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THE NEXT WORLD WAR: NOT NEAR, BUT NOT SO FAR

By
Dapo Thomas *Ph.D*
Senior Lecturer, Department of History and International studies,
Faculty of Arts, Lagos State University, (LASU), Ojo, Lagos, Nigeria

Corresponding Email: dapothomas62@gmail.com

Abstract:

The unfolding scenarios in the international system require some interrogation. The ominous threats of nuclear weapons by competing and contending powers, both major and global, give the system a complex character at a time it is relapsing into imminent anarchy. In East Asia, the crisis between China and Taiwan is experiencing massive troop and armament deployment. Also, the sticky situation between North Korea and South Korea has witnessed series of missile tests by North Korea to which South Korea has not responded other than to swagger with the U.S. in joint military drills. It is evident that the provocations are calculated. In South Asia, Iran looks unstoppable with its uranium development. The recent arms deal between North Korea and Russia was also meant to expand the scope of threat. The Russian-Ukrainian war in Eastern Europe can boast of deployment of different kinds of technological equipment and gadgets of war. This study is designed to provide theoretical understanding to these build-ups via empirical findings in order to establish their potential for escalatory tendencies into an all-out war of global proportion. The study adopts nuclear weapons and international conflict theory as its theoretical framework. There is very scarce literature on the endangerment of nuclear symmetries compelled by the overwhelming actions and desires of individual states to also develop their own nuclear capabilities like others. This paper therefore attempts a theoretical contextualization of nuclear weapons symmetries and asymmetries and the psychological and political maturity of the countries' leaderships not to allow this grandstanding to undermine and imperil global peace.

Keywords:

Nuclear weapons, next world war, international conflict, nuclear symmetries, political maturity.

Introduction

There are ominous signs in the international system to suggest that the system's elasticity is under immense threats of systemic exhaustion. The indicators for nuclear conflict are becoming more evident by the day as the system faces its most challenging moment of interference from its own agents and sub-systems. The structure agents called UNSC P5 managing the system are beginning to subjugate the system they are meant to superintend. For instance, the international system is averse to nuclear proliferation according to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of nuclear weapons, a multilateral arms control agreement opened for signature in July 1968 but only came into force in March 1970. The goal was to stop signatories from enhancing and encouraging vertical and horizontal proliferations of nuclear weapons via some safeguards system (Evans & Newnham, 1998). But Iran, a party to the NPT since 1970, is openly contravening the agreement by exceeding agreed-upon limits to its stockpile of low-enriched uranium in 2019. It also began enriching uranium to higher concentrations by developing new centrifuges to accelerate uranium enrichment, resuming heavy water production at its Arak facility (Robinson, 2023). In a similar fashion, North Korea, which acceded to the NPT in 1985, never came into compliance until its voluntary withdrawal from the NPT in 2003 following the detonation of nuclear devices in violation of UN Security Council Resolutions; North Korea continues overt nuclear enrichment and long-range missile development efforts. Although the scale of North Korea's uranium enrichment program remains uncertain, U.S. intelligence agencies estimate that it has enough plutonium to produce at least six nuclear weapons and possibly up to sixty (North Korea Crisis, 2023).

What is more, there are growing tensions between China and the U.S. over Taiwan—a scenario stimulated by Russia's unwarranted invasion of Ukraine. China's tacit support for Russia's invasion of Ukraine has heightened the tension between China, Taiwan, and the United States, a very strategic ally of Taiwan. Most nations of the world are yet to recognize Taiwan as an independent country, including the U.S., but this has not prevented the U.S. from establishing full diplomatic relations with Taiwan.

The most unprovoked act of impunity in contemporary international relations was the invasion of Ukraine by Russia and its threat to use nuclear weapons against that country. On April 20, 2022, Russia carried out its first test launch of the RS-28 Sarmat, a new long-range intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM). It warned that the new missile could defeat any missile defenses and that it should cause countries threatening Russia to think twice (Nuclear Risk During the Russian Invasion of Ukraine, n.d.). Russia's nuclear threat against Ukraine shocked the world considering that Russia is a permanent member of the UN Security Council, a body responsible for the enforcement of the Treaty on the Prohibition of nuclear weapons including a comprehensive set of prohibitions on participating in any nuclear weapon activities.

Nuclear Weapons and International Conflict: A Theoretical Guide

Robert Jervis, who coined the term "Nuclear Revolution," noted:

> "The changes nuclear weapons have produced in world politics constitute a true revolution in the relationships between force and foreign policy. The fact that neither (the United States nor the Soviet Union) can protect itself without the other's cooperation drastically alters the way in which force can be used or threatened… The result is to render much of our pre-nuclear logic inadequate. As Bernard Brodie has stressed, the first question to ask about a war is what the

> political goal is that justifies the military cost. When the cost is likely to be very high, only the most valuable goals are worth pursuing by military means… what prospective… goals could possibly justify the risk of total destruction?" (Jervis, 1989).

Moreover, for Jervis, that this destruction was essentially unavoidable under any plausible strategy constituted the essence of the nuclear revolution. He then went on to enumerate changes in international politics directly attributable to the presence of nuclear weaponry, including the absence of war among the great powers, the declining frequency of great power crises, and the tenuous link between the conventional or nuclear balance among great powers and the political outcomes of their disputes (Jervis, 1989).

Arguing in line with his earlier postulation on the anarchical character of the international system, Kenneth Waltz submits that nuclear weapons are simply more effective in dissuading states from engaging in war than are conventional weapons (Waltz, 1990). Articulating the major hurdle to global peace, Waltz contends that states pursue their security above other goals, which limits the potential for cooperation and creates security competition. Expanding on this argument, Waltz believes that in a conventional world, states going to war would believe that they may win and that, should they lose, the price of defeat will be bearable. To this extent, Waltz is of the opinion that "a little reasoning leads to the conclusion that to fight nuclear wars is all but impossible and that to launch an offensive that might prompt nuclear retaliation is obvious folly. To reach these conclusions, complicated calculations are not required, only a little common sense" (Sagan & Waltz, 1995). Waltz's final submission on nuclear wars is very instructive: "The likelihood of war decreases as deterrent and defensive capabilities increase. Nuclear weapons make wars hard to start. These statements hold for small as for big nuclear powers. Because they do, the gradual spread of nuclear weapons is more to be welcomed than feared" (Sagan & Waltz, 1995).

In their own empirical studies, Bueno de Mesquita and William Riker present a model that assumes the possibility of nuclear war (i.e., the use of nuclear weapons) when nuclear asymmetry exists (only one side possesses nuclear weapons), but assumes the absence of nuclear war among nuclear-armed states. Their model indicates a rising possibility of nuclear war resulting from nuclear proliferation to the midpoint of the international system. Where half of the states possess nuclear weapons, at which point any further proliferation results in a declining probability of nuclear war. When all nations possess nuclear weapons, the probability of nuclear war is zero (Bueno de Mesquita & Riker, 1982).

Mesquita's and Riker's position aligns with the findings of Asal and Beardsley who examined the relationship between the severity of violence in international crises and the number of states involved in the crises that possess nuclear weapons (Beardsley & Asal, 2009). Relying on data from the International Crises Behaviour (ICB) project for the years 1918 through 2000, their results indicate that crises in which nuclear actors are involved are more likely to end without violence and that, as the number of nuclear-armed states engaged in crises increases, the probability of war decreases. Both Mesquita's and Beardsley's submissions agree with the nuclear revolution thesis: the presence of nuclear weapon states in international crises has a violence dampening effect due to the potential consequences of escalation and the use of nuclear force (Bueno de Mesquita, 1982).

Extending their postulation further on international conflict, Beardsley and Asal hypothesize that nuclear weapons act as shields against aggressive behavior directed towards their possessors. Their postulation is that nuclear states will refrain from carrying out aggression against or towards other nuclear-armed powers (Beardsley & Asal, 2009). This correlates with Mesquita's argument that

nuclear asymmetry or the absence of nuclear weapons on both sides of a conflict is more likely to be associated with war (Bueno de Mesquita, 1982).

In their own argument, Osgood and Tucker (1967) opine that hostile interaction between nuclear powers under high provocation thresholds can range from verbal threats and warnings to the use of force in limited wars. A very salient point was raised by Osgood and Tucker, who stated clearly that: "In disputes between nuclear powers, military force should be viewed as requisite but potentially catastrophic power that must be carefully managed and controlled within the bounds of reciprocally recognized constraint" (Osgood & Tucker, 1967).

The general conclusion of all the studies is that conflicts between nuclear powers should reveal different escalatory patterns than conflicts between states where only one side possesses nuclear arms or conflicts where neither side possesses nuclear arms. Specifically, "disputes between nuclear powers should evidence a greater tendency to escalate—short of war—than non/nuclear disputes in which only one side possesses a nuclear capability" (Osgood & Tucker, 1967).

Nuclear War: The Farther, The Nearer

The international political landscape is laden with military conflicts and political tensions capable of developing into a global warfare of destructive magnitude in view of various threats by some of the countries involved to turn conventional warfare into nuclear warfare. Most of these wars and conflicts, going on simultaneously in most parts of the globe, portend dangerous signals and constitute an apparent threat to global peace and security. Unfortunately, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), saddled with the responsibility of ensuring and engendering global peace and security, has become polarized along ideological and political divides. Though the impression had been created that the Cold War was over, states involved in these latest wars still operate from the traditional ideological premises that once pitted the United States of America against the then Soviet Union. During the Cold War, both countries operated via proxies, but these latest conflicts have come with a new variant of proxy war called errand war (Buzan & Wæver, 2003).

The escalation of hostilities in the field of war is also noticeable in the strong-room of diplomacy, that is, the UNSC, where decisions and resolutions are treated with hideous acrimonies by the five permanent members of the Council. Expectedly, China and Russia lead the first group, while the US, Britain, and France are the arrowheads of the second group. Resolutions and decisions of the Council are vetoed by the various masters for as long as such resolutions conflict with their national security, economic interests, and political cleavages. For instance, in the ongoing Israel-Hamas war, the United States in December 2023 vetoed a UN resolution backed by almost all other Security Council members and dozens of other nations demanding an immediate humanitarian ceasefire in Gaza. Characteristically, Russia also vetoed a Resolution drafted by the United States, Israel's closest ally, reaffirming Israel's right to self-defense (UNSC, 2023).

Meanwhile, North Korea has demolished a monument that symbolized hope for reconciliation with South Korea, erasing any possibility for reconciliation with its South counterpart. The Arch of Reunification—built in 2000 after a landmark inter-Korean summit—has disappeared from satellite imagery (Satellite Imagery Analysis, 2024). Following up on this new aggressive posture, North Korea claimed that it had tested a new solid-fueled missile and underwater drones that can carry a nuclear weapon. Swaggering with its new invention, North Korea announced the launch of a new cruise missile named Pulhwasal—3-31. As of the last count, North Korea was said to have assembled 30 nuclear warheads. In addition, North Korea has the fissile material for an estimated 50-70 nuclear

weapons as well as advanced chemical and biological weapons programs (International Atomic Energy Agency, 2024). Unfortunately, at a time Russia, a member of the UNSC, should be involved in joint action against North Korea for its violation of UN resolutions, it continues to intensify its relations with the country in order to boost its ammunition supplies in its war against Ukraine. This brazen and audacious interface between Russia and North Korea has created a new puzzle in international politics as it is becoming increasingly difficult to determine Russia's stand on North Korea.

The China-Taiwan issue appears a very knotty one in the relationship between the US and China. If there was going to be any bellicosity between the two countries at any time, it may likely emanate from this particular area. In a paper titled: "Passion, Politics and Politician," Wu, a public affairs analyst, wrote: "Taiwan occupies a pivotal position in American-Asian relations; it is a hot point… the most important and sensitive problem in Sino-American relations" (Wu, 2024). Whiting calls it 'high conflict potential' (Whiting, 2024). Hal Brand, a Bloomberg Opinion columnist and the Henry Kissinger Distinguished Professor at Johns Hopkins University's School of Advanced International Studies, believes that Beijing may try to flaunt its military power to the new government in Taiwan just to show that China was not relenting on its traditional claim of One China (Brand, 2024). According to William Burns, the Director of the Central Intelligence Agency, Xi Jinping, President of the People's Republic of China, had ordered his People's Liberation Army to be ready for action by 2027 (Burns, 2024). Already, provocative exercises showed off many of the tools needed for an invasion or a blockade. All this set off an uncertain guessing game for the United States, particularly on what its strategy would be should China adopt military action against Taiwan to compel unification of the "renegade province" (Burns, 2024). Policymakers and policy experts have advised the US to take the role of nuclear weapons in a Taiwan conflict war seriously. Here is one of such admonitions: "The US should re-evaluate its theatre nuclear capability requirements for a Taiwan conflict and carefully analyze options to defeat a Chinese amphibious invasion of Taiwan with limited nuclear strikes if necessary… the US must credibly address the potential for collaborative or opportunistic aggression by China and Russia in an environment in which both are peer nuclear adversaries" (Military Analyst, 2024).

Iran's antagonism towards the West, which has extended to the International System and the UN Security Council, began with the emergence of the Islamic Republic founded by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. By the time the Shah could prop up Shia Islam as a counterweight to Communism, it was already too late, as the Islamists had emerged as a dominant force in Iran's domestic politics (Khomeini, 2024).

As soon as Iran's Revolutionary leaders seized power, the political narrative of Tehran changed its strategic outlook, shifting alliances and advocating for a Muslim awakening and unity among the 'oppressed peoples of the world to stand up to Western imperialism' (Dina, 2018). This was the background to Iran's hostile foreign policy towards the West. Since the Ayatollahs came into power, the country developed an anti-imperialist narrative, denouncing international law and institutions as vehicles for the West to impose its will on the rest of the world.

Reinforcing this conspiracy theory, the international community imposed sanctions on Iran to isolate it over its controversial nuclear program. Iran saw this international gang-up as a wake-up call to intensify its hostility towards Western imperialism and radicalize its self-reliance program. This program, later termed the "resistance economy," forms Iran's current roadmap to economic development. This self-reliance mantra has permeated every sector of Iranian society, particularly in technology and aerospace. During the Iran-Iraq war (1980–1988), Iran resumed key programs with

dual-use applications, such as starting one of the world's oldest drone programs during the war (World Politics Review, 2017).

According to McFaul (2018), Barack Obama made preventing Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon a top foreign policy priority. Consequently, the US needed to engage Russia in the diplomatic efforts. A series of meetings were organized with the Ayatollahs, including Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. After various diplomatic engagements, in which Russia played a key role, Iran and the US reached an agreement in June 2013. This agreement established the basic parameters of a grand bargain: lifting sanctions in return for Iran halting its nuclear weapons program. Two years later, on July 14, 2015, Iran signed the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). Under this agreement, Iran agreed to stop producing fissile materials at its declared nuclear facilities for at least ten years, while complying with an elaborate international inspection regime. In return, the United States lifted the sanctions (McFaul, 2018).

In a dramatic reversal, President Donald Trump withdrew the United States from the deal in 2018. In retaliation for the US withdrawal and for deadly attacks on prominent Iranians in 2020, including one by the US, Iran resumed its nuclear activities. UN inspectors reported in early 2023 that Iran had resumed its nuclear activities. Reports indicated that Iran had enriched trace amounts of uranium to nearly weapons-grade levels, raising international alarm (Kali, 2023).According to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), Iran has amassed enough enriched uranium to make weapons-grade uranium for a nuclear device in just 12 days (Robinson, 2023).

Theorizing Nuclear War Possibilities

The interesting part of Robert Jervis' argument about the nuclear revolution is that nuclear weapons have fundamentally altered world politics and established a true revolution in the relationship between force and foreign policy. His claim that the use of force in settling disputes, disagreements, and conflicts has diminished has gained traction. Though not the originator of the idea, as Bernard Brodie had already suggested alterations in international politics, Jervis merely embellished the idea by over-celebrating the end of the Cold War (Jervis, 1989). Since World War II, the Great Powers have avoided direct military confrontations and political conflicts by employing a more convenient strategic approach: proxy wars. This strategy reduces fatalities and destruction, and has been in practice since the end of World War II. Today, Great Powers and their proxies even assist non-state actors, such as Hamas in Gaza and Houthis in Yemen, allowing these groups to assume the status of state actors (Jervis, 1989).

Jervis' claim of declining great power crises is challenged by current conflicts: the war of attrition between Russia and NATO in Ukraine, the tension between the US and China over Taiwan, the Israel-Hamas conflict (with involvement from the US and Iran), the standoff between North and South Korea, and growing tension between Russia and France over African states. These events contradict the notion that great power crises are on the decline (Jervis, 1989).

Though there was much sensationalism about the end of the Cold War, such as one scholar calling it the "end of history," Jervis' "nuclear revolution" and the changes he claimed in the international system should not be celebrated until the threat of nuclear war subsides. Brodie's argument, that only the most valuable goals are worth pursuing when the costs are high, is unclear. Did Brodie consider that personal or national prestige is often considered a high goal worth pursuing through military means? What motivated Vladimir Putin to go to war in Ukraine, if not personal ego? The quality that makes international relations a state-centric discipline is being eroded by leaders like Putin and Kim

Jong Un, who seek to loom larger than their states. Leaders with this mentality might pursue personal desires using military means to the detriment of their states (Brodie, 1946).

Considering Russia's threats of using nuclear weapons against Ukraine or other countries, nuclear war seems like a matter of time. Kenneth Waltz's thesis that nuclear weapons are a force for peace and that nuclear proliferation will lead to a decline in war frequencies could be empirically validated, but it remains a theoretical exaggeration (Waltz, 1981). Countries like North Korea, Russia, Israel, and Pakistan are not behaving as though they could be restrained for long, especially considering the existential threats they face. Although Iran has not yet attained nuclear status, experts admit that producing nuclear weapons for Iran could happen in a matter of hours. Moreover, the leaders of these countries cannot be trusted to act with "correct sanity" (Waltz, 1981).

Waltz also argued, "A little reasoning leads to the conclusion that to fight nuclear wars is all but impossible, and that to launch an offensive that might prompt nuclear retaliation is obvious folly...nuclear weapons make war hard to start...the gradual spread of nuclear weapons is more to be welcomed than feared" (Waltz, 1981, p. 27). There are two perspectives here: the empirical and the "commonsensical." Empirically, statistics suggest that nuclear weapons dissuade states from engaging in war more effectively than conventional weapons. However, the issue arises in what nuclear-armed states might do when a conventional war goes badly. As Waltz stated, "To reach these conclusions, complicated calculations are not required, only a little commonsense" (Waltz, 1981, p. 28). Yet, evidence shows that some leaders might plunge their countries into nuclear war with just slight provocation, as seen in Russia's war in Ukraine, a prime example of commonsense deficit.

Asal and Beardsley's submission on the severity of violence in international crises involving nuclear-armed states is also intriguing. They stated, "Crises in which nuclear actors are involved are more likely to end without violence, and as the number of nuclear-armed states engaged in crises increases, the probability of war decreases" (Asal & Beardsley, 2007, p. 31).

Conclusion

This article does not aim to discredit the empirical studies of these great scholars; rather, it attempts to evaluate these studies in the context of contemporary developments, where there is a physical movement and deployment of nuclear weapons by states like Russia, a member of the UN Security Council (UNSC), which is responsible for ensuring global peace and security. These issues are concerning, given the irrational behavior of some leaders involved in the conflicts.

This article also calls on the international community to be more proactive in addressing the threat of nuclear war rather than assuming that nuclear deterrence will automatically prevent conflict. If the United States truly believed that nuclear proliferation would serve as a deterrent, it would not have pursued a deal with Iran to stop its nuclear weapons development. During the Obama administration, preventing Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons was a top foreign policy priority. The reason is simple: rogue states like Iran and North Korea with nuclear capabilities pose a significant danger to global peace and security. With these states wielding such power, it is only a matter of time before a Third World War begins. The threat of nuclear Armageddon keeps growing bigger and bigger everyday with the international system shrinking and sinking in stature and authority.

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Dr. Dapo Thomas is a senior lecturer in the Department of History and International Studies, Faculty of Arts, Lagos State University, Lagos, Nigeria. He is the author of the book *The Political Economy of Nigeria-United States Relations*, published in 2018, which explores the economics and politics of power.

Dr. Thomas specializes in relations between the United States and Global South countries, particularly Nigeria. He has authored incisive and engaging articles in several international and reputable journals. Some of these articles include: *Errand War: An Observer's Perspective on the Russian-Ukrainian War*, *Russia's War Maxim and Paranoid Parallelism*, *The Nigerian Civil War (1967-1970): A Theoretical Resurrection*, *Nigerian Civil War (1967-1970): New Theories, Old Problems, Fresh Crises*, *The Evolution of the Electoral Process and the Dramatics of Bene-Clientelism in Nigeria*, *When the Past is Dead, What is History Doing Alive?*, *A Road Metaphor on Nigeria's Foreign Policy and Corruption War*, and *Trial Carnivals and Molebi Theory*, among others.

Dr. Thomas is a fellow of the Nigerian Institute of International Affairs, a member of the Association of Foreign Relations Practitioners of Nigeria, and also a member of the Editorial Board of the *Journal of International Relations, International Law, and Diplomacy*.