And the nature of nuclear war which is fought by missiles, not by the ponderous moving of large numbers of troops and motorized weapons, is that the process of escalations is measured in days, hours or even minutes.

Will this latest move up the escalation ladder, providing Ukraine's military with US (and British) rockets that can hit targets deep inside Russia, and doing so in both cases with the necessary assistance of US military satellites for guidance, be the rung that leads to Russia's use of some of its nukes?

Fortunately probably not, but the mere chance that it could happen makes Biden's escalation decision beyond appalling.

I say it is not likely to lead to nuclear war because in fact, it is unlikely that Ukraine will have the ability to launch any ATACMS rockets in the remaining few weeks of Biden's presidential dotage. Firstly, even any of those rockets in Ukraine, they are few in number. The UK's Telegraph newspaper quotes a retired leader of Ukraine's military as saying it would take “hundreds” of those missiles to significantly weaken Russia's advancing counterattack in Kursk. Second, the Ukrainian military personnel using the ATACMs have to be trained in how to fire them and to use the satellite-based guidance system to direct them to targets. All that will take time. And time is running out for the Biden administration. On Jan. 3, 2025, the new Congress, which will be fully in the hands of the

Republicans, will be seated, and the new Republican-led Senate can be counted on to tie Biden's hands and reverse his decision on provision of the rockets, if instructed to do so by incoming President-Elect Donald Trump.

Jan. 3 is only 45 days away.

Moreover, Biden (who has promised Trump a "smooth transition" (in contrast to Trump's refusal to leave office after the 2020 election), will in the coming weeks have to follow the long-standing tradition of a smooth handoff by bringing Trump and his foreign policy team in on discussions on any foreign policy crisis or issue,

And Trump certainly does not want to begin his second term with a hot war on his hands. So why did Biden and his foreign policy handlers make this sudden provocative and destabilizing decision?

It is surely not because Russia invited in some North Korean infantry — poor souls who will surely be chewed up given the language barrier between the Korean-speaking troops and their Russian officers.

I suspect Biden's decision to authorize the more powerful and longer-range missiles for Ukraine was motivated by a desire to either establish his and his foreign policy team's hard line against Russia. Or more or less sinisterly, it could be an effort to actually press Russia into responding with some kind of retaliation, hopefully not nuclear, but perhaps a conventional attack on US or British trainers, of a storage depot for ATACMS rockets.

Putin, however (who has reportedly been in phone communication with Trump), knows that the incoming president badly wants to start off his second presidential term with a peace deal in Ukraine. Given that, the Russian leader, no matter how angry he may be at the breaching of one of his 'red lines,' is unlikely to allow himself to be provoked into taking a retaliatory action that could provoke a surge of anti-Russia patriotic fervor in the US. Such a result could prevent Trump from following through with his plan to be the peacemaker.

Any way you look at it though, Biden's and his advisors' move on providing those ATACM missiles and okaying their use inside Russia is the height of recklessness and must be condemned.

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