

In Dealing With Putin Threat, Biden Turns to Lessons of Cuban Missile Crisis

- President Biden has mused publicly on whether there might be an “off-ramp” for nuclear threats from the Russian leader that invoke Cold War rhetoric.

By David E. Sanger

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President Biden’s declaration on Thursday night that the world may be facing “the prospect of Armageddon” if President Vladimir V. Putin uses a tactical nuclear weapon in Ukraine included a revealing side note: that Mr. Biden has been looking to help the Russian president find an “off-ramp” that might avert the worst outcome.

His logic came right out of the Cuban Missile Crisis, to which Mr. Biden referred twice in his comments at a Democratic fund-raiser in New York, a good indication of what is on his mind. In that famous case — the closest the world came to a full nuclear exchange, 60 years ago this month — President John F. Kennedy struck a secret bargain with Nikita Khrushchev, the Soviet premier, to remove American missiles from Turkey.

With that deal, which came to light only later, a disaster that could have killed tens of millions of Americans and untold numbers of Soviet citizens was averted.

For weeks now, Mr. Biden’s aides have been debating whether there might be an analogous understanding, a way for the wounded Russian leader to find an out. They have offered no details, knowing that secrecy may be the key to seeking any successful exit and avoiding the conditions in which a cornered Mr. Putin reaches for his battlefield nuclear weapons. Karine Jean-Pierre, the White House press secretary, reiterated on Friday that Mr. Biden had no new intelligence about nuclear weapons use and said she “saw no indications” the Russians were “preparing to use them.”

After Mr. Biden’s remarks, some foreign leaders said they would like to go back to the days when nuclear threats were not discussed in public.

“We must speak with prudence when commenting on such matters,” France’s president, Emmanuel Macron, said on Friday in Prague.

But as one senior European diplomat said earlier this week, when the history of this era is written, many will be shocked at how much work was underway to assess the risks of a nuclear detonation — and to think about how to deter it. It is a hard topic to talk about in public for most officials, for fear of inducing public panic or market sell-offs.

So it was a surprise that the first member of the administration to talk openly about how to avoid forcing Mr. Putin’s hand was the president himself, at the New York home of James Murdoch, the son of Rupert Murdoch, executive chairman of News Corp., which owns, among other assets, The Wall Street Journal.

“We’re trying to figure out: What is Putin’s off-ramp?” Mr. Biden said, in a speech that was largely on domestic initiatives, the Supreme Court’s overturning of *Roe v. Wade* and other issues central to the midterm elections.

“Where, where does he get off? Where does he find a way out? Where does he find himself in a position that he does not — not only lose face, but lose significant power within Russia?”

Mr. Biden did not answer his own questions, which echo those that his aides have been asking. Nor is it at all clear that Mr. Putin is looking for a way out, at least yet. At just about every turning point in the war over the past seven months, he has reacted to failures among his troops with ever more escalation, calling up untrained recruits, conducting more indiscriminate attacks on cities, reducing gas flows and threatening, of course, to use his ultimate weapons.

Mr. Putin’s latest threats came a week ago, when he declared that the United States’ decision to drop atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945 set a precedent and that if necessary he would follow suit.

Nonetheless, the main message that Mr. Biden seemed to be conveying is that he was heeding one of the central lessons of the Cuban Missile Crisis, which unfolded when Mr. Biden was just a month shy of his 20th birthday. That lesson, in his telling, is that the United States and its allies need to avoid getting Mr. Putin’s back to the wall, forcing him to strike out.

“It’s part of Russian doctrine,” he explained to the well-heeled crowd of potential donors to Democratic senatorial campaigns, that “if the motherland is threatened, they’ll use whatever force they need, including nuclear weapons.”

It is hard to translate Mr. Biden’s description of the risks into a strategy that fits the moment. No one in the administration wants to suggest, in public or private, that the government of President Volodymyr Zelensky should avoid chasing Russian troops out of every corner of Ukraine, back to the borders that existed on Feb. 23, the day before the invasion began.

But behind closed doors, some Western diplomats and military officials say, that is exactly the conversation that may have to happen if the goal is to balance winning back territory against preventing Mr. Putin from lashing out. William Burns, the C.I.A. director and the former U.S. ambassador to Moscow during Mr. Putin’s rise, said on CBS this week that the Russian leader can be “quite dangerous and reckless” when he feels cornered or “feels his back against the wall.”

Of course, that is exactly the kind of assessment Mr. Putin is trying to encourage; his ultimate hope, American intelligence officials say, is to fracture Europe over the question of whether to confront Moscow or appease it.

He has plenty of steps remaining on the escalation ladder: He could conduct exercises with his nuclear-ready troops, he could step up cyberattacks outside Ukraine's borders and he could make use of chemical weapons, as he has done in the past, against dissidents and other targets. Then, of course, there is the possibility of attacks on energy infrastructure — perhaps similar to what happened last week, mysteriously, to the Nord Stream I and II gas pipelines.

But what the administration says it is looking for are incentives for Mr. Putin to de-escalate — a search that appears fraught.

One of Mr. Putin's periodic demands is that NATO pull back its forces from former Soviet states and not conduct what he calls provocative exercises on its borders. Early this year, he demanded that NATO sign a treaty that would have essentially rolled the alliance back to what it looked like in the late 1990s.

Many Eastern European officials, concerned about Mr. Putin's next territorial ambition, say they want NATO in their countries more than ever. To them, this is a time to build up defenses, not pull back. But some Western European officials say they could imagine scaling back on exercises or conspicuous reinforcement of troops, even temporarily. Over the summer, the Biden administration also delayed some missile tests, to avoid unnecessary provocations.

All those would be temporary moves, and Mr. Putin is clearly looking for a permanent alteration in NATO's stance. And he is not likely, many officials insist, to stop invoking the power of his nuclear arsenal as long as his ground troops are struggling.

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