



The Evolving Global Landscape of Nuclear Security

Lauren Sukin and Rohan Mukherjee



This roundtable examines sources of change in the rapidly evolving global nuclear order. Quantitative expansion combines with qualitative doctrinal changes to challenge traditional deterrence frameworks. Emerging security arrangements such as AUKUS, the Washington Declaration, and expanded NATO–Indo-Pacific ties illustrate evolving alliance strategies, while adversarial cooperation among Russia, China, and North Korea heightens risks of coordinated nuclear coercion. Across democratic and authoritarian systems alike, domestic politics increasingly influence nuclear decision-making, shaping perceptions of credibility, creating proliferation pressures, and dampening arms control prospects. Essays in this collection analyze six regional loci—Europe, Latin America, the Middle East, South Asia, China, and the Korean Peninsula—highlighting two themes: the centrality of domestic political drivers and the cascading effects of nuclear dynamics across interconnected states and regions. Together, this analysis offers a two-level framework for understanding and addressing the complex challenges confronting today's nuclear order.

The past decade has witnessed a rapid and complex transformation in the global nuclear security landscape, driven by both quantitative and qualitative changes in nuclear capabilities, doctrines, and strategic alliances. The expansion of nuclear arsenals, shifts in deterrence strategies, and the increasing entanglement of domestic politics with nuclear decision-making have collectively reshaped the foundations of the nuclear order. China's significant nuclear buildup and North Korea's continued advancement in missile and warhead technology exemplify the quantitative expansion of nuclear capabilities. Meanwhile, evolving doctrines—such as India's and Pakistan's shifting nuclear postures and Russia's persistent nuclear threats in the context of the Ukraine conflict—illustrate qualitative changes that challenge long-standing assumptions about strategic stability.

Traditional extended deterrence dynamics are being redefined. The Trump administration's antipathy toward alliance commitments, coupled with a broader shift in US global engagement, have raised concerns about the credibility of American security guarantees across the world. While these developments have the potential to unravel long-standing ties, several nascent relationships centered on deterrence are emerging to face the next nuclear challenges. The AUKUS pact, initially involving Australia, the United Kingdom, and the

United States, and now incorporating France, signals an evolving security framework in the Indo-Pacific. Similarly, the Washington Declaration between the United States and South Korea and the formation of a US–Japan–South Korea Trilateral Secretariat reflect growing efforts to reinforce deterrence against North Korea, while NATO's increased coordination with Indo-Pacific partners suggests an expanding strategic footprint and common recognition of China as a threat. The durability and effectiveness of these arrangements, however, remain uncertain as global nuclear competition intensifies.

Adversarial nuclear cooperation has also become a defining feature of this emerging nuclear era. The strategic alignment of Russia, China, and North Korea—evidenced by military coordination, arms transfers, and political signaling—raises concerns about the possibility of simultaneous regional crises or coordinated nuclear coercion. Whether through explicit collaboration or parallel actions, these states' nuclear strategies increasingly challenge the US-led security architecture.

This evolving multipolar nuclear environment underscores the need for a reassessment of existing deterrence frameworks and strategies. In this issue of the *Texas National Security Review*, we offer a collection of essays that reflects on the ongoing political and strategic changes in these increasingly interconnected nuclear environments.

Beyond broader geopolitical shifts, domestic political factors are playing an increasingly prominent role in shaping nuclear policy. In democratic societies, public opinion and political polarization can both shape the nuclear future. Divided discourse in the United States on arms control with Iran or extended deterrence to Europe show how US credibility can be undercut by domestic politics. In South Korea, Poland, and elsewhere, tenacious public support for nuclear proliferation and nuclear sharing have already begun to raise questions about these countries' nuclear futures. Meanwhile, in Sweden and Finland, domestic debates between nuclear deterrence and disarmament played a role in these states' recent accession to NATO.

Authoritarian states also factor domestic drivers into their nuclear decision-making. In China, the centralization of power under Xi Jinping has led to a nuclear policy increasingly shaped by internal political priorities, raising questions about future arms control prospects. In Russia, Vladimir Putin's historical revisionism shows the importance of understanding the individuals with authority over nuclear arsenals—and the role of the bureaucracies that stand between them. Meanwhile, Kim Jong Un has revised North Korea's nuclear doctrine to further protect against decapitation strikes and has officially rejected the idea of Korean unification. The essays in this collection each probe and shed light on the domestic determinants of the ongoing evolution in global nuclear order.

Informed by a conference hosted by the Phelan United States Centre at the London School of Economics and Political Science in June 2024, each essay in this collection examines the evolving nuclear security environment in one of six central loci: Europe, Latin America, the Middle East, South Asia, China, and the Korean Peninsula. The authors' viewpoints are diverse, providing an expansive and inclusive look at global nuclear policy and exploring how different countries and regions are tackling major new developments in nuclear security. The result is a geographically expansive but cohesive review of the global nuclear order.

The essays also highlight important implications for policy. In particular, each essay offers insights into the complex political dynamics between the United States and various nuclear stakeholders—be they treaty allies, partners, or adversaries of the United States.

Collectively, the essays point to two major themes shaping nuclear policy today. First, domestic politics remains an understudied, but critical, driver of nuclear policy. For example, Do Young Lee demonstrates that—despite the initial success of the Washington Declaration—the South Korean public's confidence in the credibility of US extended deterrence has declined, and attributes this decline to diverging US and South Korean interpretations of North Korea's evolving nuclear strategy. This divergence has gen-

erated major disagreements between Washington and Seoul about both the threat environment and the appropriate strategies to address it.

In their discussion of the Middle East, Nicole Grajewski and Jane Darby Menton similarly point to the powerful role of Iranian domestic politics. The recent attacks on Iran's nuclear program by Israel and the United States have dramatically heightened Tehran's sense of vulnerability, reducing political barriers to nuclear proliferation that have previously served as valuable guardrails.

Domestic politics also lie at the heart of China's ongoing vertical proliferation, as Nicola Leveringhaus demonstrates that strategic and internal political rationales combine to explain Xi Jinping's nuclear decision-making. Centralization of decision-making in foreign and security policy issues has elevated the status of nuclear weapons and contracted the domestic community of nuclear strategists while also diminishing their influence on nuclear decision-making. This "more CCP-aligned, paranoid, younger, and strategically less informed Chinese expert community" may have adverse implications for arms control.

Domestic politics also affect coordination between allies and partners in the nuclear realm. Jacklyn Majnemer evaluates tensions between the United States and its allies over NATO's nuclear future, arguing that effective deterrence requires satisfying the political concerns of nuclear sharing states. As the Trump administration's talk and actions perpetuate a rift between the United States and its European allies, squaring US interests with the demands of European nuclear deterrence is likely to become more challenging.

A second theme that emerges from these essays is the way in which the globally interconnected nature of nuclear politics can lead to cascading effects on nuclear policy and strategy. Leveringhaus suggests that expanded security cooperation between Russia and China in the conventional realm could prompt a deepening nuclear relationship, better positioning Beijing to manage its diversifying strategic deterrent. She further argues that China's nuclear buildup is driven by perceived vulnerability to quantitative improvements in the US arsenal, including ballistic missile defense and conventional counterforce capabilities. This situation raises important questions for policymakers on how their actions could either slow or accelerate an interactive cycle.

Many of the roundtable contributions point to second-order effects of US-China competition on the global nuclear landscape. Debak Das, for example, argues that US-China competition and the AUKUS deal have contributed to major new developments in India's nuclear posture. In what he calls "a cascade

effect of reactionary vertical proliferation,” US-China competition fuels a Chinese nuclear buildup that prompts efforts in India to shore up second-strike capabilities. This chain of events in turn exacerbates the India-Pakistan security dilemma, making recurring South Asian military crises more dangerous and more difficult for US policy to manage. Lee explains the complex effects of China’s nuclear buildup on both US and South Korean military policy. While Washington is increasingly prioritizing deterring China, Seoul remains wary of pushing away its biggest trade partner and fears becoming entrapped in a US-China conflict. J. Luis Rodriguez argues that Latin America reacts to competition between the United States, Russia, and China, noting in particular that the United States has viewed cooperation on nuclear energy and space technology between China and several Latin American countries as a potential security threat. Finally, Grajewski and Menton discuss how US-China competition affects the nuclear energy market—and shapes resulting proliferation risks—among multiple states in the Middle East, producing developments that can draw the US into regional conflicts. These essays emphasize the need for more scholarly and policy attention to the downstream effects of US-China nuclear competition on second-order dynamics that shape the nuclear environment in important ways.

Together, these essays identify significant challenges to the contemporary nuclear order. They present a two-level framework for understanding the domestic and international drivers of ongoing evolutions in nuclear security. Restoring balance to the nuclear order will require efforts on multiple fronts. First, to maintain strategic cohesion, the United States and its allies should be attentive not just to international considerations, but also to domestic political questions and perceptions at the heart of nuclear decision-making. Second, where possible, the United States may benefit from engaging domestic actors in adversarial systems to promote shared understandings of the global risks of nuclear proliferation and of more assertive nuclear postures. Third, these essays demonstrate that nuclear decisions cannot be made in bilateral or regional vacuums. Thinking about the global nuclear order as an interconnected whole and

mapping out the downstream risks of decisions will enable policymakers in the US and elsewhere to better appreciate the cascades and feedback effects that might undermine their policies in the future. ●

Lauren Sukin is the John G. Winant Associate Professor in US Foreign Policy at Nuffield College and the Department of Politics and International Relations at the University of Oxford. She is a fellow at the Peace Research Center Prague in the Faculty of Social Sciences at Charles University (UNCE 24/SSH/018, Peace Research Center Prague III) and a nonresident scholar at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. During the production of this roundtable, Dr. Sukin was an assistant professor of international relations at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) and an affiliate at LSE’s Phelan United States Centre.

Rohan Mukherjee is assistant professor of international relations at the London School of Economics and Political Science; Deputy Director of LSE IDEAS, the foreign policy thinktank of the LSE; and a faculty affiliate of the LSE Phelan United States Centre. He is also a nonresident scholar at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and at the National Bureau of Asian Research (NBR) in Washington, DC. He is the author of *Ascending Order: Rising Powers and the Politics of Status in International Institutions* (Cambridge University Press).

Acknowledgments: We are grateful to the LSE Phelan United States Centre for sponsoring the workshop in London in June 2024 where the contributors to this roundtable presented the first drafts of their essays. We are also grateful to Adeola Akande Pierre-Noël and Sakshi Verman for helping to organize this workshop, to Woohyeok Seo for serving as rapporteur, and to Chiara Cervasio, Jennifer Erickson, Rosemary Foot, Matthew Fuhrmann, Matthew Jones, Jamie Kwong, and Peter Trubowitz for their time and intellectual input as discussants.

Image: *Missile Gallery* [Image 9 of 9], by Tyler Greenlees¹

1 For the image, see <https://www.dvidshub.net/image/7642581/missile-gallery>.