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Ukraine: Nuclear End-Game?

by GWYNNE DYER

Last Sunday Vladimir Soloviev, the anchor of Russia's most popular current affairs show, ?Sunday Evening', was delivering his usual ?all is going splendidly' take on the war in Ukraine when he suddenly went off-piste. The United Kingdom, he suggested, is planning to use nuclear weapons against the Russian forces in Ukraine.

How did he know that? Well, Britain has been accusing Russia of committing a genocide in Ukraine, and since that can't be true ? Russians never behave badly, even in wartime ? the evil Brits must be creating a pretext for launching a nuclear strike.

?It's the perfect option,? Soloviev explained. The Americans don't want to do it themselves, because they might be hit in retaliation by Russian nukes. It's the British who will be ordered to use their tactical nuclear weapons in Ukraine, and suffer the Russian retaliation if necessary. (Everybody knows that the UK is an American-controlled colony.)

Maybe it's just the standard propaganda nonsense. After all, it would sound perfectly plausible to anybody who gets all their information from Russian mass media. But Vladimir Putin's regime has the weird but deeply ingrained habit, whenever it is preparing to commit some dastardly deed, of accusing the other side of doing it, or planning to do it, first.

It's like a boxer who always telegraphs his punches: it doesn't make any practical sense, but maybe it makes sense psychologically. At any rate, it definitely got my attention, and I'll bet it did the same in strategic circles in a number of Western capitals.

Maybe it was just idle speculation to fill talk-show time, or maybe it was an attempt to discredit the many reports of crimes committed by Russian troops in Ukraine ? but maybe it was an opening bid to justify and normalise the eventual use of Russian tactical nuclear weapons against Ukrainian forces.

I am inclined to give more weight to the former two possibilities, simply because forward planning has not been the hallmark of Russian military behaviour in this war. But here's what the people charged with contingency planning would be telling Putin right now if there is anybody home in the strategic foresight department of the Russian armed forces.

The big Russian offensive starting this week in eastern Ukraine could capture enough territory for Putin to freeze the situation and declare a victory, but it would take many weeks and involve further huge casualties. And it might not succeed, even after all that.

To admit defeat against a much smaller opponent like Ukraine after deliberately starting the war would put the Putin regime at mortal risk, so what are the Great Leader's best remaining options? There is only one, actually. Escalate.

This is what Putin always does when he's in trouble, and the only escalation that could change the course of events at that point would be nuclear. Just tiny nukes, of course: this would be a bluff to squeeze some concessions out of the Ukrainians and hold NATO at bay, not a decision to commit national suicide (including personal extinction for Putin).

Russia does have some very tiny ?tactical' nuclear weapons ? one kiloton or less. Nobody else bothers to make them that small, but then nobody else's army still reflexively sees nuclear weapons, regardless of formal deterrence doctrines, as just a bigger kind of artillery.

Use one in an airburst over a small Ukrainian town or even a Ukrainian military position, and you'll kill just a few thousand people, including even the fallout victims. And maybe ? just maybe ? that will frighten the Ukrainians and NATO into giving Putin a face-saving partial victory.

So if it comes to that ? I'm not predicting that it will, but it could ? what should NATO do? The answer, almost certainly, is: DO

NOTHING NUCLEAR.

Condemn the Russian first use of nuclear weapons, of course, and watch the entire world join the chorus. Ukraine should continue military operations as if it didn't happen, except that at this point it could ask NATO forces again to provide air support within its borders and NATO should agree. And everybody hopes for the best.

What's the alternative? Get into a tit-for-tat tactical nuclear war on Ukrainian soil? Nuke Moscow? Don't be stupid.