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FROM DETERRENCE TO CONUNDRUM: UNDERSTANDING THE EMERGING GLOBAL NUCLEAR ORDER AND HOW TO APPROACH IT

Gregory O. Hall, *University of Kentucky, USA*

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The world has not experienced the detonation of atomic weapons in war since the US attacks on Japan in 1945, but analysts believe that we are now closer to nuclear war than at any time since then (i.e., the famous "Doomsday Clock" now stands at 89 seconds before "midnight"). I contend that we have entered a global nuclear conundrum. We are trapped in this situation because states pursue nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation while at the same time they are selectively privileging proliferation. Furthermore, states perpetuate dangerous regional conflicts that easily can escalate to the level of nuclear confrontations. This is true for states in both the Global North and the Global South. As long as this situation persists, it will be impossible to achieve progress in confronting the worsening nuclear threat. The problem cannot be solved under these circumstances.

Nuclear weapons are the most powerful implements of war that exist. These weapons and supportive technologies ensure rapid and widespread killing and destruction by harnessing and then releasing massive amounts of energy. According to Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) 2024 estimates, there are 12,121 nuclear weapons in the world; the United States and Russia together possess almost 90% of that total. Among the remaining seven nuclear-weapon states (NWS), China, Pakistan,

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India, and North Korea are the leading players in modernizing and increasing their arsenals.

The threat posed by these weapons has been increasing and diversifying steadily since the 1960s: there is an urgent need to bridge the perceptual "North–South divide" that persists. Potter and Mukhatzhanova (2012) reminded us of the work to be done in the West to overcome long-standing attitudes of "indifference, ignorance, and unilateralism" related to Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) perspectives and politics regarding the nuclear threat. NAM is the world's next largest organization representing the countries of the Global South, after the United Nations.[1] At the same time, we are reminded that NAM must address nuclear proliferation initiatives among members including India, North Korea, and Pakistan (Potter and Mukhatzhanova 2012, 10–15, 37–38, 155–57, 139–40). All parties must find new opportunities and develop new frameworks that will improve the global-security environment, build trust, manage regional conflicts, and—most important—reach consensus on a new set of values and norms focused on areas including regular consultation and communication, deterrence, disarmament, arms control, and non-proliferation. We are presented with an opportunity to design a new and more stable nuclear order. This order will rest on two pillars or constituencies (i.e., leaders and policy makers and global society) and, from their interplay, the requisite values, norms, policies, and frameworks for security will be formed.

Increasingly, observers question whether there is a future for arms control and disarmament. US–Soviet/Russian bilateral agreements such as the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, and the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty have been scrapped or are in jeopardy. Multilateral initiatives such as the Conference on Disarmament, the United Nations First Committee, and the Special Sessions on Disarmament have been ineffective for years. Other multilateral nuclear agreements, including the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, are moribund. Some observers even question whether a mass exodus from the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (commonly known as the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty or NPT) could be on the horizon.

A new North–South dialogue on the nuclear threat would require reexamination of important realities and "uncomfortable truths" that sustain the deep divide among NWS and non-NWS throughout the Global South. For example, many non-NWS have long questioned the commitment of NWS to pursue disarmament in "good faith," as prescribed in the NPT (Article VI). Potter and Mukhatzhanova (2012, 45–47) wrote about the US emphasis on non-proliferation versus the NAM/Global South emphasis on disarmament. Other major issues include nuclear Israel, nuclear North Korea, and the glaring lack of support among NWS for the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons. Fear and mistrust abound. We are stuck.

Decades of arms races, miscalculation, and the proliferation of other forms of weapons of mass destruction (WMD), as well as major advances in military technology (e.g., delivery vehicles including hypersonic missiles and lethal autonomous weapons), have brought us to the current situation. Moreover, hostile rhetoric among the NWS about nuclear weapons and their use is increasing. Much of this is from the Kremlin and its allies during Russia's current war in Ukraine. However, as Gerson (2007) and others have outlined, the United States has a long history of issuing nuclear threats in its own various disputes. Such rhetoric heightens mistrust and instability within already-fraught bilateral relationships and ultimately provokes confrontation. Can we continue to expect that nuclear deterrence will "hold" in our increasingly fraught geopolitical environment?

Observers use terms such as nuclear multilateralism, nuclear multipolarity, nuclear regionalization, and even nuclear "disorder" to describe the present global situation. Narang (2014) and others have explored the regional dynamic. Other scholars have examined the great-power triangular nuclear dynamic (i.e., China, Russia, and the United States) (Hall 2023, 50–53). The nuclear "club" has become more diverse since the 1990s, with conflicts being played out in various regions—for example, Eastern Europe/Former Soviet Union, Middle East, South China Sea, and Taiwan Strait. Under these circumstances, it is critical to understand important dynamics related to counterparts' leadership and their domestic environments. This could not be more true in the evolving multilateral nuclear order.

Conflicts are more likely to spiral out of control as antagonists strive to "prevail." Making faulty assumptions and misreading counterparts' aims risks actions and reactions that easily could escalate conflicts. Hughes and Kuznick (2024) coined a term for this: "escalation escalator." What would it look like to "win" and "lose" in conventional conflicts fought among NWS? Given power asymmetries among national actors, it certainly would be tempting to "go nuclear" to avert defeat in a conventional war. Of particular concern are the Russia–Ukraine, China–Taiwan/United States, and Iran–Israel conflicts. Because it has become evident in recent months that Ukraine will neither prevail in this war nor regain any of its lost territories, would the United States consider providing Ukraine with nuclear technologies and support to stave off their defeat? What about China and the United States? At what point would a conventional war over Taiwan escalate to the nuclear level? How do we explain the nuclear-deterrence dynamic in the context of the festering conflict between Israel and Iran? Regional-level conventional wars already are horrendous, but escalation to the WMD level could be catastrophic. In the final analysis, in the opinion of this author, probably the surest way to avoid a nuclear exchange of any type is to better manage regional conflicts while they are still in the conventional phase.

We are presented with an opportunity to design a new and more stable nuclear order.

We find ourselves in a nuclear conundrum. Interest in pursuing arms control and disarmament appears to be waning in many quarters, and outer space could be the next venue for furthering the global nuclear competition. Space limitations do not allow for a fuller consideration of these suggestions, so I briefly list two pillars of recommendations and strongly emphasize the need to engage across the Global North and the Global South. Western leaders and strategists should undertake

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"minilateralist" initiatives on nuclear issues, engaging their counterparts in select countries who maintain strong relations with China and/or Russia. It is difficult to imagine that governments will be motivated to invest the level of energy and resources in diplomacy that produced the arms-control agreements of the 1980s. Nevertheless, it is hoped that these suggestions contribute to the nuclear-security discourse. The first pillar is composed of recommendations for leaders and policy makers and would prioritize no nuclear threats and intimidation; no warring in the vicinity of nuclear power plants; no first use; humans being in control in all phases of the decision to launch nuclear weapons; and resolving conventional conflicts.

The second pillar includes suggestions for global society (notably, scholars, practitioners, and civil society) and would prioritize a (re)commitment to engaging diverse (especially non-Western) peoples and perspectives; and expansive use of simulation and gaming nuclear conflicts (beginning in secondary school) to highlight the regions and issues discussed in this article. The proceedings of these programs could be shared with various non-governmental organizations, governments, and especially the multilateral disarmament bodies for their further analysis and deliberation.

Players within the two constituencies must want to lessen the role of nuclear weapons in international politics. Whereas leaders and policy makers will control aspects such as resources and communications, global-society actors will bring energy, urgency, and innovative ideas to the discussion. Not only must the two pillars endeavor to become larger, global, and more diverse, they also must continually develop and explore new opportunities to grow and work together—that is, to broaden and deepen the web of interactions—to meet the security challenges of our time. The Doomsday Clock is ticking for refocusing efforts to break out of our global nuclear conundrum. The problem is complex, but we still can solve it if we try.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The author declares that there are no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research. ■

NOTE

1. NAM's founding principles and goals, which were adapted largely from the 1955 Bandung Conference of Asian and African nations, continue to receive strong support within the organization and throughout the Global South. They include equality, economic cooperation, nuclear energy for peaceful purposes, peaceful coexistence, and mutual non-aggression and non-interference in domestic affairs.

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MEDIOCENTRICITY OF THE WAR BETWEEN RUSSIA AND UKRAINE IN THE CONTEXT OF NUCLEAR ARMS THREAT

Teresa Sasińska-Klas, *University of Information Technology and Management, Rzeszów, Poland*

Weronika Świerczyńska-Głownia, *Jagiellonian University, Kraków, Poland*

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Public Opinion in a Democratic System

From the 1990s to the present, we have been observing a process of increasing democratization of life in Central and Eastern European countries and, simultaneously, in other parts of the world, a deepening crisis of democratic ideals. The media often is blamed as the main culprits in this process, suggesting that it significantly contributes to the decline of active civic attitudes. In other words, it weakens the processes of political participation and leads to a regression of democratic institutions (Huntington 1968). A critical approach to this issue has been developed in the social sciences—including political science, political sociology, and communication theory—in discussions about broadly understood participatory democracy (Dalton 2004).

On February 24, 2022, Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, which continues to this day, and it is difficult to expect a resolution to this armed conflict in the near future. The topic of the war between Russia and Ukraine is at the center of media attention, and citizens gather information from the media regarding how the armed conflict is unfolding and what forms it takes. Poland shares a border with both Russia and Ukraine, as well as Belarus, which actively supports Russia's military actions in Ukraine. Therefore, the fear and concerns, as well as the reactions of Polish society regarding the ongoing war, are currently at the forefront of research concerning public opinion in Poland. From the Polish perspective, the nuclear threat is perceived as closer and more immediate and direct (Research Report No. 67, 2024).

Celiński (2013) and Szpunar (2017) analyze how the media reconstruct and deconstruct culturally established ways of understanding and explaining the changes occurring in the media and, more broadly, how they engage in these transformations. Beyond the media's internal evolution, a major external factor revealing shifts in Polish social awareness since 2022—and intensifying the sense of military threat reported by the media—is Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine.

Mediocrity of War

Mediocentricity—as indicated by researchers including the prominent German media scholar Siegfried Zielinski (2011a)—has become a social fact, which is clearly confirmed by the war in Ukraine. This means that the autonomy and strength of media communication are greater than social factors. By focusing on the media sphere, it is accepted that the media is a fundamental factor of social change.

The media plays an autonomous and external role relative to the social system, and it shapes this social system (i.e., the theory of technological determinism). Although it focuses on the media sphere, by informing public opinion about the war, it increasingly demonstrates that this issue is broadly outlined in an

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