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Is Ukraine's position improving? What's Russia's breaking point? Is House of Dynamite accurate?

di Lawrence Freedman

Thanks, as ever, for sending it so many excellent questions. My answers are today and Sam's will be coming later in the week.

There were far more than I can answer so apologies to those who took the trouble to write and are not getting a reply. The questions were also often accompanied by some sharp observations on the topics being raised, so apologies again for not republishing them here but this post is already long.

Topics covered include:

- *Is Ukraine's position improving? Can they shift the narrative?*
- *Why does Putin think it's worth continuing?*
- *Ukraine's manpower problems*
- *Russia's threat to Europe beyond Ukraine*
- *Threats to the UK and levels of preparedness*
- *Whether there was ever a rules-based order different to today*
- *Iran and whether Trump abandoning the nuclear deal has led to today's crisis*
- *China and the threat to Taiwan*
- *Arms control and the end of the START treaty*
- *A review of House of Dynamite*

Ukraine

Inevitably many of the questions were on the Russo-Ukraine War. ***Thomas I-G*** *asked whether the conventional narrative is now turning. Is there now 'an alternative possibility of Ukraine managed to surpass expectations in defending and counterattacking and how would that impact future negotiations?'*

There has been a slowdown in Russian activity this year. This is partly down to freezing weather, Russian units in Ukraine being unable to access Starlink communications (a curious episode because Musk's company apparently agreed to request from Ukraine to make Starlink terminals access in Ukraine only available to authorised users), and problems with quantity and quality of manpower. Some Ukrainian sources claim that Russia is now struggling to replace losses with more men, with reports of foreigners being tricked into front-line service. Russia's failures to seize Kupiansk and Pokrovsk, and even being expelled from the former, undermine the Kremlin's narrative of inevitable victory, which has been taken too seriously by Western media as well as in the Trump administration.

By way of caution we should note how hard it can be to track the ebb and flow of the front-line fighting. The New York Times has just published its latest in a series, which began in August 2024, predicting the imminent fall of Pokrovsk, and eventually it may be right. Also yesterday, there were suggestions that because Russian forces had overstated claims of gains near Oleksandrivka and Huliaipole, they were now reporting non-existent Ukrainian counterattacks to explain why they don't actually hold these positions.

Commander-in-chief Syrskyi has recently described a front line stretching about 1,200 kilometres, with drone-determined kill zones of up to 15–20 kilometres. He reported that the number of Russian troops deployed on Ukrainian territory has remained largely unchanged over the past six months at about 711,000–712,000 personnel, including operational reserves, with losses at an average of 1,000 to 1,100 troops per day. He also claimed that Ukrainian forces are on the offensive in roughly a quarter of combat engagements 'along certain sections of the front line.'

If this proportion could be increased then the battle for territory could take on a different complexion. I suspect that there will be caution in Kyiv about launching an ambitious counter-offensive, especially given the problems experienced with the previous one in 2023, and the even greater risks now because the battle space is much more transparent. There may be some points where the Russians have become so thinly spread because of the resources devoted to Donetsk that there might be opportunities available to be exploited.

A significant forward push would certainly be a morale booster for Ukraine (where the population has been enduring miserable conditions) and could obviously shift the narrative quite quickly. Instead of the Russians claiming that they'll take the rest of Donetsk by military means if it is not handed over voluntarily in negotiations they would have to wonder whether, if they do not agree an early ceasefire, they'll lose more of their gains (and for the same reason the Ukrainians might lose interest in a ceasefire).

The shift may be more gradual because – absent a gaping hole in Russian lines available for quick exploitation – the safest approach will be to employ infiltration tactics backed by concentrated firepower to liberate discrete areas.

In terms of the impact on Russian calculations much depends on how this understood in the Kremlin. It is not clear how well informed either the military or civilian elite are about the front lines situation, although big setbacks would be hard to gloss over.

A related question is whether Putin can continue to prosecute the war with the same intensity as in past years. Thus ***Martin Treacy*** *asks 'why does Putin think he can win in Ukraine', noting how little territory as taken for such huge losses and how unlikely it is that Ukraine will agree to hand over the rest of the Donbas. Martin raises some possibilities: ''Is Putin simply in denial/misinformed by sycophants? Caught in a Zugzwang where he has no way out? Too stubborn to face reality?'* ***Carol Gamm*** *also picks up on this theme of the Kremlin's predicament, with problems with pushing forward as well as pulling back. She asks about where there could be a breaking point for Russia, observing its growing dependence on China as well as economic difficulties.*

Because of the state of the economy I don't think Russia can continue to fight in this way indefinitely although I cannot offer any predictions. While the current discussions on how the war ends are very similar to those of 2024 and 2025 I would be surprised if the war continues along the same lines into 2027. My instinct is that something will give during 2026, but there are no certainties here.

I addressed the question of why Putin thinks he can win last October. There is no reason to suppose he has changed his view although the lack of progress in recent months should have given him grounds for concern. The longer this goes on without a major breakthrough on the ground, and assuming the Ukrainians get through the harsh winter despite the regular attacks on their energy supplies, we must assume that there will be some pressure on the Kremlin to find a way out of the war. His problem is that if he continues then he faces more losses and a deteriorating economy (there are many reports of consumer grumbles about the inflation, especially with food) yet if he accepts a lesser deal or ceasefire then his failure to achieve his core objectives will be apparent, leaving the question of what all this pain and sacrifice was for.

Russia's strategic position has deteriorated because of the war – not only because of the distorting effect in its economy but also its dependence on China, which will be hard to shake off, the loss of European markets, and the enlargement of NATO to include Finland and Sweden. One could also add Germany's return as a serious military power. When this ends, however much of Ukraine is controlled, Russia will look a far weaker power than it did at the start of 2022.

Trump gave Putin the opportunity to get out of this war with a better deal than he deserved. The combination of his excessive demands and less military progress than anticipated meant that he missed the opportunity. Part of Putin's problem is that he has been very explicit about his war aims. A deal which did not leave him on control of all the Donbas would now appear as an evident failure, which is why it has become such a focus for the recent negotiations and the main stumbling block to a settlement. If Ukraine can continue to limit any advances by the Russian army, and they seem to believe they can, then even the Trump administration might appreciate that rather

than pressure Ukraine to give up its own territory it would do better to persuade Russia that it cannot have Ukraine's. If that led to a simple ceasefire then attention would shift to the issue of security guarantees, as Russia would want to maintain the option of coming back for more at a later date.

Ukraine's manpower problems could be a constraint should opportunities to mount serious offensives arise. ***Ben*** *asks about a piece Phillips O'Brien published late last year titled 'The Fewer Soldiers on the Front Line the Better'. As he says, this article 'attempts to downplay the significance of Ukraine's manpower crisis by arguing that on a highly transparent battlefield where attack drones are prevalent well manned defences will simply result in higher levels of casualties for Ukraine.'*

I know of no Ukraine military figure who has not been frustrated by the lack of manpower caused by problems with mobilisation and soldiers going AWOL. So I think Phillips is wrong on this one. Insufficient manpower – along with insufficient artillery - has required Ukraine to be extraordinarily innovative with drones in a great variety of roles. Ground drones are increasingly being used for logistics and casualty evacuation. They can set up firing posts that can be operated remotely. This is impressive and they can relieve the pressure on the infantry and lead to fewer casualties. But drones can't do everything. The reason why it was necessary to retrieve situations in Kupyansk, Pokrovsk and elsewhere is that Ukrainian lines were too thinly spread to spot Russian infiltrations until they were well advanced. If the Russians had been better able to reinforce their initial successes then retrieval would have been even harder.

There are also a limited number of situations such as these that can be managed at one time. Ukraine has managed to reduce, but not eliminate, the need for infantry in defensive operations by having decent drone surveillance to spot approaching troops. This, however, requires keeping the operators safe from Russian drones, and they can be frustrated by murky conditions which allow enemy troops to move forward without being spotted. And when it comes to offensive operations you still need infantry to seize and then control territory. For all these reasons manpower remains

a pressing issue in Kyiv. It is worth noting that Ukraine commentary stresses the importance not just of numbers but also decent training.

Given the distinctive challenges posed by the Trump administration, as well Putin's aggression, several questions touch on both Europe's support for Ukraine, and whether it can become less dependent on the US. ***John Woods*** *asks what Britain, France and Germany are actually doing for Ukraine, and* ***Michael*** *asks whether 'gaining strategic independence - arguably including some form of success in Ukraine - is in Europe's interest and, if yes, what are the broad steps to be taken?*

Sarah *notes the 'sense of inevitability in some media reporting that Putin will 'definitely' attack the Balkans or eastern edge of Europe (and so therefore, presumably, NATO) in the next 5 or so years, and asks why this certainty?* ***Jouni*** *asks how much if anything, can be inferred from Russia's military record in Ukraine for a possible military confrontation between Russia and European country(-ies)/EU/Nato/US? In her question* ***Carol Gamm*** *also raised the question of the credibility of the nuclear dimension of European security guarantees.*

The European response can be divided into five:

First, economic assistance. Although the EU scheme to use seized Russian financial assets to support Ukraine unfortunately fell through late last year an alternative approach to loan Ukraine €90 billion was agreed.

Second making sure that Ukraine still has access to high end US equipment. It is shameful that it is necessary for Europe to pay for this under the PURL scheme, but it is a means of keeping Kyiv supplied with vital US equipment and spare parts.

Third, making direct supplies of equipment, ammunition, and components.

Fourth, intelligence. A year ago this was one of the main dependencies on the US. It is still there but substantially reduced.

Fifth, the first four points have strengthened Ukraine diplomatically. By reducing dependence on the US this also reduce US leverage over Ukraine.

This has been slow to ramp up and that has been frustrating for Ukraine (as could be seen in Zelensky's speech at Davos). Ukraine's view, which is compelling, is that it is in the front-line of the defence of European democracy and that any support it gets

is not altruism but essential to European security interests. If Ukraine lost then Europe's security problems would look a lot worse.

What happens in Ukraine will certainly shape the way that European security will be viewed in the future. If Russia wins it will be emboldened. If it fails to do so then it will be fair to assume that a country that can't defeat a much smaller neighbour after four years of gruelling fighting will not fancy its chances against well-equipped NATO countries.

In its current mood, which is belligerent and quite paranoid, Russia will remain a military challenge and will seek to reconstruct its force as quickly as possible if only because it also sees NATO as a threat if it appears weak. There is a tendency to underestimate the problems Russia will have in finding resources to do this, especially if sanctions remain in place and oil prices stay low, and the loss of morale and confidence of the army given its failures to defeat Ukraine in what was expected to be an easy victory. Also the various war scenarios assume NATO is caught napping and does not begin to mobilise, and we know from 2021-2 that Western intelligence has pretty good knowledge of Russian movements and logistics.

So I would not anticipate some random act of aggression against a NATO country. In the short-term at least this will mean that direct aggression from Russia will not be such a threat, although there will be a legacy of hostility to the West for its backing of Ukraine and perceived Russophobia, and indirect 'grey area' aggression will be ongoing. And with relations so tense it is possible that an incident involving Russian armed forces and those of a NATO country could escalate. Lastly, the deterrent value of Western forces will be lost if they are not sustained. The war has also exposed some serious deficiencies in European preparedness, including ammunition stocks and industrial capacity which are only slowly being rectified.

When there is discussion of 'strategic independence' for Europe that normally means independence from the United States, and that will be extremely difficult for some time. The UK and US in particular are extremely interdependent in all domains, including nuclear and intelligence. It would also require using scarce resources to replace US derived capabilities. There is a difference between the US not doing much

for Europe in the event of a major crisis (which we must fear to be likely) and actively trying to undermine it, which would be by far the worst case and unlikely. A US reluctance to act on its alliance obligations must be a prudent assumption. In that case the priority for spending has to be building up Europe's conventional capabilities.

There is an issue of nuclear capabilities. I am of the view that the combined British and French capabilities should not be dismissed as trivial. We are so used to the idea of enormous arsenals that we tend to forget what a single warhead could do. Nonetheless alliance nuclear deterrence looks far more effective with the US engaged. Even if we are not sure about the engagement, so long as Russia cannot dismiss the possibility, the deterrent effect is still there.

(*In this connection* ***Brother Randor*** *asks 'Is Ukraine developing nuclear weapons and if not, why not?* To which the answer it is not. It has signed up to the Non Proliferation Treaty and a nuclear programme would be an enormous diversion of resources and take years to show results, and would give Russia an excuse for a pre-emptive strike.)

Iain *looks forward to the consequences of a Russian failure for Putin's position and asks about historical parallels between 20th century Germany and Russia: both were forced into state collapse by Western allies (1918 and 1991), and both times we failed to manage the peace or curb their militaristic temperament, so that both bounced back (1930s and since 2008).*

The upheavals in Germany after 1918 followed capitulation in a great war while the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 was part of a wider failure of governance, and not just Cold war rivalries. The aftermath in both instances began with hopes for amicable and productive relations with the Western democracies which turned sour. I don't know if we'll face similar upheavals once this war ends but I'm sure Putin is nervous of a backlash against a catastrophic act of aggression.

It is possible that there will be internal turmoil inside of Russia because of the domestic consequences of the war – inflation, degraded infrastructure, high crime rates, aggravated by returning former criminals who had opted for military service, and political uncertainty.

Putin has, however, filled his government with loyalists and there is no tradition of military coups in Russia. There is no ruling party that could decide that it needed a new leader (as the Communist Party did with Khrushchev in 1964). So it is not clear how he would go. Nonetheless a palpable failure in Ukraine (which could mean a ceasefire along the current line of contact) combined with a severe economic downturn could start to panic the elite, even while the bulk of the population would probably be relieved and pleased to get on with their lives. I suspect Putin's most formidable opponents would be angry ultra-nationalists who could feel betrayed, with a golden chance to bring Ukraine back into the Russian sphere lost.

Threats to the UK

Diarmid *asks what the military threats to the UK might plausibly be over the next decade or so.* ***Ben in Northern Ireland*** *asks about the state of societal British national resilience, both to threats short of war, and if the country was militarily targeted, especially from Russia? What can we do to strengthen national/household/personal resilience?*

There are two sorts of threats. One which is ongoing concerns the 'grey zone' between peace and war, where there is sabotage and subversion, including cyberattacks, and possible random attacks on facilities with some military relevance. These Russian activities can often be trivial but as we have seen with Salisbury poisonings and Litvinov they can also be deadly. This is more a matter for the police and security agencies than the military. There are also possibilities of incidents at sea and in air from Russian ships and aircraft operating on the edge of and occasionally creeping into territorial waters or airspace. Much more dangerous would be some demonstrative conventional strike on UK, which is why there is concern about past neglect of air defences. This obviously would be high risk for Russia as they would have no certainty about possible responses but in a highly charged situation, perhaps arising out of some confrontation over Ukraine, it's not impossible.

In terms of major war we are into alliance scenarios where UK would be part of a NATO response to Russian aggression, either against Ukraine in violation of a ceasefire or against one of the Baltic states as discussed above. I think it is hard in the

UK to get people to the big war threat taken seriously. This is not the case in those countries which share borders with Russia. They take the threat very seriously and have elaborate plans, in which the population is fully engaged, to manage hostilities with their neighbour.

The UK has a geographical advantage should a land war develop in Europe. What needs to be explained is the importance of being able to deter such a war and deal with it quickly should it arise, which essentially requires working closely with allies. The ongoing 'grey area' threats do affect the UK and require a different sort of resilience – essentially being alert to the risks and watching out for suspicious activities. I would take the threat of cyberattacks particularly seriously – not least because there are so many actors – criminal as well as state – able to mount such attacks. We have seen some big UK institutions hit by these attacks over the past year.

Rules-Based order

Ben: '*You've previously expressed scepticism about the idea of a rules based order. To the extent there have been rules over the last 80 years arguably the most consequential has been that states should not seek to acquire territory by force.*

How do you think the post-war period compares to other historical periods in terms of the relative peace between the great powers? To what extent is this attributable to the existence of 'rules' versus other factors?'

The so-called 'Long Peace', first identified in 1985 and in principle still in place, does not, obviously, refer to a world without war but to the lack of a third world war involving the major powers, comparable to the previous two. This is not the result of states following the rules but because of the fear of this third world war, especially if it led to the use of nuclear weapons, Even without nuclear weapons large-scale hostilities would be extraordinarily costly and disruptive. So the long peace had as much to do with balances of power and fear of an uncontrollable confrontation as the Charter of the UN, which has been regularly ignored. This is not to deny the importance of the principles of non-aggression and international law because they do provide a way of evaluating actions, including our own, even if they do not always govern them.

There was a period in the 1990s when the UN seemed to be working as it should, because relations between the West and Russia were good and China was not yet ready to assert itself. This influenced responses to Iraqi aggression against Kuwait and the upheavals in the former Yugoslavia. But this began to break down over Kosovo in 1999 and then even more so with the invasion of Iraq in 2003. Russian aggression against Ukraine, from 2014, finished it off.

Where the rules were more important (and where I think the idea of a rules-based order first arose) was in trade. Trust and predictability was important in allowing mutually beneficial patterns of trade to develop. Arguably that was disrupted to a degree by China for some time (its entry into the World Trade Organisation may have ended up subverting the body), and then more recently in his uniquely erratic way by Trump. My guess is post-Trump it will be hard to recover the lost ground although we already have the evidence of the costs of less open trade.

Claire Hickson: *Is it wise for the government to be cutting back the FCDO so severely? Can you discern a clear strategy / long-term plan against which the cuts are being made (other than the overall trend of protecting the network and cutting the centre) and is it a sensible one? Does the capacity of a country's foreign policy apparatus (including intelligence) have much bearing on results in foreign policy and if not, could they cut FCDO even further?*

I tend to agree. I think we need diplomats more than ever and strong representation. We are effectively giving up on our ability to compete with China in Africa etc. My view (and not just because of Richard Moore's recent interview) is that our intelligence agencies, including GCHQ, still operate effectively and do provide good guidance and influence.

In the end the issue is priorities in foreign policy. In security terms we have become even more focused on Europe than before, especially as Trump gives the US a less active role and doesn't seem to welcome a prominent European role in the Indo-Pacific. (That is not a reason for us to stay clear as we should value good relations with countries like Australia, South Korea and Japan.) They welcome European interest in their security predicaments. Elsewhere there area regions where we will have a

minimal military role but do need strong diplomatic presence and could benefit from a stronger pot of money for development assistance. In its absence we can see far less interest and influence in Africa, for example, than in the past.

Iran

Jonathan Hare: *To what extent is the US military escalation against Iran the result of Trump's withdrawal from the JCPOA? … Trump's sabotage of the JCPOA undermined moderate elements in the regime and gave the hard liners the perfect opportunity to maintain that the Great Satan and its friends could never be trusted. If the JCPOA had been allowed to run its course, would we now see a prosperous, stable and less malign Iran? What is more effective - aggressive power play or patient diplomacy (albeit with a big stick)?*

Counterfactuals are always difficult. The JCPOA was working as it should when Trump walked away in 2017. Abandoning it meant Iran had more enrichment capacity and enriched Uranium than would otherwise have been the case, which in turn provided a rationale for last summer's strikes by Israel and the US. By now we would have been in whatever followed JCPOA because it was a relatively short-term agreement. Whether it would have led to a more moderate Iran I am less sure. Hardliners and the IRGC would have remained at the top of Iran's power structure, and, even with more sanctions relief, the inbuilt dysfunctions and corruption in the Iranian system would have ensured that the economy remained in a bad way. The weakness of the economy, and the resulting popular discontent, is one reason why there is a relatively moderate element now trying to negotiate with the US.

The Trump administration's approach to Iran has been muddled. It has set as its priority dismantling the Iranian nuclear programme, but when earlier in the year the regime was rocked by demonstrations, and responded viciously, it seemed to back regime change. That no longer appears to be on the US agenda. The US is now dealing with the regime on its nuclear programme, raising the questions again of what will be the military consequences if the current talks fail, and what happens to the economy if they succeed and sanctions are eased.

Arms Control

Christopher K Pike*: Arms control is a particularly difficult subject to get one's mind around. Nuclear arms control even more difficult! We've seen comparatively little commentary, particularly in the mainstream media, about the end of the START treaties last week. I'd be very interested in Lawrence's view of the political angles and possible ways forward by opening some sort of dialogue with a view to achieving some control over warhead and delivery systems. Surely Britain and France could take a lead?* ***Cheryl Rofer*** *raises a similar, question, noting Trump's belief that he could negotiate a new and more beautiful treaty.*

The expiry of the last strategic arms agreement is the end of an era. The first agreements were signed in Moscow by Presidents Brezhnev and Nixon in 1972. Their value can be overstated. The levels set by the agreements were quite high and encouraged the idea that the best rationale for the size of one side's arsenal was the size of the other's. Yet the agreements provided some predictability and the verification procedures some reassurance. The negotiations encouraged discussions at the highest levels about the risks of nuclear war and an arms race.

There are two reasons why the absence of serious nuclear discussions at the moment is concerning. The first is that Russia has been making routine nuclear threats since the Crimean annexation of 2014 and they have become more regular over the past few years. I have never thought it likely that Putin would authorise nuclear use to solve his Ukraine problem, other than to warn NATO countries of the potentially dire consequences of getting directly involved in the fighting. Putin is aware that one thing that distinguishes Russia from other middle powers is its vast nuclear arsenal, and he is keen that nobody forgets that.

The second and related reason is that doubts about the Trump administration's commitment to the US's alliance obligations has led a number of countries to wonder whether they should acquire nuclear weapons. Here there is still a major treaty in place – the 1970 non-proliferation treaty. By and large sticking with an alliance with the US has seemed to be a better bet than national nuclear programmes, but doubts

about US alliance commitments may lead to some countries rethinking their positions. So the big tests for arms control may be to sustain the NPT.

As for strategic arms control the best option would be to sustain the current limits informally. The problem now is not just a lack of trust and uncertainty about what negotiations can achieve, but China's growing arsenal, which encourages the view that any future talks should be at least trilateral. I don't think China will be interested until it has caught up more in numbers. The UK and France have always been wary about getting involved in these discussions because they have no obvious bargaining position. What they can do is encourage conversations among nuclear powers (including India and Pakistan) on risks and to ensure good communication at times of crisis. But I doubt we will go back to the grand arms control treaties of the past, at least not without a change for the better in the international environment.

China

Philip Jarvis: *With Xi purging generals (to replace with more compliant ones?) and the US distracted by domestic strife, what are the chances that China will use this as an opportunity to make a move on Taiwan (eg. blockade the island)?*

The Chinese have acknowledged that all the disruption at the top of the PLA will have an impact on the readiness of their armed forces. Issues of espionage and loyalty and corruption have been raised that will not go away for some time. Mutual distrust between the military and civilian spheres will continue. This means that China will not want a hot war with the US and Xi may be more cautious than he would be if he had more confidence in the military leadership and more progress on his modernisation programme. Despite some obvious strengths the Chinese economy is also not in great shape.

The rational policy for Xi is to keep up the pressure on Taiwan, through exercises and other means, without taking drastic steps, not least because of the potential international economic reaction. He can wait. Over time it is likely that a Taiwanese government, uncertain about Trump's support, will move to a more accommodating posture, without agreeing to complete reunification. The Taiwanese know that the

most likely trigger for a Chinese move would be if they insisted on their full independence from the mainland.

Trump has signalled reluctance to confront China directly in the region although the Chinese will have concluded by now that Trump is so erratic that they can't be sure either way of what he might do in the event of a major crisis. Trump knows that the 'loss' of Taiwan would be seen as a defeat for him (much worse than Afghanistan for Biden).

Nonetheless, he still tends to see China more as an economic challenge than a security one, and may also recognise (but who knows) that he has been outsmarted by Xi on the trade front. Given that he has limited success in cosying up to Russia he now seems to see more possibilities in improving relations with China.

House of Dynamite

Reader: *After his magisterial review of Barbie I would be very interested to see a review of House of Dynamite by Lawrence. As when I saw it, it sounds like there was a lot of shouting at the screen when you watched it over Christmas.*

I also did a review of Oppenheimer which is perhaps a better comparison. As a movie I enjoyed House of Dynamite. It has a clever construction. It was most interesting as an example of how responsible officials and politicians would react to a sudden moment of extreme pressure and how quickly moods and behaviours can change. It conveyed the tension between professionalism and panic. It was, however, probably just as well that it left open the two questions of what would happen when the missile reached its target and whether the president would decide to wait or to fire off US weapons against, as far as one could tell, a range of potential enemies.

My problem was with the scenario, which was preposterous. As with Annie Jacobsen's Nuclear War: A Scenario, which has a similar scenario and which I found even more annoying, there was no real explanation of why North Korea would attack the US in this way. It is a reflection of the lingering impact of Japan's surprise attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941 on the US strategic imagination, that the country gets caught out by an attack launched without warning and for no obvious purpose. A single shot attack against the US from North Korea needs some explanation. What was the crisis

that brought it on? What was it supposed to achieve? There is a suggestion that this came from a missile-carrying submarine, about which US analysts could only speculate, yet if that was the source then why was only one missile launched leaving a number still in the submarine? In fact, if you are going to launch a nuclear war why do it with just one missile? Why Chicago? There is zero political context.

And why was the president under such pressure to respond before the missile hit, other than to add to the dramatic tension? It would make sense to get forces on to the higher alert, and prepare retaliation against North Korea, but the US does not have a launch-on-warning policy and in this case no reason to launch against anybody else until more was known. As the incoming missile was not stopped by the defences (which is plausible) and was going to reach its target, the best advice would have been to wait and see what happened when it did. There was always a chance that the device would fail to detonate. And why was the strategic commander pushing so hard for a massive response with some pretty flimsy rationales? He was a throwback to the stereotypes of the 1950s and 1960s (when the actual generals did their best to live up to them). You would expect more sophistication and caution from a top commander.

I am all in favour of reminding audiences of the risks of nuclear war and the horrendous power of even individual nuclear weapons. The difficulty of coming up with credible scenarios for their use, however, remains some consolation.