

# Do Non-Nuclear Weapon States Carry the Fear of Nuclear Threat?

## An Assessment through the Lens of Ukraine-Russia Conflict

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### Abstract

*In January 2022, the 'Nuclear Armageddon Watch' was timed at 100 seconds to midnight, which is highly alarming. The Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) which entered into force in 1970, created an environment of nuclear checks and balances. Although highly criticised for its biased approach, the NPT is the oldest and the only existing Arms Control Treaty from the Cold War era. However, despite its existence, the stimulating debate between nuclear 'haves' and 'have-nots' has raised multiple concerns of nuclear risks that question the international structure. The recent Ukraine-Russia conflict has stunned the world for multiple reasons. However, the one pertinent concern expressed by the international community is Russia's nuclear threat to Ukraine, which is a Non-Nuclear Weapon State (NNWS).*

*Should the threat be taken seriously? Or is the threat directed towards US and the West via Ukraine? The international community is in splits with the varied perspectives. This article assess the nuclear dimension of the Ukraine-Russia conflict and will discuss the following questions- First, Does NNWS carry the fear of nuclear threat? Secondly, why does Russia's nuclear threat to Ukraine raise questions on the NPT regime? Thirdly, why does*

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*the Cold War rivalry continue to dominate the international structure and, in turn, dictate the security dimensions of the smaller states? The article recommends strengthening the nuclear security regime and the role of the international community in achieving it.*

## **Introduction**

The changing geopolitical dimensions in the contemporary world have spurred a number of debates within the international community. The dynamic nature of international politics should be understood through the history of events, as it provides a base for analysing the contemporary issues. One such issue that grabbed the international attention in the beginning of 2022 was that of Russia invading Ukraine. This immediately sparked a global condemnation of Russia, with US and its allies rekindling NATO and expanding its membership. The Ukraine-Russia conflict has ignited a series of issues that should be addressed, some of which might turn out to be fatal. However, one of the most alarming situations in this conflict was Russian President Vladimir Putin issuing a nuclear threat to Ukraine.

The post Second World War period was primarily dominated with the discussion on nuclear weapons and its preventive measures. Both the US and USSR, were involved in vertical proliferation and by the Détente of 1970's, a number of treaties were signed between both the superpowers. Since its creation, nuclear weapons have been posed with 'security threat perspective'. However, with the disintegration of the USSR and the changing political structure, from bipolar to unipolar and then to multipolar; the existence of nuclear weapons escalated from one phase to the next.

In January 2022, the 'Nuclear Armageddon Watch' was timed at 100 seconds to midnight which is alarming<sup>1</sup>. In the contemporary context, nuclear weapons continue to occupy a dominant role within the security perspective and influence the national security dimensions of the states. The most prominent debate within the nuclear discussion is the debate between 'Nuclear haves' and 'Nuclear have-nots'. The Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty of 1968 barred the Non-Nuclear Weapon States (NNWS) from acquiring nuclear weapons and, as such, they continue to face a security

dilemma, especially if they share a close geographical proximity with a nuclear state. This debate has been exemplified in the case of the Ukraine-Russia conflict whereby Russian President Vladimir Putin had employed nuclear rhetoric against Ukraine.

### **History of Nuclearisation and De-nuclearisation of Ukraine**

Ukraine was a part of the former Soviet Union until it achieved its independence in 1991. At the time of its independence, Ukraine was the third largest possessor of nuclear arsenals in the world. Following the disintegration of Soviet Union, there was an immediate discussion on the claimants of the nuclear arsenals of the former Soviet Union, existing in Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Ukraine. While the process of dismantling nuclear weapons in Belarus and Kazakhstan happened quite swiftly, there were contestations about denuclearising Ukraine within the internal leadership.

Post-independence, Ukraine has been a part of a number of treaties to deal with the nuclear arsenals that stayed in the Ukrainian soil belonging to the former USSR. Between 1992 and 1994, Ukraine was part of three significant treaties that shaped the current course of its nuclear decision- Lisbon Protocol 1992, Massandra Accords 1993, and Trilateral Statement 1994. The Budapest Memorandum was a trilateral treaty signed between United States, Russia and United Kingdom on 05 December 1994 to offer security assurances to Ukraine. By 1996, Ukraine handed over its entire nuclear arsenal to Russia in exchange of 'security assurances and economic aid'.<sup>2</sup>

The vision of the Budapest Memorandum was "to respect the independence and sovereignty and the existing borders of Ukraine" and "to refrain from the threat or use of force" against the country.<sup>3</sup> The idea behind this treaty was to contain the 1900 strategic nuclear arsenals that Ukraine possessed at that point of time. The geopolitical situation in 1990's was alarming due to the rise of global conflicts across different continents. As a signatory of the treaty, the US accorded highest priority to provide assurances to Ukraine so that the collapse of the USSR and the violent breakout of Yugoslavia do not led to conflict among nuclear armed states.

Under the treaty, Ukraine sought three assurances in lieu of giving up the nuclear arsenals. First, the highly enriched uranium in the nuclear warheads could not be used as fuels in the nuclear reactors. Ukraine sought for compensation on the enriched uranium which Russia agreed to provide. Second, since the Ukrainian economy was rapidly shrivelling, it could not afford to eliminate the ICBMs since it was costly. The US pledged to cover the costs. The third Ukrainian demand was the most crucial yet simple one. Ukraine wanted security assurances once the process of eliminating the nuclear warheads was over. The Budapest Memorandum pledged to provide that<sup>4</sup>. Unfortunately, Russia over the years has violated the Budapest Memorandum on multiple occasions, including the illegal annexation of Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula.

The Budapest Memorandum proved to be a sham for Ukraine as it was the sole ground on which Ukraine decided to give up its nuclear arsenals.

### **Do NNWS carry the fear of a nuclear threat?**

The essence behind the creation of nuclear weapons was to instil 'threat perspective' and alter power dynamics in international politics. After the catastrophic event of US dropping atom bombs in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the international community has constantly lobbied against the existence of nuclear weapons. The NPT, which promises to provide security assurances to NNWS, has been unable to pursue its pledges. Within the security framework, NNWS are constantly fighting with nuclear anxiety from a probable attack by a Nuclear Weapon State (NWS). This is evidently the case of Ukraine.

The feeling of 'nuclear anxiety'<sup>5</sup> has impacted not just the NNWS, but also the NWS. While NNWS are in a state of constant fear that a nuclear attack will be fatal as countering the attack would be impossible; a NWS is equally fearful of a nuclear threat, as the retaliation to a nuclear attack would be catastrophic. Nuclear threat can be directed through two ways- Existential and Psychological. On paper, both Existential and Psychological threats may be interchangeable, however, there is a slight distinction. The Existential threat from a nuclear attack is the anxiety around the weapons per se, which is lethal not just to one's own self. It holds the power to destroy lands, languages, cultures, environment, and the future of human existence<sup>6</sup>. It is the actual threat of a nuclear attack.

The Psychological threat of a nuclear attack emanates from the Existential threat but is propagated through various mediums like press, social media, pressure groups, lobbying etc. It is the constant imagery and visuals that make people feel threatened about an entity that can destroy everything in minutes. On most occasions, the Psychological threat is the baton that NWS hold to intimidate the NNWS. This is vividly observed not just in the context of Russia and Ukraine but even in the case of North and South Korea. The persistence with which North Korea has moved with its nuclear armament has not just affected the region but has caused instability in international politics as well. With North Korea constantly threatening to employ nuclear weapons against US and its allies, the threat of a Nuclear Armageddon is looming large. North Korea's preoccupation with nuclear weapons has brought South Korea to brinkmanship to acquire nuclear weapons for its own safety.<sup>7</sup>

So, is nuclear rhetoric more intimidating than the actual attack? Russian President Vladimir Putin's implicit nuclear threat was a way to sham the counter offensive that Kyiv was implementing to push back Russians from their soil. It might not have been an immediate threat but the impasse is detrimental to the conflict that has prolonged for so long. Moreover, the Russian attack on the south Ukrainian nuclear power plant, Zaporizhzhya<sup>8</sup>, is viewed as the stepping stone to a larger doom lurking around. The harmful chemicals and radioactives from the shelling will impact the civilians who are already struggling to survive in the conflict zone. This opens up the room for yet another kind of nuclear threat- Nuclear Terrorism.

Following the attack on the south Ukrainian nuclear plant, the site has become prone to the threat of Nuclear Terrorism. This is threatening as non-state actors can get involved in this racket and the international nuclear system does not include non-state actors in its circle of discussions. The series of action that has followed post the attack on the nuclear site; like Russians halting the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) investigations on the site has raised serious concerns on the authority of the NPT regime.<sup>9</sup>

### **NPT Regime: A Sham?**

By the mid-1960's, the US, USSR, Britain, France, and China started possessing nuclear weapons. The two superpowers were

already fighting the angst of the Cold War theatrics. A few disarmament treaties had been signed, the UN adopted the resolution to eventually eliminate nuclear weapons, and international organisations like IAEA were established to monitor the nuclear actions of these five states. With more countries beginning to acquire and develop their own nuclear weapons, the need for a more comprehensive treaty was felt to stop nuclear proliferation. The NPT of 1968 is the only nuclear treaty from the Cold War period that continues to exist even today. It is one of the documents responsible for providing both 'Positive' and 'Negative' security assurances to the NNWS.<sup>10</sup>

At the time of signing the treaty, the five nuclear countries had pledged to not threaten or use nuclear weapons against NNWS. However, in reality this has rarely happened. The Ukraine-Russia conflict has yet again highlighted the gaps in the NPT regime. Article I and II of the NPT<sup>11</sup> has barred the NNWS from receiving nuclear weapons and materials in any form, which practically closes the opportunity for NNWS to fight for their existence in case of a nuclear attack. The negotiation between the NWS and NNWS began with Positive Security Assurances. It introduced the idea of a 'Nuclear Umbrella' in which a nuclear state guarantees aid to a non-nuclear weapon state in case the latter is attacked by another state possessing nuclear weapons. This was easier to achieve both verbally and on paper. But this is not the case for Negative Security Assurances (NSA) in which a nuclear weapon state pledges not to use or threaten to use nuclear weapons against a non-nuclear weapon state<sup>12</sup>. Each of the five signatories to the NPT have pledged for NSA on different accounts, but none of them were legally binding and were limited in scope. There have been multiple accounts in which a NWS has failed its commitment to NSA. The case of Ukraine-Russia conflict is no different.

President Putin's nuclear rhetoric should be assessed through the decree that he signed in 2020, "*Basic Principles of the Russian Federation's State Policy in the Domain of Nuclear Deterrence*". In this decree, he clearly lays down the circumstances under which Russia will use a nuclear weapon. It states that Russia will use a nuclear weapon in case it is attacked by another state with nuclear weapons or other weapons of mass destruction. It further

states that “in the event of aggression against the Russian Federation with the use of conventional weapons when the very existence of the state is in jeopardy” Russia will use its nuclear weapons to secure the state<sup>13</sup>. The Russian government has used this framework to defend Putin’s nuclear rhetoric. So, how is this related to the NPT regime?

The NPT regime provided the scope for each of the NWS to develop their own nuclear policies. While it was supposed to halt proliferation and de-escalate nuclear weapons, it merely ended up supporting the needs of the NWS. So, is the NPT regime a sham? Well, it is a mixed bag of developments. While the Positive Security Assurances have been addressed and executed to a satisfactory level by the NWS, the same cannot be said about the Negative Security Assurances. The presence of NPT has at least provided a framework for addressing the behaviour and actions of the NWS in the international society to not create a threat perspective among the ‘nuclear have-nots’. It might not have been very effective because of its limited scope, but its importance in the nuclear security framework cannot be dismissed.

### **Cold War rivalry in Post-Cold War period: Superpowers vs Middle Powers**

The US and USSR emerged as the two superpowers after the end of the Second World War, which divided the world along ideological lines. The world was in splits as some joined either of the two blocs while the rest decided to adopt the non-aligned path. With the disintegration of the USSR, and the US ascending to its hegemonic power, it was believed that the world had moved from a bipolar to a unipolar system. However, even after three decades of the disintegration of USSR, the Cold War rivalry between US and Russia has continued to dominate the discussions on international security. Why is that so, especially since we now live in a multipolar world?

Throughout the 1900s, both the US and Russia worked extensively to make themselves militarily and economically strong. This cannot be replaced by any country without a strong build on military, economy, and soft power. The rivalry between the US and Russia may never cease, but their repercussions are borne by the Cold War allies.

In the race to win the most powerful country in the world and the constant struggle for power between these two Cold War rivalries, it is the former allies that face the consequences. Despite the end of the Cold War, NATO continues to exist, which clearly threatens the Russian security perspective. In response to that, Russia has employed aggressive politics, especially in the last decade, under the guise of protecting its own security. Russia has claimed that the attack on Ukraine has been propelled due to USA's attempts to install a NATO ally in Russia's immediate neighbourhood. In fact, the rationale behind Putin's nuclear rhetoric is also governed by this framework.

The role of middle powers in ensuring global stability is very significant. Even during Cold War, they played a significant role in mediating between the two blocs. Middle powers hold the key to leveraging between two powerful countries, but it can only be achieved through effective diplomacy and soft power negotiations.

### **Conclusion**

A nuclear rhetoric from a state that possesses nuclear weapons during an armed conflict is extremely dangerous. The danger is not just restricted to the involved parties in the conflict but is extended to other parties in the international politics<sup>14</sup>. It also opens up the space for non-state actors to take undue advantage to indulge in the larger gamut of Nuclear Terrorism. President Putin might have believed that his nuclear brinkmanship would force US and its allies to pressurise Ukraine into negotiating with Russia. Putin might have employed his nuclear rhetoric not for immediate action, but it does not eliminate the anticipation of a probable attack that looms large. He will perhaps use it to negotiate terms with Kyiv to keep the Russian-occupied territories.

Within the nuclear security framework, the Ukraine-Russia conflict has raised a number of questions, revealed the gaps in the NPT regime, and highlighted the dominance of Cold War rivalry that continues to impact the other states in international politics. There is no international system that addresses the nuclear issue with legally binding rules. The UN Security Council comprises of the same five countries that possess nuclear weapons and are part of the NPT. With P5 members possessing 'veto power', it is almost impossible to have a singular decision on the nuclear issue. Perhaps, the United Nations should perform its duty beyond that



of a watch dog and provide for a system that tries to reduce the nuclear anxiety that continues to propel. The international community, including academicians, scientists, politicians, lobbying groups etc., should come forward to propose a serious, legally binding document to address the issue of nuclear threat.

### Endnotes

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