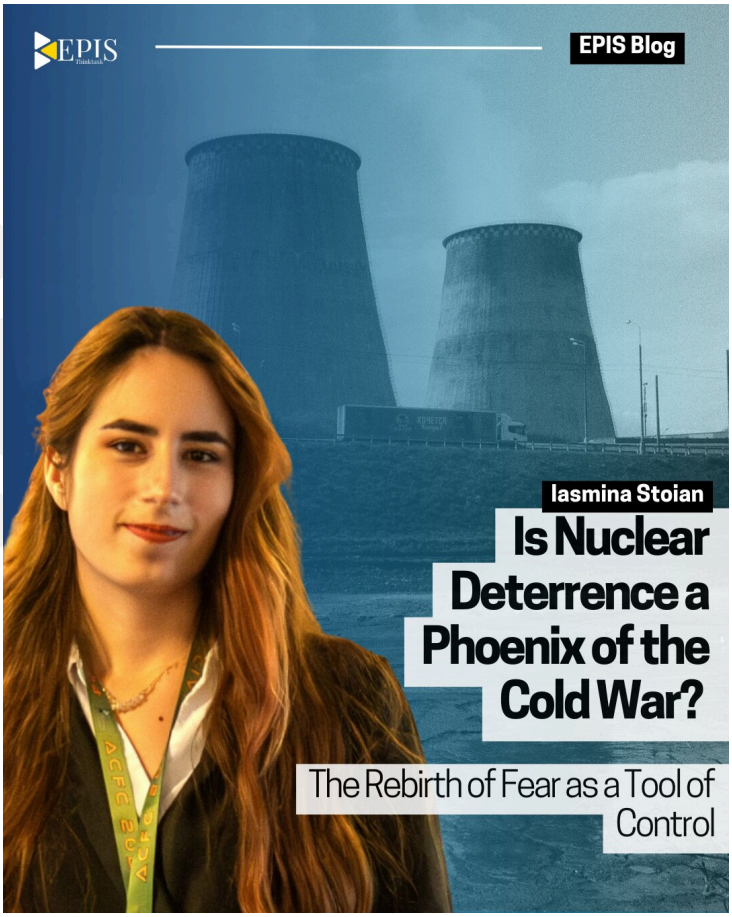
Is Nuclear Deterrence a Phoenix of the Cold War?

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Is Nuclear Deterrence the Phoenix of the Cold War? – The Rebirth of Fear as a Tool of Control

The revival of nuclear deterrence

Nuclear weapons – something neither new nor unheard of, and yet still profoundly relevant. After the Cold War, when many believed that nuclear threats had been buried deep in the ground, something close to the Romanian expression “a îngropa securea” (to bury the hatchet). Yet history proved

the opposite. In 1998, India and Pakistan conducted their first nuclear tests, despite the alleged "last tests" already being carried out by the U.S., China, France, and Russia in the early 1990s. By 2006, North Korea joined the list of nuclear-capable states with its first test. The story continues today, with Russia threatening to use nuclear attacks against Ukraine, and Iran developing new nuclear facilities, some of which were attacked by Israel only months ago. So, was this always a trend or was nuclear deterrence developed in the last decades?

This blog examines arms control as one of the root causes for the renewed proliferation of nuclear weapons, explaining the existing treaties and states' shifting positions toward them. It then shows how new geopolitical dynamics and technological advancements revived interest in nuclear modernization. The analysis continues by highlighting the strategic dilemmas faced particularly in NATO, where commitments to deterrence coexist with commitments to arms control. Finally, the text balances states' strategic rationales with the humanitarian risks and long-term consequences for humanity.

A rusting arms control order?

Some of the best-known treaties, including the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT), the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF Treaty), and New START, once symbolized collective commitment to limiting nuclear escalation. Yet in recent years, states previously committed to these frameworks have withdrawn or suspended their participation. While signing a treaty does not have the same legal effect as ratification, a signature still expresses political support for the treaty's aims and principles. Nonetheless, the U.S. withdrew from the INF Treaty in 2019, citing Russia's persistent non-compliance. North Korea withdrew from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) altogether. In 2023, Russia suspended participation in New START, the last remaining bilateral nuclear arms agreement with the U.S.

This erosion explains why the arms control order appears increasingly "rusting." After WWII, policymakers promised "*to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war, which twice in our lifetime has brought untold sorrow to mankind*". Yet the last decades have shown an accelerating corrosion of this commitment. Dismantling treaties that aimed to discourage or prevent the use of nuclear weapons has weakened collective trust and deepened geopolitical divisions.

This also raises a thought question: could the catastrophic humanitarian experience of Hiroshima and Nagasaki one day take on the meaning of an erga omnes or even a jus cogens norm (peremptory norms), indirectly prohibiting nuclear weapons? While legal scholars will argue that this is not the case, it remains a compelling reflection on the normative direction in which the world is heading.

Modernization race

While the global world is in a current battle of modernization – with the growing use of new technologies, autonomous weapons, and cyber capabilities – nuclear arsenals are also gaining popularity. We see how US and France have intensified their modernization programs, suggesting that after technology, nuclear weapons are on the second place. France holds around 300 nuclear warheads, the U.K. over 250, yet combined they still do not reach the U.S., which has over 1,700 deployed warheads. This marks a shift from the previous decade's emphasis on disarmament toward qualitative proliferation and technological advancement of nuclear systems.

The modernization race also reshapes alliances. Some states, often considered smaller powers on the global stage, may align themselves closely with larger nuclear-capable allies, likely out of fear of being left unprotected. Thus, we must ask then whether these states are genuinely pursuing strategic alliances, or whether they are seeking shelter under the umbrella of stronger powers to protect themselves against nuclear threats.

Strategic dilemmas

While NATO affirmed in 2022 that the fundamental purpose of its nuclear forces is deterrence and that the Alliance will remain nuclear as long as nuclear weapons exist, this position stands in contrast to the UN's advocacy for global nuclear disarmament and the elimination of all CBRN (Chemical, Biological, Radiological, and Nuclear) weapons. A tension therefore arises between these institutional visions: deterrence versus disarmament. Key NATO members such as the U.S. and France reaffirm their nuclear strategies with increasing urgency, especially in the context of Russia's nuclear threats in the ongoing war in Ukraine. Historically, some NATO members – Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium – were more critical of nuclear weapons. Yet officially, none oppose NATO's collective nuclear posture. Parallelly, Iran continues advancing its nuclear program, and Israel's recent strike on Iranian facilities highlighted just how fragile and explosive this situation remains. The world was, once again, dangerously close to a major catastrophe.

This presents the dilemma: does nuclear deterrence contradict the commitments in NATO's 2022 Strategic Concept, which emphasizes defence efforts alongside arms control, disarmament, and non-proliferation? And if so, how can a state advocate for disarmament while simultaneously expanding or supporting nuclear capabilities?

Between strategy and survival

The tension between nuclear deterrence and the survival of civilian populations can be captured by the metaphor "between the devil and the deep blue sea" – caught between the risk of conflict and the risk of mass destruction with irreversible, long-term humanitarian consequences.

Unfortunately, nuclear weapons remain a very serious threat to the future of our mankind. Overshadowed by climate change, which seems to have gained greater prominence among policymakers, the nuclear threat is as much as relevant and shall not be overlooked. Disguised as stability and national protection, nuclear deterrence simultaneously fuels deeper divisions and silent escalations between states, many of which align with stronger powers out of fear rather than conviction.

As an analogy, the nuclear deterrence strategy can be compared to a phoenix, rising again from the ashes of old fears left behind after the Cold War. At that time, the international community started a global mobilization through disarmament efforts, treaty drafting, and political commitments to eliminate the most destructive weapons, hoping that nuclear threats would have burned out. And yet, the phoenix has risen from its ashes.

On a closing note, we must ask ourselves: at what cost does this "nuclear" protection secure our countries, our homes, our people we care about, compared with what it threatens to destroy?

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