

**‘Present Nuclear Dangers’, talk by Paolo Cotta Ramusino, Secretary General of Pugwash
at the event “Nuclear Dangers and the Arms Control and Disarmament Architecture”
held on the margins of the 10th NPT Review Conference on August 12 2022.**

The present global situation is full of dangers. The world has probably not known a similar dangerous environment since the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962. But while that crisis lasted 13 days, the war in Ukraine, which is at the heart of our present dangerous situation, has been going on for about 170 days, since February 24. And there is at present no sign that the war will end soon.

Several factors lie at the origin of this war. The history of relations between what is now Ukraine and Russia is complex. Let us just recall some past causes of antagonism between Russia and Ukraine, such as the death of 4 (or more) million Ukrainian kulaks during the Stalinist period, and the support that some Ukrainians gave to the invading German troops during WW 2.

More recently, the antagonism between Russia and Ukraine was revived following the 2013 Euromaidan demonstrations protesting the government’s decision to postpone the signature of the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement (resulting in the deaths of demonstrators, policemen and ordinary people), which Russia had tried to boycott in various ways. This also stimulated a growing antagonism between the Russian- and Ukrainian-speaking populations. A separatist movement in the eastern Russian-speaking part of Ukraine (the Donbas) was generated, and was repressed by the Ukrainian government. According to the UN, between 2014 and the end of 2021, altogether more than 14,000 people were killed in the Donbas region.

The Euromaidan demonstrations promoted a change in the leadership of Ukraine. President Yanukovych (linked to Russia) was induced to leave Ukraine, and a new Ukrainian leadership emerged (President Poroshenko) that promoted the Ukrainian language over Russian, strict connections with the European Union and the West in general, and later, even the separation of the Ukrainian church from the Moscow Patriarchate.

The annexation of Crimea by Russia in 2014 also raised very serious problems in Ukraine.

NATO’s eastward expansion -which reached many countries bordering Russia, despite the informal mutual assurances given at the end of the Cold War between Russia and US - is also an important cause of concern in Russia. Russia is obviously worried not only about the loss of its “external zone of influence,” but also about its very own integrity. Russia has 85 federal subjects including 22 Republics. Many languages are spoken in Russia. The concern here was, and is, the possible separation of these various federal subjects and the possible fragmentation of Russia stimulated by anti-Russian movements inside the former Soviet States.

On 24 February 2022, Russia invaded Ukraine. The goals initially mentioned of this invasion have shifted from forcing a new leadership in Ukraine to the occupation of the Donbas and part of the Ukrainian Black Sea shore. Understanding the Russian motivations is possible, but this is of course very different from justifying in any sense this attack. By signing the Charter of the United Nations, all states committed to refrain from the threat or use of force against the political independence and territorial integrity of any other state.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has been certainly catastrophic for the Ukrainian population. It is now hard to assess the number of civilians and soldiers from both sides that have been killed in Ukraine since February 24,

2022. Approximate estimates of casualties are 12,000-13,000 civilians and several tens of thousands of soldiers. Ukrainian cities have been destroyed. Besides the tragedy for the Ukrainian people, concerns have been raised about the increase of tensions between Russia and most NATO countries.

Some issues:

1. NATO countries, and particularly the US and the UK, are actively providing weapons to the Ukrainian army. Since the understanding is that these weapons should possibly not be used against the territory of Russia, the continuous shipping of weapons to Ukraine has resulted in enabling the Ukrainian army to better resist the invasion on its own soil, but with the consequence of extending the duration of the war, destroying several Ukrainian cities, reducing agricultural and industrial output, endangering nuclear power plants, and increasing the number of casualties.
2. Possibly between six and eight million Ukrainians have fled to neighboring countries and more are displaced within Ukraine itself.
3. Countries possessing nuclear weapons – particularly Russia, US and UK – are directly or indirectly involved in the war. If the tensions inside Europe grow, the risk of nuclear use cannot be excluded. This would be an unprecedented disaster. Nuclear deterrence is believed to have been relevant, during the Cold War, for the absence of a war in Europe, but this can no longer be taken for granted. The danger of an escalation of hostilities toward the possible use of nuclear weapons is serious. Finding a workable solution is urgent, starting with a quick ceasefire.
4. The immediate consequences of the war in Ukraine are evident. In particular heavy combat is poisoning the environment and destroying the crops of grain that provide food for many parts of the world.
5. Many other aspects of the global economy are heavily affected by the war in Ukraine. The energy supply (gas and oil) for European countries is under serious constraints, inflation has crept up in most states, and there are many other negative consequences. All countries involved should work together to offset the global impact of this war, but this will not be easy.
6. The longer the war continues, the higher the risk of escalation and the closer the world would move towards the nuclear threshold.

The consequences of the war in Ukraine may also include some important negative consequences concerning nuclear proliferation. Other countries may think that if Ukraine had kept the nuclear weapons that had been located inside its territory at the time of USSR, then Russia would not have dared to attack Ukraine. Some European NATO countries (like Poland, the Baltic Republics, etc.) might consider asking the US to deploy nuclear weapons on their territories as the US is doing in Italy, Germany, Belgium, Netherlands, and Turkey. And this could possibly induce Russia to do the same, say, in Belarus.

The present nuclear risks are unfortunately not only limited to the direct consequences of the war in Ukraine.

The Iran nuclear deal (JCPOA) seems, as we write, difficult to restore, and this is inducing Iran more and more to take the path of further developing its nuclear program. What Israel will do is also a matter of serious concern. While Europeans are preparing a possible final version for the restored JCPOA, there are rumors that the Iranian Revolutionary Guards have planned the killing of Bolton and Pompeo as a retaliation for the killing of Qasem Soleiman and may be more recently of Sayyad Kodai.

In South Korea and Japan, proponents of a national nuclear capability have become more vocal.

Military activities in Northeast Asia between the Koreas, the US and Japan are also a source of concern. The DPRK is obviously believing that the acquisition of nuclear weapons increased its security.

The situation regarding China, the US and Taiwan is also very worrisome. The actions and the rhetoric of the parties involved are far from reassuring.

Moreover we must always bear in mind that both India and Pakistan possess nuclear weapons and that their mutual antagonism (e.g. on the issue of Kashmir) is still very strong.

More generally, the whole architecture of security based on the Charter of the United Nations and on multilateral and bilateral treaties and other arrangements is endangered. The arms control process is globally in danger. Recently Russia stopped the Americans to make the inspections according to the New Start Treaty (the only surviving arms control treaty).

Peace and security are common goods: no country can feel safe and secure unless all feel the same.

In summary what could be done?

- a. Promote the widest possible awareness and understanding of the present nuclear dangers;
- b. Promote in particular the end of the war in Ukraine with reasonable compromises and respect for the various regional diversities, taking into account the legitimate security concerns of the different parties. The war will not be solved by further shipments of weapons but by talking and establishing effective and quick negotiations;
- c. Support an urgent ceasefire in Ukraine that would permit meaningful negotiations and the start of the reconstruction of the devastated country with international help;
- d. Support in all possible ways the restoration of the JCPOA;
- e. Facilitate the dialogue between China and other countries about Taiwan, in order to preserve the scheme of one country with two different political systems;
- f. Work for dialogue and possible cooperation between South and North Korea and, more generally, promote stability and dialogue in Northeast Asia.
- g. Facilitate continuous dialogue in South Asia between India and Pakistan.

These are not at all easy tasks, but we have to remind ourselves, every single day, that nuclear danger is not an abstract concern but a dramatically serious problem that affects the entire international community.

NB. This article draws heavily on the Pugwash Note written by Amb. Sergio Duarte, President of Pugwash, and myself and more recently on my talk at the Amaldi Conference in Rome (April 9,2022).