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Nuclear Armageddon Threatens World Again

By Ivan Sukhov

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I was born in Moscow in 1977 and as I child I was exposed to countless films about the war between the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany, along with constant propaganda concerning the nuclear threat. Like many Soviet children, I occasionally had nightmares about German armored cars rumbling down our street, or of hearing that a nuclear conflict had broken out and frantically searching for my parents in the ensuing chaos.

Ever since former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev signed the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces, or INF, Treaty with former U.S. President Ronald Reagan, thereby enabling every person on the planet to breathe a sigh of relief and stop the countdown to Armageddon, those childhood nightmares never again came back to haunt me — until now.

This is not just because the specter of nuclear holocaust might have arisen again, but for the simple fact that war has returned to Europe.

It is easy enough to theorize about war when you are sitting in a comfortable office with a map

of events on the wall or even standing at the podium during a presidential news conference. However, theory always falls short of the reality on the ground.

There, during a pause in the shelling, a frightened civilian emerges from the dust of broken concrete and shattered glass to find bread, only to wind up a corpse, their face mauled by wild dogs. For the dead and their loved ones, there is no "right side" or "guilty party," no "sacred Russian sovereignty" and no "Western world of freedoms." There, peaceful existence and life itself have ended. Only ruins, death and half-crazed dogs remain.

Even after we thought it was safe to forget the route to the nearest bomb shelter, we witnessed numerous instances of conflict and killing — some in this part of the world, or even on Russian territory. But when the peace was shattered and people died in, say, Grozny, it did not feel like it was happening to us per se. But now, with the events in Ukraine, it does.

This is partly because it does not seem that some outside force is controlling the conflict in eastern Ukraine. With every hour it becomes clearer that the demon of war has been set free, and that it is capable of destroying not only the Donbass. It is even possible that, during the hours that passed between the time I penned these words and the moment you read them, the situation has changed yet again — and not for the better.

The question of who started the war is extremely important from the standpoint of international law, but international law will have its say only after the guns are silenced — that is, if anyone is left to speak or to listen. More important is the question of whether the international community possesses any tools it can employ to stop the shooting now, before it is too late.

Of course, the answer to this question depends on the viability of Russia's political machine. Because Russia controls one side in the conflict, a cease-fire is at least a possibility. And if Moscow were to admit that it, and not the separatists, is actually conducting one side of the war, it would create a clearer institutional framework for resolving the conflict — despite the extremely negative consequences it would also entail for Russia.

Cynically speaking, such a step would allow Russia to "demand concessions" for no longer disguising its role in the war. Whatever its shortcomings, the ruling regime in Moscow is an incomparably more solid negotiating partner than the self-proclaimed leaders of Donetsk and Luhansk with their virtual republics.

An even worse scenario would emerge if Moscow loses technical control over the separatists and uses events in the conflict zone as a tool for political struggle at home. Even if that seems unlikely at the moment, such an outcome is inevitable considering the fragility of the self-proclaimed republics and the growing dissent over the war among Russia's ruling elite.

Of course, this war has two sides, and just as it makes sense to ask how much President Vladimir Putin controls the actions of the separatists, observers must question to what extent Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko controls his country's military, both at the front lines and to the west.

To some degree, the relationship between Kiev and its partners in the West resembles the relationship between the separatists in Donetsk and leaders in Moscow. If Kiev did not

have such ties with the West, if those links existed only in the minds of pro-Kremlin propagandists such as Dmitry Kiselyov, it would mean that Ukraine would have to face a severe political crisis and fight a full-scale war entirely alone.

In fact, the extent to which Ukraine is not alone in the world is a function of the larger and more important question of how much the international community has developed in the 23 years since the collapse of the Soviet Union.

The main question is whether the world possesses a mechanism by which it can stop a military conflict from escalating to a point at which one or more sides might decide to use weapons of mass destruction — or at least guarantee that they will not use such weapons under any circumstances.

With the nightmares of the early 1980s so distant and long forgotten now, we have become lulled into a false sense of security. What's more, the worst villains to appear in the last 20 years were no match for the world's major powers.

Even though doubts persist as to whether former Iraqi President Saddam Hussein ever held weapons of mass destruction, and despite the West's subsequent difficulties in implementing a functional institutional process in that country, nobody ever doubted during the Gulf War that military intervention would succeed, at relatively minimal cost, in eliminating whatever threat Iraq posed to the international community.

Now, an entirely different situation has arisen as the fears of the Soviet Union that some Western ideologists held during the Cold War are becoming a reality — almost 25 years after that country has ceased to exist. And with Russia threatening to withdraw from the restraints imposed by mutual arms controls agreements signed since the Cold War, the nuclear threat is experiencing a rebirth.

Does the modern world possess the necessary resources to once again eliminate that threat and diffuse this ticking time bomb — and to do so before even one part of the world becomes, if not a "nuclear wasteland," then a heap of ruins full of dead bodies and flesh-eating dogs?

Can today's politicians accomplish what Reagan and Gorbachev did almost 30 years ago? Does today's global community — more emancipated than it was 20 years ago, with individuals just as desirous of living out their natural lives — have the resources to avert disaster?

Can mankind rely on the political resources of national and international institutions? Is there a some way to ensure that if a world leader reaches for the "red button," we will all have time to take cover?

So far, there are no comforting answers to these questions.

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The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

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