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ESCAPING THE TRAP: WHY WAR MAKES NUCLEAR DISARMAMENT INEVITABLE

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The return of high-intensity warfare in Europe, the rise of Sino-American rivalries, the erosion of arms control treaties and the normalisation of nuclear blackmail have brought the nuclear issue back to the forefront of international security. Nuclear arsenals did not disappear after the Cold War: they are being modernised, diversified and are once again becoming instruments of political signalling, whilst the line between deterrence, intimidation and operational readiness is becoming increasingly blurred. In this context, advocating for nuclear disarmament is not a moral stance detached from reality, but a strategic position based on a clear observation: the more numerous, sophisticated and integrated into military doctrines nuclear weapons are, the greater the risk of their intentional, accidental or miscalculated use.

This argument faces a recurring counter-argument: that nuclear weapons have prevented major wars between great powers and are therefore a necessary evil. Yet strategic history shows not so much robust stability as a series of crises managed on the brink of disaster. Deterrence does not eliminate risk; it claims to manage it through the threat of mass destruction. Yet this management becomes increasingly unstable as command chains become digitised, artificial intelligence speeds up decision-making, doctrines of use become more flexible, nuclear powers invest in more ‘usable’ weapons, and hybrid conflicts blur the thresholds. As highlighted by SIPRI in its *Yearbook 2025*, a new nuclear arms race is emerging at a time when control regimes are highly fragile, with the risk of an increase in deployments not only by the US and Russia but across the board following the expiry of New START Treaty in February 2026.

The sudden resurgence of the nuclear threat

For nearly two decades after the end of the Cold War, some members of the Western elite believed that nuclear weapons belonged to a bygone strategic era. The overall reduction in Russian and American stockpiles, the expansion of non-proliferation standards and the priority given to counter-terrorism seemed to confirm this view. This period masked a more sobering

reality: the nuclear powers' dependence on their arsenals has never ceased. In March 2026, the Federation of American Scientists (FAS) estimated the total number of nuclear warheads worldwide at 12,187, of which 9,745 were in potentially deployable military stockpiles, including approximately 4,012 strategic and tactical weapons deployed on missiles or aircraft, of which nearly 2,100 are maintained on high operational alert, primarily by Russia and the United States, but also by France.

These figures do not represent a passive remnant of arsenals inherited from the 20th century; they describe actively modernised forces. SIPRI highlights that almost all nuclear powers are pursuing intensive modernisation programmes, upgrading delivery systems, command systems, warheads and associated infrastructure. China is now believed to possess at least 600 warheads and has been increasing its arsenal by around 100 warheads per year since 2023, whilst the United States and Russia, which together possess around 90% of the world's nuclear weapons, could increase their deployments if no framework to replace the New START treaty is agreed.

The danger also lies in the renewed political role of nuclear weapons. Since the large-scale invasion of Ukraine, Russia has brought the rhetoric of nuclear threat back to the fore as a tool of strategic intimidation. Even when actual use does not occur, the threat alone alters the calculations of the actors involved, affects external support and transforms conventional warfare into a conflict under the shadow of nuclear war. It is precisely here that the theory of deterrence reveals its fragility: if nuclear weapons are meant to protect peace, why do they so easily become an instrument of coercion in a war of aggression? The political use of the threat confirms that these weapons are not merely defensive. They are also tools of coercion, for securing military gains and for blurring normative boundaries. To assert, as France does, that its nuclear weapons are purely defensive does nothing to alter this reality. As Ban Ki-moon, the former UN Secretary-General, emphasised, '*there are no good hands for wrong weapons*'.

Nuclear deterrence: a false promise of stability

The core of traditional nuclear doctrine rests on the idea that the fear of unacceptable retaliation deters attack. In its most optimistic form, deterrence is said to produce a paradoxical stability: over-armed states would not dare to cross the threshold. However, this interpretation rests on several absurd assumptions, notably the constant rationality of leaders, the robustness of communications, the absence of major technical errors, and the clarity of signals exchanged during a crisis. Yet none of these assumptions is guaranteed in contemporary conflicts. For the leader of a nuclear power, it effectively means making his country's security dependent on his own

belief in the enemy's belief in his adversary's determination to resort to nuclear weapons and expose himself to a devastating retaliation. A dangerous game of poker.

SIPRI emphasises that advances in artificial intelligence, cyber, space, missile defence and quantum technologies are redefining deterrence and defence by creating new sources of instability. The institute also warns that the acceleration of decision-making brought about by these technologies increases the risk of a nuclear conflict breaking out as a result of a misunderstanding, miscommunication or technical accident, or even access to nuclear codes by madmen or terrorists. This assessment is crucial: nuclear stability is undermined not only by the hostile intentions of adversaries, but by the very increasing complexity of the systems designed to maintain it.

Deterrence theory has always underestimated the role of organisational imperfection and chance. Early warning, command and control systems do not exist in a vacuum; they are managed by bureaucracies, fallible individual operators, chains of command and infrastructure vulnerable to stress, misinformation and physical deterioration. The shorter the timeframes become, the greater the temptation to automate certain segments of the assessment or response. Yet automating a chain where the ultimate stake is the use of weapons of mass destruction amounts to shifting the risk, not eliminating it. The promise of perfectly rational deterrence thus becomes a dangerous fiction, as it politically diminishes the urgency of disarmament.

The purportedly stabilising nature of nuclear weapons is all the more questionable given that they do not prevent wars. SIPRI points out that tensions between India and Pakistan briefly led to an armed conflict in early 2025, and cites the risk that strikes on nuclear-related military infrastructure and third-party disinformation could turn a conventional confrontation into a nuclear crisis. We have just noted that a nuclear-armed Israel attacked non-nuclear Iran and that the latter was not deterred from retaliating against Israel. The existence of nuclear arsenals therefore does not eliminate rivalry, escalation or miscalculation. On the contrary, it adds a layer of existential danger to conflicts that would otherwise have clearer limits.

Proliferation as a consequence of insecurity

The current crisis in the nuclear order is fuelling a second danger: the spread of the nuclear temptation. When security guarantees to allies become uncertain and the major powers re-embrace the nuclear weapon as a symbol of status and autonomy and the ultimate assurance of security, other states reassess their options and are tempted to follow suit. In Europe, East Asia and the Middle East, we are witnessing a renewed focus on nuclear status or nuclear sharing

arrangements. The British think tank Chatham House, for its part, highlighted in 2025 and again in 2026 that the uncertainty surrounding US security commitments could fuel new proliferation dynamics, particularly in the Middle East and Asia.

This phenomenon reveals a structural paradox. Advocates of deterrence argue that nuclear weapons protect those who possess them, thereby offering other states a powerful incentive to acquire or host them. Proliferation is therefore not an anomaly external to the deterrence system; it is a logical consequence of it, historically encouraged by the nuclear powers themselves, as research by several experts such as Benoît Pelopidas has shown. As long as nuclear weapons continue to be presented as the ultimate guarantor of security, it will be difficult to convince regional powers to renounce this option in the long term, especially in deteriorating strategic environments.

A strictly managerial approach, which would involve distinguishing between 'responsible' arsenals and 'destabilising' ones, is not sustainable in the long term. It entrenches a politically fragile and legally contested nuclear hierarchy. The Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) has certainly limited the spread of arsenals, but it is also based on a compromise: non-nuclear-weapon states renounce nuclear weapons in exchange for access to civilian nuclear energy under safeguards (IAEA monitoring) and a commitment by the nuclear powers to pursue disarmament negotiations 'in good faith'. When this second pillar—disarmament—appears to have been stripped of its substance by the ongoing modernisation of arsenals, the legitimacy of the regime erodes.

Disarmament is not a utopian dream, but a way out of the trap

In this context, nuclear disarmament must be championed not as a utopian slogan, but as a framework for the gradual reduction of risk. The first step is to **challenge the notion that the world would be safer with modernised, more deployable, more integrated and larger arsenals**. The most recent data suggest the opposite: the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* has set the 'Doomsday Clock' – conceived by several Nobel laureates at the start of the Cold War – to 89 seconds to midnight (catastrophe) in January 2025, then to 85 seconds in January 2026, citing in particular the worsening nuclear risk, the quantitative and qualitative expansion of stockpiles, the erosion of safeguards such as arms control agreements, and the effects of disruptive technologies. Although this clock is symbolic, it encapsulates an expert assessment of the level of systemic danger.

The second step is to **restore international law as a framework for delegitimising nuclear weapons**. The Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW), adopted in 2017 and which

entered into force in 2021, prohibits the development, testing, production, possession, stockpiling, use and threat of use of nuclear weapons, as well as cooperation in these activities. Although no nuclear power, whether a party to the NPT or not, nor any country under a ‘nuclear umbrella’ has acceded to it at this stage, its significance is normative: it reverses the burden of proof. It is no longer up to disarmament to justify its relevance; it is up to the possession of nuclear weapons to justify their compatibility with human security and collective survival, which they are obviously incapable of doing.

The most common objection is practical: what is the point of a ban treaty without the possessors? The answer lies in the history of disarmament norms. The bans on biological weapons (in 1972) and chemical weapons (in 1993), anti-personnel landmines (in 1977) and cluster munitions (in 2008) did not immediately achieve universal adherence to these norms nor prevent states from signing up to them on the grounds that possessor states were exempt, but they transformed the political, financial and reputational costs associated with these weapons. Similarly, the TPNW, by reference to the norms of international humanitarian law, establishes a norm of illegitimacy that already weighs on threat doctrines and associated funding (indeed, the cessation of cooperation between States Parties and non-Parties has an indirect effect on the latter). The treaty also offers a credible legal framework for a risk-reduction policy that cannot be limited to technical arrangements between nuclear powers.

Planning the way out: towards a realistic disarmament strategy

Advocating for disarmament does not mean ignoring the constraints of the transition. A realistic strategy must combine several levels of action, as proposed by IDN. First and foremost, **urgent risk-reduction measures must be reinstated**: the resumption of strategic dialogue channels, safeguards against cyber-operations targeting nuclear systems, increased transparency on doctrines and arsenals, a commitment not to target early-warning infrastructure—including in space—and the re-establishment of a successor framework to the New START Treaty.

At the doctrinal level, the adoption of no-first-use policies and the phased withdrawal from launch-on-alert postures would reduce the risk of a decision being taken under time pressure and would establish mutual trust between nuclear powers, facilitating their gradual and controlled renunciation of their nuclear arsenals. This is the logic that has prevailed in other disarmament agreements: making the possession and use of these weapons illegal has reassured possessors that they would not be threatened by them—as they are destined to disappear—and has encouraged them to accede to the treaties.

Risk reduction must not, however, become a permanent substitute for disarmament. Without a political timetable, technical stabilisation risks simply perpetuating the existence of the weapon. This is why an approach inspired by disarmament advocates, in consultation with all stakeholders (including defence industry workers and the military), remains relevant: it links national and international security to the humanitarian, environmental and civilisational consequences of any nuclear explosion, and serves as a reminder that no credible humanitarian response capability exists in the face of a nuclear detonation over a major city. In other words, the decisive question is not whether deterrence can work most of the time, but whether humanity can reasonably accept basing its security on a system whose failure, however rare, would be irreversible. As we have seen, the nuclear weapon can be both a weapon of genocide and a weapon of collective suicide.

The case for disarmament does not require denying the existence of conflicts; it requires recognising that nuclear weapons exacerbate their potential for destruction. Contemporary warfare demonstrates that these weapons are neither relics nor talismans of stability. On the contrary, they are amplifiers of uncertainty, coercion and systemic vulnerability. In a world where control regimes are crumbling, where regional crises are intertwined and where decision-support technologies can accelerate errors, **disarmament is once again becoming a policy of strategic prudence**. Realism today is no longer about managing the nuclear threat indefinitely; it is about organising a way out of it.