The New Doctrines of Deterrence: Power Shifts in the Multi-Polar Nuclear Order

KRISZTINA KOCSIS details the global dynamics of nuclear weaponry in the post-Cold War era.

The Cold War bipolarity between the United States and the Soviet Union was underscored by the possession of nuclear weapons which assured the equal capability of both sides to annihilate their adversary. This delicate balance was referred to as ‘the doctrine of deterrence,’ ‘the politics of fear,’ and especially ‘mutually assured destruction’ (MAD); safety became a ‘sturdy child of terror’(Churchill 1955). The nuclear order of the Cold War divided the world into two ‘magnetic fields,’ which in their gravitation established alliances, or ‘nuclear umbrellas’(Freedman 2019). The power dynamic rested on a seemingly straightforward symmetry. If one superpower were to launch a missile, the other would retaliate. However, with the dissolution of the straightforward bipolarity of the Cold War and the reorganisation of alliance systems, the doctrine of deterrence no longer held. A multitude of states either acquired nuclear weapons or were in the process of developing them. As a result, the doctrine of non-proliferation was developed, which aimed to neutralise a global order inseparably underscored by the presence of weapons of mass destruction (Miller 2019). Still, the ‘non-proliferation regime’ and the institutional establishments around it resulted in a system that solidified the status quo and maintained the hierarchy between the already established ‘haves’ and ‘have-nots’(Ruzicka 2018). The non-proliferation system fails to neutralise the nuclear arena; nuclear weapons continue to underscore the global order. Consequently, the doctrine of deterrence still exists today in the third nuclear era. However, the doctrine has to be redefined: safety is still a ‘sturdy child of terror,’ but the terror of today exists in a complex and tangled web of international relations that is more fragile, more delicate, and ever more unpredictable.

The Cold War’s clear bipolar order disintegrated, which resulted in an even starker imbalance between the two side’s alliances through the unequal development of technological and military capabilities and the diverging number of contemporary allies (Dodds 2013). At the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the two ‘magnetic fields’ changed their gravitational power. The post-Soviet member states gravitated towards the United States and its alliance, while Russia was left without a significant alliance base. Furthermore, the United States defined itself as the upholder of the global order, which created an image as the ‘patron-state’ of not only its growing European alliance but also the multitude of countries aiming to integrate into the institutionalised and alliance-bound international order (Dodds 2013).

With the end of the Cold War’s bipolar nuclear order and the beginning of the proliferation process, the former superpowers and the newly founded nuclear-weapon states (NWS) articulated a new

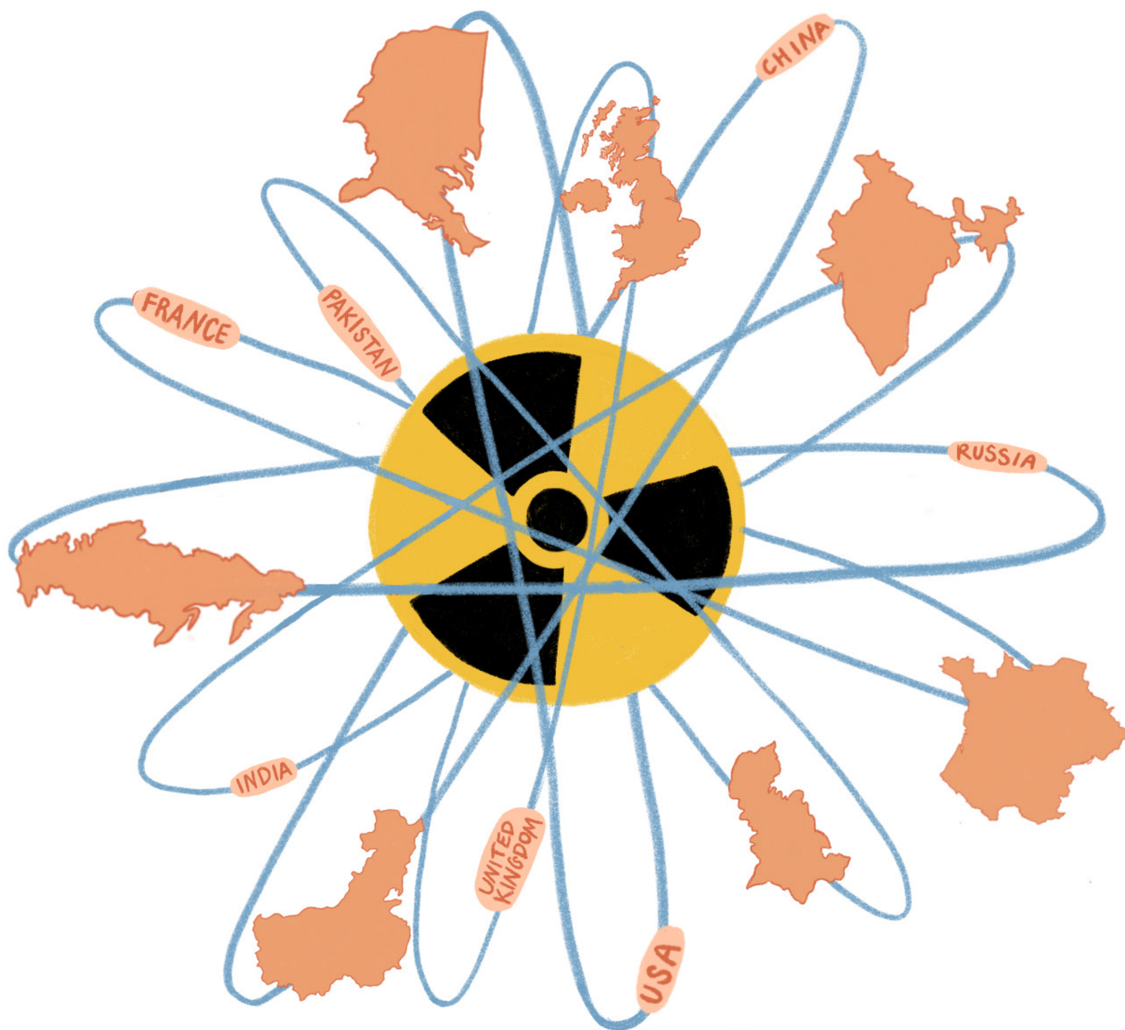

Illustration by Anastassia Kolchanov

narrative, namely that nuclear weapons and their further proliferation were inherently destabilising and that their elimination was desirable (Ruzicka 2018). This reasoning was strengthened by the newer NWS, who were either outside of traditional alliance blocks or loosely tied to them. Institutions were constructed around these concepts. However, these efforts carried an underlying tone of preserving the structural power of the status quo by the already established NWS, due to the knowledge that any further proliferation would disrupt the unique global position they enjoyed. Rising power hierarchies were implemented in the institutional structures of global security and strategic positionality, namely the United Nations Security Council, whose five permanent members (the United States, Russia, China, the United Kingdom and France) are all nuclear powers and dictated the rules of the institutional establishments of the 'nuclear regime'(Lodgaard 2011).

The first regulating body, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), was established in 1957. It was designed primarily for the US and the USSR to oversee the civilian use of nuclear energy by smaller states. However, its regulatory efforts can be easily evaded. The dual-use problem entails that the states which use nuclear energy for peaceful purposes can proceed with the development of nuclear technology for military purposes virtually unnoticed (Młynarski 2017). These issues undermine the IAEA's ability to effectively prevent proliferation. Still, the restriction of states' access to nuclear energy for peaceful means was a structural attack on their economic development. Consequently, the IAEA's work was to monitor the international distribution of nuclear energy and its use (Młynarski 2017).

This surveillance was extended by the signing

of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in 1968. This treaty is considered to be the most comprehensive legal establishment of the 'non-proliferation regime,' established around three main concepts: disarmament of current NWS, non-proliferation, and the peaceful use of nuclear energy (Lodgaard 2011). Due to their structural inequality, the compliance of states is assured on many levels. Weaker states are largely deprived of nuclear energy through NPT-connected trade deals which sets back their economic power, especially for developing countries, but compliance is tied to IAEA monitoring, the breaching of which results in sanctions (Dalton et al. 2013). In the case of NWS, these regulations do not hold, and their pledge for disarmament has not been legally complied with. It is a vaguely promised future endeavour; nevertheless, after an era of significant reduction of nuclear arsenals, currently the modernisation and increasing the number of nuclear weapons is undertaken by the United States, Russia, China and non-Security Council states as well, and non-nuclear states possess little power to enforce the reduction of supplies (Müller 2017).

In the late days of the Cold War, superpower-exercised pressure was crucial in the regime's formation. However, the bipolarity of the Cold War left room for certain states to manoeuvre through the selective membership of nuclear non-proliferation treaties. France and China, for example, were signatories of the IAEA but not of the NPT, maintaining the possibility for the development of weapons. This was also true for states on the 'periphery' of the Cold War order who received less overt supervision from the superpowers but still had the potential to produce nuclear weapons, such as India, Pakistan, South Africa, Brazil, and Argentina (Ruzicka 2018). Yet, the shift of power away from Russia and towards the US allowed American international alliance networks to exercise unprecedented influence on emerging nuclear states. As a result, only four states had the potential to be economically and militarily strong enough to 'allow themselves' to be established nuclear powers after the 1990s: India, Pakistan, Israel and North Korea. For other states, the materially inferior status seemed more beneficial than taking the risk of nuclear production (Ruzicka 2018).

Despite the well-established global hierarchy of nuclear 'haves' and 'have-nots,' underlying issues of extended deterrence are still present (Legvold 2019). The US and Russia, after a period of seemingly peaceful and progressive arms negotiations, are employing increasingly hostile rhetoric and are launching modernisation campaigns (Moniz and Nunn 2019). The United States is ultimately superior in terms of conventional weaponry, which historically relegated nuclear weapons to a lower priority. In contrast, due to Russia's conventional military inferiority during the Cold War, more emphasis was placed on developing nuclear arsenals; this dynamic triggers US preparation in the currently hostile security relationship (Legvold 2019).

China, as an emerging global superpower, presents a fascinating contrast to the aforementioned relationships. The stark imbalance characterising the US-China relationship in the Cold War is now less distinct economically. Even if their nuclear capabilities are still radically asymmetrical, the nuclear component is becoming more dominant in the relationship with China's rapid modernisation efforts. Considering India and Pakistan, their nuclear capabilities have developed as a result of their bilateral regional disputes and asymmetric conventional arms race, and this relationship has barely changed. However, with China and India becoming nuclear powers, regional border disputes are gaining new dimensions, and constructions are a high-risk security environment around the Indian Ocean (Legvold 2019). Israel exercises strict nuclear non-proliferation pressures in the Middle East. North Korea, the least transparent and predictable nuclear power, generates constant preparedness from the United States and makes the Korean Peninsula another high-risk security hotspot (Ruzicka 2018).

These relations are further complicated by

the complexity of adversarial relations. China, India and the United States identify three-way competition which gives a new push to their arms race. Pakistan and Russia remain largely focused on single adversaries, but in the case of Russia, now the opponent's nuclear alliance further polarises the already profound imbalance (Legvold 2019). Sir Lawrence Freedman (2019, 74) argues that in the early stages of the Cold War, 'political order was a possible casualty of nuclear disorder; now it is more likely that the nuclear order can be put at risk as a result of political disorder.' The role of nuclear weapons and their deterrent function has changed since their first invention. They are no longer primarily symbolic tools tied to a notion of balance between two powers and conditional threats between them. Due to their proliferation and the consequent power asymmetry between states owning them, their deterrent effect is defined by the actual potential of their use—a possibility some states emphasise and instrumentalise more than others based on their perceived relational strength or weakness. Even though nuclear weapons today are not in the spotlight of the international system as they used to be at the height of the Cold War, they continue to influence state security narratives. While some states, such as Russia, contribute more significant weight to its nuclear capacities, the United States and its alliance keeps nuclear weaponry less to the centre of everyday political discourse. However, the United States needs to keep its nuclear power within this discourse, as even though it has little interest in nuclear escalation due to its conventional strength, its alliance system maintains reliance on its capacities. Consequently, when signs of conflict escalation are present today, nuclear weapons are more visible and receive heightened importance in state security narratives, even though the potential for an actual nuclear conflict remains negligible. These narratives, however, are indicative of how they became the ultimate symbols of military might and capability to induce terror, something still resembling their initial Cold War roles (Freedman 2019).

The future of the nuclear order is still unknown. Much depends on the new US administration and the alliances or disputes it is willing to develop with its allies and adversaries equally: whether the European network will harmonise its nuclear efforts with those of the US to construct an arms development to complement it, not to replace it in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) (Hagel et al. 2021). In the meantime, new countries are articulating interest in developing nuclear weapons—many of whom are US allies. The future of nuclear politics is to be the result of diplomatic and economic relations first and foremost, but the current state of nuclear deterrence rests on a highly sensitive global security environment with regional disputes and fragile stalemates. However, today's international political order is still underpinned by nuclear weapons which are to different extents instrumentalised by states in their security narratives and discourses, creating a new nuclear order which is still in flux and is far from the straightforwardly defined contours of the Cold War. The future of deterrence is unknown, and there are few reasons for optimism.

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