

*Conclusions & Insights Following
a Webinar Discussion
on*

*The War in Ukraine:
Implications for Global Arms Race & WMD Proliferation*

11 May 2022

Introduction

Almost two months since hostilities erupted, the **Russian invasion of Ukraine** has already become the largest armed conflict on **European** soil since the end of World War Two. In addition to the extensive human suffering and the tragic loss of life, the widespread destruction of infrastructure in Ukraine, and the largest refugee crisis in the continent since the 1940s, the war has already **disrupted international security** and the international system in profound ways. Few now doubt it will have a lasting impact on the **future trajectory** of world events for years to come.

The Ukraine war has highlighted the dominance of current **superpower rivalry**, while further discrediting the **United Nations** as an organization capable of upholding global peace. It has disrupted critical supply chains and caused potential food security challenges in many regions across the globe; further eroded trust in American global leadership; brought back **nuclear weapons rhetoric**; and is likely to have **reignited a global arms race**. These last two issues are the focus of this paper.

On **26 April 2022**, the **Abba Eban Institute for International Diplomacy at Reichman University** convened a special online discussion, titled “The War in Ukraine: Implications for Global Arms Race & WMD Proliferation.” A team of international experts weighed in on possible developments in the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and the possibility of an accelerated global arms race, both triggered by Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.

Below are the **main insights** that emerged from the discussion, which focus on the erosion of international norms regarding the non-use of nuclear weapons, the erosion of the NPT regime, and the intensification of a global conventional arms race. On the **conceptual level**, an important conclusion from the discussion is that, following the Ukraine war, **research into international security should not treat these issues independently of one another**; instead, **policymakers and researchers must integrate the consideration of those issues and their linkages**.

Participants *(in alphabetical order)*:

- Prof. **Akiyama Nobumasa**, School of International and Public Policy & the Graduate School of Law at Hitotsubashi University, Tokyo
- **Mohammed Baharoon**, Director General, Dubai Public Policy Research Center (B’huth)
- Col. (res.) **Shlomo Kashi**, Devil’s Advocate Department, Tel Aviv
- **Lea Landman**, Head of Diplomacy 2030 Program, Abba Eban Institute for International Diplomacy, Reichman University
- **Nitin Pai**, Founder and Director, Takshashila Institution, Bangalore
- Dr **Or Rabinowitz**, Assistant Professor, the Department of International Relations, Hebrew University of Jerusalem
- **Yun Sun**, Senior Fellow & Co-Director of the East Asia Program, Director of the China Program, The Stimson Center, Washington D.C.
- **Goor Tsalalyachin**, Executive Director, Abba Eban Institute for International Diplomacy, Reichman University

Implications for WMD Proliferation

The event’s participants all agreed that the Ukraine war has **deepened global tensions** regarding nuclear weapons but were nevertheless divided as to the expected trajectory of this trend.

The fate of the **Non-Proliferation Treaty** (NPT) regime remains in limbo. For 40 years, nuclear weapons were considered an option of last resort, but from the very first days of the Ukraine war, the **Kremlin** started signalling it may consider using them. The consequence, as noted by the panellists, is that the so-called “**limited nuclear options**” – until recently a taboo – have suddenly made a disturbing comeback.

This was not helped by **China’s** timid reaction to **Russia’s** announcements on this matter. European countries have called upon China to publish a statement against the use of nuclear weapons, but Beijing has so far rejected their plea, leaving them deeply frustrated. The overall result is a double blow – both a failure of the NPT regime and the simultaneous and sudden return to the fore of nuclear weapons as a tool of diplomacy, coercion, and deterrence.

Consequently, the experts’ debate on **non-proliferation** focused primarily on whether the NPT is on its deathbed – or has already passed. One speaker argued that, while “everybody is disappointed with the NPT,” it is too early to declare the Treaty as obsolete, but another claimed that upholding it is simply not a viable option anymore.

Despite these dire warnings, it is far from clear whether a nuclear arms race is indeed imminent and inevitable. On the one hand, **Japan** has reportedly begun **debating the possibility of “hosting” American nuclear weapons** on its soil for the first time, while **China** is working to

expand its nuclear arsenal to boost **deterrence against possible American and Japanese interventions**. Furthermore, events in Ukraine will undoubtedly make it extremely difficult to convince countries with nuclear weapons, such as **Pakistan** and **Iran** (if it acquires them), to give them up in the future.

On the other hand, developing and procuring nuclear weapons is extremely difficult and remarkably costly in terms of political, economic, and global risks. Therefore, many countries will likely decide to seek **alternatives to nuclear weapons**, such as joining or bolstering their **defence alliances**, seeking shelter under a **“nuclear umbrella”** or nuclear **“sharing.”** Some will likely contemplate “civilian” nuclear plans that will bring them **closer to the threshold level**, whereby they possess sufficient quantities of enriched uranium required for the production of nuclear weapons but do not necessarily proceed towards weaponization.

What emerged from the discussion is the apparent agreement about the **limited prospects of preventing further proliferation** of weapons of mass destruction. Given the potential **erosion** of the **WMD non-proliferation norms**, and in light of recent **Russian threats** of using nuclear weapons, one expert suggested that world powers must now work to reach a new agreement and declare a “No First Use” policy to reduce the nuclear risk. Under such a framework, nuclear weapons may serve as tools for diplomacy or survival – but never as offensive weapons.

However, the speakers stressed that the chances of reaching a new international agreement are very slim, at least in the short term. What all agreed upon is that without finding a way to convince China to join such an endeavour, no new treaties on nuclear weapons can be promoted.

An Accelerated Arms Race?

The experts who participated in the event agreed that the **Ukraine war will trigger a new global conventional arms race** and discussed several of the main types of weapons systems which are likely to receive increased attention in the upcoming years. First among these are **hypersonic weapons**, which were first used in combat by Russia in Ukraine and are part and parcel of the **superpower competition**. In response to the use of such weapons, other countries are already expressing interest in developing or acquiring countermeasures, such as **advanced anti-aircraft and anti-missile defense systems**, including laser-based systems such as Israel’s “Iron Beam.” Finally, long-range artillery, capable of hitting targets harder and from a greater distance than before, is also expected to be in high demand in the upcoming years.

The Ukraine war has also shifted countries’ calculus regarding **arms procurement**. Specifically, it has strengthened Japan’s resolve to acquire **long-range conventional strike capabilities**, given that Tokyo will not seek to develop nuclear weapons of its own. While acquiring conventional strategic strike capabilities carries the risk of escalating the arms race in the Asia-Pacific, **Japan believes it has no choice** given the growing threat from China in the region.

From Beijing's perspective, the arms race in its region has been "aggravated and accelerated" by the Ukraine war. However, this trend began after the establishment of the **AUKUS** alliance between **Australia**, the **UK**, and the **US** in September 2021. The Chinese have come to view AUKUS as a direct challenge by the US and other countries on its side. On the other side of the **Taiwan Strait**, the war has also led Taipei to actively consider bolstering its defence capabilities, including advanced long-range strike capabilities. It may also expand its reserve forces.

The one area which has defied experts' expectations regarding the Ukraine war is the **cyber domain**. So far, cyberattacks have caused relatively little damage compared to the extensive firepower the Russians have used on Ukraine soil. This raises questions regarding the utility of cyber weapons in a large military campaign and may demonstrate that they are not the "silver bullet" some expected them to be.

That said, the experts agreed that if **cyberattacks** cause serious damage – for example, to **critical infrastructure** – the stakes would rise significantly. The problem, as they pointed out, is that the cyber domain does not fall either under conventional or non-conventional warfare, and it lacks established international norms. Consequently, miscalculations are bound to take place, and in case of serious attacks, **retaliation might quickly escalate from the cyber to the physical domain**. One expert even warned of **cross-domain implications**, where **serious cyberattacks may trigger a nuclear response**. Such complexities are troubling for many countries, which are struggling with questions of cybersecurity and strategic deterrence.

Conclusions

While it is still early to draw clear conclusions from the Ukraine war, we can make some preliminary observations on the ways it has already affected international security, and how both researchers in the field and policymakers can better address recent developments.

First and foremost, the war and the nature of NATO countries' response, or lack thereof, may be seen by others worldwide as an **important universal lesson**: That in the case of foreign aggression and direct military confrontation, they have only themselves to rely on. Therefore, the long-term concern is that this lesson will serve as an **inducement for some countries to seek their security assurances in the form of nuclear deterrence**.

Such a development might open the door for an even **greater erosion of the NPT regime** and international **norms against the use of nuclear weapons** in combat, which have evolved since the end of World War Two and the Cold War era. The war in Ukraine – during which Russia threatened the use of nuclear weapons, NATO warned against Russian use of chemical weapons, and the US president explicitly warned from spilling into World War Three – already marks a **substantial erosion of international norms regarding WMD**.

Additional concrete indications of this troubling trend were mentioned in the discussion. Public statements, as well as “behind-the-scenes” information (mainly from the Asia-Pacific region), indicate the **change in attitude towards non-conventional weapons**. **North Korea, China**, and (with the obvious differences) also **Japan**, remain **countries of interest** for further research, as developments in this theatre might trigger regional and international dynamics with the potential for the gravest consequences for world peace and security.

Yet **new security assurances** may also be found in areas other than the development of WMD programs. One potential avenue is the establishment of **new partnerships**. As a lesson from the war, countries may drive harder for establishing new pacts and **“mini-lateral” arrangements, or bolster existing ones**, to jointly develop **new capabilities or procure them from others**. As recent developments have shown, this may also be the path for smaller states to **seek shelter under a greater power’s nuclear umbrella**.

Another complementing route might be an **accelerated race for new military technologies**. The development and/or acquisition of such technologies may provide nations with a competitive edge on the battlefield and function as a **strategic (conventional) deterrent**. Therefore, **the arms race which already dominates superpower competition might be expanded to additional countries across the globe**.

This potential course of development may be seen both in **Europe** as well as in the **Middle East**. For example, concerns expressed in the Middle East about **Iran’s nuclear ambitions**, the looming nuclear deal slated to replace the JCPOA, and Tehran’s regional subversion (political and military), are already inducing regional actors to increase military procurement and cement regional diplomatic and defence alliances – even with **Israel**. At the same time, the war in Ukraine has already affected the new defence strategy for the **European Union**, which is committing itself to a **substantial increase in defence expenditure** towards a “quantum leap” of its members’ military capabilities *vis-à-vis* Russia.

Ultimately, then, the discussion held by the Abba Eban Institute highlighted the three converging trends:

- (a) **The erosion of international norms regarding the non-use of nuclear weapons;**
- (b) **The erosion of the NPT regime** and a potential long-term increase in nuclear weapons proliferation; and
- (c) **The intensification of a global conventional arms race** – both offensive (e.g., long-range precision-guided munitions) and defensive (e.g., anti-missile defence systems), some of which is already taking place.

Therefore, the primary conclusion for the **policymaking and research communities** alike is the need to **integrate** all three of these trends into any future analysis. The experts’ discussion highlighted the many ways these **trends converge** and affect one another. Consequently,

studying any one of them separately risks painting an incomplete picture of the international system and contemporary geopolitics.

For example, Japan considering housing American nuclear weapons and developing strategic strike capabilities cannot be divorced from China's race to procure hypersonic weapons and expand its nuclear arsenal; existing and future **alliances** will likely feature some element of nuclear umbrellas and the ease in which using nuclear weapons has been **accepted, or shrugged off**, by much of the international community – in spite of the decades-old nuclear taboo – demonstrates the feebleness of the NPT regime and may be the harbinger of a new nuclear arms race.

The future of international security, in sum, looks much grimmer than before 24 February 2022. Tackling these questions head-on may help develop the type of discussion decision-makers, diplomats, academics, and practitioners need to have, in order to positively shape our collective future.

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