

# Neither Gold, silver nor bronze: G7's SUBstandard performance in Hiroshima

By Aaron Tovish, Steering Committee Member of NoFirstUse Global

For the final press “de-briefing” of the NGOs after the release of the G7’s Hiroshima Vision on Nuclear Disarmament, I produced, for the reporters covering the summit, this handy comparison of stances taken against nuclear threat-making:

The GOLD standard: Vienna Declaration of TPNW States Parties:

*“We condemn unequivocally any and all nuclear threats, whether they be explicit or implicit and irrespective of the circumstances.”*

The SILVER standard: Bali Declaration of the G20:

*“The use or threat of use of nuclear weapons is inadmissible.”*

The BRONZE standard: India and China, long-standing no-first-use policies

SUBstandard: Hiroshima Vision on Nuclear Disarmament of G7:

*“... we reiterate our position that threats by Russia of nuclear weapon use ... in the context of its aggression against Ukraine are inadmissible.”*

The comparison I will focus on here is of the two most recent stances, the Bali “Silver Standard” (November 2022) and the Hiroshima “SUBstandard” (May 20).

Note that the exact same national leaders and EU high representatives were present at both occasions; only that in Bali they had to find common ground with 9 other national leaders and 3 foreign ministers. Also note, when they say “reiterate”, the G7 are NOT referring to Bali, rather to a “reminder” they sent to Russia in February (of this year). If, in Hiroshima, they had applied that same reminder to themselves, that would have led to a Silver Standard rating. Instead, the February statement was used to further narrow the application of the Bali stance not only to Russia and Russia alone, but also to Russia when in the act of invading Ukraine. In summary: the G7 have relegated unto themselves the determination of the circumstances under which a nuclear threat is inadmissible.

How this jibes with a “rule-based international order” is left for everyone else to wonder. “Guidance” can be found by their reference to the January 2022 statement

of the P5, where the Reagan-Gorbachev truism that “A nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought.” was immediately followed, not by Reagan’s and Gorbachev’s disavowal of competition for military superiority, but rather by this disclaimer: “security policies are based on the understanding that nuclear weapons, for as long as they exist, should serve defensive purposes, deter aggression and prevent war and coercion.” – in essence saying that it is perfectly “admissible” to threaten nuclear weapon use (or even use them) for “defensive purposes [and to] deter aggression and prevent war and coercion.” Many of Russia’s string of nuclear threats have been couched in this language, and as have many of the US’s past nuclear threats.

The grotesque prospect we now face for the 2023 G20 New Delhi Summit is a deadlock between the South and North, with Russia and the West — in tandem! — attempting to drain all meaning from “inadmissibility”.

But it needn’t be so. With a concerted effort, between now and the Delhi Summit in September, “inadmissibility” can be reaffirmed, setting the stage for action at the UN General Assembly. The key to advancing this goal lies in yet another plurilateral grouping, the BRICS.

Allow me to introduce them with the imagery of a hand: four fingers and a thumb. The four fingers are:

**Brazil and South Africa**, each of whom were instrumental in launching the NWFZ initiatives in their regions (although Brazil input was interrupted by the period of military dictatorship); and

**China and India**, both of whom have longstanding no-first-use policies (the Bronze Standard above, although India’s is tarnished by making an exception for nuclear retaliation against other WMD attack).

Sticking out like a sore thumb is:

**Russia!**

The challenge, when they hold their 2023 summit in South Africa, will be – sticking with this imagery – to wrap the fingers around the thumb. Russia needs to face the prospect of being isolated on this issue among the key countries that have thus far spared it nearly universal isolation because of the invasion of Ukraine. Thus far, the four have been consistent in condemning nuclear threats in their interactions with Russia. When President Xi visited Moscow, he and President Putin issued a statement to explicitly condemning nuclear threats (which Putin promptly violated).

If, and it is by no means a given, the BRICS Summit can resuscitate “inadmissibility” in its full sense – and Putin can behave himself for a month – the stage will be set for a vital debate at the G20 New Delhi Summit. The G7 participants will be compelled to choose between wrecking the summit and exposing their atrophied view of inadmissibility or agreeing to return to the Silver Standard.

Either way, the UN General Assembly, and in particular its First Committee which deals with peace and security issues, will be the venue in which this debate, among and within Groups, is expanded to the world as a whole. If Russia and NATO, in effect, join ranks against the non-nuclear world, they will be courting serious problems in 2026 NPT Review Conference, possibly setting the review process up for an unprecedented third consecutive failure. (There will be a foretaste of this dynamic in early August at the Review’s first Preparatory Committee’s meeting.) If, with the encouragement of fellow nuclear powers China and India, they see the wisdom of avoiding such a North/South confrontation, they may find that returning to the Bali Silver Standard is not such an onerous course of action after all.

#### ENDNOTE:

Intertwined in this dynamic are negative security assurances (NSA) and no-first-use policies (NFU), the “Bronze Standard”. Completely shutting down the infrastructure and mindset of threatening to and being capable of using nuclear weapons will not be an overnight affair. Here India and China can show a way forward: not threatening to initiate nuclear, i.e., NFU. The non-nuclear worlds desire for NSA would be satisfied – and some – by the wider adoption of NFU, since it would, in effect, be giving NSA to nuclear-weapon states and their allies, as well as to all non-nuclear states. This would be a major boost for the NPT.

NoFirstUse.Global has created a mechanism for members of civil society worldwide to support the preservation of inadmissibility and to promote NFU. The Declaration of Public Conscience adds “unconscionable” to “inadmissible” and calls for the UN to act along the lines described above. In one month, it has been endorsed by over a thousand politicians, religious leaders, experts, and activists from all over the world. Readers are invited to add their names and to invite others to do so as well. It is a powerful way to tell the nuclear powers who retain the option of initiating nuclear war that they will be under close scrutiny during the next six months.