

CONFRONTATION BETWEEN RUSSIA AND THE UNITED STATES. THE VIEW OF A REPRESENTATIVE OF THE US PEACE MOVEMENT

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I want to thank Oleg Bodrov for inviting me to join today's webinar. He has been teaching me about the Baltic region's nuclear and military dangers. I was thrilled a year and a half ago when we arranged for him to educate members of Massachusetts' legislature about the imperatives of demilitarizing U.S.-Russian military tensions and creating a nuclear-free world beginning in the Baltic region.

These are nasty times. *The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* warns that the U.S. assault on what remains of the world's arms control regime, the increasingly unrestrained nuclear, cyber and high-tech arms races, increased US and Russian reliance on their nuclear arsenals, the climate emergency and authoritarianism have brought humanity to 100 seconds to midnight – the closest ever to the self-annihilation of our and other species.

It is in this context, and given the reality that every nuclear weapons state has either prepared and/or threatened to initiate nuclear war during international crises and wars, we must take the recent tensions and war preparations in the Baltic region very seriously.

The dangers are compounded by the Trump government and by the gravest political crisis since the United States' civil war in the 1860s. First, Lawrence Wilkerson, formerly Secretary of Defense Colin Powell's chief of staff, has reported that during the first years of the Trump government, Secretary of Defense Mattis ordered that no significant military actions be taken without his approval. Why? To prevent Trump from launching nuclear attacks midst one of his rages.

Mattis is no longer Secretary of Defense. So, we cannot assume that Secretary Esper has erected a similar firebreak against nuclear catastrophe.

Second, like other autocrats, the sanctify of life and human dignity are being sacrificed as our 21st century neo-fascists seek to consolidate their power. As we see with the 180,000 U.S. people who have lost their lives to Covid-19, and the number of Trump associates who have been jailed- at least temporarily - for their corruptions, Trump and his cronies are willing to sacrifice anyone or anything to remain in power. This applies to the country's allies and to Trump's ostensible friends like Vladimir Putin.

To frame my understandings of U.S.-Russian military confrontations – including in the Baltic region, let me share a lesson from my undergraduate days at Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service, when Bill Clinton was my classmate. On the first day of our international relations class, Professor Ello welcomed us by saying: "The study of international relations is analogous to the study of the rules of the game among Mafia families." But the good news is that in addition to murder and gang warfare, Mafia tribes – sometimes in response to outside pressures and interventions - also negotiate ceasefires.

Of course, while Professor Ello may have influenced a future president and diplomats, it wasn't universally true. Today's webinar, like the Palme Commission and the international peace movement collaborations that contributed so powerfully to the end of the Cold War, is an expression of life affirming international relations.

Structurally the core of the crisis we face is that the U.S. is an empire in decline which seeks to maintain its global power and influence, while the Putin government seeks to restore Russia's empire

and its great power status. The Baltic region, Europe at large, the Middle East, and even U.S. elections lie at the vortex of these historically and economically driven tensions. which, as Dr. Horst Leps' report warns, could escalate to nuclear war.

In the U.S., the popular understanding is that NATO remains a defensive alliance designed to prevent Russian aggression. Never entirely true, that conception is now ancient history. NATO, which was created to “keep Russia out, Germany down and the U.S. in” has now expanded to Russia's borders and has become a global alliance with North African, Latin American and Asian partner nations.

Having served its ostensible purpose, the alliance should have been retired with the end of the Cold War. Instead of pursuing Common Security diplomacy in the tradition of the Palme Commission, NATO was repurposed. Intoxicated by the illusions of the so-called “unipolar world order”, and with the arrogance of power inherent to all imperial nations, President Clinton violated the Gorbachev-Bush agreement.

You will remember that this agreement provided for German reunification on West German terms in exchange for the U.S. committing not to move NATO an inch closer to Moscow. That arrogant and aggressive mistake was the functional time bomb that derailed the possibility of creating the European Common Security order. Clinton's expansion of NATO to Russia's borders sparked the new Cold War, which was intensified when the Atlantic Alliance signaled its intention to make Ukraine and Georgia members of NATO. Now, with U.S. and German forces continually deployed along Russia's western border, and given Russian memories of catastrophic invasions from the West (Napoleon, the French in 1872, and World Wars I & II), it should come as no surprise that we face escalating tension.

Russia, of course, has hardly been blameless, as we reflect on its Baltic provocations, its “little green men” in the Ukraine and its murderous military operations in support of the Assad dictatorship in Syria.

Following Clinton's time in office, the U.S. quest to restore U.S. and NATO nuclear primacy began with W. Bush who quit the ABM treaty in order to develop first-strike related “missile defenses.” Responding in kind and compensating for its lagging conventional military capabilities, Moscow increased its reliance on its nuclear arsenal. This, in turn, reinforced U.S. and NATO hardliners, resulting in the spiraling arms race that again places Europeans at the center of the potentially deadly vortex. It was a similar situation in the 1980s – albeit with more nuclear weapons –that brought us to the brink of annihilation and inspired Prime Minister Palme's brilliant Common Security initiative that resulted in the INF Treaty and served as the paradigm for the end of the Cold War, even before the fall of the Berlin Wall.

Dr. Leps' report takes NATO and its commitments to its military buildups as givens. This is likely true, but the Trump factor should not be underestimated. There are contradictions at play which could weaken the alliance. Trump has repeatedly spoken of his admiration for Vladimir Putin. He welcomed Russian efforts to subvert the 2016 U.S. presidential election. He has remained silent in the face of reported Russian bounties for the killing of U.S. troops in Afghanistan, Russian interference in our current elections, and the assassinations of dissenting Russian figures.

Meanwhile, as Trump has criticized NATO and announced reduction of U.S. forces in Germany (some of whom will be relocated to Poland), the U.S. national security strategy

identified Russia and China as the primary threats to the U.S., and the Pentagon is focused on reorienting the greater part of its military capacities to great power competition focused on Russia and China. This is reinforced by immense and provocative military exercises like Defender 2020 in Europe and RIMPAC in the Pacific.

As European nations recoil in horror and disbelief as Trump assaults democracy, and denigrates NATO, European elites are increasingly taking other steps to ensure their security – laying the foundations for creation of a European superpower.

The U.S. is not speaking or acting with one voice. The contradiction in U.S. approaches to Europe can be resolved in several ways. Should Trump lose in November's election and leave office as he is constitutionally bound to do, the Biden Administration will do all that it can reinforce the Atlantic Alliance. But, with Trump having demonstrated U.S. unreliability, distrust will endure, with unforeseeable consequences. The other possibility is that Trump will either steal the election or refuse to leave office should he lose. In that case, over the next four years he will either reverse course and more fully embrace NATO and its confrontation with Russia or – more likely – he will more publicly embrace Putin and hasten NATO's decline, with its foreseeable and unforeseeable consequences.

All of which brings us back to the increasing militarization and dangerous provocations in the strategically vital Baltic region among them the massive Defender 2020 military exercises, practice nuclear bombing runs by U.S. B-52s, Russian deployment of nuclear capable missiles in Kaliningrad and its Ocean Shield military exercise. These, and incidents like a Polish warplane shadowing the plane carrying Russia's Defense Minister in international airspace and Russian warplanes intrusion into Swedish airspace each carry the danger that misjudgment or an incident could precipitate great power war, much like the 1914 terrorist's bullets in Sarajevo brought on the guns of August.

The military-to-military communication structures that are in place to manage responses to such encounters are helpful, but they are hardly sufficient.

In closing, I want to affirm and celebrate Dr. Leps' conclusions. It is past time to adopt strategies of "pragmatic cooperation....to de-escalate and stabilize the security situation through practical cooperation in common areas of interest." The Palme Commission's Common Security paradigm provides the way forward: realpolitik "political peace negotiations are the only possibility – arms control disarmament and disengagement."

Our responsibilities are to develop the vision and popular movements that convince our governments that a new Cold War is in no one's interest, and that a demilitarized and denuclearized Baltic would serve our common interests.

Democrats and progressives are currently focusing on the November election and defending what remains of U.S. democracy. That will determine the landscape in which we live, educate and organize for years to come.

That said, a recent poll indicates that 74% of Democrats – who comprise at least half of the electorate - "prefer a candidate who would "prioritize diplomacy. "Only 15% side with a candidate who wants "to make sure the U.S. remains the strongest military power in the world and is willing to use that power." The pandemic and its economic and social fallout are teaching that investing in life-affirming programs like green economy infrastructure, public health, education and housing, provide more security than war preparations and Trump's wall.

In the coming years, there will be an intense struggle over national budget priorities. Earlier this year, about 1/4 of members of Congress voted to cut U.S. military spending by 10%, and there are popular calls for cutting military spending for up to 50%. These are foundations we can build on, as we simultaneously press for Common Security diplomacy.

As we learned in our Civil Rights movement of the 1950s & 60s, the Vietnam War era peace movement, and town meeting votes, and the millions in the US and Europe and the people-to-people diplomacy that forced President Reagan to join Gorbachev in the nuclear disarmament negotiations that led to the INF Treaty and the end of the Cold War, ultimately if people mobilize around just demands, we can win the changes we need.