

## **The Broken Nuclear Taboo**

*Nancy Ries argues that there are few remaining barriers to nuclear war.*

In 2015, the world entered the eighth nuclear decade. Given the fact that ground-based ICBMs and submarine-deployed missiles have been on high alert -- launchable within minutes -- without pause since the early 1960s, and given the sheer scale and complexity of the deployment of nuclear weapons, it is remarkable that there has not been a nuclear exchange, whether due to intentional, accidental, or unauthorized launch, in the past seventy years.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, it seems to be almost a miracle of political-military restraint that no atomic bombs have been used in military hostilities since 1945.

There is little reason, however, to celebrate the miracle. Contrary to the majority belief of the world's citizens, neither the strategy of mutual assured destruction nor the high-alert weapons deployments has ceased. A full quarter century after the end of the USSR, both the US and Russia maintain a portion of their arsenals -- around 900 nuclear missiles each -- on hair-trigger, 'launch on warning' alert, poised to obliterate urban targets and military installations across Eurasia and North America within less than an hour.<sup>2</sup> What makes this reality particularly dangerous is that official and public rhetoric around nuclear weapons seems to be changing in significant ways.<sup>3</sup> Discourse matters enormously in nuclearism, a point made by scholars and military professionals alike.<sup>4</sup> Some nuclear states are making declarative statements and performing their nuclear powers in ways that suggest that what many dub 'the nuclear taboo' -- a constraint on nuclear 'first use' and an internalized prohibition against using nuclear weapons or even *planning* for their use in conventional military contexts -- is fading.

That is happening at a time when only small portions of the public are paying attention. While worry over very real problems of securing radioactive material or thwarting the nuclear ambitions of terrorist organisations or rogue leaders like Kim

Jong Un is widespread, the world public seems barely to notice what many nuclear arms experts have often warned in the past few years: the world is closer to the brink of a nuclear war initiated by Russia or the United States than it has ever been since the height of the Cold War in the early 1980s.

In January 2016, *The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* announced that that the hands of the famed Doomsday Clock would remain, for a second year, at three minutes to midnight. ‘The probability of global catastrophe is very high,’ they wrote, and the actions needed to reduce the risks of disaster must be taken very soon’.<sup>5</sup> Former US Secretary of Defense William Perry declared in an interview with the *Guardian*, in January 2016, ‘The probability of a nuclear calamity is higher today, I believe, that it was during the cold war[...] A new danger has been rising in the past three years and that is the possibility there might be a nuclear exchange between the United States and Russia [...] brought about by a substantial miscalculation, a false alarm.’<sup>6</sup>

If recent geoscientific models are correct, even a ‘small’ nuclear war where atomic bombs incinerate only a few large cities, will likely send enough ash into the atmosphere to induce nuclear winter, posing an immediate and severe threat to human agriculture and potentially extinguishing many forms of terrestrial life.<sup>7</sup> Quite starkly, what this means is that the vast nuclear force maintained by the US and Russia even long after the end of their Cold War antagonisms threatens a cataclysmic impact on all life across the entire planet. It is not merely ‘human civilization’ that is at stake in a nuclear war, as the standard rhetoric puts it, but the very existence of terrestrial ecosystems and species. The stakes could not be higher. Climate change scenarios paint a dire picture for the planet in coming decades, but the scenarios which would result from a regional nuclear war entail a planetary cataclysm of imponderable magnitude. This reality makes nuclear threats, scenario-gaming, and televised missile-rattling not only unnerving but incomprehensible. At a time when millions of citizens and leaders around the world are contributing so

much effort and creativity trying to *save* the planet, it is outrageous that others are investing so much human energy and fiscal material to destroying it.

Despite the overall low level of public awareness of the imminent danger of nuclear war, there are voices and organised campaigns in the world demanding an end to nuclear exterminism -- this man-made system for destroying the planet -- through disarmament and ultimate abolition. After several years of international conferences, in December 2015, the UN General Assembly adopted, by a vote of eighty-three percent of countries, 'The Humanitarian Pledge for the Prohibition and Elimination of Nuclear Weapons'.<sup>8</sup> None of the nine nuclear-armed states -- The US, Russian Federation, the UK, France, China, India, Pakistan, Israel, and North Korea -- voted for the Humanitarian Pledge, nor did any of the members of NATO, most of which have hosting or sharing agreements<sup>9</sup> with the three nuclear members of the NATO alliance, or the so-called 'nuclear umbrella' states Japan, Taiwan, and South Korea.<sup>10</sup> Activists report, not surprisingly, that the United States actively lobbied other nations not to sign the pledge.<sup>11</sup>

Nick Ritchie, a scholar of nuclear disarmament who wrote an official summary of the 2015 Humanitarian Initiative Conference, noted that the five Nuclear Weapons States (NWS) -- who are also the five permanent members of the UN Security Council (the P5) -- view the Initiative as 'willfully idealistic,' and argue that it 'distracts from their preferred 'step-by-step' approach to nuclear disarmament'.<sup>12</sup> It is hard to see much meaningful disarmament progress in their approach.<sup>13</sup> In the past several years, each one of the P5 nations has unveiled vast nuclear modernisation plans, promising literally trillions of dollars of expenditure in both strategic and tactical nuclear weapons over the coming decade, a development that all of the major nuclear watchdog organizations, scholars, and military critics of nuclearism decry as dangerously destabilizing.<sup>14</sup> Modernisation does not lead in a trajectory towards disarmament.

Amidst this massive wave of new nuclear investments, the P5 completely failed even to mention the humanitarian pledge in their joint statement from the sixth 'P5 process' meeting in February of 2015.<sup>15</sup> This signals a practice of political silencing, or what we might call 'a refusal to hear'. The pledge represents and expresses the cumulative labors of decades -- the work of an abolition movement made up of military and political leaders (often retired), nuclear scientists, religious leaders, environmentalists, physicians, architects and engineers, many other relevant professionals, plus millions of citizens from hundreds of countries who have struggled against the bomb since its first unleashing.<sup>16</sup> The voices of Europeans in particular, who have maintained anti-nuclear movements since the origins of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) in the late 1950s and who are currently fighting an uphill battle against the costly and dangerous modernisation of the Trident nuclear submarine, are silenced in their leaders' reluctance/refusal to sign the pledge.<sup>17</sup> The stories of suffering from Hiroshima and Nagasaki are shut out; the reports of grave damage from nuclear testing from the Marshall Islands and other Pacific nations are stifled;<sup>18</sup> the mounting evidence of the enormous and widespread damage of plutonium production is barely visible.<sup>19</sup> All of these issues anchor the humanitarian initiative movement.<sup>20</sup> The very fact that the initiative -- a momentous multi-national political-legal struggle over the future of nuclear arms has been taking place at the heart of the international system (the United Nations) yet the news media barely reports on it, is sign itself of the power of silencing at the heart of nuclearism. This silencing of nuclear protest means that little penetrates the hubris of military elites, who trust their own infinite ability to manage the forces that they hold.

In her recent monograph, *Thermonuclear Monarchy*, philosopher and cultural theorist Elaine Scarry compels readers to meditate on the 'weaponry that enables a tiny number of people (one, fifty-three, or two hundred twelve) to annihilate millions of people.'<sup>21</sup> She calls these 'out-of-ratio weapons,' critically analysing the grotesque political absurdity and existential insanity of vesting the ability to destroy cities, regions, countries, or whole continents -- as one Trident submarine's missiles

can do in half an hour.<sup>22</sup> In the hands of single individuals -- whether they be presidents, prime ministers, or military leaders, the world can be destroyed with astonishing ease.

For many decades, what scholars call a ‘nuclear taboo’ has held among the nuclear weapons nations, and most crucially, in the two countries whose arsenals stand on hair-trigger alert: the US and USSR/Russia. In an influential 2005 essay, Nina Tannenwald characterised that taboo as an entire range of institutional, legal, behavioral, and discursive practices that create a powerful shared abhorrence for even considering the use of nuclear bombs.<sup>23</sup> Tannenwald argues that this taboo has been expressed and maintained via ‘public opinion, the diplomatic statements of governments and leaders, the resolutions of international organisations, and the private moral concerns of individual decisionmakers.’<sup>24</sup>

This taboo has unraveled in profound ways since 2014. On 16 March of that year -- on the very same day of the Russia-sponsored referendum on Crimean independence -- Russian TV news anchor Dmitry Kiselev, General Director of Russian International Information Agency, discussed the Russian Federation’s automated nuclear weapon launching system ‘Perimetr’ (which is, as Eric Schlosser has noted, the same as the ‘Doomsday Machine’ the Soviets create in Dr. Strangelove<sup>25</sup>), and in a tone of threatening glee announced that ‘Russia is the only country in the world that can turn the United States into radioactive ash.’<sup>26</sup> This clip reverberated in news stories around the world, and *was* widely if mildly criticised in Russia, though not by official state spokespersons.<sup>27</sup>

Since then, dozens of broadcasts by other leading Russian TV hosts have featured stories that celebrate various components of the Russian nuclear system. Weekly shows on state-sponsored television such as “Military Secret” with Igor Prokopenko, “Moment of Truth” with Andrei Karaulov, have featured open nuclear threats, missile-launch spectacles, and video simulations of destroyed Manhattan.<sup>28</sup> Russian President Vladimir Putin has made a number of nuclear pronouncements in

the past two years, during many public events, meetings, interviews, and formal speeches.<sup>29</sup> The gist of these is that Russia's nuclear forces are ready to be used, and can strike the United States within half an hour via ICBMs. In a documentary film about the takeover of Crimea, Putin clearly states that Russia was ready to utilise all of its forces, including nuclear, to defend its interests.<sup>30</sup> As if responding via its own nuclear taboo-busters, in early 2016, the BBC broadcast 'World War III: Inside the War Room' – featuring a fictional Russian invasion of Latvia and the resulting military consultations among top UK officials.<sup>31</sup> Will NATO or the US authorise the use of nuclear weapons in response? We all can find out at the end of the show, and as well, we can go on to play the 'Could You Stop World War Three', and 'Interactive Adventure: How to Survive a Nuclear War' -- two BBC-produced internet entertainments which straightforwardly turn nuclear war *into* games.<sup>32</sup>

The world has crossed a nuclear threshold without much public awareness. Such broadcasts, taken within a widening context of nuclear sabre-rattling and entertainment across many media, languages, and nations, illustrate that the old nuclear taboo is broken; the unthinkable has become not merely thinkable but part of the everyday mediated spectacle. Such military-political entertainment reverberates complexly, and alarmingly, across the planet – so that the BBC mockumentary is discussed in hundreds of Russian news stories and TV shows, as proof that the UK, US, and NATO are pondering a nuclear first strike on Russia.<sup>33</sup> That, in turn, fuels Russia's own nuclear legitimisation game, which feeds back quite nicely into the trillion dollar nuclear modernisation plans of the three NATO nuclear-weapons nations. This is a new phase of nuclearism, quite different from the stolid and secretive -- but also phenomenally expensive -- nuclear gaming of the Cold War.<sup>34</sup>

One chilling dimension of it is that leaders and potential leaders on both sides rattle their nuclear weapons seemingly in blasé indifference to the 'mutual' part of 'mutual assured destruction.' Neither the Russian declarations of nuclear readiness nor the bellicose statements about indiscriminate bombing that come out

of the mouths of American presidential candidates seem to waste any words on the scale and ubiquity of annihilation that nuclear war guarantees. Nor do they attend at all to its horror, the humanitarian atrocity that the recent Pledge underscores. A good portion of the world public is seduced by the figure, the antics, and the loose words of all-powerful leaders, ready and able, quite literally, to push the buttons that will end the world.

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<sup>1</sup> See The National Security Archive, George Washington University, Electronic Briefing Book No. 43, 'Launch on Warning: The Development of US Capabilities, 1959-1979. Available at: <http://nsarchive.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB43/> (Accessed 16 Mar. 2016). For an excellent overview of the history of nuclear high alert, see E. Schlosser, *Command and Control: Nuclear Weapons, the Damascus Accident, and the Illusion of Safety*, New York, Penguin Books.

<sup>2</sup> 'Reducing the Risk of Nuclear War: Taking Nuclear Weapons Off High Alert'. Union of Concerned Scientists, January 2016. Available at [www.ucsusa.org/ReducingtheRisk](http://www.ucsusa.org/ReducingtheRisk) (Accessed 13 Mar. 2016).

<sup>3</sup> P. Koshkin (2016). 'Buzz about World War III Only Fuels Russia's Confrontation with the West', 4.2.2016, available at: <http://www.russia-direct.org/analysis/buzz-about-world-war-iii-only-fuels-russias-confrontation-west> (Accessed 19 Mar. 2016). Saprykin, Y. (2015). 'Kak my perestali boiatsia I poliubili bombu' ('How We Stopped Being Afraid and Started Loving the Bomb'), 28.1.2015. Available at: <https://slon.ru/insights/1209561/> (Accessed 19 Mar. 2016).

<sup>4</sup> J. Derrida, et al, 'No Apocalypse, Not Now (full speed ahead, seven missiles, seven missives)'. *diacritics*, vol. 14, no. 2, 1984, pp. 20-31. Derrida's essay inspired a generation of theoretical work on nuclear discourse across many disciplines, still ongoing. For a recent comment by a former top Pentagon official, that summarizes why discourse matters, see W. Perry, 'The Risk of Nuclear Catastrophe Is Greater Today Than During the Cold War' in *Huffington Post*, 20.1.2016. Available at: [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/william-jperry/nuclear-catastrophe-risk\\_b\\_9019558.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/william-jperry/nuclear-catastrophe-risk_b_9019558.html) Perry says: 'Even though I believe that these threats are rhetoric, I do understand that our natural instinct is to respond in kind — returning the threats and playing "follow the leader" in the arms buildup.'

<sup>5</sup> 'It Is Still Three Minutes to Midnight'. Available at: <http://thebulletin.org/#> (Accessed 16.3.2016).

<sup>6</sup> J. Borger, 'Nuclear weapons risk greater than in cold war, says ex-Pentagon chief'. *The Guardian*. Available at: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jan/07/nuclear-weapons-risk-greater-than-in-cold-war-says-ex-pentagon-chief> Accessed 12 March, 2016.

<sup>7</sup> M.J. Mills, et al, 'Multidecadal Global Cooling and Unprecedented Ozone Loss Following a Regional Nuclear Conflict', *Earth's Future*, vol. 2, no. 4, 2014, pp. 161-176; A. Robock and O.B. Toon, 'Self-Assured Destruction: The Climate Impacts of Nuclear War', *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, vol. 68, no. 5, 2012, pp. 66-74.

<sup>8</sup> 'Humanitarian Pledge for the Prohibition and Elimination of Nuclear Weapons, UN General Assembly, Resolution 70/48 adopted by the General Assembly on 7 December 2015. Pdf available at: [http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view\\_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/70/48](http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/70/48) (Accessed 5 Mar. 2016).

<sup>9</sup> X. Hall, 'Time for Nuclear Sharing to End' Available at: <https://www.opendemocracy.net/can-europe-make-it/xanthe-hall/time-for-nuclear-sharing-to-end> (Accessed 18 Mar. 2015)

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.icanw.org/pledge/>

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.psr.org/nuclear-weapons/blog/global-disarmament-movement.html>

<sup>12</sup> N. Ritchie (2015). 'The Humanitarian Initiative in 2015.' Available at: <http://nwp.ilpi.org/?p=4602> (Accessed 11 Mar. 2016).

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<sup>13</sup> Ritchie points out that: 'Many states are now deeply concerned at the glacial pace of nuclear disarmament under the NPT and the value that nuclear-armed states continue to place on their nuclear weapons 25 years after the end of the Cold War. They argue that the nuclear-weapon states have failed to meet their commitment to pursue 'negotiations in good faith' on nuclear disarmament made in 1968 and reaffirmed in 1995, and their 'unequivocal undertaking' to eliminate nuclear weapons leading to nuclear disarmament made in 2000 and reiterated in 2010.' Ritchie, Nick (2015). 'The Humanitarian Initiative in 2015.' Available at: <http://nwp.ilpi.org/?p=4602> (Accessed 11 Mar. 2016).

<sup>14</sup> See Nukewatch's 'Nuclear Modernization' for a digest of recent sources. Available at <http://nukewatch.org/modernization.html> (Accessed 20 Mar. 2016).

<sup>15</sup> Ritchie (2015).

<sup>16</sup> The International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons is the major umbrella organization for the global abolition movement. Available at <http://www.icanw.org/> (Accessed Mar 20, 2016).

<sup>17</sup> Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, and People Not Trident available at: <http://www.cnduk.org/> (Accessed 19 Mar. 2016).

<sup>18</sup> 'Marshall Islands Begins Legal Action Aimed at Global Nuclear Disarmament'. Available at: [http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/mar/10/marshall-islands-begins-legal-action-aimed-at-global-nuclear-disarmament?CMP=share\\_btn\\_fb](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/mar/10/marshall-islands-begins-legal-action-aimed-at-global-nuclear-disarmament?CMP=share_btn_fb) (Accessed 16 Mar. 2016); see also H. Barker, *Bravo for the Marshallese: Regaining Control in a Post-Nuclear, Post-Colonial World*. Belmont, CA, Wadsworth Publishing, 2012.

<sup>19</sup>K. Brown. *Plutopia: Nuclear Families, Atomic Cities, and the Great Soviet and American Plutonium Disasters*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013.

<sup>20</sup> H. Williams, et al 'The Humanitarian Impacts of Nuclear Weapons Initiative: The 'Big Tent' in Disarmament' *International Security*, 31.3.2015. Pdf accessible at: <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/files/.../field/.../20150331nuclear.pdf> (Accessed 19 Mar. 2016)

<sup>21</sup> E. Scarry, *Thermonuclear Monarchy: Choosing between Democracy and Doom*. New York, W.W. Norton and Company, 2014, p. 5.

<sup>22</sup> See Scarry's extended discussion of the Trident, in particular its vast capacities to destroy coupled with its insanely slow receipt of communications when submerged. *Thermonuclear Monarchy*, pp. 11-17.

<sup>23</sup> N. Tannenwald, 'Stigmatizing the Bomb: Origins of the Nuclear Taboo.' *International Security* vol. 29, no.4, 2005; also N. Tannenwald, *The Nuclear Taboo, The United States and the Non-Use of Nuclear Weapons Since 1945*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2007.

<sup>24</sup> N. Tannenwald, 'Stigmatizing the Bomb: Origins of the Nuclear Taboo.' *International Security* vol. 29, no.4, 2005, p. 9.

<sup>25</sup> E. Schlosser, "Almost Everything in "Dr. Strangelove" Was True. *New Yorker*, 17.1.2014. Available at <http://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/almost-everything-in-dr-strangelove-was-true> (Accessed 20 Mar. 2016).

<sup>26</sup> D. Kiselev on Russia Television Channel 1 'Vesti' Available with subtitles at: <https://youtu.be/OKOwRWAYwA?t=45s> (Accessed 20 Mar. 2016).

<sup>27</sup> See brief comments on Novaya Gazeta, available at: <http://www.novayagazeta.ru/news/1679503.html> and Kisilev's self-defense at Gazeta.ru available at: [http://www.gazeta.ru/social/news/2015/09/17/n\\_7601057.shtml](http://www.gazeta.ru/social/news/2015/09/17/n_7601057.shtml) (both accessed 20 Mar. 2016).

<sup>28</sup> For instance, 'Moment of Truth' January 11, 2016: <https://youtu.be/by0GKpTNT5Y?t=26m22s> and 'Scientific Detective' April 19, 2015: Available at: <https://youtu.be/jdOF-yk6sXE> (Both accessed 20 Mar. 2016)

<sup>29</sup> S. Fidler, (2011) 'Over Dinner, Putin Takes Issue with Western Powers' *Wall Street Journal*, 12 Nov. 2011. <http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052970204358004577032533741783056>; accessed 15 Mar. 2016. T. Parfit, (2014) 'Vladimir Putin Issues New 'Large Nuclear Power' Warning to West' *The Telegraph*, 16 October, 2014. Available at: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/vladimir-putin/11167192/Vladimir-Putin-issues-new-large-nuclear-power-warning-to-West.html> Accessed 18 Mar. 2016.



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An article on the TV Zvezda website incorporates Putin's 2011 remark, showing its reverberations; see 'Symmetrical Answer: with what kind of weapons can Russia destroy the US within half an hour?' 7 November, 2015. Available at: <http://tvzvezda.ru/news/forces/content/201511070813-oxxi.htm> (Accessed 18 Mar. 2016). RT Live, 16 June 2015 displayed Russia's missile investments: 'Putin: Russian nuclear forces to get 40+ ballistic missiles in 2015' 16 June, 2015. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RNrjLQ24-3w> (Accessed 18 Mar. 2016).

<sup>30</sup> A. Kondrashev, Television documentary, *Crimea, the Way Home*. Broadcast on Rossiya 1 on 15 March, 2015. Available here, time-cued with subtitles: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t42-71RpRgl&feature=youtu.be&t=1h29m11s> (Accessed 18 Mar. 2016). Note that Kondrashev's question to Putin at minute 1:29:49 are the only words in the film untranslated in the subtitles. He asks President Putin: 'Does what you said just now mean that we brought even our nuclear forces to a state of military readiness?' To which Putin responds, "We were ready to do that."

<sup>31</sup> 'Inside the War Room' available at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b06zw32h> (Accessed 20 Mar. 2016).

<sup>32</sup> "Could You Stop World War Three?" Available at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/guides/zpm8xsg> and Interactive Adventure: How to Survive a Nuclear Bomb. Available at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/taster/projects/how-to-survive-a-nuclear-bomb> (Both accessed 18 Mar. 2016).

<sup>33</sup> BBC Whips up Anti-Russia Hysteria to Apocalyptic Levels. RT 7.2.2016. Available at: <https://www.rt.com/op-edge/331667-bbc-media-russia-propaganda/>

<sup>34</sup> '\$1 Trillion per Decade' – Global Zero. Available at: <http://www.globalzero.org/get-the-facts/cost-of-nukes> (Accessed 20 Mar. 2016).

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