

According to this nuclear weapons expert, the West is playing with fire: 'Putin is hiding something that we sometimes forget'

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Interview Tom Sauer



Tom Sauer. 'For the first time in 75 years we are again very close to the actual deployment of a nuclear weapon.' honeImage Wouter Van Vooren

Professor of international politics and nuclear weapons expert Tom Sauer (University of Antwerp) warns that Vladimir Putin is not bluffing when he threatens to use tactical nuclear weapons. 'I expect a nuclear test first. And if it doesn't scare us, it's capable of throwing a tactical nuclear weapon into a Ukrainian battlefield, still with the power of seven times Hiroshima.'

“How Bachmoet looks now after many months of fighting, suddenly one Russian nuclear bomb can destroy another city in Ukraine in one fell swoop. We are really much closer to that moment than we tell ourselves.”

In recent years, Tom Sauer (53) has repeatedly encountered a kind of collective state of denial among politicians “that Russian President Vladimir Putin will never dare to use a nuclear weapon”. The leading expert on nuclear weapons and disarmament agreements in Belgium calls it a dangerous naiveté. “We are playing with fire.”

When we meet him in his office at the University of Antwerp, the G7 summit in Hiroshima has just come to an end. Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida had the heads of state and government of the richest industrial countries lay flowers in front of the monument that commemorates how on August 6, 1945 Hiroshima and on August 9 the city of Nagasaki were reduced to ashes by two American atomic bombs.

Sauer: “For the first time in 75 years, we are again very close to the actual deployment of a nuclear weapon. I'm not just saying that. On the American right there was already a warning from former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, on their left Noam Chomsky, in Germany sociologist Jürgen Habermas.

“The Doomsday Clock, which is adjusted every year by the scientists of the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists, has never been closer to twelve because of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Ninety seconds! Even during the Cold War, in the 1950s, it was two minutes to twelve. Yet the G7 have missed a major opportunity to translate the imminent nuclear threat into disarmament talks. In fact, not a single concrete step forward has been taken, while in recent years all arms control agreements have disappeared into the wastepaper basket. We are entering a nuclear anarchy, where there is no longer any restriction on the arms race. For the first time since the 1980s, we see that the number of nuclear weapons is no longer falling, but is rising.”

Former Russian President Dmitry Medvedev

warned this week of a 'nuclear apocalypse'. President Putin has already let slip that Hiroshima 'shortened WWII and saved soldiers' lives'. Recently, US General Retired Kevin Ryan, a former military attaché in Moscow, warned that he would deploy tactical 'nuclear weapons' in Ukraine on that basis.

"Like many experts in my field, I also say that there is a real risk that nuclear weapons can indeed be used, yes. We really need to realize how many vital interests are at stake for Putin and for Russia. That's why he started this war. Everything goes back to US President George W. Bush's promise in 2008 to make Georgia and Ukraine members of NATO - despite warnings from, among others, the then US ambassador, also the current CIA director, Bill Burns, to do so. especially not to do. The Kremlin made it clear that this was a big fat red line.

"Our politicians always thought that Putin was bluffing. Even now, some think that Putin, still furious, will stroll back to his office after a counter-offensive and say, 'sorry, I was wrong'. No way. Not going to happen. He can no longer do that in relation to his environment and supporters.

"To be clear, Putin is most responsible for this war. I am not a Putin lover, on the contrary. I try to be a Putinverstehher. I try to understand why actors like him act the way they do. I think we should all do that. That's not sympathy, it's empathy. If we want to come to a solution, we will have to do that."

Just as empathetic then: a cornered cat makes strange jumps. Will Putin use nuclear weapons if he is cornered by a counter-offensive?

"The worst-case scenario will certainly be on the table. Putin has something up his sleeve that we sometimes forget: nearly 6,000 nuclear weapons. I'm not saying he'll fire them right away at the West, but he can nuclear escalate in slices. Presumably he will first conduct an underground, then an aboveground nuclear test, with a mushroom cloud that will have a great psychological effect on the whole world.

"If, in Putin's eyes, the West has not yet understood the signal, he can indeed proceed to deploy a nuclear weapon in Ukraine - which is not yet a member of NATO until further notice."

What signals are there that he is already planning the offensive deployment of nuclear weapons?

"The population is being prepared. In Russia, nuclear rhetoric is constantly present in state propaganda. The nuclear units would have already been put on a higher state of readiness at the start of the war. It can be very simple and fast. The minds in Russia have matured from that rhetoric, from those actions. Putin has also made the three generals responsible for deploying tactical nuclear weapons the boss of Russian combat operations in Ukraine. It doesn't take many fingers for the Russian button, and they're all in Putin's pocket. Those officers are now also responsible for Russian gains or losses in Ukraine. So they have no reason not to carry out those orders when they come.

"Moscow also fired Kh-55 practice missiles without a warhead into Ukraine as a test. Tactical nuclear weapons will also be moved to Belarus in July. That being said, this is also a copy-paste of NATO policy. It is the Americans who have tactical nuclear weapons with us in Kleine Brogel, in the Netherlands, Germany, Italy and Turkey. Putin has long been asking for it to be removed. That didn't happen. Now he does the same."



A postage stamp poster in Kiev shows Putin on trial at the International Criminal Court in The Hague.

noneImage Getty Images

How powerful is a tactical nuclear weapon?

"Giant, in absolute terms. An entire city can be destroyed. We are talking about an order of magnitude of 100 kilotons per Russian tactical nuclear weapon. In Hiroshima it was a 15 kiloton bomb and you know what happened there. Multiply that times seven. Then a city like Bachmoet will be gone in one fraction. The world will not immediately go to the pennants, yes, but then that threshold of the use of nuclear weapons will have been crossed for the first time in 75 years. Where will it end then?"

Then the question is how Ukraine and the West would react?

"If you then follow military logic, you have to react hard, especially with conventional weapons. Only then you drive Putin even more into the corner and there is a risk that NATO will become directly involved

a war with Russia - which they have repeatedly said they do not want. Since Ukraine is not a NATO member, we are not even supposed to respond. Biden has also said that even then the US would not nuclear strike back. A good thing, but by saying so explicitly he undermines the doctrine of mutual deterrence.

"In fact, it gives Putin extra arguments to consider it. Even if the Russian president is conventionally more heavily attacked after the deployment of one nuclear weapon, he still has 5,999 nuclear weapons at hand to escalate further. So we are playing with fire. We will be in a dangerous situation if Russia is pushed out of Ukraine, just what the West wants to achieve with arms deliveries. We are actually making Putin want to use nuclear weapons. Unfortunately, according to my analysis, we have to hope that the Ukrainian counter-offensive will not be too successful."

Belgium now plans to train Ukrainian pilots for F-16 fighters, which others will supply. How do you feel about that?

"If you had said this a year ago, no one would have believed you. Many experts who were against it at the time because of the escalation risks now go along with it. We're kind of blinded by the short term, by the escalation, and I'm afraid we don't see the bigger picture anymore. What if that doesn't work either? Will we then deliver even more powerful range missiles?

"We forget that Putin doesn't have much to lose anymore. This is the most important thing for him in what remains of his life. I understand that I'm kicking the shins of the Ukrainians, but from the international global point of view, the danger of nuclear world war, I think it would be better if negotiations were started now.

"Only China made a peace proposal to Russia and Ukraine, which I think was not so bad. That emphasized respect for sovereignty, ceasefires, protecting civilians, starting peace talks, stabilize world economy, Ukraine

rebuild and so on. What's wrong with that? Okay, it didn't explicitly say that Russia should withdraw immediately. But at least it was a concrete peace proposal."

There are now calls to make Ukraine a NATO member?

"I fear that it will have to become a neutral Ukraine, like Switzerland, at least in the medium term. Afterwards you can strive for a more stable solution for the European security order. Some of us have still not understood that neutrality is an absolute minimum for the Russians to stop this war. Ukraine as a NATO member will never be reconcilable with Russian interests.

"I like to use an image from my colleague John Mearsheimer (University of Chicago). "If a little monkey plays next to a gorilla and that little monkey picks that gorilla's eyes with a stick, the little monkey shouldn't be surprised to get a big whack in return." Many states have already disappeared in history. Mind you, I'm against that too. It is only a fact that this kind of hard power politics now predominates."

What is the alternative?

"There is something better for that hard power struggle: collective security, agreements between each other, cooperation. But we just failed to do that after the Cold War. We have not integrated Russia into that Atlantic security order on an equal footing. We expanded NATO while the Warsaw Pact fell away. Of course the Russians will get angry."

Didn't NATO set up the NATO-Russia Council, from which they departed?

"Yes, but that didn't go far enough for the Russians. They got a desk

in Evere but no participation. However, they have asked three times to become a member of NATO. Even Putin. We have three times *no, no, no* answered. It was like the G7 that became the G8. This meant that the G7 took decisions, the Russians were allowed to join the meeting on the second day and were only allowed to sign 'for agreement'. Of course it doesn't work that way. The Russians felt humiliated. Then you shouldn't be shocked that a man like Putin claws.

"So we also made mistakes in the past. We missed a lot of opportunities in the 1990s, which ultimately led to this war, for which – to be clear – the biggest responsibility rests with Russia. We ignored many Russian warnings. We have also opted for the hard power game."

Can it be useful to admit those Western mistakes after all?

"Political leaders do not like to admit that they make mistakes. They could, however, put it on their predecessors. It will be very difficult. And we're in a war right now, which makes it even more difficult. We should de-escalate. Emotions need to cool down. There is first a need for a ceasefire, but even those attempts are not made. That is incomprehensible, because again, that nuclear cloud may soon be hanging above us as well."

What do you think of the EU's position in this conflict?

"In my view, the EU sometimes goes further than NATO in its war rhetoric. This has to do with a lack of safety culture. The EU has never done that. Commission President Ursula von der Leyen is now suddenly acting as if we have been a regional power in the world for years, while the EU is not even a fully-fledged democratic state. How

was she democratically elected?

"I think von der Leyen is misusing this war for other political purposes. This way it can easily unite the member states through this war. Have you heard anything about human rights criticism in Poland? I find that hypocritical."

Will there also be a debate within NATO to move the tactical nuclear weapons from Kleine Brogel more to the east?

"Yes, that question is already there. The Poles want that, but I think the Americans will hold back. I understand that question from the point of view of the eastern states, but it will not help, on the contrary. If nuclear weapons are used, it will be in their vicinity anyway."

Then we will also have to deal with the fallout, the nuclear fallout?

"The fallout from the detonation of a tactical nuclear weapon would be comparable to Chernobyl. It does depend on the weather conditions, the wind direction and whether our weather presenters inform the population about the radioactive cloud in time. *(what the late Armand Pien did not do in 1986 by order of the government, MR)*. I also don't think the Russians will use this weapon if the wind direction is wrong for them."

Is our government working on contingency plans for this risk?

"No. Not at all. I have contacts with top diplomats who still dismiss the nuclear threat as a bluff. Our politicians also do not believe that one day they may have to make a lightning decision in NATO about whether and how we will retaliate if a nuclear weapon explodes. They don't care about that at all. They are right that there will not be an immediate attack on Brussels. But once a tactical nuclear weapon has exploded, it can quickly escalate to the deployment of strategic nuclear weapons. There are of those

both sides now 1,500 aimed at each other, ready to be fired at once. Russia is also targeting NATO and EU headquarters, Kleine Brogel, the seaport of Antwerp, and so on. Nothing will be left of Belgium then, you know.*(sigh)* I do not understand that our government is not thinking more about preventing this danger."