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Multilateral nuclear disorder: Let's rock till we explode

The global nuclear order has so far proven resilient in the face of Russia's war on Ukraine. European engagement through the EU and NATO can help shore up this uneasy equilibrium



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Russia's war against Ukraine is intimately tied to the global nuclear order. The Russian president, Vladimir Putin, has issued countless nuclear threats since February 2022: among other things, warning those who might consider coming to Ukraine's defence of consequences "never seen in your entire history"; placing Russia's nuclear forces on "enhanced combat duty"; and preparing to deploy Russian nuclear warheads in neighbouring Belarus.

The Kremlin has also conditioned arms control talks with the United States on Ukraine, stating that such discussions "cannot be isolated from geopolitical realities" in an attempt to blackmail Washington into giving up on Kyiv. Indeed, the very fact of Russia's war could break the international non-proliferation regime – as countries facing threats to their security may be more likely to seek the bomb, and those that already have it will never give it up.

Yet, the global nuclear order has proven resilient to Putin's challenge. The norms, practices, and institutions of the nuclear age – no matter how unjust – remain largely as they were before the war. Russia's nuclear weapons may dissuade NATO countries from sending troops to fight alongside those of Ukraine. But the alliance's nuclear weapons also deter Russia from attacking the supply hubs in Poland and elsewhere that facilitate Ukraine's self-defence. The nuclear non-use norm remains unbroken, and no new countries have acquired nuclear weapons since Russia's landgrab of Crimea in 2014. Multilateral engagement by Europeans through the EU and NATO can help to shore up this uneasy equilibrium.

Nuclear fissures

EU member states are deeply divided on nuclear matters. One EU country – France – commands a nuclear arsenal of its own. Most others benefit from the United States' nuclear umbrella as members of NATO. Belgium, Germany, Italy, and the Netherlands even host US nuclear weapons on their soil through the alliance's nuclear sharing arrangements. Austria and Ireland, meanwhile, were instrumental in the drafting and adoption at the United Nations of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) in 2017, which seeks to comprehensively ban nuclear weapons; Malta signed up too. Finland and Sweden, which were militarily non-aligned throughout the cold war and after, have now joined NATO, or, in the latter's case, will do so imminently.

EU member states thus represent the full continuum of views towards nuclear weapons. Consequently, the EU's position on nuclear weapons and how to address their risks, threats, and benefits reflects the three pillars of the 1968 Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) as the lowest common denominator: nuclear non-proliferation, access to civilian nuclear energy, and negotiated disarmament. NATO upholds that it will remain a nuclear alliance for as long as nuclear weapons exist. In private, some European leaders might even subscribe to the late British prime minister Margaret Thatcher's view: "I want a war-free Europe. A nuclear-free Europe I do not believe would be a war-free Europe." Their

ranks might have swelled since February 2022. But this diversity of views across the EU also allows member state governments to credibly engage different global constituencies, as views around the world are no less diverse.

Nuclear treaty proliferation

From 2010 onwards, the “humanitarian consequences of any use of nuclear weapons” began to receive increasing attention in international discussions. Austria and others championed a “Humanitarian Initiative” and pledged to close the legal gap on prohibition that the NPT left open. Ban treaty sympathisers among EU member states have since tried to shift the bloc’s default position. Within the EU, this led to a crystallisation of two subgroups, which, according to one EU official, brought “the worst” out of supporters and opponents alike whenever the TPNW was on the agenda. The result has been an agreement to disagree among EU members, to avoid the elephant in the room and permit progress on other parts of the union’s common security and defence policy agenda.^[1]

The TPNW has neither had quite the effect its proponents hoped for, nor that its opponents feared. Critics of the ban treaty had argued that it would undermine the NPT regime. But since its entry into force in 2021, no signatory of the TPNW has withdrawn from the 1968 treaty. To the contrary, many government statements have stressed the two treaties’ complementarity, as did the final declaration of the first meeting of parties to the TPNW in June 2022.

Where the meeting fell short was in condemning Russia’s nuclear-backed invasion of Ukraine. For all their emphasis on humanitarian principles, ban treaty members’ solidarity with the attacked should have come almost naturally. After all, Ukraine is one of only four countries globally to have relinquished nuclear weapons (the others being Belarus, Kazakhstan, and South Africa). Yet, most delegations refrained from calling out Russia – albeit not all – and the final declaration effectively resorted to nuclear whataboutism, castigating “any and all” nuclear threats. This could turn out to be as much of a roadblock to expanding membership as the rejection of the ban treaty by the countries who would actually do the disarming. Compared to the TPNW, the participation of the US, the United Kingdom, and the Soviet Union in the NPT considerably boosted buy-in from other UN members.

The non-outcome of last year's NPT review conference illustrates another way in which Russia's war has affected consensus-based forums. Whereas the ban treaty meeting avoided taking a stand on the invasion to achieve consensus, a Russian veto on the final day of the NPT conference prevented a joint declaration and with it explicit condemnation of Russia's occupation of the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant. Some delegates reported frustration that the war crowded out discussions on other critical issues, such as emerging and disruptive technologies and their effects on nuclear risks and stability.^[2] Others were disappointed that language on disarmament in the draft did not go far enough. But most considered the conference a success – and none (bar Russia) threatened to block the final statement.

“Gentlemen, you can't fight in here!”

Diplomatic discipline has allowed EU members and their partners to push for farther-reaching condemnation in majoritarian forums such as the International Atomic Energy Agency's board of governors, which adopted three resolutions in 2022 against Russian opposition. European diplomats need to be mindful of the decision-making mechanisms of the forums in which they operate, and acknowledge that the perception of their initiatives by countries in Africa, Asia, and Latin America could evolve as Russia's war drags on. If Europeans push the envelope too far, it could come at the cost of progress on other issues of importance to these countries. In some cases, assembling a coalition for a side statement may be more effective than insisting on specific language for a consensus document. This can also serve to put reluctant countries on the spot. China, for example, has been notoriously

China has been notoriously engage in discussions arsenal and doctrine

unwilling to engage in discussions of its nuclear arsenal and doctrine.

EU member states and NATO allies can adopt other measures to reduce nuclear risks. US-Russian arms control is now on life support, and China's nuclear build-up is accelerating unchecked. Short of formal arms control agreements, the international community is rediscovering risk-reduction, transparency, and confidence-building measures as ways to close off the riskiest pathways for inadvertent and accidental escalation between the nuclear powers. Military-to-military communication channels, for example, can help to de-conflict activities and prevent misunderstandings. NATO allies have also demonstrated unilateral restraint in refraining from mirroring Russia's nuclear bluster, to avoid normalising it.

But, even in an area as seemingly uncontroversial as nuclear risk reduction, not every conceivable measure actually enhances security. And, given Russia's record of deliberate risk manipulation, some might even put Europeans at a distinct military disadvantage. Arguably, Russia has had a little too much confidence about what NATO countries would *not* do in support of Ukraine. Nevertheless, as NATO allies and their partners seek to promote a distinction between responsible and irresponsible – or to some: less and more irresponsible – nuclear behaviour, some risks associated with unilateral steps could still be worth accepting to gain broader international support in the narrative confrontation with Russia (and China).

Europeans should prepare for an era of intense nuclear competition. In addition to Russia's heightened propensity for risk manipulation, there are also growing reasons to doubt Moscow's commitment to non-proliferation: Russia's plan to deploy nuclear warheads to Belarus turns on its head the Kremlin's previous criticism of NATO nuclear sharing arrangements. The Kremlin might also come to believe that selective proliferation – or tacit support for others' nuclear hedging – would create a bigger headache and distraction for the West than for itself. Already, Russia's dependence on Iranian drones for strikes against Ukraine's civilian infrastructure has led to a shift in Moscow's position on negotiations to curb Teheran's nuclear ambitions. Far from the post-cold war era of cooperative threat reduction, Russia is becoming a nuclear rogue.

It is crucial to condemn Russia's behaviour in the broadest possible terms. However, it is the Kremlin's disregard for humanitarian norms and violent rejection of the post-cold war European security architecture that requires Europeans and NATO allies to be able to deter, and if necessary, defeat Russian aggression. Beyond the requirements for effective conventional defence and deterrence, a competitive armaments strategy would give Russia a reason to take seriously Europeans as counterparts in arms control. This would also support the EU's non-proliferation objectives by allowing Washington to shift resources and attention towards the assurance of allies in other regions – given that US nuclear backed security guarantees have long contributed to limiting the spread of nuclear weapons.

The US will in all likelihood follow through on its 'Indo-Pacific pivot' over the coming years, or be forced to do so suddenly in response to Chinese actions. In that scenario, it will only become more imperative for Europeans to present Russia with risks and challenges it would wish to negotiate away – rather than plead in vain for the Kremlin to come to its senses.

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[1] Author's interview with EU official, remote, 2023.

[2] Author's conversations with conference participants, Wilton Park, UK, 2022.

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