Beste leerling,

Voor het college Internationale Politiek vragen we je om het artikel van Nina Tannenwald ‘Is using nuclear weapons still taboo?’ te lezen. Denk vervolgens na over een antwoord op de volgende vragen:

- Hoe werkt nucleaire afschrikking?
- Wat houdt het nucleaire taboe in?
- Hoe waarschijnlijk is het dat Vladimir Poetin kernwapens zal inzetten vanwege de oorlog in Oekraïne?
Is Using Nuclear Weapons Still Taboo?

By Nina Tannenwald
Foreign Policy
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In March 1990, the New Yorker published a cartoon by Jack Ziegler that captured the optimism at the end of the Cold War. The cartoon shows an executive sitting at his desk as a worker enters the office carrying a large bomb with fins. “Bring that H-bomb over here, will you, Tom, and just slip it into my ‘out’ box,” the executive says. “Sure thing, boss!” the worker responds.

The image of putting nuclear bombs “in the outbox” was emblematic of the hope many had that a new era of cooperation between the United States and the former Soviet Union was emerging. The fear of a nuclear war breaking out between the world’s two superpowers receded, and many hoped that nuclear weapons, although they would still exist, would no longer be central to international politics. Mikhail Gorbachev, the Soviet Union’s last leader, declared in June 1991 that “the risk of a global nuclear war has practically disappeared.”

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Today, more than 30 years later, nuclear bombs are back in the inbox. Fear of nuclear war between the United States and Russia has returned with a vengeance. As a result of Russia’s brutal invasion of Ukraine and Russian officials’ alarming nuclear threats, the world is closer to the use of nuclear weapons out of desperation—or by accident or miscalculation—than at any time since the early 1980s.

The Russia-Ukraine war serves as a harsh reminder of some old truths about nuclear weapons: There are limits to the protection nuclear deterrence provides. (Usable conventional weapons may get you more protection.) In a crisis, deterrence is vulnerable, not automatic and self-enforcing. There is always the chance that it could fail.

In the first decades after World War II, many U.S. military and political leaders, and much of the public, expected or feared that nuclear weapons would be used again. Hiroshima and Nagasaki made the horrors of atomic bombings visible for all. The notion that nuclear war
could happen at any moment permeated American society. Many Cold War-era buildings—including schools, airports, and even motels—were constructed with a fallout shelter in the basement. The instruction to “duck and cover” in the event of a nuclear attack (rather than run to a window to look out) became part of U.S. civil defense drills that every U.S. citizen, including schoolchildren, was encouraged to practice.

Movies such as On the Beach (1959), a piece of post-apocalyptic science fiction, depicted a world annihilated by nuclear war. Military strategists such as Herman Kahn, one of the historical inspirations for the madman title character of Stanley Kubrick’s classic black comedy Dr. Strangelove, proselytized about “thinking the unthinkable”—the need to think about how we would fight and survive a nuclear war. Events such as the Cuban missile crisis made these fears palpably real. For 13 days in October 1962, the world came the closest it ever has to nuclear war. Many people at the time believed the world was about to end in mushroom clouds.

Yet, during the same period, norms of restraint developed. A nuclear taboo—a normative inhibition against the first use of nuclear weapons—emerged as the result of both strategic interests and moral concerns. A global grassroots anti-nuclear movement, along with nonnuclear states and the United Nations, actively sought to stigmatize nuclear weapons as unacceptable weapons of mass destruction. After the scare of the Cuban missile crisis, the United States and the Soviet Union also pursued arms control agreements to help stabilize the “balance of terror.” These norms of nuclear restraint helped foster the now nearly 77-year tradition of nonuse of nuclear weapons, the single-most important feature of the nuclear age.

But today, most of these arms control agreements have been torn up, and nuclear-armed states are once again engaged in costly arms races. We are in a period of nuclear excess rather than restraint. All of this brings us to the current moment and the big question suddenly on everyone’s minds: Do Russian leaders share the nuclear taboo? Would Russian President Vladimir Putin use a nuclear weapon in the war in Ukraine?

He certainly wants the world—and in particular the United States—to at least think he might. On the day he announced the beginning of a “special military operation” in Ukraine, Putin warned that any country that attempted to interfere in the war would face “such consequences that you have never experienced in your history,” which many took to be a veiled nuclear threat. Other Russian officials have made similar statements over the course of the war.

So far, it is likely that these threats are more about deterring NATO than actual use. Russia has apparently not increased the alert levels of its nuclear forces but rather activated a communications system that could transmit a launch order. Russian officials are certainly aware that any use of nuclear weapons would bring devastating consequences for Russia and for Putin himself, including widespread condemnation and global opprobrium. As Anatoly Antonov, Russia’s ambassador to the United States, claimed in early May, “It is our country that in recent years has persistently proposed to American colleagues to affirm that there can be no winners in a nuclear war, thus it should never happen.” Still, the risk that Putin would use a nuclear weapon is not zero, and the longer the war goes on the more the risk goes up.

The United States and NATO have reciprocated neither the discourse of Russian officials (nuclear threats) nor the claimed behavior (enhanced readiness of nuclear arsenals) but rather have funneled vast amounts of conventional weapons to Ukraine while promising to pursue
accountability for Russian war crimes. Despite scattered calls in the United States for the creation of a “no-fly zone” over some or all of Ukraine, the Biden administration wisely resisted. In practice, this would mean shooting down Russian planes and risk igniting World War III.

Yet, as the war drags on, the United States may be sleepwalking into an expanded—and therefore more dangerous—war. Russia’s weak military performance has tempted defense hawks and unrequited Cold Warriors to shift the goals from simply helping to prevent Ukraine’s defeat to, as U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin suggested on April 25, creating a “weakened” Russia. An alarming number of foreign-policy commentators, including retired U.S. military officers and NATO supporters who should know better, have cavalierly urged the Biden administration to get much more aggressive in helping Ukraine or even pursue total victory, despite the risk of nuclear escalation.

Using the war to reassert U.S. hegemony is a dangerous game. There is a whiff of nuclear forgetting in the air. One reason the Cold War remained cold was that U.S. leaders recognized that confronting a nuclear-armed adversary imposes constraints on action. When the Soviet Union invaded Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968, the United States refrained from responding with military force. Yet today there is an entire generation (or more) of people for whom the scary realities of the Cold War and “duck and cover” are the stuff of history books, rather than lived experience. As the historian Daniel Immerwahr wrote recently, “This is the first decade when not a single head of a nuclear state can remember Hiroshima.”

In making nuclear dangers vivid again, the Russia-Ukraine war reminds us of not just the benefits but also the significant risks and limits of nuclear deterrence. Deterrence has likely kept Russia from expanding the war to NATO countries such as Poland and Romania. Russia’s nuclear arsenal has kept NATO from intervening directly, but it has also failed to help Russia take or hold significant territory in Ukraine or compel Kyiv to surrender. Most importantly, the war reminds us that controlling escalation is a giant unknown. We have no idea what would happen if a nuclear weapon were actually used.

The war also reminds us that norms are ultimately breakable. In the last few years, numerous norms that we once thought were robust have been undermined. Norms of democracy are under siege in the United States and elsewhere. Internationally, states have eroded norms of territorial integrity, multilateralism, arms control, and humanitarian law. The nuclear taboo, while widely shared, is more fragile than other kinds of norms because a small number of violations would likely destroy it.

Some might argue that the taboo and deterrence are robust because no rational leader would see a benefit to starting a nuclear war. The prominent international relations realist Kenneth Waltz, a proponent of nuclear deterrence, famously wrote that nuclear weapons create “strong incentives to use them responsibly.” The problem is that, even if true some of the time, this may not always be true. Not all leaders may be rational or responsible. This view also overlooks the possibility that nuclear war could begin through accident, misperception, or miscalculation. In short, the nuclear taboo and deterrence are always at risk.

Which brings us back to Putin. In 1999, Putin launched himself to power as Russia’s prime minister, overseeing the country’s shockingly brutal second war in Chechnya. Since then, Russia under Putin has shown itself willing to violate important international norms,
including those against territorial conquest (Crimea, Ukraine) and against attacking civilian targets. Shredding the rules of war, the Russian military has inflicted devastation and cruelty on civilians in Chechnya, Syria, and now Ukraine. In Ukraine, Russia shelled Europe’s largest nuclear power plant at Zaporizhzhia, a reckless act that set part of the facility on fire. Such strikes risk nuclear disaster.

Russian officials have portrayed Ukraine’s national identity and existence as a threat to Russia and have employed increasingly exterminationist language in their stated quest to “denazify” Ukraine as well as to justify the war to the Russian public. Coming on top of what appear to be appalling Russian war crimes in the Ukrainian cities of Bucha, Kherson, Mariupol, and elsewhere, such talk raises the specter of genocide. Leaders who are willing to engage in genocide might not feel many inhibitions about using a nuclear weapon.

We do not know what is in Putin’s head, of course. But the worry is that if the war continues going badly for Russia, Putin might reach for a tactical nuclear weapon—a low-yield bomb designed for use on the battlefield—out of frustration. While smaller than the big city-raising strategic ones, they are still tremendously destructive thermonuclear weapons with all the devastating effects of the Hiroshima bomb.

The United States and Ukraine do not have identical interests in this war. While Russia’s aggression, protected by nuclear threats, must not pay, the United States has an obligation to avoid a wider war that could increase the risk of direct U.S.-Russian confrontation. Of all the lessons of the past, the risk of nuclear war is one we forget only at our deepest peril.