

Nuclear weapons, China and Ukraine

Lord Howell of Guildford- House of Lords - 01.12.22 .

“My Lords, I congratulate the noble and right reverend Lord, Lord Harries, on bringing forward this debate. It is the second time in a week or so that he has secured a debate on a vital international topic. He is doing the work of this House’s business managers for them by playing to the Lords’ strengths in this area. At a time when our colleagues in the other place seem to be sinking down the plughole of bickering and short-termism, it is the accumulated experience of their Lordships that can focus on the international issues which, in the end, are more decisive than any others in our daily lives and our long-term existence as a nation. So I hope the noble and right reverend Lord will take an accolade from me for making a better case than most for a future active and experienced House of Lords.

The potential use of tactical nuclear weapons is the most important issue of all because, of course, it would unlock grim escalation and proliferation, end the balance of nuclear deterrence entirely and lead us straight to a world war and mass incineration with the consequences the noble and right reverend Lord just described.

I do not believe, as some do, that there is a halfway house between small tactical nuclear weapons and the full force of massive destruction on a scale never seen before in human history. In the present fraught situation, it is China, rather than Russia, where the key lies to governing Putin’s actions. There is no doubt in my mind that until now, China has been the most powerful restraint on Putin and his warmongering generals. As he increasingly loses on the ground to Ukrainian resilience and ingenuity, Putin’s latest assurance, about a fortnight ago, was that he would not use nuclear weapons in Ukraine after all. Of course, that cannot be trusted; it is just one statement. It is interesting that he had to make it, because it should be seen entirely in the context of trying to keep China’s vague approval of what he is doing. In all the back-track exchanges with Russia since the Russian invasion, in addition to the official hotline, to which I have had the privilege of access, Putin’s toying with nuclear weapons has been China’s No. 1 concern. It has been quite ready to use its good offices with Moscow in exchange for specific restraints on American and NATO supply and the technological sophistication of weapons.

China may have immediate problems with Xi Jinping’s rising unpopularity and all the riots, but these will not affect its weight and influence with Moscow. Their relationship may have started out as an unlimited

partnership, but China has not supplied weapons to Russia, and it has applied quite a few financial and trading controls. China's business community is deeply apprehensive about the effect of Putin's war on their world business. For example, Chinese citizens are not even allowed to use their credit cards in Russia and have to carry around piles of cash when they visit. They would much prefer being mediators to being rooters for Russian success.

Longer term, China is a big nuclear power and now, according to the Americans, it is planning—idiotically, in my view—to triple its nuclear arsenal. By preparing for superpower conflict and hegemonic struggle with the US, it is heading on precisely the wrong route, greatly to the detriment of the Chinese people. This unfolding crisis, with its impatient and aggressive turn towards Taiwan, is the next chapter. All needs urgently to be managed and controlled, as it was in the Cold War, to prevent the situation turning red hot. We will need many further debates on that, but in the meantime, ugly though Chinese policies have become in many areas, and on our guard though we must be with every action they take, this is one area where we must work with the Chinese so they carry on being the vital restraint on Russia's nuclear madness.”