

Nuclear Weapons and Great Power Politics Are Here to Stay

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When talking about nuclear weapons, it is necessary to clarify some important points before delving into complicated reasoning.

Nuclear weapons are here to stay, and anyone who believes in a progressive denuclearization of the globe is sadly mistaken. Try asking any Indian, Pakistani, Chinese, Russian or American policy-maker what they think about abandoning their nuclear weapons and they will tell you that it will never happen. To believe that a country would be willing to simply abandon its most powerful weapon and means of deterrence is simply unrealistic. Nevertheless, I would like to emphasize in this article how nuclear weapons are crucial to a stable future world order. Any reasonable person possessing a magic wand would wish to make vanish a weapon that is capable of eliminating humanity. The problem is that in the real world, this possibility does not exist and nukes are here to stay.

There is the valid argument that the absence of nuclear weapons would have greatly altered the balance during the Cold War, leading to a massively devastating war between the two superpowers of the time, even if only fought conventionally. In this two-part series I will try to argue how nuclear weapons can, especially in the future, be a guarantor of peace rather than posing the threat of global destruction. One always has to keep in mind the great risk that humanity has placed itself in with the invention of such a destructive weapon: they are a sword of Damocles hanging over the destiny of humanity. For this reason, a balance between great powers is necessary in order to ensure that a nuclear catastrophe can never happen.

In order to be able to advance this analysis in a sensible and realistic way, it is necessary to recall the history of the last century and observe the behaviour of the nations involved. Without focusing too much on the details, it is commonly recognized that the prelude to the First and Second World Wars was characterized by growing clashes between the powers. The composition of the international framework was varied, with countries like Germany, the United Kingdom, Japan, France, the United States and the Russian Empire/Soviet Union in constant competition with each other, stemming from their strong growth at the time combined with their imperialist tendencies. History has shown how a multipolar environment with several powers competing provides the perfect recipe for conflict, resulting in the millions of deaths we saw in the two world wars. In international relations, a multipolar environment is generally held to be unstable and difficult to control and predict by a single power. Not surprisingly, Multipolarity refers to a situation where several powers compete with each other without any one of them being able to dominate one or more of the others. Such an unstable balance has often resulted in one or more of these powers triggering devastating conflicts in an effort to achieve regional or global hegemony.

The conclusion of the Second World War ended the period of Multipolarity, with only two competing global powers remaining on the world stage. The Soviet Union and the United States achieved their maximal aims in terms of post-war influence, fundamentally reorienting international relations. The substantial military and strategic balance between these two powers, leading to a bipolar world order, was characterized by nuclear weapons, a technological innovation that would forever alter the nature of the balance of power between countries.

On August 6, 1945, the world became aware of the destructive power of the atomic bomb when Japan lost about 80 thousand citizens in Hiroshima in a blink of an eye. The second atomic bomb dropped on the city of Nagasaki on August 9, 1945, ushered in a new and delicate reality governing international relations. The balance of power turned decisively in favour of the United States, with all global risks that this entailed. It is now in the public domain that Truman intended to scare Stalin, and impose a new global order favouring the United States, through the practical demonstration of nuclear power visited on Japan. Declassified documents show that the plan for global domination was already in the minds of American military planners before the conclusion of the Second World War. Since the USSR was the only remaining rival power, it should not come as a surprise that the CIA and other policy-makers were contemplating [decapitating the Soviet Union with nuclear strikes](#). The intent was to get rid of the only existing adversary and pave the way for American military, economic, political and cultural domination over the entire globe.

The first part of this analysis leads us to the first counterintuitive conclusion. Although all of humanity is aware of the devastating consequences of nuclear weapons, it was not until August 29, 1949, with the first Soviet nuclear test, that a new balance of power was established. In this context, the term Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD) was coined, referring to the capacity of nuclear-armed powers to obliterate each other in a nuclear exchange. Therefore, such an exchange would not benefit either party, since it would only bring about a nuclear winter from which no winner could emerge.

The pressing need to balance the United States drove the Soviet Union to develop its own nuclear weapons. This need for deterrence remains valid today, with North Korea recently demonstrating this by developing nuclear weapons to deter [aggressive US foreign policy](#). Since the 1950s, Washington has sought to overthrow North Korea's political leadership and expand its sphere of influence throughout the country, as it did with South Korea in the years following the Korean War. But thanks to Pyongyang's nuclear weapons, US plans for invasion and conquest have had to be downsized to empty threats and bluster. The frustration evident in the statements of Washington's hawks derives from the impotence that North Korea's nuclear deterrent reduces them to. In reality, however, North Korea's conventional deterrence alone is enough to give pause to the designs of any potential aggressor designs, a subject I have [covered](#).

That nuclear weapons alter the balance of power in international relations remains as valid today as it ever did. It is important to reach another parallel conclusion concerning situations experienced during the Cold War. Historical examples have emerged recently whereby Russian or American military personnel risked unleashing a nuclear apocalypse as a result of electronic malfunctions or incorrect risk perceptions. But it is nevertheless unsurprising that no nuclear exchange resulted from any of these instances. Human reasoning, even among mortal enemies, pauses to consider the consequences of Armageddon, at the critical moment exercising sufficient doubt on the matter to avert

resorting to the most destructive weapon ever created by man.

I have previously maintained that a nuclear war would not favour anyone and would therefore be [highly unlikely](#). The counterargument often offered is that of the risk of an accident or miscalculation resulting in nuclear conflagration. Yet even this scenario presented itself several times during the Cold War and failed to result in thermonuclear war. Errors are inherent in technology, but history has shown the propensity for good sense to prevail when the stakes are so high.

The case of the Cuban missile crisis is illustrative. Although the US and the USSR were not on the verge of nuclear war in 1962, the tensions reached during those few months are still remembered as one of the most delicate and dangerous moments in history. The reason is clearly linked to all that we have discussed thus far. A war between powers in a bipolar world order would certainly have seen the attempt of one side to overpower the other in an effort to achieve global hegemony. It is easy to imagine a war between superpowers escalating to nuclear warfare, with disastrous consequences for humanity. Once again, we should not be surprised by a de-escalation of the situation. A clarifying call between JFK and Khrushchev ended the Soviet attempt to mirror the threat posed by the Americans in Europe by deploying its own weapons to Cuba, thereby violating the [Monroe Doctrine](#). (In 1962, Washington deployed in Turkey the famous Jupiter missiles, which Moscow considered an existential threat that threatened the doctrine of MAD by nullifying Moscow's retaliatory second-strike capability.

Thanks to a balance of power in a bipolar environment and the danger posed by a nuclear exchange, the possibility of direct conflict between the great powers was avoided throughout the Cold War. In the next and final article, I intend to explain why nuclear-armed powers in a Multipolar World Order decrease the likelihood of a nuclear apocalypse, as counterintuitive as it may seem.

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