

Loose Talk About the End of Everything

By Victor Davis Hanson

After a recent summit between new partners China and Russia, General Secretary Xi Jinping and Russian Federation President Vladimir Putin issued an odd one-sentence communique: “There can be no winners in a nuclear war and it should never be fought.”



No one would disagree, even though several officials of both hypocritical governments have previously threatened their neighbors with nuclear attacks.

But still, why did the two feel the need to issue such a terse statement—and why now?

Rarely has the global rhetoric of mass annihilation reached such a crescendo as the present, as existential wars rage in Ukraine and Gaza.

In particular, Putin at least believes that he is finally winning the Ukraine conflict. Xi seems to assume that conventional ascendant Chinese military power in the South China Sea has finally made the absorption of Taiwan practicable.

They both believe that the only impediment to their victories would be an intervention from the U.S. and the NATO alliance, a conflict that could descend into mutual threats to resort to nuclear weapons.

Thus the recent warnings of Xi and Putin.

Almost monthly, North Korean dictator Kim Jong Un continues his weary threats to use his nuclear arsenal to destroy South Korea or Japan.

A similarly monotonous, pro-Hamas Turkish president, Recep Erdogan, regularly threatens Armenians with crazy talk of repeating the "mission of our grandfathers." And he occasionally warns Israelis and Greeks that they may one day wake up to Turkish missiles raining down upon their cities.

More concretely, for the first time in history, Iran attacked the homeland of Israel. It launched the largest wartime array of cruise missiles, ballistic missiles and drones in modern history—over 320 projectiles.

Iran's theocrats simultaneously claim they are about ready to produce nuclear weapons. And, of course, since 1979, Iran has periodically promised to wipe Israel off the map and half the world's Jews with it.

Most ignore these crazy threats and write them off as the braggadocio of dictators. But as we saw on October 7, the barbarity of human nature has not changed much from the premodern world, whether defined by savage beheading, mutilations, murdering, mass rape, torture, and hostage taking of Israeli elderly, women, and children.

But what has radically transformed are the delivery systems of mass death—nuclear weapons, chemical gases, biological agents, and artificial-intelligence-driven delivery systems.

Oddly, the global reaction to the promise of Armageddon

remains one of nonchalance. Most feel that such strongmen rant wildly but would never unleash weapons of civilizational destruction.

Consider that there are as many autocratic nuclear nations (e.g., Russia, China, Pakistan, North Korea, and perhaps Iran) as democratic ones (U.S., Britain, France, Israel, and India). Only Israel has an effective anti-ballistic missile dome. And the more the conventional power of the West declines, the more in extremis it will have to rely on a nuclear deterrent—at a time when it has no effective missile defense of its homelands.

In a just-released book, *The End of Everything*, I wrote about four examples of annihilation—the classical city-state of Thebes, ancient Carthage, Byzantine Constantinople and Aztec Tenochtitlán—in which the unimaginable became all too real.

In all these erasures, the targeted, naïve states believed that their illustrious pasts, rather than a realistic appraisal of their present inadequate defenses, would ensure their survival.

All hoped that their allies—the Spartans, the anti-Roman Macedonians, the Christian nations of Western Europe, and the subject cities of the Aztecs—would appear at the eleventh hour to stave off their defeat.

Additionally, these targeted states had little understanding of the agendas and capabilities of the brilliantly methodic killers outside their walls—the ruthless wannabe philosopher Alexander the Great, the literary patron Scipio Aemilianus, the self-described intellectual Mehmet II, and the widely read Hernán Cortés—who all sought to destroy utterly rather than merely defeat their enemies.

These doomed cities and nations were reduced to rubble or absorbed by the conquerors. Their populations were wiped out or enslaved, and their once-hallowed cultures, customs, and

traditions lost to history. The last words of the conquered were usually variations of, "It can't happen here."

If the past is any guide to the present, we should take heed that what almost never happens in war can certainly still occur.

When killers issue wild, even lunatic, threats, we should nonetheless take them seriously.

We should not count on friends or neutrals to save our civilization. Instead, Americans should build defense systems over the skies of our homeland, secure our borders, ensure our military operates on meritocracy, cease wild deficit spending and borrowing, and rebuild both our conventional and nuclear forces.

Otherwise, we will naively—and fatally—believe that we are magically exempt when the inconceivable becomes all too real.

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