

# Putin and the Insanity Gambit

by George Friedman - April 30, 2024

When I was in graduate school, a small group of my peers and I spent considerable time examining the circumstances under which it would be possible for one nuclear power to launch a nuclear attack against another. Since none of us could get dates, we spent a lot of time on this topic, using the Cuban missile crisis as the basis of our analysis. The criteria for such an attack was that the other side's command system had collapsed and thus the country had no way to retaliate, or that the other side was simply lying about its nuclear arsenal to begin with, or some other scenario I don't remember. Lonely Saturday nights bled into one another.

The problem we kept running into – whether the arsenals were matched, asymmetric in number or disproportionate in capability – was that nuclear weapons would almost never be used, except perhaps if there were a situation in which one side had superb and trusted intelligence on location and the status of the enemy. There were other, stranger concepts based on mutually assured destruction. If we could eliminate the potential of the enemy to retaliate, it was a go. (There were proposals for special operations forces to penetrate enemy command points, deploy poisonous gas to kill launch crews, and so on.) But inevitably, a nuclear attack on a nuclear power would almost certainly result in mutually assured destruction or in an attack on an ally of a nuclear power, which would risk a less certain but still probable nuclear response. It's easy to understand why, after Hiroshima and Nagasaki, there has never been another nuclear attack.

However, there was one scenario that had a possibility of success, which we called the insanity gambit. All other scenarios revolved around the sanity of the leadership. Initiation of a successful launch would trigger mutual destruction, and with the annihilation of the attacker's own country, we could not find a condition in which a nation's self-annihilation would provide greater security. No rational leader would come to a different conclusion. But this is, in essence, the strategy Russian President Vladimir Putin is toying with.

He has on several occasions said that Ukraine's continued resistance to Russia, and American and European support for Ukraine's defense, risks nuclear war. A nuclear attack on Ukraine would possibly trigger a U.S. response, while an attack on the United States – technically within the realm of possibility according to his statements – would certainly result in a massive attack on Russia. To be clear, the U.S. is not going to initiate nuclear war over Ukraine. Under normal circumstances,

neither would Russia – unless the pressure of war drives Putin insane, making him willing to engage in mutually assured destruction. Since Russia is not insane, it follows that Putin is not planning to initiate nuclear war. But if Moscow can convince its adversaries that the situation has forced them to mutual suicide, the U.S. and its allies may change their policies to be more accommodating to Russia's needs, however unlikely the threat may be. Bringing nuclear war – and, implicitly, Russian sanity – into the equation might change the outcome of the war. The U.S. is unlikely to initiate a preemptive strike against the insanity gambit of a sane nation. After all, Washington also has second strike capabilities.

To make this work, Putin has to convince other countries that he is prepared for nuclear war. In the process, he will also have to convince his countrymen, which only further undermines the strategy. The insanity gambit works only if it is so convincing that it frightens a leader's own colleagues. It is a gambit born of desperation, useful only in graduate school for lonely men to ponder.

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