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The quest for a world without warheads

Is this the age of strategic nuclear piracy?

Jean-Marie Collin

Eight decades after Hiroshima, nuclear deterrence is back in vogue. But while nuclear powers pump money into modernising their arsenals, two thirds of UN members have signed a treaty to ban them.

Despite commitments made in 1968's treaty to 'facilitate the cessation of the manufacture of nuclear weapons', those in possession of them have never given disarmament a chance

The destruction of Hiroshima by a US atomic bomb on 6 August 1945 'inaugurate[d] a new historical epoch', according to the Austrian philosopher Günther Anders (1). He was less concerned with the power struggle between the US and the Soviet Union than with the radical shift that had taken place: humanity now had the means to bring about its own demise.

Eighty years later, the risk of apocalypse endures. Just nine states - the US, UK, Russia, France, China, India, Pakistan, North Korea and Israel (though this last has never officially acknowledged its status as a nuclear power) - possess more than 12,000 nuclear warheads (2). In addition, 40 or so other countries have defence policies linked to nuclear armament, either through NATO membership or agreements with nuclear powers (such as that between Belarus and Russia).

Despite commitments made in the 1968

Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) to 'facilitate the cessation of the manufacture of nuclear weapons, the liquidation of all their existing stockpiles, and the elimination from national arsenals of nuclear weapons and the means of their delivery', those in possession of 'the bomb' have never really given disarmament a chance. Current nuclear programmes are shaped by decisions taken in the 2000s, a period of relative stability in relations between major powers, and preceding the war in Ukraine, which has seen Russia threaten to press the red button. The production process for nuclear weapons is lengthy, with between 20 and 30 years from an initial political decision to manufacture and commissioning.

France's continuing airborne nuclear capability is a clear example of its decision not to disarm. In accordance with a schedule drawn up in the 1990s, medium-range air-to-ground missiles (ASMP) were replaced with an 'im-

proved' version (ASMP-A) at the end of the 2000s. A mid-life modernisation programme was then launched in 2016, enabling the two existing strategic squadrons to be equipped with a 'renovated' vector (ASMPA-R) between 2024 and 2035. The ASN4G missile, in development since 2014, will then take over from ASMP-A around 2035 and has an estimated service life of 20 years.

The same goes for China, which initiated intensive development of its nuclear capabilities in the 2010s, when it possessed 175 deployed nuclear warheads (3). Its main motivation seems to have been the idea that a sizeable arsenal strengthens deterrence - a conviction shared by both Washington and Moscow. Beijing's 'peace through strength' (4) strategy has made China the world's third-largest nuclear power. The *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* estimates that it now has 600 warheads.

Escalating to de-escalate

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Recent developments in international relations have provided fertile ground for the return of defence policies based on nuclear deterrence. While this has long existed, it is now being flaunted more openly. Russia's aggressive strategy of escalating to de-escalate has seen it issue repeated nuclear threats, causing France to put three of its four nuclear-armed ballistic missile submarines (SS-BNs) on alert (5). In 2018 President Donald Trump boasted about the size of his nuclear button to North Korea's Kim Jong-un, who was conducting his own series of ostentatious nuclear tests.

Since beginning his second term, Trump has cast doubt on the dependability of the US security umbrella. In this context, the Europeanisation of the French deterrent - championed by prime minister Alain Juppé in 1995, then by Nicolas Sarkozy in 2008, and given fresh impetus by Emmanuel Macron since 2017 - is attracting unprecedented interest, in particular from German chancellor Friedrich Merz.

Possession of a nuclear arsenal is often presented as natural, permanent and without consequences. But it weakens the credibility of order established by the NPT, which seeks to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons. The treaty promotes détente and cooperation with a view to reducing arsenals, enlisting the help of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), created in 1957, to do so. The NPT has helped to limit proliferation. But its core aim of nuclear disarmament, partially implemented during the 1990s, is now being ignored by nuclear powers. How can the treaty's goals be achieved if governments, in this case those of France and its allies, continue to insist on the importance of these weapons for their own security?

Despite commitments made in 1968's treaty to 'facilitate the cessation of the manufacture of nuclear weapons', those in possession of them have never given disarmament a chance

This stance undermines their ability to advocate for non-proliferation. On 1 May 2025 South Africa pointed this out at the third preparatory committee meeting for the NPT's review conference in spring 2026. The drift, taken to its conclusion, would stymie all criticism of Russia, which has been stationing nuclear weapons in Belarus since 2024. In the same vein, it is hypocritical of pro-nuclear European states to tolerate the illegal attack on Iran by Israel (which does not recognise the NPT) and the US. The attack was launched on the basis of Iran's unconfirmed intention to acquire the bomb - although nuclear powers themselves do not fully comply with their obligations to nuclear disarmament.

We risk entering what neoconservative political scientist Thérèse Delpech in 2005 called an 'era of strategic piracy' (6). At the time she imagined a 'classic' proliferation scenario in which the usual suspects like North Korea, China and Iran could start a chain reaction in Asia and the Middle East. But while her analysis partly holds (Iran does not have the bomb), Delpech overlooked the role of supposedly democratic states (France, UK, US) and their allies in this dangerous situation.

These major players still root their security policies in deterrence. In November 2024 Macron described the world as being made up of 'herbivores and carnivores', suggesting a simplistic opposition between 'responsible' and 'irresponsible' powers (7). But the current dead-

lock cannot be attributed to any particular regime type. Whether liberal or authoritarian, nuclear powers adhere to deterrence theory, which is based on a constant threat to unleash weapons of mass destruction on political, economic and military centres of power - and thereby inflict mass civilian casualties. This makes it difficult to distinguish 'responsible' from 'irresponsible' states.

Obscuring another vision of security?

Nuclear powers are trying to obscure another vision of security, one supported by a majority of governments and grounded in international law. This vision emerged during the NPT's eighth review conference in 2010, which gave rise to a series of studies on the consequences of both deliberate and accidental nuclear explosions, as well as on the need to develop a long-term 'humanitarian approach' to security.

So-called disarmament states opposed to nuclear weapons (including South Africa, Mexico, Malaysia, New Zealand, Austria and Ireland) then demanded a total ban covering use, stockpiling, financing and threats. Adopted in 2021, the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) is a necessary prelude to moving on from the nuclear security vision. A system must be banned before it can be eliminated - not the other way round. Under pressure from global condemnation, Russia and the US removed biological and chemical weapons from their arsenals following conventions banning such weapons in 1972 and 1993.

The same logic must be applied to nuclear weapons, now outlawed by the TPNW. Both former US defence secretary Robert McNamara (in a speech at the

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UN on 24 May 2005) and Pope Francis (during a speech in Hiroshima on 24 November 2019) declared these weapons to be immoral. The TPNW was adopted by 122 countries (out of 193 members) on 7 July 2017 at the UN General Assembly and 'condemn[s] unequivocally any and all nuclear threats, whether they be explicit or implicit'. This broad coalition of countries will not 'rest until the last state has joined the Treaty, the last warhead has been dismantled and destroyed and nuclear weapons have been totally eliminated from the Earth' (8).

The TPNW's follow-up sessions have opened an unprecedented debate on these governments' 'security concerns' (9). Signatory states point out that deterrence theory is fraught with uncertainty and carries significant risk of 'calamitous developments' being prevented by 'luck rather than procedure' (10). They are referring to incidents such as the Cuban missile crisis in 1962, and the false alarm detected at the last minute by Stanislav Petrov in 1983 (11). In both these cases, a stroke of luck - rather than the rationality of deterrence - prevented nuclear war.

Note(s):

Despite commitments made in 1968's treaty to 'facilitate the cessation of the manufacture of nuclear weapons', those in possession of them have never given disarmament a chance

(1) Günther Anders, 'Reflections on the H-Bomb', *Dissent*, spring 1956.

(2) Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 'World nuclear forces,' *SIPRI Yearbook*, 2024.

(3) Hans M Kristensen and Robert S

Norris, 'Chinese nuclear forces, 2010', *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 1 November 2010.

(4) Tong Zhao, 'The real motives for China's nuclear expansion', *Foreign Affairs*, 3 May 2024.

(5) Jean-Louis Lozier, 'Ukraine: un changement d'ère nucléaire' (Ukraine: a change of nuclear era), *Politique étrangère* 3, 2022.

(6) Thérèse Delpech, *Savage Century: Back to Barbarism*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2013 (first published in French 2005).

(7) Rebecca Hersman, 'European Trilateral Track 2 Nuclear Dialogues, 2019 Consensus Statement', Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), 13 March 2020.

(8) First Meeting of States Parties to the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, 'Our commitment to a world free of nuclear weapons', 23 June 2022.

(9) 'Report of the coordinator of the consultative process on security concerns of States under the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (Austria)', 20 February 2025.

(10) Ibid.

(11) Ward Wilson, *Five Myths about Nuclear Weapons*, Mariner, New York, 2013.