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Nuclear Fears: Are We Forgetting Nuclear Dangers?

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Some Western observers have long been lamenting about what they perceive as a fading of nuclear fears among the broader population. In contrast to the generations that lived through Hiroshima or the Cuban Missile Crisis, they argue, the awareness of living under a nuclear Sword of Damocles has given way to “apathy.” Even worse, in numerous polls about what people fear most, nuclear war has moved to the end of the list. As a result of this public disinterest, so the argument continues, mainstream security policy with its fixation on the “dogma” of nuclear deterrence remains unchallenged – a development that supposedly could make nuclear war more likely.¹

If this analysis were correct, it would indeed give cause for concern. Fortunately, however, it is widely off the mark. The intellectual failure of dealing with the nuclear reality is not one of the broader public's, but of the very critics for whom greater nuclear fears seem to equal greater political enlightenment. To be sure, the risks of nuclear deterrence are and will remain high, which is why any sensible security policy must never trivialize them.² However, a closer look reveals that much of the criticism of the supposed nuclear apathy of the Western populace is simply an expression of the critics' frustration about the lack of traction of their own anti-nuclear agenda. And that is just as well. For as the war between Russia and Ukraine demonstrates, a policy based on nuclear fears alone would render the West paralyzed and simply invite more states to challenge Western interests and values – increasing the prospects for war.



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There is nothing wrong with being afraid of nuclear weapons, given their enormous destructive potential. Indeed, it is precisely this fear that moderates international relations – witness the fact that, except for mostly minor skirmishes, no two nuclear powers have ever attacked each other or their allies. Consequently, Western security policies “use” the latent fear of nuclear war to prevent major wars from occurring in the first place.³ However, if the fear of a nuclear inferno becomes the sole determinant of a country’s foreign or security policy, that country would render itself politically impotent, as it would cede the initiative to other, more ruthless (or reckless) actors. If the fear of nuclear war moves center stage, nuclear weapons de-politicize politics by pushing everything else off the agenda. They become an “equalizer” that overrides any differences between democracies and dictatorships or between attackers and defenders. One of the first to recognize this fateful effect was Norman Angell, Nobel Peace Prize laureate and once Britain’s most famous pacifist. In 1947, just two years into the nuclear age, he accused the British “Campaign on Nuclear Disarmament” of wanting to instrumentalize the fear of nuclear Armageddon in favor of an unacceptable policy of “benevolent neutrality” toward the totalitarian Soviet Union.⁴

Nowhere has this de-politicization of the security discourse been more evident than in the protests against NATO’s decision to deploy nuclear missiles in Europe in response to Soviet deployments. The European peace movement, which took to the streets in the early 1980s, was not interested in discussing fundamental political issues. In view of what they believed to be an imminent “Euroshima,” there was no room for debates about the political or ideological roots of East-West antagonism or the different political systems of the adversaries.⁵ The Soviet leadership understood that Western nuclear fears would work to Moscow’s advantage. By persistently invoking the specter of nuclear annihilation, the Soviet Union sought to deflect any discussion about its non-democratic nature or its poor human rights record. The emphasis on “common survival” served as a convenient distraction from the weaknesses of its own system. Why bother about human rights, when the issue at stake was nothing less than the survival of mankind? However, despite massive Soviet support for the European peace movement, Western governments did not yield. The peace movement, which never enjoyed the support of the majority of the broader population, disappeared. A few years later, the Soviet Union collapsed under the weight of its many internal problems – precisely those problems that the peace movement, caught in its real or imagined nuclear fears, never cared to address.

Russia’s attack on Ukraine showed once again that the instincts of Western publics appear more mature than those of many nuclear critics. Putin’s blatant nuclear threats against the West did not cause panic. While many people remain concerned about Putin’s unpredictable behavior, the Western governments’ approach of supporting Ukraine by delivering arms did not lead to mass protests. Understandably, the extent of Western support for Ukraine will remain a matter of lively debate, yet many people seem to grasp the fundamental point that a policy of “He



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who threatens, wins” must not be allowed to prevail. This does not testify to any “apathy” toward nuclear dangers, but to commonsense.

In order to bolster their charge that the broader population does not harbor enough fears of the danger of nuclear weapons, some critics revert to peculiar arguments. For example, one U.S. academic recently suggested that Western societies have become indifferent to nuclear dangers because Hiroshima is now too far in the past.⁶ Apparently, the population is only able to learn from catastrophes that they personally remember (except for the academic himself, whose unique acumen enabled him to recognize the dangers posed by nuclear weapons despite belonging to the same post-Hiroshima generation). But if it is indeed personal memory that shapes policy, what about the Holocaust, which occurred around the same time as the race for the bomb? Has the mass murder of European Jews also lost its horror simply because it happened so long ago? Hardly. The thesis that we now live in a nuclear age without nuclear memory because the deep-seated understanding of the horror of nuclear weapons is now lacking, misses the point. Khrushchev, too, recklessly issued nuclear threats. And President Truman dismissed General MacArthur, when the latter suggested during the Korean War that the United States could use nuclear weapons against China. Hence, contrasting an allegedly cautious Hiroshima-generation with a more reckless generation of today is a shallow attempt to manufacture a problem that does not exist.

Similarly, attempts by anti-nuclear activists to interpret the Russia-Ukraine war as a vindication of their abolitionist goals ring increasingly hollow. For example, ICAN, the Non-Governmental Organization that was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for its successful campaigning for the Treaty for the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, states that “[t]he Ukraine crisis demonstrates how disastrously nuclear deterrence has failed,”⁷ yet does not offer any explanation for this daring claim. Daryl Kimball, in a desperate attempt to salvage the fading abolitionist momentum, reverts to that same red herring argument, when he opines that the war has proven NATO’s nuclear deterrent “useless.”⁸ However, the same argument can be made against NATO’s conventional forces—after all, they, too, did not deter Putin from invading Ukraine. The key issue—that there simply was no deterrence relationship between the West and Russia regarding Ukraine in the first place—is deliberately obscured. NATO’s nuclear deterrent will only have “failed” if Russia were to launch a major attack on one or several NATO Allies. Such weak *non sequiturs* resonate neither with decision-makers nor with the broader public, who are perfectly capable of understanding that a war in which a nuclear-armed aggressor employs outright genocidal rationales does not make a plausible case for nuclear abolition, but rather for keeping ones’ own nuclear powder dry.

This is exactly what the West is doing. NATO’s new *Strategic Concept*, agreed by 30 nations, reiterates the Alliance’s nuclear dimension, even highlighting, for the first time, the importance of European-based nuclear weapons.⁹ At the same time, the German Government, led by the traditionally anti-nuclear Social Democratic and Green parties, vowed to purchase the U.S. F-



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35 fighter in order to cement the country's role in NATO's nuclear sharing arrangements. A majority of Germans polled are now in favor of retaining U.S. nuclear weapons in the country.¹⁰ And Sweden, which has long flirted with abolitionist schemes, is now joining NATO, even acknowledging "the essential role of nuclear weapons".¹¹ None of these decisions suggest that these governments or their constituencies have grown indifferent to nuclear dangers. They simply realize that only a NATO nuclear deterrent can prevent potential opponents from instrumentalizing their own nuclear arsenals to achieve political or military gains. This is "Deterrence 101."

Using nuclear fears as a catalyst for political action on nuclear abolition may be a legitimate means of political discourse within Western democracies. However, those who revert to such tactics must walk a fine line between enlightening their audience and simply scaring it. When ICAN offers unsettled citizens advice on how to deal with nuclear anxiety ("focus on your breathing"), it essentially offers advice on how to cope with the very fear they themselves are so eager to instill in their constituents.¹² By the same token, the famous "Doomsday Clock" on the cover of the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, the hands of which are moved ever closer to midnight, is receiving less media attention when a real war is going on. Overly dramatic press statements ("The doorstep of doom is no place to loiter")¹³ may offer comic relief, but are not likely to galvanize the public into anti-nuclear activism.

In sum, if the great antinuclear movement that challenges Western nuclear orthodoxy does not materialize, it is not because the public has somehow become numb to nuclear dangers. Rather, it is because anti-nuclear arguments simply do not fare too well in a security environment that, as Russia is forcefully reminding everyone, remains shaped by the continued existence of nuclear weapons and the need for nuclear deterrence. Prevailing in such an environment requires a thorough understanding of nuclear risks, but hitting the panic button will be counterproductive. As a German proverb goes, *fear is a bad advisor*.

¹ See Ashley Lytle and Kristyn L. Karl, "Understanding Americans' Perceptions of Nuclear Weapons Risk and Subsequent Behavior," *International Journal of Communication* Vol. 14 (2020), pp. 299-323, available at <https://www.google.de/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=2ahUKEwiCveT-3Oz4AhXDvKQKHRT1A04QFnoECAgQAQ&url=https%3A%2F%2Fijoc.org%2Findex.php%2Fijoc%2Farticle%2Fdownload%2F12369%2F2909&usg=AOvVaw3zHp4e2R-TNP9OGbWHejDi>; Daniel Immerwahr, "Forgetting the apocalypse: why our nuclear fears faded - and why that's dangerous," *The Guardian* (online), May 12, 2022, available at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/may/12/forgetting-the-apocalypse-why-our-nuclear-fears-faded-and-why-thats-dangerous>.

² See Keith B. Payne, *Deterrence is Not Rocket Science: It is More Difficult*, Information Series No 527 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, July 6, 2022), available at <https://nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/IS-527.pdf>.

³ See Melanie Kirkpatrick, "Why we don't want a nuclear-free world", interview with James R. Schlesinger, *The Wall Street Journal*, July 13, 2009, available at <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB124726489588925407>.



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⁴ See Martin Ceadel, *Living the Great Illusion: Sir Norman Angell* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 377-378.

⁵ See Michael Rühle, *Good and Bad Nuclear Weapons: Berlin's Part in Shaping Nuclear Reality* (Berlin, Germany: Körber Foundation, April 2009), available at https://www.kas.de/wf/doc/kas_16795-544-1-0.pdf.

⁶ Immerwahr, op. cit.

⁷ ICAN statement, June 12, 2022, available at <https://twitter.com/nuclearban/status/1535988410925604867>.

⁸ Darryl G. Kimball, "A Turning Point on Nuclear Deterrence," *Arms Control Today*, July/August 2022, available at <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2022-07/focus/turning-point-nuclear-deterrence>.

⁹ See NATO 2022 *Strategic Concept*, June 29, 2022, para. 29, available at https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2022/6/pdf/290622-strategic-concept.pdf.

¹⁰ Robert Bongen, Hans-Jakob Rausch and Jonas Schreijäg, "Erstmals Mehrheit für Atomwaffen-Verbleib," available at <https://www.tagesschau.de/investigativ/panorama/umfrage-atomwaffen-deutschland-101.html>.

¹¹ NATO Accession Letter by the Swedish Government, July 5, 2022, available at <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1w45JQzIRSruHIMbziXL-SelhDDUMTqRG/view>.

¹² ICAN, *Dealing with Nuclear Anxiety*, February 28, 2022, available at https://www.icanw.org/dealing_with_nuclear_anxiety.

¹³ "At doom's doorstep: It is 100 seconds to midnight," 2022 Doomsday Clock Statement, *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, January 20, 2022, available at <https://thebulletin.org/doomsday-clock/current-time/>.

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