

Statement on Nuclear Risks for UN Panel NPT PREPCOM 1 May 2025

BACK JUST A BIT, OR TEETERING ON THE BRINK – HOW CLOSE TO MIDNIGHT REALLY?

The mere fact that we are closer to the potential end of civilisation than ever before in history is surely the issue that 'trumps' all other issues. Out 'there' in the public it is however largely ignored (though the market for luxury doomsday shelters booms as never before). Here in the UN it is at least understood. And it is the apocalyptic possibilities of nuclear weapons that drive the concerns that lead to conferences such as this NPT Prepcom.

I have been updating the UN on nuclear risks on behalf of NGOs for over a decade now.

For the first time I am unsure if the objective risk of catastrophe is larger this year than last year. To date, ever since around 2010, nuclear risks have been ever - increasing. Its just possible in my view, that it may have receded by about half a centimetre back from the brink. If it has decreased it's by very little. This cautious assessment can be overtaken (in either direction) by a statement from either Trump or Putin, tomorrow. It matters little whether we are 1% 'safer' than same time a year ago. Its still uncertain if we are bumping along the bottom or about to plunge into the abyss.

Whatever the case, we are hovering – teetering on the brink – as close as we have ever teetered, and for far longer than we ever teetered during the cold war. Closer than the Cold War, for longer than the Cold War. The Cuban Missile crisis was after all a mere 13 days.

On 28 Jan 2025, the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists Doomsday Clock moved precisely one second forward from a metaphorical 90 seconds to 'midnight' where it had stayed a number of years, to a metaphorical 89 'seconds' to 'midnight'.

Both 90 seconds and 89 seconds are unprecedentedly close, though the Clock was at 90 seconds for a number of years. By way of comparison, the clock hands in 1983, when the world nearly ended twice in the Serpukhov-15 incident from which we were saved by Colonel Stan Petrov, and the November Able Archer NATO exercise, in which NATO rehearsed for the apocalypse, but the Kremlin thought it was the real thing – were at 3 minutes to midnight, as they were during the Cuban Missile Crisis. Yet the Serpukhov-15 incident of 26 Sept 1983 along with the Cuban Missile Crisis and the Able Archer incident of November 1983, in which NATO rehearsals for nuclear war were assumed by the USSR to be the real thing, **are** the archetypal 'cold war' 'near misses'. They are the point of reference. **Yet the clock is much closer to midnight now than during these crises, and has been there longer.**

Once the clock hands reached 2 minutes to midnight this was already regarded as unprecedented, and discussions began as to whether the hands could be moved by 30 seconds. Yet 2 minutes to 'midnight' was already some years ago and a return to 2 minutes to midnight now would be a distinct improvement.

The move by **one** second to 89 seconds is exactly what the Bulletin's advisory board says it is. As we approach midnight, every second becomes much more valuable because we are running out of seconds. The clock in other words, is telling us we are running out of time.

The 2025 Doomsday Clock statement notes that:

“In setting the Clock one second closer to midnight, we send a stark signal: Because the world is already perilously close to the precipice, a move of even a single second should be taken as an indication of extreme danger and an unmistakable warning that every second of delay in reversing course increases the probability of global disaster.”

and:

“In regard to nuclear risk, the war in Ukraine, now in its third year, looms over the world; the conflict could become nuclear at any moment because of a rash decision or through accident or miscalculation. Conflict in the Middle East threatens to spiral out of control into a wider war without warning. The countries that possess nuclear weapons are increasing the size and role of their arsenals, investing hundreds of billions of dollars in weapons that can destroy civilisation.

The nuclear arms control process is collapsing, and high-level contacts among nuclear powers are totally inadequate given the danger at hand. Alarming, it is no longer unusual for countries without nuclear weapons to consider developing arsenals of their own—actions that would undermine longstanding nonproliferation efforts and increase the ways in which nuclear war could start.”

[\[https://thebulletin.org/doomsday-clock/2025-statement/\]](https://thebulletin.org/doomsday-clock/2025-statement/)

In a recent news-item, the Swedish Government has said it is providing (as the Swiss Government does) fallout shelters for its population and other measures intended to deal with the possibility of nuclear (and conventional) war.

[\[https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-14558815/Sweden-prepares-nuclear-bunkers-7-MILLION-citizens-WW3-fears-grow.html\]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-14558815/Sweden-prepares-nuclear-bunkers-7-MILLION-citizens-WW3-fears-grow.html)

In a related item, Spain is seeing a surge in privately constructed nuclear bunkers

[\[https://uk.news.yahoo.com/construction-private-bunkers-spain-rises-145009172.html\]](https://uk.news.yahoo.com/construction-private-bunkers-spain-rises-145009172.html)

Also in the same collection of items is one in which the possibility of Ukraine actually acquiring and using nuclear weapons is canvassed.

[\[https://www.19fortyfive.com/2025/04/forget-nato-ukraine-might-need-nuclear-weapons/\]](https://www.19fortyfive.com/2025/04/forget-nato-ukraine-might-need-nuclear-weapons/)

Some Ukrainians argue that, absent the elimination of the 400 or so nuclear weapons on Ukrainian soil in 1990, and their removal to Russia or scrapping, Ukraine would have been able to deter Russia from its 2022 invasion. In fact, it would have been all but impossible to turn those weapons, aimed at Europe and the US, on Russia, and for Ukraine to establish operational control over them.

Ukraine agreed to eliminate those weapons under the Budapest Memorandum in which Russia, the US, and the UK agreed to guarantee Ukraine's security, and which France and China also did in separate documents.

[\[https://web.archive.org/web/20210821102247/https://day.kyiv.ua/en/article/close/assurances-without-guarantees-shelved-document\]](https://web.archive.org/web/20210821102247/https://day.kyiv.ua/en/article/close/assurances-without-guarantees-shelved-document)

There are those who argue that the Russian threat-making is fundamentally a bluff, its aim, is to generate fear. Aaron Tovish writes:

“...You are NOT thinking of starting a nuclear war. You are PRETENDING to be thinking about starting a nuclear war, because you want your adversaries to THINK you might start a nuclear war.

I say, be careful about what you want, you might get it. In other words, your

pretense could have unintended consequences.”

[\[https://nofirstuse.global/2022/04/25/putin-dont-even-pretend-to-think-about-starting-a-nuclear-war/\]](https://nofirstuse.global/2022/04/25/putin-dont-even-pretend-to-think-about-starting-a-nuclear-war/)

and:

If there was ever any doubt about it; the dead give-away came on 21 September 2022:

“This is not a bluff!” While this was meant, of course, to strengthen the accompanying nuclear threat, it ends up doing exactly the opposite: the threatener is overly desperate to have his threat believed. He does not want, above all, to have his bluff called. Shakespeare springs to mind: “Thou protesteth too much!”

[\[https://aaron-tovish.medium.com/liberation-day-minus-7715-log-9-theyre-all-bluffing-not-just-putin-but-that-doesn-t-make-it-ok-78d929273df9\]](https://aaron-tovish.medium.com/liberation-day-minus-7715-log-9-theyre-all-bluffing-not-just-putin-but-that-doesn-t-make-it-ok-78d929273df9)

As I note later, some sources such as the SVR blog, cite an FSB study that even suggests that much of the Russian nuclear arsenal may not be operational at all. (The SVR Blog even suggests that at least two attempted nuclear explosive tests also failed). It is at least possible that a large portion of Russia’s nuclear forces MAY be ‘Potemkin’ forces. Maybe.

And it is well to recall that NATO refuses (so far) to renounce its own ‘first use’ policies, as well as the Nixon ‘madman posture’, in which the US adopted a threatening posture toward North Vietnam - a posture that bought precisely no dividends whatsoever, but did nothing for global strategic stability.

So it may well be that these ‘sound and fury’ threats may signify nothing. Indeed it is to be fervently hoped that is the case. However even making them WITHOUT the conscious intent to actually carry them out increases the likelihood of events spiralling out of control.

And all of this emphasises the need for measures that reduce the risk of nuclear war.

So why are we so unprecedentedly close to the brink?

Why the widespread and long- standing alarm amongst nuclear cognoscenti, and why the widespread seeming apathy amongst the rest of us including even peace and disarmament activists?

There seem to be two major obvious factors in place here – the explicit issuance of nuclear (war) threats, and the erosion of disarmament, nonproliferation and ‘strategic stability’ (a term the disarmament movement needs to reclaim) norms. It is we, not advocates of nuclear war, and least of all those who claim that the ‘righteous’ (Russian or US) will be ‘raptured’ to ‘heaven’ by some perverse and diabolical deity, who stand for ‘strategic stability’.

ONE - During the later 60s, 70’s and 80’s, there were disarmament negotiating processes – arms control – and pathways for de-confliction and de-escalation, with communications set up (hotlines) between decision makers and between militaries.

All have been, unceremoniously, step-by-step, discarded. There was a framework. Now that is almost gone.

Examples are the INF treaty, the Open Skies Treaty, and a variety of mil to mil communication pathways. (as referenced in the Doomsday Clock statement).

And of course, the New START Treaty itself expires in Feb 2026 with no replacement. There are currently NO negotiations going on about that though there is talk from time to time of it. Without it the door will be open to an unrestrained arms race.

Most critical for immediate – term 'strategic stability' (avoidance of global thermonuclear war) are however, the mil-to-mil, and decision-maker to decision-maker, hotlines, which by all accounts even where they continue to exist, have fallen into disuse.

TWO – is the unprecedented making of EXPLICIT threats of nuclear weapons use. As noted in discussion above, making such explicit threats even if not actually meant, **even if it is a bluff**, increases the risks of inadvertent escalation. And we can never be QUITE sure that it is a bluff, even if claims that 'this is not a bluff' tend rather to reinforce our hope that it is indeed a bluff.

It is noteworthy that during the early part of Biden's term, Biden and Putin, at a decidedly awkward meeting at a chateau in Geneva, reaffirmed the Reagan- Gorbachev statement that 'A Nuclear War Cannot be won and must Never be Fought'. (Myself and colleagues lobbied vigorously for that). A year or so later, after the Russian war on Ukraine had started, the G7 and the G20 at successive summits, affirmed that 'the use or threat of use of nuclear weapons is impermissible'. We lobbied for that, too.

Further reaffirmations of Reagan-Gorbachev either by the UNSC, or if this is not possible by the UNGA, would be highly desirable, as would reaffirmations one way or another of the G20 and G7 statements that the 'use or threat of use of nuclear weapons is inadmissible'.

However, in February 2022, in the immediate wake of the commencement of Russia's war on Ukraine, Putin stated that countries that 'attempted to interfere' with Russia's 'special military operation' would experience 'consequences you have never before experienced in your history'. It was never clear if the threat was directed to the US, the UK, or France, or all of them, but coupled with Kremlin footage of Putin ordering Russia's nuclear forces onto a higher state of alert the intent was obvious.

Arms Control Today reminded us in a recent editorial that Putin had said:

"No matter who tries to stand in our way ... they must know that Russia will respond immediately, and the consequences will be such as you have never seen in your entire history,"

Seven months later, as Russian forces were in retreat in eastern Ukraine, Putin suggested that he might order the use of shorter-range nuclear weapons "if the territorial integrity of our country is threatened," including the territory in Ukraine that Russia had illegally seized. "This is not a bluff," he added. Aaron's take on that is previously noted.

[\[https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2025-04/focus/who-really-gambling-world-war-iii?emci=93dfec20-9805-f011-90cd-0022482a9fb7&emdi=6b1d17f7-dc0b-f011-90cd-0022482a9fb7&ceid=9322384\]](https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2025-04/focus/who-really-gambling-world-war-iii?emci=93dfec20-9805-f011-90cd-0022482a9fb7&emdi=6b1d17f7-dc0b-f011-90cd-0022482a9fb7&ceid=9322384)

Since then, Putins explicit nuclear threat has been followed by further threats, some of a more 'theological' nature. ('The Righteous (who are all Russian) will be 'raptured to Heaven') – to steal a phrase from US Senator Strom Thurmond in 1983. These more 'theological' threats, reminiscent of ones made by Thurmond and Reagan in the 1980s, came from Russian State TV's Margarita Simonyan and State TV's Soloviev, former President Medvedev, Foreign Minister Lavrov, and Peskov.

The frequency of these nuclear threats has been such, at one period amounting to two or

three times a week, that most people and most analysts have tuned out to them though the Murdoch press have reproduced them with perverse glee.

Nevertheless, analysts have hovered between dismissal 'just another threat to end civilisation, ho hum' and taking them seriously. The CIA has claimed in a report that Russia has twice seriously contemplated use of tactical nukes on Ukraine, once in March/April 2022, and once last October. While the CIA may have an incentive to inflate threats, we are nonetheless advised to take these assessments seriously.

Further threats were made as recently as 15th April '25, by RussianState TV broadcaster Soloviev. That they were not made by Putin allows a veneer of deniability. However that were quickly seized on and run with by another state TV broadcaster, Margarita Simonyan. The threat is to the UK and is in the context of a possible 'coalition of the willing' in Ukraine:

"You have to realise that not only the frontline units you're planning to deploy on the territory of Ukraine will be destroyed, but since we can't perceive it in any other way other than the direct participation of your countries, you will feel the consequences, the likes of which you have never seen."

"All of your howling will not help you." He added in a grim threat to Britain, France, Germany, and the Baltic states: "Your fate will be sad."

[\[https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/world-news/russia-sends-terrifying-ww3-threat-35062528\]](https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/world-news/russia-sends-terrifying-ww3-threat-35062528)

Its worth noting that this 'terrifying threat' is not NECESSARILY nuclear. It could merely be taken that way.

So are these threats nothing more than a bluff, entirely not to be taken seriously?

Should we be worried , even very worried about them?

There probably just isn't a ready answer to exactly how much weight we should put on them. It's noteworthy that no actual changes in posture or deployment of the kind we should expect if nuclear weapons use were being seriously contemplated have been reported.

The juxtaposition with the G7/G20 statement that 'the use or **threat of use** of nuclear weapons is inadmissible' is stark.

A number of Government leaders – Ranging from Biden, to Modi to Xi Jin Ping – have claimed to have talked Putin **out** of using nuclear weapons.

The often illuminating SVR Blog, which claims to give an insiders view of the Kremlin, stated that the chief of the CIA had said to the chief of the FSB, '...tell your boss if he orders the use of nuclear weapons, it will be the last order he ever gives'.

[General of the SVR <https://t.me/s/generalsvr>]

Threat has been met with counter-threat, with the possibility of the initiation of an escalatory spiral.

At the same time as all sorts of alarming signals – the most alarming signals possible in fact – are being given, there are other signals that are not QUITE so alarming.

As noted, no dispersals of nuclear or bomber forces of the sort that would precede a conflict or serious apprehension of a conflict, have yet taken place. Putin HAS however, ordered Russia's nuclear forces to be kept on constant high alert.

[<https://www.newsweek.com/russia-putin-nuclear-forces-combat-readiness-warning-2001357>]

In December '24, Putin said the US had pushed him to his 'redlines', and made threats to deploy short and medium range tactical nuclear weapons. The report is made in lurid style in the Daily Mail:

[<https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-14197301/Putin-says-West-pushed-red-lines-threatens-lift-restrictions-Russian-missile-deployment-chilling-WW3-threat.html>]

The SVR blog, even in the very same report as the CIA-FSB encounter, noted a number of humiliating nuclear test failures and launch failures that infuriated Putin. SVR said an internal FSB report (also circulated by the CIA) said that over 80% of Russia's nuclear arsenal was/is unusable and would not work when called on to do so.

More recently, Russia's newest, largest, most advanced missile seems to have blown up on its launch pad at an attempted flight test.

There are reports:

[<https://carnegieendowment.org/russia-eurasia/politika/2025/01/russia-nuclear-arsenal-modernization?lang=en>] that Russia may now be diverting resources **from** its nuclear forces to conventional ones.

According to the Carnegie Endowment, Russia's nuclear modernisation plan has stalled, with the same proportion of Russia's nuclear forces built after the fall of communism as in previous years.

Nevertheless, the repeated making of nuclear threats – to incinerate London, Paris, Berlin, Kiev – are unprecedented prior to 2022. We may now be getting used to them, and we are starting to shrug them off.

Ergo, the psychic numbing – the 'Oh no not again' – referred to earlier.

Most recently, deputy foreign minister Sergey Vershinin warned that the likelihood of conflict between nuclear - armed powers was/is 'extremely high'.

[<https://www.theweek.in/news/defence/2025/02/27/why-russias-deputy-foreign-minister-thinks-a-military-conflict-between-nuclear-powers-is-extremely-high.html>]

While we can take limited relief that it is all (hopefully) bluff, the emphasis must be on "limited". Because each time a threat is not carried out, the next threat must contain an escalatory element to properly impress the threatened.(which is more or less what Putin has been doing) This has taken several forms over the last few years and each of them increases the risk of **inadvertent** use.

When it comes to explicit threats, primacy may well go to the threat President Trump made from the podium of the UN General Assembly with respect to the DPRK during his first term, before 'falling in love' with Kim.

Trump has also waxed eloquent more recently on the possibility of nuclear war. Back in mid March he noted that:

"The greatest is sitting on shelves in various countries called 'nuclear weapons' that are big monsters that can blow your heads off for miles and miles and miles," he told Sunday Morning Futures.

"It's just bad you have to spend all this money on something that if it's used, it's probably the end of the world."

"There's no reason for us to be building brand new nuclear weapons, we already have so many," he said.

"You could destroy the world 50 times over, 100 times over. And here we are building new nuclear weapons, and they're building nuclear weapons.

"We're all spending a lot of money we could be spending on other things actually, hopefully much more productive."

[\[https://www.express.co.uk/news/world/2024753/donald-trump-nuclear-war-usa-russia\]](https://www.express.co.uk/news/world/2024753/donald-trump-nuclear-war-usa-russia)

Could this be an expression of a genuine interest in nuclear disarmament? Could Trump be persuaded to pursue a disarmament or at least a risk reduction agenda, with Putin, after having contributed over the years to the removal of so much of the framework of mutual restraint and arms limitation? Would Putin reciprocate?

This is surely a possibility at least worth pursuing.

Medvedev has claimed in a story published in Jan of this year, that under President Biden, the US and Russia did come close to nuclear war. One must clearly take all that Medvedev says with a large pinch of salt; According to him:

"What did catch my attention was his unhealthy interest in Ukraine, even though he explained it to me by acting on [former President Barack] Obama's instructions. Over time, those instructions turned into an obsession – the transformation facilitated by political mistakes, plain corruption, and poor judgement stemming from historical ignorance and failure to appreciate the nature of 'Ukraineness.' At some point, the old man went off the rails and essentially unleashed a war between the collective West and Russia, which almost led to a nuclear exchange with NATO,"

[\[https://www.newsweek.com/dmitry-medvedev-nuclear-war-nato-almost-began-joe-biden-2017352\]](https://www.newsweek.com/dmitry-medvedev-nuclear-war-nato-almost-began-joe-biden-2017352)

Repeated nuclear threats (by either side) do a number of things.

--They remove and dissolve psychological barriers to actual nuclear weapons use. Having threatened so many times to bring on the apocalypse, there more easily comes a time when buttons get pushed, numbers are input and keys inserted and turned.

--They make an accidental apocalypse (or not so accidental) much easier. In the past, spurious launch orders have been successfully dismissed because 'it just couldn't happen'. Now it could.

--The 'theological justification' for a global nuclear exchange is especially dangerous because it pits good against absolute evil (whether its Reagan or Thurmond in 1983, or Simonyan or Soloviev day before yesterday or a month ago on You Tube), and because those who doubt the wisdom of destroying the world are obviously opposed to the 'will of God'.

This would lead me to nothing but a rousing chorus of either Tom Lehrer's 'we will all go

together when we go' or the medieval Dies Irae, depending what I find before me on YouTube, as I head for my bunker or for the remote Australian countryside.

BUT there are a number of possibilities for an organisation such as the UN and the Governments that comprise it that can be done.

The European Leadership Network outlined a series of measures to 'reverse the slide to nuclear war' in Feb 2025:

[\[https://europeanleadershipnetwork.org/group-statement/statement-by-the-euro-atlantic-security-leadership-group-easlg-three-essential-steps-for-reversing-the-slide-to-nuclear-war/\]](https://europeanleadershipnetwork.org/group-statement/statement-by-the-euro-atlantic-security-leadership-group-easlg-three-essential-steps-for-reversing-the-slide-to-nuclear-war/)

These commonsense measures included:

—No return to nuclear testing

—Advance nuclear fail-safe (ie measures to avoid an accidental apocalypse).

No First Use can be regarded as a component of this.

I have already mentioned measures such as the resumption or improvement of mil to mil communication. The General Assembly here has passed a number of resolutions on the operational readiness of nuclear weapon systems, notably the De-alerting Groups Operational Readiness resolution, also the Indian Governments Reducing Nuclear Risks resolution.

Possibly the single most useful measure might be **No First Use**. Commonsense would indicate that if nobody uses nuclear weapons first they will not get to be used.

Adoption by the Nuclear Weapon states of credible **No First Use** policies would, arguably, open a door to multilateral negotiations for the phased elimination of nuclear weapons under a strict and effective verification and compliance framework.

The risky First – Use options maintained by most of the nuclear armed states and NATO (except India and China, both of whom need to be encouraged to maintain their **No First Use** policies) reflect and implement a policy to threaten the use of, or to actually use, nuclear weapons in a variety of scenarios including non-nuclear ones.

No-First-Use policies on the other hand, limit the role of nuclear weapons to deterrence of other nuclear attacks only, making it possible for nuclear armed states to join an agreement that would prevent such attacks.

Awareness of the nuclear risk reduction and disarmament benefits of **No First Use** has been gaining attention in multilateral forums including NPT Preparatory committee meetings such as this one, and China has formally proposed a No First Use agreement by the P5.

We urge that **No First Use**, amongst a suite of other risk reduction postures and policies such as de-alerting and better mil to mil communication, be adopted immediately as a measure that both in theory and in practice might just make the difference between nuclear war as an alarming possibility, and nuclear war as a catastrophic reality.

