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*Opinion*

## How the US, not just Russia, helped bring the world closer to nuclear war



- The West has effectively been challenging Russia's right to be a hegemonic power
- What if the proxy US campaign in Ukraine doesn't lead to Russian regime downfall but instead to a desperate Putin using nuclear weapons?

**Tom Plate**

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Illustration: Craig Stephens

To lose one's sense of decency by raising the threat of nuclear weapons just once – here we're talking directly to you, Mr Vladimir Putin – may be dismissed as a mere unfortunate slip; but to [raise it more than once](#) can suggest mindlessness, or madness. A measure of narcissism may be acceptable as a common human foible; but as a defining characteristic of a major global political figure, it is rarely

without cost to others. Indeed, for the rampant egomaniac, prolonged reflection becomes irresistible generally only when admiring oneself in a mirror.

It is very hard to imagine the full extent of an unprecedented catastrophe until the blow-up happens in front of you. The predictions of loss from a nuclear war range from regional obliteration to planetary catastrophe.

To be sure, “experts” could be dug up to downplay the worst that could happen – or even deny that it ever would happen at all. But that sort of radioactive denial was anything but the case last week in Santa Barbara, California, fortunately, where an important international Zoom seminar took place.

Santa Barbara, draping decorously on the sun-splashed coast of the Pacific Ocean about 90 miles north of far-more populous Los Angeles, is a lively intellectual centre of West Coast policy thinking that includes a major university and high-level, non-profit think tanks.

One of the most relevant these days is the Nuclear Age Peace Foundation (NAPF), founded in 1982 as a non-profit, non-partisan international education and advocacy organisation. NAPF’s policy aspirations include not only global nuclear non-proliferation but also complete elimination of all nuclear weapons from the face of the earth.

That’s an excellent idea. As Richard A. Falk, professor emeritus of international law at Princeton, stated, “nuclear dangers have become more salient than any time at least in this century”. The always provocative policy sage was the lead star in a mostly grave NAPF international panel discussion on the [nuclear dangers intensified by the Ukraine war](#).

But Falk being Falk – his extraordinary 1971 book *This Endangered Planet: Prospects and Proposals for Human Survival* was recently named one of only six “Books for the Century” by America’s very influential Foreign Affairs magazine – he insists that the deadly swirl of crisis interconnectedness cannot be contained by a sloppy system of roiling national interests; it is all related. It demands systemic, careful, persistent attention by powerful global consensus.

Falk’s landmark book, an examination of existential environmental crises as well as nuclear, called for “a revolution in consciousness that would reimagine how peoples and societies could organise themselves for sustainable life”.

Well, that hasn’t happened yet. Falk – now 91 – conceded that “we know what to do, but we don’t know how to get it done”.

The credentialed discussants also concurred with Falk’s curt dismissal of the timeworn geopolitical method of divide and conquer. The tactic can yield short-term success to make leaders look good; but it is obviously a toxic deterrent against reaching consensus on big global challenges. The Ukraine war – so tragic, so unnecessary – stands out as a severe regression in world reordering. The unseemly primal lust with which [Washington by proxy](#) jumped into the regional crisis and made it an increasingly global one stunned many.

In effect, knee-jerk muscular policies inadvertently hop on to the road to war. Propaganda blasts in all directions make all who disagree with you the devils of our epoch. Demonisation swells up further during the run-up to war. In the process of painting the enemy into a corner of evil, you invite a commensurate counter-reaction from the designated devil.

That cycle takes you over the edge of reason: you may forget that only God is perfect, and the fact of the matter is that you're not God. Any suggestion that you think you might be puts you into the category of the super-narcissist. Fair-minded sceptics become very uncomfortable with simple-minded binary thinking and will quickly look for third options to escape.

Falk asked: why is it that it's the largest states which tend to be the most simplistic explainers of the difference between the forces of good and evil? China and Russia are no saints in this respect, of course, but the United States itself has parlayed its international brand of American exceptionalism into, in Falk's words, a preposterous "permanent innocence".

Take the mounting [Taiwan tension](#). You cannot send a message to China that it would face what Russia is now facing, to no small extent due to Western proxy involvement, if it tried to take Taiwan by military means, without in effect firing up the Chinese military further. It is close to hyper as it is; so further US threats are a puerile prescription for peace.

The same goes for the dealings with Moscow, which are so misdirected now. In effect the West is challenging Russia's right to be one of the hegemonic powers. What if the obvious-to-everyone [proxy US campaign](#) in the Ukraine doesn't lead to regime downfall but instead to a desperate Putin using nuclear weapons?

Note that at the United Nations, all five of the permanent members of the Security Council are nuclear-armed; worse yet, four of these five do not even renounce the first use of these heinous weapons whose genetic effects last for generations. Only China does.

But would Beijing stick to that long-held policy in a severe showdown that began with conventional weapons? Who knows? But at least it starts in the right place, as should the other four supposed UN leaders. Professor Falk gets it right: humanity's existence is not worth putting at risk.

**Tom Plate, distinguished scholar of Asian and Pacific Studies at LMU in Los Angeles, is the Pacific Century Institute's vice-president. His first book – Understanding Doomsday, on the nuclear arms race – was published in 1971.**