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## Nuclear Weapons and Putin's War

Russia's invasion of Ukraine and its nuclear threats have generated fear of nuclear war in Europe for the first time in decades. To make sense of this, the current conflict must be placed in the context of the global politics of nuclear weapons. Global nuclear politics is, broadly speaking, about a fundamental contestation between an ideology of nuclearism that frames nuclear weapons as legitimate and necessary within the parameters of a particular conception of security, and anti-nuclearism that frames them as illegitimate and dangerous within a different conception of security. It is a contestation in which nuclearism remains deeply embedded in the centres of power in world politics and anti-nuclearism has a subaltern status.<sup>1</sup>

### The return of nuclearism

The nuclear dimensions of the Ukraine war are symptomatic of a revitalisation of nuclearism. This is part of a wider re-militarisation of international politics associated over the past two decades with the response to 9/11, the rise of China, a resurgent Russia and the spread of nationalist populism.

This is particularly so in Russia, where nuclearism has become deeply embedded in Russian national identity. This has found its starkest expression in its so-called 'nuclear euphoria'.<sup>2</sup> This refers to the nationalistic celebration of Russia's nuclear weapons, notably since the annexation of Crimea in 2014, in the form of increased threat making against NATO states<sup>3</sup>; significant spending on exotic and 'invincible' nuclear weapons systems<sup>4</sup>; and major nuclear exercises.<sup>5</sup> The nuclear aspects of the current war are therefore not new, only the latest expression of a re-nuclearisation of the East-West relationship driven by Russian nuclearism in particular.

This 'nuclear euphoria' is an expression of an almost Manichean Russian national identity conception in which NATO has become entrenched as an implacable and existential threat over the past 15 years or so.<sup>6</sup> This 'othering' reproduces a counter-hegemonic, pan-Slavic, victimised national identity conception in Russia, one that has become conflated with a hyper-masculine Putinism. This was most evident in Putin's television address on 24

**A summary of Dr  
Nick Ritchie's  
presentation and  
responses by  
panellists  
Professor  
Nicholas Wheeler,  
Dr Laura  
Considine,  
and  
Dr Olamide  
Samuel**

\* This compilation is based on a keynote talk by Nick Ritchie to the 9th International Conference on Eurasian Politics and Society IEPAS2022 Conference, York St John University 13-16 July 2022 and responses from panellists.

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February 2022 in which when he described the future of Ukraine as an existential threat to Russia and its sovereignty.<sup>7</sup> When Russia's official nuclear doctrine states that use of nuclear weapons would be justified in response to an attack in which the existence of the country itself is at stake, then this framing of the Russia, the West, Ukraine and war increases the seriousness of the situation and highlights both the centrality and dangers of nuclearism.<sup>8</sup>

This narrative is now mirrored in the West through a similar resurgence of nuclearism in a new security narrative of 'a return to geopolitics' that emerged after Crimea. It is a narrative in which nuclear weapons have been re-valued and re-legitimised and in which NATO has entrenched Russia as its primary threat after two decades of the war on terror.<sup>9</sup>

Nuclearism as an ideology is also at work in arguments that it is the threat of nuclear violence that has kept the current conflict limited to Ukraine (at the time of writing), thereby reproducing a hegemonic narrative that nuclear

Nuclearism as an ideology is also at work in arguments that it is the threat of nuclear violence that has kept the current conflict limited to Ukraine, thereby reproducing a hegemonic narrative that nuclear deterrence can and should be relied upon to prevent all-out war.

deterrence can and should be relied upon to prevent all-out war. But at the same time (and as we saw at periods in the Cold War) the idea that Russian nuclear threats *should* prevent more direct Western military intervention has been deeply frustrating to many in Europe and the US and *actively* resisted.<sup>10</sup> There have been widespread calls to intervene more directly, for example through a no-fly zone, and these calls go hand-in-hand with reassurances that any escalation such moves might induce can be controlled.<sup>11</sup> However, Cold War experience shows that convincing yourself you know the other's red lines and that you can push right up to or even cross them whilst managing escalation based on a common understanding of nuclear deterrence and escalation control, is a big bet to place. This is particularly so when considering this is the first time a paranoid nuclear superpower has been squeezed very hard economically whilst fighting a major war that is tied up in narratives of its vital interests and core identity of both the country and the leadership personally. Nevertheless, there are plenty of willing gamblers at the nuclear casino who are confident that nuclear deterrent threats are the answer and that escalation can be controlled.

#### Anti-nuclearism at the margins of power

Anti-nuclearism also features in the discourses of the war as an expression of resistance to nuclearism, though at the margins of power in world politics. This has been reflected in deep concerns about the efficacy of nuclear deterrence in practice rooted in an established body of work on misperception, accidents, pressures to escalate, the role of luck in nuclear crises and the capacity for crises to rapidly spiral out of control. These concerns were expressed in relation to the current war at the First Meeting of States Parties to the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons negotiated in June 2022.<sup>12</sup>

Underpinning these concerns is the indeterminacy of nuclear deterrence in practice, because we don't know, and we cannot say in advance that we do, that nuclear deterrence is working, or that it isn't working; that it will work over the course of this crisis, or that it won't work; that escalation will or won't lead to nuclear war; and that a non-nuclear outcome is or isn't the result of nuclear deterrence working as intended when intended. Yet the dominant narrative of nuclearism insists we *can* say very concrete things in support of nuclear deterrence and escalation control.

Anti-nuclearism is also reflected in how the illegitimacy of Russia's nuclear threats are framed as a symptom of the international security system. Here, Russian nuclear threats are the latest example of a systemic problem, not an exclusively Russian problem. There is nothing particularly novel about Russia's nuclear threats because threats like these are the regular output of a system of state security that ultimately rests on the threat of nuclear omnicide. Instead, the discourse is one of the illegitimacy of all nuclear threats because of the unacceptable humanitarian and ecological consequences of nuclear violence and the risk of nuclear detonations as long as nuclear weapons exist.

Finally, anti-nuclearism comprises a much broader set of perspectives on nuclear weapons and the war, notably from across the global South, that centre more on questions of nuclear justice and inequality, often in the context of colonial histories.<sup>13</sup> Here, we see that the scale of opposition to Russian aggression has been a mainly Western rather than a global affair.<sup>14</sup>

In sum, the nuclear dimensions of the Ukraine war can be understood in terms of a familiar contestation between nuclearism and anti-nuclearism, one in which nuclearism remains deeply embedded as an ideology and a structure of power in national and world politics. It is subject to anti-nuclearist resistances that have been re-energised and advanced through the process over the past decade that led to the negotiation of the TPNW and now by very real fears of escalation, deliberate or otherwise, to nuclear violence in Ukraine.

*Dr Nick Ritchie is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Politics at the University of York.*

**Professor Nicholas Wheeler  
University of Birmingham**

The threats made by Russian President Vladimir Putin, and the growing fear that he might be prepared to break the 'nuclear taboo' are for Nick Ritchie the 'regular output of a system of state security ['nuclearism'] that ultimately rests on the threat of nuclear omnicide'. I will contest the claim that Putin's nuclear threats are merely a continuation of 'nuclearism': I will argue that there is an *exceptionality* about Putin's threats that separates them from the existential threat that underpins the system of nuclear deterrence.

Anti-nuclearism is also reflected in how the illegitimacy of Russia's nuclear threats are framed as a symptom of the international security system.

Ritchie defines nuclearism as ‘an ideology . . . that frames nuclear weapons as legitimate and necessary’. Such a conception does not recognise how far strategic thinking has been divided since the beginning of the nuclear age over the utility of threatening nuclear weapons. On one side are those who follow the ‘nuclear revolution’ thesis. This states that the only purpose for nuclear weapons is to deter nuclear attacks against one’s own national territory. Even a limited use of nuclear weapons for ‘war-fighting’ *must* inevitably escalate to Armageddon.<sup>15</sup>

In contrast, the ‘counter-nuclear revolutionists’ question the very notion of a nuclear revolution. If one or more nuclear-armed states are prepared to manipulate the risks of nuclear annihilation for coercive purposes, then the others have no choice but to convince risk-taking leaders that they cannot succeed. This requires a spectrum of nuclear capabilities to deny adversaries the possibility of ‘nuclear victory’.<sup>16</sup>

The house of nuclearism therefore contains two major rooms – one prioritising nuclear deterrence, based on ‘Mutual Assured

Destruction’ (MAD) as a fact of strategic life and a statement of national nuclear policy, and one where MAD is rejected in favour of a strategy involving nuclear risk manipulation. Thankfully, decision-makers in US-Soviet crises during the Cold War followed the nuclear revolution/MAD script, believing that nuclear weapons conveyed no decisive political or military advantage over an opponent with the capacity to hold an opponent’s cities at nuclear risk.

In the Cuban missile crisis, there is no evidence that the US possession of a 7:1 nuclear superiority over the Soviet Union emboldened Kennedy to manipulate the shared risks of nuclear war to intimidate Khrushchev into backing down.<sup>17</sup> Nor does the evidence suggest that the Soviet leader would have agreed to the withdrawal of the nuclear missiles in Cuba that could hit US cities in the absence of Kennedy’s non-invasion pledge towards Cuba. Instead, it was the knowledge of absolute losses to both sides – not the prospect of relative gains through the manipulation of nuclear threats – that made de-escalation possible.

Putin’s overt manipulation of nuclear fear in 2022 to intimidate NATO policy over Ukraine indicates that

the Russian leader, unlike his Soviet predecessors, views nuclear weapons as a psychological instrument for purposes of intimidation and blackmail. Putin’s behaviour, *contra* Ritchie, has been exceptional, when compared with earlier US-Soviet nuclear interactions. These had been characterised by mutual restraint, empathy, and in the case of the Cuban Missile Crisis, even trust.<sup>18</sup>

US President Joe Biden said on 6 October 2022, ‘We’re trying to figure out: What is Putin’s off-ramp?’<sup>19</sup> This suggests that US officials have been exploring the possibilities of a deal over Ukraine that would reduce the risks

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of Putin resorting to the use of nuclear weapons. In October 1962 Kennedy and Khrushchev devised a formula that left neither side humiliated. The challenge today is to find an 'off-ramp' that neither rewards Putin nor leaves him dangerously humiliated, and at the same time delivers long-term security for Ukraine.

*Nicholas J. Wheeler is Professor of International Relations in the Department of Political Science and International Studies at the University of Birmingham and non-resident Senior Fellow at BASIC.*

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### **Dr Laura Considine University of Leeds**

In his insightful commentary, Nick Ritchie sets out an analysis of nuclear politics as a realm of contest between incommensurate ideologies of nuclearism and anti-nuclearism. I think that it is also important to question why nuclear weapons politics has formed this binary and its implications. I suggest that this form of nuclear politics is a reaction to what Itty Abraham calls the fundamental ambivalence of nuclear technology.<sup>20</sup> Abraham argues that ambivalence, as the simultaneous existence of multiple meanings in nuclear practices, is a permanent feature of nuclear technology in that we cannot control the meaning of nuclear processes and power. We manage this ambivalence of the splitting the atom through discursive division, nuclear discourse, as Abraham argues, is internally split through binaries of salvation and apocalypse, civil and military, sex and death, as Carol Cohn famously stated.<sup>21</sup> This can also be seen in how often we see talk of 'paradoxes' in nuclear strategy and scholarship.

Nick Ritchie sets out an analysis of nuclear politics as a realm of contest between incommensurate ideologies of nuclearism and anti-nuclearism.

The ideologies Ritchie identifies are, in a way, two sides of the same coin in that both provide ways of discursively settling the ambiguities of nuclear technology and bringing certainty where there is none, whether this is through nuclear deterrence or nuclear abolition. Nuclear politics takes this form as an attempt to resolve the fundamental ambivalence of nuclear technology and the uncertainty it creates. But this contest is, as such, unending in that the inherent ambivalence of nuclear technology cannot be resolved and so we move through cycles of nuclear weapons politics as a repetition of the discourse of nuclearism-antinuclearism. Nuclear politics will continue to take this form unless we can dedicate ourselves to thinking through and beyond the traditional boundaries of the structure of nuclear politics - something that is easier said than done.

*Dr Laura Considine is an Associate Professor in the School of Politics and International Studies at the University of Leeds.*

## Dr Olamide Samuel

Ritchie offers an insightful intervention which frames the resurgence of Russian nuclear threats in service of its invasion of Ukraine, as symptomatic of the ongoing contestation regarding the meaning of nuclear weapons as a feature of current international relations. There is much to commend and indeed extrapolate from this framework. Locating the fundamental contestation inherent in the global politics of nuclear weapons as a contestation between hegemonic nuclearism and subaltern anti-nuclearism, provides much needed clarity regarding the identification of evolving nuclear and anti-nuclear interests that have been rapidly reinvigorated as a result of Putin's war. On the basis of Ritchie's account, it is possible to reliably isolate these distinct and evolving (anti)nuclear interests in a manner which exposes the power relations that constitute the ordering, sequencing and even the potential termination of the conflict.

The coupling of hegemony with nuclearism or anti-nuclearism with the subaltern appears to be a productive 'problem solving' lens through which one can understand the immediate power dynamics at play in this conflict.

However, Ritchie's framing is not without its own dose of paradoxes. Of particular interest to me, is the widespread neutrality of mostly global south states and the seeming reinvigoration of non-alignment, characterised by a reluctance of these states to condemn Moscow's nuclear threats. These are states that are at the same time articulating an anti-nuclearist discourse, and even spearheading progress in the recently established treaty on the prohibition of nuclear weapons. It is therefore worth questioning whether the framing of a hegemonic nuclearism versus subaltern anti-nuclearism is capable of sufficiently capturing these states' interpretations of the nuclear power dynamics at play in this conflict.

The coupling of hegemony with nuclearism or anti-nuclearism with the subaltern appears to be a productive 'problem solving' lens through which one can understand the immediate power dynamics at play in this conflict. However, I argue that such a frame foregoes the understandings that can be found in the appreciation of 'hegemonic anti-nuclearism', or 'subaltern nuclearism'. Given the historical and contemporary great power animosity between the US

and Russia, might it not be worth exploring how Russia might be operating on an inversed version of Ritchie's frame? Doing so will at once highlight the primacy of economic and developmental interests of those ambivalent global south states in determining their strategic (and ad-hoc) alliances, and indeed Russia's exploitation of these interests.

Perhaps People's suggestion to widen the scope of the nuclear critique (nuclearism in particular) "*beyond hard and fast distinctions between 'civil' and military' nuclear power*" might enable us to extend our thinking about the interconnectedness of nuclear and wider socio-economic insecurities, opening up a series of complex questions, that better illustrate the rationales behind non-aligned ambivalence.<sup>22</sup> Widening our very understanding of nuclearism in this manner, might better place us to respond to the practical question of whether hegemonic and subaltern anti-nuclearism can make any progress in dislodging hegemonic and subaltern nuclearism. In the end, I

hope that our critical engagement on these issues lives up to Considine's challenge that we dedicate ourselves to thinking beyond the boundaries of the binary discursive divisions which structure our understandings of nuclear politics.

*Dr Olamide Samuel is a Research Associate in Nuclear Politics in the School of History, Politics and International Relations at the University of Leicester.*

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