NUCLEAR THREAT – THE FACTOR THAT LESSENED THE LIKELIHOOD OF CONFLICT ESCALATION DURING THE COLD WAR –

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The nuclear weapon, the "ambassador" of peace, is one of the strangest ideas ever uttered. Despite the obvious nonsense, this concept can be considered a great truth. Blinded by concerns to find the most effective method of winning the bipolar confrontation, the two superpowers of the 20th century, the USA and the USSR, undertook the most extreme and most expensive experiments to put them at an advantage.

After defusing the tension of the situation created as a result of the deployment of nuclear missiles on the territory of Turkey and Cuba, the two superpowers engaged in an extensive process of disarmament, which also involved representatives of the academic environment, who expressed their positions and offered solutions to the problems about which the two superpowers continued to have reservations.

Keywords: nuclear weapon; Cold War; USSR; USA; crisis;

TECHNOLOGICAL EQUALITY – I.V. STALIN'S GREAT DREAM

The end of the Second World War caused, as expected, a split within the coalition formed during the conflict between the US, the UK, France, and the USSR to carry out armed actions against the Axis powers. Even if the need for the moment justified the creation of that group of forces, the ideological position of the democratic states could not be aligned with the communist ideology promoted by the Soviets. As a result, the former *"allies"* became declared enemies who built alliances and developed military strategies to achieve a total victory in the ideological confrontation unfolded over half a century. One of the most important aspects of the new type of conflict was the desire of the two configured superpowers – USA and USSR – to build a military instrument through which they could gain a major advantage, in strategic terms, over the opponent. The creation of the atomic weapon and its successful use against Japan positioned the USA as the main systemic power. It was a great advantage in the first part of the confrontation, which was intended to be promoted as the main deterrent of the USSR.

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Enthusiastic about the security provided by the atomic weapon, American policymakers neglected the USSR's efforts to achieve parity in military capabilities. The existence of the nuclear weapon in the arsenal of the American military was seen as a guarantee of almost certain victory. Thus, many of the American politicians almost dared to ignore the judgments of military strategy (Gray, 2010, p. 227). Aware of the fact that, with the emergence of the new weapon, the numerical superiority of the Soviet armed forces was nullified, the leader of the USSR, Joseph Vissarionovich Stalin, ordered the start of a nuclear armament programme. Despite his optimistic approach and his defiant statements like: *"Atomic bombs are intended to frighten the weak-minded, but they cannot decide the fate of a war"* (Sixsmith, 2021, p. 389), he was willing to spare no effort to nullify the US strategic advantage.

Aware of the risks arising from the expansion of the group of states possessing nuclear technology, the USA submitted a report to the UN expressing its agreement to bring nuclear technology under the control of this organization. The American request came in the form of a plan for the control of atomic energy, bearing the name of its initiator, Bernard Mannes Baruch, an adviser to President F.D. Roosevelt. He requested the establishment of the Atomic Energy Commission.

Aware of the risks arising from the expansion of the group of states possessing nuclear technology, the USA submitted a report to the UN expressing its agreement to bring nuclear technology under the control of this organization (Townshend, 1997, p. 141). The American request came in the form of a plan for the control of atomic energy, bearing the name of its initiator, Bernard Mannes Baruch, an adviser to President F.D. Roosevelt. He requested the establishment of the Atomic Energy Commission (Buck, p. 1), which would then regulate access to nuclear technology and implicitly to the manufacture of atomic weapons. To the USSR, such a prospect seemed unacceptable, and they were willing to risk everything, including exclusion from the international community, to achieve a status similar to that of the USA. As a result, the Soviet representative at the UN refused to sign the protocol proposed by the Americans. Moreover, the leader of the USSR, I.V. Stalin, considered that approach as an attempt by the Americans to prohibit the Soviets from achieving the much-desired *"technological equality"* (Gray, p. 228), in order to later impose their own system of thought on them.

The first Soviet efforts to create an atomic weapon had begun in the early 1930s, but, because of the purges ordered by I.V. Stalin, many researchers had died or been imprisoned in camps, thus halting the Soviet nuclear programme. During the course of the war, the Soviet dictator was constantly informed about the advance made by the Westerners in the development of their nuclear programme. In 1943, the information received clearly indicated that the Americans were going to achieve the much-desired weapon, which led I.V. Stalin to relaunch the nuclear research programme. The great Russian physicist Igor Kurchatov was appointed to lead the group of Soviet scientists, who was promised all possible support (Johnson, 2019, p. 22). In the meeting he held with Russian scientists immediately after the Hiroshima bombing, I.V. Stalin mentioned the immediate need to obtain the atomic weapon: *"One request from you, comrades, is to supply us with atomic weapons as soon as possible. The balance has been destroyed. Give your bomb – it will remove a great danger to us. Ask for whatever you want, comrades! You will not be refused! As the saying goes, until the child cries, the mother does not give him the breast"*. (Holloway, 1981, p. 183). The restriction of the study to some authors considered *"bourgeois"* greatly hampered the mission of the scholars who personally informed I.V. Stalin that they could not develop the research without having access to Einstein's theory of relativity. The dictator approved their approach by ordering to Lavrentiy Pavlovich Beria, head of the feared People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs (NKVD) repression service, to provide them with everything they wanted, also mentioning the fact: *"Leave them alone – we can always shoot them later!"* (Sixsmith, p. 392). The mission of the Soviet researchers was greatly simplified by the action of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg, who, for ideological reasons, chose to deliver to the Soviets important documents containing the significant details for the production of such devices (Garber, Walkowitz, 1995, p. 2).

The American monopoly on the production of nuclear weapons ended much faster than expected during the war. *"Miraculously"* just four years after the end of the war, on 29 August 1949, at the Semipalatinsk range, in Kazakhstan SSR, the USSR detonated its first nuclear weapon, with a capacity of 22 kilotons, similar to the famous *"Fat Man"*, used by the USA in Nagasaki (Podvig, 2004, p. 2), thereby nullifying the United States' nuclear advantage. From that moment on, the two superpowers embarked on an extensive nuclear weapons programme. The mentioned fact has severely tested the ability of the international community to effectively manage such a situation and to find solutions leading to détente in terms of the political situation between the two states. After obtaining the first atomic weapon, the Soviets started an extensive programme aimed at creating devices for transporting such weapons. The first vector capable of carrying a nuclear payload was made even before the advent of nuclear weapons, in 1946. The TU-4 (Tupolev) aircraft, which was a faithful copy of the American model B-29, became the pride of Soviet aviation. However, taking into account the very small range, it could not cause problems for the USA. The programme continued at a rapid pace, which allowed two more TU-16 and TU-20 aircraft to be developed in an interval of only 10 years. Those far more powerful devices with a range of 3,800 miles (Townshend, p. 142), were capable of reaching the American coastline. The big problem that the Soviets had to deal with was that, at that time, there was no possibility that those devices could be supplied from the air. As a result, those aircraft could not have returned to Soviet territory, which again would have discouraged

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any of the pilots from accepting such a mission. Consequently, the Soviets paid increased attention to the creation and development of strategic missiles capable of hitting any target on the US territory. In this regard, the Russians unjustifiably benefitted from a major advantage in relation to their competitor. At that time very few specialists knew that at the end of the war the USSR had captured a large part of the German scientists who had been involved in the Nazi missile programme. Despite the fact that the director of the German rocket development project, Wernher von Braun, had been arrested by the Americans and sent to the USA, the Soviets had captured the laboratories and factories where the German scientists had been working, thus taking over most of the results of their work, including prototypes of rockets (Bergaust, 2017, p. 119). The first Soviet ballistic missiles were obtained in 1955, while the Americans achieved them three years later, having a serious problem regarding the insufficient range of only 2,500 kilometres (Townshend, ib.). By the early 1960s the two superpowers had greatly diversified their nuclear payload capabilities, being able to easily strike any type of target at close range.

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THREATS AND NUCLEAR CRISES IN THE EARLY COLD WAR

The first tense moment of the Cold War was the dispute over the control of the German capital Berlin, which took place during the years 1948-1949. The unpredictability of the Soviets in terms of the way of action led the Americans to also consider the use of the nuclear arsenal as a backup option. During the hostilities caused by the Soviet blockade of West Berlin, taking advantage of the uniqueness of its nuclear power, the USA tried to intimidate the USSR by sending two B-29 squadrons to Europe. Even though the configuration of their devices was similar to those that bombed Nagasaki and Hiroshima, there was no confirmation that they were accompanied by atomic weapons. Considering that the Soviet nuclear programme had not yet delivered the first atomic weapon, there were voices that claimed that the deployment of those aircraft decisively influenced the Soviet decision to abandon the blockade (Dingman, p. 54). The aspect was highlighted even by the US President, Harry S. Truman, who stated: *"If it weren't for Bomb, the Russians would have taken control of Europe a long time ago"* (Gaddis, 2021, p. 57).

The advance of research in the field of nuclear weapons production was evident as both superpowers developed several types of such devices that could be used in different phases of the armed conflict. Perhaps the most dangerous in terms of ease of use was the tactical nuclear weapon. It was intended to be used directly on the battlefield against large military groups whose annihilation was becoming imperative. The first discussions about the possibility of using such weapons were held on 25 June 1950 when President Truman requested the advice of the Air Force Chief of Staff, Hoyt S. Vandenberg, to develop an action plan that would analyse the possibility to annihilate the Soviet military bases located near the Korean peninsula using atomic weapons (Dingman, p. 55).

The tensest moment of the first part of the Cold War occurred in November 1950, when the American troops led by General Douglas MacArthur advanced quickly into the territory of North Korea, reaching the banks of the Yalu River at the border with China. His action was based on the intelligence according to which, at the urging of Stalin, the Chinese dictator, Mao Zedong, made the decision to send troops to support the Korean communists: *"We should not miss the attempt to help the Koreans (...), we must give them a hand of help by sending there volunteers from among our soldiers"* (Gaddis, p. 47). As early as early August, Mao had ordered General Gao Gang, the commander and political commissar of the Northeast Military District, to form a task force of over 250,000 men near the Korean border (Chen, 1992, p. 12). The advance of American forces was also halted because of the pressure exercised by the 300,000 *"Chinese volunteers"* who had been crossing the river since 26 November. In that context, D. MacArthur asked President H. Truman for approval to use five tactical nuclear weapons to stop their advance. According to calculations, the use of those weapons could have caused the loss of over 150,000 Chinese military, which contributed decisively to the cessation of hostilities. What the US General took into account was Mao's determination to continue the offensive regardless of the cost in human lives.

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The situation was further complicated when the Chinese asked the Soviets to use their own nuclear weapons in case the Americans decided to bomb the Chinese troops in Korea. On 2 December, the USSR submitted an ultimatum to the USA demanding the cessation

of any initiative to use nuclear weapons. Moreover, to show their determination, on 4 December, they ordered the lifting of two nuclear-armed bombers from the base in Vladivostok, which had the mission to bomb the US troops stationed at Pusan and Inchon. Ignoring the Soviet warning, MacArthur escalated and ordered the bombers stationed in Japan to attack Vladivostok as well as the Chinese cities of Shenyang and Harbin (Gaddis, p. 52). The situation was de-escalated only as a result of an exemplary mobilization of the international community that, aware of the risk, asked the USA to abandon General MacArthur's crazy plans. Following those protests and the rational calculations that were made by US politicians in April 1951, President H. Truman decided to remove General MacArthur from office. The decision to dismiss the general was one of the most unpopular decisions made by President H. Truman who argued his point of view that if it had not happened the world would have been headed for the Third World War: *"I thought a lot about it and finally decided that there were times when he wasn't exactly in his head. And there was never anyone around him to keep him in line. (…). Why the hell, if he had his way, he'd take us into World War III and blow up two-thirds of the world".* (Time, 1973).

After the death of the Soviet dictator, Joseph Vissarionovich Stalin, in 1953, one of his trusted men, the former political commissar, the hero of Stalingrad, Nikita Khrushchev, was promoted to the leadership of the USSR. Stalin's successor tried to recommend himself as the "reformist" leader of the USSR, who wanted to rebalance the country after the "great Stalinist terror".

THE 1962 CUBAN MISSILE CRISIS

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Unfortunately, Nikita Khrushchev was not very interested in the subject. In fact, he wanted to hide from the world his plan to reorganize the internal policy of the Soviet state, a policy that remained known as *"de-Stalinization",* using that diversion. He promoted the false idea that he would reject the cult of personality and would like to return to the principles of collective leadership (Băncilă, 2015, p. 193). In fact, all those supposed reforms masked his energetic actions to eliminate his political opponents. Like his predecessors, V.I. Lenin and I.V. Stalin, N. Khrushchev devised a plan to discredit his candidates, the process of de-Stalinization serving him well to force them into exile or even sentence them to death. One of the most dangerous opponents, Lavrentiy Pavlovich Beria, was accused of treason, terrorism and counter-revolutionary activity and sentenced to death (Knight, 1993, p. 192). Once his power was consolidated, N. Khrushchev devoted himself to foreign policy, through which he tried to increase the prestige and influence of the USSR in the world. His nuclear programme remained a priority. Thus, he became the protagonist of the tensest moment of the Cold War, the Cuban Missile Crisis.

In spite of the international commitments made by N. Khrushchev, he never ceased to use nuclear terror to intimidate the ideological opponent. The greatest challenge of the Cold War occurred on 14 October 1962, when a U-2 operated by the US Air Force flew over the airspace of the island of Cuba and identified on its territory several launch pads for Soviet medium-range missiles.

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Taking into account that at the beginning of the 1960s there was no technology necessary to intercept the enemy's missiles, the probability of avoiding a nuclear disaster was minimal. According to the plans made at the highest level of the leadership of the two states,

it was desirable that when one of them would have taken the decision to initiate nuclear bombings, it would have the possibility to totally annihilate the capabilities of the opponent, otherwise risking its own self-destruction. In his book, *"Geopolitics and Geostrategy"*, Paul Claval mentioned that Georgy Malenkov, Prime Minister of the USSR between 1953 and 1955, stated that: *"a nuclear conflict could have such consequences for the country that initiates it that victory would lose its meaning".* (Claval, 2001, p. 108). The analysis continued to dominate the foreign policy of the two states, each of them weighing any situation that could have escalated to a nuclear conflict.

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At the time of the outbreak of the Cuban Missile Crisis, the two countries had made significant progress in the construction of nuclear missile submarines. Each of the two adversaries possessed several dozen of such devices that could remain submerged even for several months, during which time they could move undetected to a sufficiently small distance from the target (Ib., p. 109). Even if all the land targets were initially hit, the undetected submarines could in turn eliminate a large part of the targets in the enemy territory.

The most important problem that should have been managed, however, arose when both powers developed multiple warhead missiles. Each missile could carry between 6 and 15 nuclear warheads that could hit different targets and could be launched from the depths of the planetary ocean from the submarines of the two states (Tămaș, 1999, p. 205). These vectors carrying nuclear weapons had the ability to move without much difficulty on about 70% of the planet's surface, their location being particularly difficult to detect.

CONCERNS OF CIVIL SOCIETY AND ACADEMIA FOR THE RESOLUTION OF THE NUCLEAR CRISIS

After the end of the *Cuban Missile Crisis*, the two superpowers started a series of discussions regarding the identification of the optimal solution to reduce the nuclear arsenal and to compel other states to give up their nuclear programmes. The first step was taken in 1963 when, through the signed treaty, the two agreed to give up surface tests (Kissinger, 2015, p. 239). Subsequent discussions led to new commitments that materialized in 1968 with the signing of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (Ib., p. 271), to which Great Britain also joined. The other two nuclear powers recognized at that time, China and France, signed the treaty in 1992, and a number of states such as India and Pakistan categorically refused to sign it. The two superpowers pledged to support the world's states to develop their civilian nuclear programmes in exchange for signing the treaty. An unprecedented situation was created by North Korea which, after initially agreeing to sign the agreement, withdrew in 2003 and developed its nuclear weapons programme, which it successfully completed in 2006 by detonating its first nuclear bomb. Despite this failure, the treaty contributed significantly to reducing the number of nuclear powers, states such as Iraq, Syria, Iran, South Africa, Brazil or Argentina being stopped from continuing their nuclear programmes (Ib., p. 272).

In 1983, the American astronomer Carl Sagan developed a theory of the disaster that could affect Terra in the event of a nuclear war. He claimed that the huge amount of dust and smoke that would have been released into the atmosphere could have absorbed almost 99% of the sun's brightness, thus producing a true nuclear winter.

The possibility of attacks on large urban agglomerations has led the states of the world to identify solutions to reduce the possible loss of human life. The political class and civil society have laid the foundations for a long-term relationship based on mutual respect and the achievement of common goals (Ib., p. 239). During the 1950-1960 period, in the American academic environment (Harvard, Caltech, MIT universities), there were several meetings in which the development of a doctrine of the *"limited use"* of atomic weapons was discussed (Ib., p. 268). It was proposed that they would be used only on the battlefield or that they would engage exclusively military targets.

All these elements created a state of tension at the societal level. Thus, atomic weapons ceased to represent only a preoccupation of the military and political decision-makers. Many academics began to promote pacifist ideas and made calculations that attempted to determine the effects that a nuclear war might produce. In 1983, the American astronomer Carl Sagan developed a theory of the disaster that could affect Terra in the event of a nuclear war. He claimed that the huge amount of dust and smoke that would have been released into the atmosphere could have absorbed almost 99% of the sun's brightness, thus producing a true nuclear winter. The calculated interval of lack of sunlight, between 6 months and 2 years, would not have been the only effect created. There was talk of radioactive contamination, acid rain, destruction of the ozone layer and many other problems that initially could have led to the extinction of plants and animals and later humans (Sagan, Pollack, Ackerman, Toon, Turco, 1983, pp. 1283-1292).

In 1981, the Home Office simulated the possible consequences of a nuclear attack on Great Britain. In the first 15 days after the Soviet attack occurred, 45.3 million people could have died, and other 3 million would have been seriously injured. Similar calculations were made in the USA, which estimated that in the event of an attack by the USSR, at least 100 million people could have died (Claval, ib., p. 109). This type of analysis produced the expected result and led the political people in the governance of the two superpowers to be cautious and analyse very carefully any of the situations that could have led to such a catastrophe.

The two superpowers disputing their primacy within the system were required to negotiate to identify solutions that would avoid nuclear winter. Despite the unpredictability that continued to dominate the relations between the two political-military blocs and to back up the arms race, political leaders were willing to negotiate.

Another important contributor to the securing of atomic weapons was the political scientist Francis Fukuyama who spoke of the solidarity of the two major nuclear powers (Fukuyama, 2007), coining the term *"political prudence".* He insisted on increasing the level of collaboration between the politicians of the two states with the objective of identifying solutions capable of limiting proliferation and reducing the number of nuclear warheads in use. More than ever in history, the two superpowers disputing their primacy within the system were required to negotiate to identify solutions that would avoid nuclear winter. Despite the unpredictability that continued to dominate the relations between the two political-military blocs and to back up the arms race, political leaders were willing to negotiate. Unexpectedly, that strategy created exactly the opposite effect, the nuclear threat, based on the principle of producing massive damage, deterred the use of such devices and also prevented the outbreak of a classic conflict. This effect produced especially on the psychological level has remained known in history as *nuclear peace*. The only leader who was not intimidated by the weapons of the two superpowers was Mao Zedong who declared that the state he led was prepared to sacrifice even a few million lives in exchange for preserving political independence (Harris, 1965, p. 90).

CONCLUSIONS

Despite all the commitments made and the possible risks that would have resulted from a nuclear war, the two superpowers continued to allocate significant sums of money to their nuclear programmes and to accumulate numerous devices. In 1991, at the end of the Cold War, it was estimated that the two superpowers together possessed approximately 20,000 nuclear warheads (USSR – 9,537 and USA – 8,772) (Ib., p. 112), a legacy that created numerous problems in the years that followed. Nuclear weapons in use or in stock had to be maintained and guarded, which posed financial problems for the Russian Federation and the other successor states of the USSR on whose territory such weapons remained stored. Even if the political leadership of those states had assumed through international treaties the limitation of the nuclear arsenal and the possibility of using it, there was no guarantee that those devices could have fallen into the hands of terrorist groups. This type of threat had not been taken into account until that moment, but in the new international system created, non-state actors had become the equals of nation states.

Moreover, after the attack of the Russian Federation on Ukraine, on 24 February, 2022, the world has been once again faced with a new Cold War. The outbreak of the crisis in Ukraine and the military impasse in which the Russian leadership has entered have brought the *"nuclear solution"* back to the attention of political decision-makers. Several times during the course of hostilities, the Russian Federation has set *"red lines"* and expressed its intention to use nuclear weapons. Using the experience resulting from the previous confrontations in which the use of the nuclear bomb was discussed, I believe that the international community will find the optimal solution that will defuse this crisis and the nuclear option will still remain a deterrent.

ROMANIAN MILITARY THINKING

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