



ANALYSIS

THE DISORDERLY ADVENT OF THE TRIPOLAR NUCLEAR ORDER

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Introduction

Former Acting Assistant Secretary of Defense for Space Policy, Dr. Vipin Narang, stated on August 1, 2024, that the United States is facing a “multiple nuclear challenger problem” with Russia as a nuclear peer, the People’s Republic of China (PRC) becoming a nuclear peer, and the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) further developing its nuclear capabilities.¹ Compared to the rather benign nuclear threat environment that emerged after the Cold War (once the nuclear implications of the dissolution of the USSR had been resolved), the United States and its Allies find themselves today in an unstable interregnum towards a new global nuclear order. Therefore, this article aims to focus on the concept of nuclear polarity and the role of non-material factors in the current transition period towards a tripolar nuclear order with three nuclear peers, namely the United States, Russia, and the People’s Republic of China.

In the context of the academic and policy debate on polarity, it is useful to not only focus on the static distribution of forces but also to look at the transition period or the dynamics of power relations between orders.² The study of balance-of-power dynamics—with Robert Gilpin’s book *War and Change in World Politics* as an influential study in the field—remains an essential topic for the academic discipline of International Relations.³ As a result, observing and analyzing the dynamics of global nuclear power relations between nuclear orders enhances the understanding of the current situation.

The next section, therefore, reviews polarity as a description of the global power distribution and the current debate on whether the international system is (partially) unipolar, bipolar, or multipolar. This is followed by a discussion on nuclear polarity as a description of global nuclear deterrence relationships. The focus lies here on the emergence of nuclear tripolarity with China as a third pole, next to the United States and Russia. However, nuclear tripolarity has not arrived yet. Subsequently, the current unstable interregnum between nuclear bipolarity and tripolarity and the role of non-material factors is explained in the fourth section.

If we focus on the non-material factors, some signs already point towards such a dangerous interregnum. Nuclear diplomacy, related to the arms control and non-proliferation regime, is becoming more difficult, for instance. Democracies are more prone

¹ Vipin Narang and Heather Williams, “Nuclear Threats and the Role of Allies: A Conversation with Acting Assistant Secretary Vipin Narang,” *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, August 1, 2024, available at <https://www.csis.org/analysis/nuclear-threats-and-role-allies-conversation-acting-assistant-secretary-vipin-narang>.

² Jonathan Kirshner, *An Unwritten Future: Realism and Uncertainty in World Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2022).

³ Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).



to domestic pressure regarding disarmament than autocracies, with potentially devastating consequences for the security of the former. And Russia's irresponsible nuclear behavior could be explained by a mix of fear, pride, and overconfidence. The conclusion emphasizes the role of leadership, next to rebalancing the nuclear deterrence equilibrium, to stabilize the transition phase between nuclear orders.

Polarity

Regarding the question of polarity as a description of global power distribution, Stephan G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth argue that the world remains unipolar. They acknowledge, however, that compared to the situation in the 1990s, the United States lost some of its power. Subsequently, Brooks and Wohlforth describe the current order as "partial[ly] unipolar."⁴ Fareed Zakaria also acknowledges that "The United States remains the single strongest country when adding up all hard-power metrics." Nevertheless, he also argues that the current order is a "post-American world."⁵ Others, such as Cliff Kupchan, state that the world is going back towards bipolarity, with the United States being one pole and the People's Republic of China as the other.⁶

Some claim, however, that world politics has evolved to a multipolar order. Richard N. Haass and Charles A. Kupchan state that *Pax Americana* (or U.S. primacy) is "running on fumes," and that bipolarity with the United States and China as poles or *Pax Sinica* are nonstarters. They argue in favor of creating a "global concert of major powers," similar to the 19th-century Concert of Europe, with six members, namely China, the European Union, India, Japan, Russia, and the United States.⁷

The French classical realist Raymond Aron's views on polarity in the international system—described in *Peace & War* from 1966—added an extra dimension, next to the distribution of power. The "configuration of the relation of forces" in the international system leads to the mentioned division between a bilateral and multilateral configuration.⁸ However, Aron inserts another dimension based on ideas and emotions because these "influence the decisions of the actors." Subsequently, Aron argues that we also need to look at the behavior of the poles, or "the nature of the states and the objectives sought by those in

⁴ Stephan G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth, "The Myth of Multipolarity: American Power's Staying Power," *Foreign Affairs*, April 18, 2023, available at <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/china-multipolarity-myth>.

⁵ Fareed Zakaria, "The Self-Doubting Superpower: America Shouldn't Give Up on the World It Made," *Foreign Affairs*, December 12, 2023, available at <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/self-doubting-superpower-america-fareed-zakaria>.

⁶ Cliff Kupchan, "Bipolarity is Back: Why It Matters," *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 44, No. 4, 2021, pp. 123–139, available at <https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2021.2020457>.

⁷ Richard N. Haass and Charles A. Kupchan, "The New Concert of Powers: How to Prevent Catastrophe and Promote Stability in a Multipolar World," *Foreign Affairs*, March 23, 2021, available at <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/world/2021-03-23/new-concert-powers>.

⁸ Raymond Aron, *Peace & War: A Theory of International Relations* (London and New York: Routledge, [1966] 2017), p. 95.

power.”⁹ This leads to the difference between homogeneous and heterogeneous systems. He defines the former as systems “in which the states belong to the same type, obey the same conception of policy”, and the latter as systems “in which the states are organized according to different principles and appeal to contradictory values.”¹⁰

Aron stated as examples that the European system preceding the French Revolution consisted of a combination of multipolarity and homogeneity, and the global system during the Cold War was a heterogeneous and bipolar system.¹¹ If we apply these dimensions to the current international system, the abovementioned discussions show that the jury is still out on whether the current order is (partially) unipolar, bipolar or multipolar. However, regarding the second dimension, we can observe a move away from a homogeneous system—the liberal, rules-based order—towards a more contested heterogeneous system with increasing tensions between democratic and authoritarian regimes.

Nuclear Polarity

While there are power and regime differences between the United States, China, and Russia, the nuclear side of the story is also crucial to consider. Multiple authors have recently been discussing the issue of nuclear multipolarity or tripolarity. It is important to note that, according to James M. Acton, the concept of polarity here is used “to describe the structure of deterrence relations; it is not used in its more common political science sense to describe the broader distribution of power in the international system.”¹²

Thus, moving to nuclear polarity, Paul Bracken argues that “Today’s world is not simply nuclear *and* multipolar.”¹³ The global world order is now a nuclear multipolar system because nuclear weapons proliferated “beyond the nuclear powers of the Cold War.”¹⁴ Furthermore, on a regional level, he describes the security system in Asia as “pentapolar,” consisting of China, Russia, the United States, Japan, and India as major powers.¹⁵ Stacie Pettyjohn and Jennie Matuschak argue that the world is “entering an unprecedented multipolar nuclear world where the United States must simultaneously deter two nuclear great powers.”¹⁶ Next to implications for deterrence, the emergence of nuclear multipolarity also has implications for arms control, non-proliferation, and disarmament. Rebecca Davis

⁹ Ibid., p. 99.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 100.

¹¹ Loc cit.

¹² James M. Acton, “Chapter Five: Nuclear multipolarity,” *Adelphi Series*, Vol. 50, No. 417, 2011, p. 83, available at <https://doi.org/10.1080/19445571.2010.567047>.

¹³ Emphasis in the original: Paul Bracken, “Our Complicated and Dangerous Multipolar Nuclear World,” *Orbis*, Vol. 64, No. 1, 2020, p. 132, available at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.orbis.2019.12.009>.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 133.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 146.

¹⁶ Stacie Pettyjohn and Jennie Matuschak, *Long Shadows: Deterrence in a Multipolar Nuclear Age* (Washington, D.C.: Center for a New American Security, 2022), p. 25, available at <https://s3.us-east-1.amazonaws.com/files.cnas.org/documents/CNAS-Report-Nuclear-Deterrence-Final.pdf>.

Gibbons and Stephen Herzog argue in this regard that “the nuclear nonproliferation regime based around the NPT [Non-Proliferation Treaty] will likely be weakened by changes in the global distribution of power.”¹⁷

The United States and Russia remain the two major nuclear powers with the biggest arsenals.¹⁸ Nevertheless, China is modernizing and building up its nuclear arsenal. Eventually, China will likely reach parity regarding deployed warheads—1,500—in 2035.¹⁹ This development results in the emergence of the two-peer problem or nuclear tripolarity, whereby the United States will have to deter two nuclear peers cooperating against it simultaneously, namely Russia and China.²⁰ M. Taylor Fravel, Henrik Stålhane Hiim, and Magnus Langset Trøan claim that the expansion of the Chinese nuclear arsenal is “less a shift in Chinese intentions than a response to what Beijing perceives as threatening changes in U.S. nuclear strategy.” Therefore, they see the start of a “dangerous action-reaction cycle” that could result in a “major nuclear arms race.”²¹ In contrast, Matthew Costlow, Robert Peters, and Kyle Balzer argue that the arms race metaphor is a “simplistic disfigurement of a complicated reality.” They argue that nuclear restraint by the United States will not stop the expansion and modernization of the Chinese and Russian nuclear arsenals based on historical Cold War experiences. Subsequently, Costlow, Peters, and Balzer are proponents of reinserting the hedging role for US nuclear weapons.²²

This two-peer problem is currently one of the main nuclear deterrence issues in policy and academic circles. *America's Strategic Posture: The Final Report of the Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States* from October 2023 stated that “the United States lacks a comprehensive strategy to address the looming two nuclear-peer threat environment and lacks the force structure such a strategy will require.”²³ Nonetheless, as

¹⁷ Rebecca Davis Gibbons and Stephen Herzog, “Durable institution under fire? The NPT confronts emerging multipolarity,” *Contemporary Security Policy*, Vol. 43, No. 1, 2022, p. 71, available at <https://doi.org/10.1080/13523260.2021.1998294>.

¹⁸ Hans M. Kristensen and Matt Korda, “10. World nuclear forces,” in *SIPRI Yearbook 2022: Armaments, Disarmament and International Security* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022).

¹⁹ Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China* (Washington, D.C., 2022), p. 98, available at <https://media.defense.gov/2022/Nov/29/2003122279/-1/-1/1/2022-MILITARY-AND-SECURITY-DEVELOPMENTS-INVOLVING-THE-PEOPLES-REPUBLIC-OF-CHINA.PDF>

²⁰ Brad Roberts, Michael Albertson, Paul Bernstein, Elaine Bunn, Brad Clark, Elbridge Colby, Jacek Durkalec, Jeff Edmonds, Kayse Jansen, C. Robert Kehler, Pat McKenna, Frank Miller, Brian Radzinsky, Robert Soofer, Sugio Takahashi, Michael Urena, John Warden, and Greg Weaver, *China's Emergence as a Second Nuclear Peer: Implications for U.S. Nuclear Deterrence Strategy* (Livermore: The Center for Global Security Research at Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, Spring 2023), available at https://cgsr.llnl.gov/content/assets/docs/CGSR_Two_Peer_230314.pdf; Robert Litwak, “A Tripolar Nuclear World: Challenges to Strategic Stability,” *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 46, No. 4, 2023, pp. 143–158, available at <https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2023.2286790>.

²¹ M. Taylor Fravel, Henrik Stålhane Hiim, and Magnus Langset Trøan, “China's Misunderstood Nuclear Expansion: How U.S. Strategy Is Fueling Beijing's Growing Arsenal,” *Foreign Affairs*, November 10, 2023, available at <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/china/chinas-misunderstood-nuclear-expansion>.

²² Matthew Costlow, Robert Peters, and Kyle Balzer, “A Misleading Metaphor: The Nuclear ‘Arms Race,’” *War on the Rocks*, November 20, 2023, available at <https://warontherocks.com/2023/11/a-misleading-metaphor-the-nuclear-arms-race/>.

²³ Madelyn R. Creedon, Marshall S. Billingslea, Rose E. Gottemoeler, Rebeccah L. Heinrichs, Robert M. Scher, Franklin C. Miller, Jon L. Kyle, Gloria C. Duffy, Lisa E. Gordon-Hagerty, John E. Hyten, Matthew H. Kroenig, and Leonor A. Tomero,

mentioned in the introduction, former Acting Assistant Secretary of Defense for Space Policy, Dr. Vipin Narang, argues that the two-peer nuclear problem “understates the complexity of the challenge we face.” He speaks of a “multiple nuclear challenger problem because each adversary presents different challenges for U.S. strategists.”²⁴

Consequently, the global order is moving from a (partial) unipolar order regarding the global power distribution, which is bipolar on the level of nuclear deterrence, towards a multipolar order, that will become tripolar on the level of nuclear deterrence (see the Table below). The caveat here is that the emphasis lies on the main nuclear deterrence relationships on a global scale. During the Cold War, the main relationship was between the United States and the Soviet Union. After the Cold War, it was between the United States and Russia, the main successor state of the Soviet Union. The new nuclear order is then characterized by the emergence of nuclear tripolarity between the United States, Russia, and the People’s Republic of China. During the nuclear era, regional nuclear powers also emerged, such as the United Kingdom (1952), France, (1960), the People’s Republic of China (1964)—which is now in the process of becoming a nuclear peer to the United States and Russia—then reportedly Israel (1960s), India (1974), Pakistan (1998), and North Korea (2006). However, the transition seems to be going rough and is not without nuclear risks.

	1945-1990		1991-2010s		Late 2010s-...
Polarity	Heterogeneous Bipolarity	<i>Post-Cold War Interregnum</i>	Homogeneous Unipolarity	<i>Current Interregnum</i>	Heterogeneous (Partial) Unipolarity/ Bipolarity/ Multipolarity
Nuclear Polarity	Bipolarity		Bipolarity		Tripolarity

Table: the interregnums between nuclear orders.

A Disorderly Transition Period

While the post-Cold War interregnum was also not without risk, the interregnum was brief and the threats were clearly demarcated, namely the issues of horizontal nuclear proliferation and “loose nukes.” Immediately after the Cold War, there was a threat of horizontal nuclear proliferation to (and from) the successor states of the Soviet Union beyond Russia because Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Ukraine inherited parts of the Soviet nuclear arsenal that were located on their territories. Nevertheless, horizontal non-

America’s Strategic Posture: The Final Report of the Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States (Washington, D.C.: Institute for Defense Analyses, 2023), p. vii, available at <https://armedservices.house.gov/sites/republicans.armedservices.house.gov/files/Strategic-Posture-Committee-Report-Final.pdf>.

²⁴ Vipin Narang and Heather Williams, “Nuclear Threats and the Role of Allies,” op. cit.

proliferation diplomacy was successful because all three states agreed to denuclearize.²⁵ Another risk was the issue of so-called loose nukes or the possibility that former Soviet nuclear weapons (but also materials, technologies, and human capital) could end up in the hands of non-state actors, such as terrorist groups and criminal organizations, or rogue states.²⁶

The present transition period is also not without risk. Moreover, compared to the immediate post-Cold War interregnum, the current interregnum seems to be lasting longer before the global nuclear order stabilizes at a new nuclear deterrence equilibrium. If we only look at systemic metrics or the distribution of capabilities, the world moves from (partial) unipolarity to multipolarity. If we only look at the numbers of major nuclear powers, the world moves from bipolarity to tripolarity. However, if we look at non-material factors—factors that classical realism finds important but that neorealists tend to discount²⁷—such as the importance of leadership, diplomacy, domestic politics, regime type and national character, and the motivations of fear, pride, and hubris, the transition from (partial) unipolarity and nuclear bipolarity towards multipolarity and nuclear tripolarity could thus be depicted as an unstable interregnum.

First, Nina Tannenwald argued in 2018 that the nuclear taboo, or the “consensus that nuclear weapons are so destructive and abhorrent that it would be unacceptable to use them,” is weakening.²⁸ While in January 2022, the five nuclear-weapon states issued a joint statement that affirmed the belief that “a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought,” the nuclear rhetoric and action by one of these five states—Russia—has undermined the credibility of this consensus.²⁹ The use of nuclear rhetoric by Russia against Ukraine and its partners for blackmail and coercion purposes has continued during the war.³⁰ Furthermore, Russia did not stop at issuing threatening nuclear rhetoric; actions and policies also changed. For instance, Russia forward deployed non-strategic nuclear weapons to Belarus.³¹

²⁵ Martin B. Kalinowski, “Nuclear Arms Races and Arms Control at the Beginning of the 21st Century,” *Security Dialogue*, Vol. 35, No. 2, 2004, pp. 217–225, available at <https://doi.org/10.1177/09670106040449>.

²⁶ André W. M. Gerrits, “Russia, the West, and the Loose Nukes Syndrome,” *International Relations*, Vol. 14, No. 6, 1999, pp. 23–39.

²⁷ Kirshner, *An Unwritten Future*, op. cit.

²⁸ Nina Tannenwald, “The Vanishing Nuclear Taboo? How Disarmament Fell Apart,” *Foreign Affairs*, October 15, 2018, available at <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/world/2018-10-15/vanishing-nuclear-taboo>.

²⁹ The White House, “Joint Statement of the Leaders of the Five Nuclear-weapon States on Preventing Nuclear War and Avoiding Arms Races,” January 3, 2022, available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/01/03/p5-statement-on-preventing-nuclear-war-and-avoiding-arms-races/>.

³⁰ Horovitz and Stolze, “Nuclear rhetoric and escalation management in Russia’s war against Ukraine: A chronology,” *SWP Working Paper*, No. 2, 2023, pp. 1–257, available at https://www.swp-berlin.org/publications/products/arbeitspapiere/Horovitz_and_Stolze_-_Nuclear_Chrono_Final_2August2023.pdf.

³¹ Jack Detsch and Robbie Gramer, “Russia’s Nuclear Weapons Are Now in Belarus: The move sends a clear political message, but some experts downplay its military significance,” *Foreign Policy Magazine*, March 14, 2024, available at <https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/03/14/russia-nuclear-weapons-belarus-putin/>.

Second, the violation and demise of the nuclear arms control regimes, originating from the (post-) Cold War period, indicate the revisionist attitude of certain major powers. This demise can be exemplified by Russia's violation of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, and the subsequent U.S. withdrawal from the treaty after no diplomatic solution could be found.³² From 2019 onwards, the 2010 New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) was the only bilateral nuclear arms control treaty left. The treaty was extended for five years in 2021. However, on 21 February 2023, Russia suspended its participation in New START and the United States considers it to be in open violation.³³

Third, the non-proliferation regime is also in crisis. Talks and negotiations at the NPT Review Conferences and Preparatory Committees are becoming harsher, resulting in the inability to agree on a final document. Alexander Mattelaer speaks of a "diplomatic battleground."³⁴ An anonymous author from the U.S. government's Senior Executive Service stated that "Even if the NPT continues to limp along, ever more toothless, the broader strategic nuclear-stability regime is increasingly rickety."³⁵ The Russian violation of the 1994 Budapest Memorandum, whereby Ukraine became a non-nuclear-weapon state and party to the NPT in exchange for security assurances from Russia, the United States, and the United Kingdom, undermined the credibility of major power security assurances to prevent nuclear proliferation.³⁶ North Korea is further developing its nuclear arsenal.³⁷ The United States, under the Trump Administration, withdrew from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) or Iran nuclear deal in 2018. Subsequently, Iran is taking technological steps forward and getting closer to the bomb.³⁸ Russia also de-ratified the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) in November 2023.³⁹ Even though Russia remains a signatory state to the

³² U.S. Department of State, *Adherence to and Compliance with Arms Control, Nonproliferation, and Disarmament Agreements and Commitments* (Washington, D.C., June 2020), p. 7, available at <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/2020-Adherence-to-and-Compliance-with-Arms-Control-Nonproliferation-and-Disarmament-Agreements-and-Commitments-Compliance-Report.pdf>; See also Amy F. Woolf, *Russian Compliance with the Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty: Background and Issues for Congress (R43832)* (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, 2019).

³³ Paul K. Kerr and Mary Beth D. Nikitin, *Arms Control and Nonproliferation: A Catalog of Treaties and Agreements (RL33865)* (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, 2023).

³⁴ Alexander Mattelaer, "Bleak prospects for nuclear disarmament," *Egmont Policy Brief*, No. 320, 2023, p. 2, available at https://www.egmontinstitute.be/app/uploads/2023/10/Alexander-Mattelaer_Policy_Brief_320_vFinal.pdf?type=pdf.

³⁵ Anonymous, "Slouching Towards a Nuclear Gomorrah," *Survival*, Vol. 65, No. 6, 2023/2024, p. 138, available at <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2023.2285608>.

³⁶ Alexander K. Bollfrass and Stephen Herzog, "The War in Ukraine and Global Nuclear Order," *Survival*, Vol. 64, No. 4, 2022, pp. 7–32, available at <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2022.2103255>.

³⁷ Hans M. Kristensen, Matt Korda, Eliana Johns, and Mackenzie Knight, "North Korean nuclear weapons, 2024," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, Vol. 80, No. 4, 2022, pp. 251–271, available at <https://doi.org/10.1080/00963402.2024.2365013>.

³⁸ Kelsey Davenport, "Iran's nuclear program is advancing. So too should negotiations," *Atlantic Council*, March 2, 2023, available at <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/iransource/irans-nuclear-program-is-advancing-so-too-should-negotiations>; Kali Robinson, "What Is the Iran Nuclear Deal?," *Council on Foreign Relations*, October 27, 2023, available at <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/what-iran-nuclear-deal>.

³⁹ Camille Grand, "Another blow to arms control: Russia's 'de-ratification' of the nuclear test ban treaty," *European Council on Foreign Relations*, November 2, 2023, available at <https://ecfr.eu/article/another-blow-to-arms-control-russias-de-ratification-of-the-nuclear-test-ban-treaty/>.

CTBT, the de-ratification move can be seen as a first step towards the resumption of public nuclear testing, or at least creating the necessary room to maneuver.

Last, the path towards nuclear disarmament is becoming harder due to an increased reliance on nuclear weapons by major powers for security and deterrence (and in the case of Russia also for intimidation). Moreover, there is also an increase in international polarization on nuclear disarmament due to the adoption and ratification of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW). The nuclear ban treaty was negotiated, adopted, and opened for signature in 2017. It entered into force on 22 February 2021, after the 50th instrument of ratification had been deposited.⁴⁰ Opponents of the nuclear ban treaty, such as Brad Roberts, point towards the disadvantages for democracies because democratic states are more prone to public pressure than autocracies, and the risk of undermining extended deterrence, which is foundational for the security of numerous democratic societies. Nevertheless, Roberts recognizes the need for a “substantive dialogue about nuclear deterrence and disarmament.”⁴¹

Conclusion

The current transition period can thus be described as an unstable interregnum that puts strategic stability between the major nuclear powers under pressure. The meeting on arms control between the United States and China on November 6, 2023 was a hopeful signal.⁴² Nevertheless, the lack of clarity by China about the reasons for the expansion of its nuclear arsenal; Beijing’s refusal to date to engage in any meaningful arms control discussions, the vastly different strategic goals and objectives of the two sides, and the antagonism and lack of trust between both major powers are likely to complicate negotiation of any new formal arms control agreements.

Furthermore, while the Soviet Union and later Russia did display some leadership regarding arms control and non-proliferation during the second half of the Cold War and shortly after, Russia’s current irresponsible nuclear behavior and imperial revanchism make it a particularly dangerous nuclear power. Some parallels can thus be drawn between the current unstable interregnum and the period at the beginning of the Cold War that was characterized by unchecked vertical and horizontal proliferation. Lastly, the European Union (EU)—consisting of a nuclear-weapon state, NATO allies, and vocal disarmament

⁴⁰ United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs, “Treaty on the prohibition of nuclear weapons,” available at <https://disarmament.unoda.org/wmd/nuclear/tpnw>.

⁴¹ Brad Roberts, “Ban the Bomb? Or Bomb the Ban? Next Steps on the Ban Treaty,” *ELN Global Security Policy Brief*, March 2018, p. 8, available at <https://www.europeanleadershipnetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/180322-Brad-Roberts-Ban-Treaty.pdf>.

⁴² Office of the Spokesperson, “Assistant Secretary Mallory Stewart’s Meeting with the People’s Republic of China’s (PRC) Ministry of Foreign Affairs Director-General of Arms Control Sun Xiaobo,” *U.S. Department of State*, November 7, 2023, available at <https://www.state.gov/assistant-secretary-mallory-stewarts-meeting-with-the-peoples-republic-of-chinas-prc-ministry-of-foreign-affairs-director-general-of-arms-control-sun-xiaobo/>.

supporters—also lacks the necessary unity to play a significant role in nuclear weapons issues.⁴³

As a result, the likely conditions to stabilize the emerging nuclear tripolar order are a rebalancing of the nuclear deterrence equilibrium between the major powers, similar to the establishment of mutually assured destruction between the two superpowers of the Cold War, and a generational turnover in the leadership of major powers. Henry A. Kissinger stated in 2010: “It is said that nature abhors a vacuum; so does the international system. Chaos, if it occurs, will sooner or later settle down into a new order. It is the task of statesmanship to try to bring about what must happen ultimately and save humanity untold suffering.”⁴⁴ Alas, it is hard to see at this moment when and where that statesmanship will come from with a United States that is increasingly fixated on the PRC’s power rise, a China that is rapidly expanding its nuclear arsenal and is opaque about its intentions, a belligerent and revanchist Russia, and a disunited EU.

In short, the global nuclear order is going through an unstable transitional period or interregnum. Subsequently, before a heterogeneous multipolar international order with tripolarity at the level of nuclear deterrence (with three nuclear peers: the United States, Russia, and China) emerges, and before the third nuclear age is fully underway, policymakers globally will need to navigate the current unstable interregnum with caution and awareness of the possible nuclear risks. The nuclear powers will thus need to be prudent to avoid unintended escalation in a context marked by crumbling guardrails. To achieve a more stable global nuclear order, two conditions must be met. First, a rebalancing of the nuclear deterrence equilibrium needs to occur between the three major nuclear powers. Second, because it is currently unclear where the necessary statesmanship will be found to stabilize the transition period in the global nuclear order, a generational change in the leadership of the major nuclear powers is likely to be required to safely manage the new nuclear age.

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⁴³ Michal Onderco and Clara Portela, “External drivers of EU differentiated cooperation: How change in the nuclear nonproliferation regime affects member states alignment,” *Contemporary Security Policy*, Vol. 44, No. 1, 2023, pp. 150–175, available at <https://doi.org/10.1080/13523260.2022.2146336>.

⁴⁴ Henry A. Kissinger, “Power Shifts,” *Survival*, Vol. 52, No. 6, 2010, p. 210, available at <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2010.540792>.