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*The 2nd in our occasional series of expert comment and analysis, by **Susan Eisenhower**, CEO & Chairman of The Eisenhower Group, Inc; Chairman Emeritus of The Eisenhower Institute and GSF Advisory Board member. As always, the views expressed are those of the author and not of Global Strategy Forum unless otherwise stated.*

The Russia-Ukraine Crisis: It's Time To Get The Back Channels Back

For 25 years, I devoted myself to arms control and international security with a specialty on the Soviet Union and new Russia. I spent considerable time thinking about the worst-case scenario: a security failure that could mean nuclear weapons are launched intentionally or accidentally. Like us, our Russian counterparts had the same obligation to think 'outside the box', assess the steps that might lead to 'strategic instability' and suggest ways to mitigate it. The value of these 'second track' or 'back channel' lines of communication was that they gave both governments ideas about what could be done to reduce the potential for catastrophic miscalculations. In the context of our current crisis, the potential for a nuclear showdown keeps me awake at night and remains with me even in my sleep.

The world is weary from a nearly three-year pandemic, yet we are compelled now to think again about what could go fatally wrong, this time in the national security realm. I am among those who are appalled by Russia's illegal, immoral invasion of Ukraine, and I am inspired by the courage of the Ukrainian people. I also support targeted sanctions on Russia. The longer view, however, requires a closer look at several unthinkable things that we might find ourselves facing.

Of real urgency is the fact that we are seeing a more determined Vladimir Putin, the Russians continue to advance to Ukraine's capital, and their president is running out of options. In that regard, the West has made it plain that while we will not put boots on the ground in Ukraine, we will wage '[economic war](#)' on Russia instead.

As a contingency planner, I believe we must understand the potential dangers this crisis implies. The most likely by-product of cutting ties with a major supplier of global



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commodities suggests that we are bound to experience rising inflation and a deepening supply chain problem. Throttling another major power's economy may mean their only defence is offence, leading to cyberattacks and other weapons of disruption. We should also be prepared for the potential of terrorist attacks, generated by the sense that America is occupied solely with this crisis. The catastrophic humanitarian conditions in Afghanistan could inspire such revenge, perhaps. Millions of people there have been left [destitute](#) by the precipitous departure of the United States and our allies.

Given the heft of the international sanctions imposed on Russia, some people are predicting that its economy will ultimately collapse. Should chaos and calamity ensue inside Russia we will, once again, worry about the fate of their nuclear materials and the potential for 'loose nukes', as well as the possible sale of nuclear know-how to other adversarial countries. We made enormous progress on these concerns after the end of the Soviet Union with the cooperation of new Russia. Given the current crisis, this option is not available to us today.

We might also see some worrying developments regarding China's eye on a resource-rich space they have long coveted - the Russian Far East, a land abundant in energy and mineral resources. Beijing's interest in this region has long been known to the Russian side.

Finally, regarding a nuclear confrontation. Might this be the last resort for a disturbed, unstable autocrat who sees his world

disintegrating in some final and ignoble way? Many people have not been schooled to imagine the scenario of a nuclear war—it is literally unimaginable. There are ways to escalate a crisis to the "shock and awe" of limited use. But if all things fail, it ends with the annihilation of both our countries and the rest of the world. That's why, collectively, we have responsibilities to search for ways to deconflict this current crisis before it becomes primarily a confrontation between two nuclear superpowers.

Nuclear confrontation is not an irrational worry. Nuclear matters are more complex and considerably more dangerous than they were during the Cuban Missile Crisis and other showdowns. Please take the time to listen to Senator Sam Nunn's excellent [interview](#) on Georgia Public Radio on this topic. As one of our country's leading voices on nuclear matters, he notes that cyber hacks, indeed escalating cyberattacks and their potential connection to nuclear capability and command and control, make the possibility of a nuclear miscalculation a very real concern.

We are not at the brink yet. But the risk of getting there is very real. Urgent thinking is required to get ahead of the 'law of unintended consequences.' Only a very few experts predicted the end of the Soviet Union or the 2007-2008 Global Financial Crisis. I agree with Washington Post columnist, David Ignatius, in his [column](#) on March 2. We must consider looking for an 'off-ramp.' Might a highly respected retired stateswoman like Angela Merkel play a role here?



We must also assure that we have enough official and semi-official contacts between our countries that can be used as 'back channels' in case we find ourselves in a Cuban Missile Crisis-type scenario. The United States and Russia, in tit-for-tat disagreements, emptied out their embassies and consulates well before this immediate crisis. More recently, personnel in the US Embassy in Ukraine were sent home on February 14. Contacts in the Federal government between US officials and their Russian counterparts have also been drastically curtailed over the years, and 'second track' bilateral security forums are also all but gone. During the crisis in Cuba in 1962, relationships developed through such channels played a critical role in finding a resolution to the confrontation before it 'went nuclear.'

As we understood then, interacting with counterparts in an adversarial country is not a sign of approval or weakness; it is a pragmatic way to widen understanding of the other side's mood and how far they might go. It could alert us if there is a miscalculation or an intentional move toward a Doomsday end game. It is urgent that we find a way to deconflict the current crisis, starting with a ceasefire. We must also gain Russian assurances, if possible, that any nuclear option is off the table.

The worrying voices in the heads of those who cannot sleep at night are getting louder. We must think about these scenarios in the cold light of day and at the very least reinstitute a process to fortify and expand key contacts with the other side. It is an 'all hands on deck' imperative to avoid a widening of the war and an eventual showdown that could become potentially catastrophic.

PS. A week ago, I thought my article this week would be about the last 30 years, as I planned to offer context for this crisis and some thoughts about the lessons we could learn from those three decades. But unfolding events have made me realize now that we are beyond the point where the past is likely to influence the short-term crisis. There will be time for evaluations later

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