

From Terror to Titans: The Return of Nuclear Great Power Politics and the Decline of the Global War on Terrorism

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Abstract

This study investigates the transformation of global security from the counterterrorism-oriented Global War on Terrorism (GWOT) to the re-emergence of nuclear great power politics in a multipolar international system. Employing the theoretical lens of Critical Security Studies (CSS), it critically examines how nuclear threats are discursively framed, securitized, and situated within structural hierarchies that privilege state-centric and militarized approaches over human security concerns. The research adopts a qualitative methodology based primarily on secondary sources, including peer-reviewed academic literature, policy documents, and institutional reports. Through a discursive and normative analytical approach, the study highlights the re-securitization of nuclear weapons, the side-lining of non-state and human security threats, and the perpetuation of inequalities in the global security order. The findings underscore how the renewed emphasis on nuclear deterrence reflects and reinforces systemic power imbalances, while neglecting pressing issues such as climate change, poverty, and public health. The paper concludes by advocating for a re-envisioned global security paradigm that prioritizes inclusive governance and human emancipation.

Keywords: Critical Security Studies; Nuclear Deterrence; Global War on Terrorism; Securitization; Human Security; Nuclear Great Power Politics

Introduction

The dawn of the 21st century was largely defined by a security paradigm centered around the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT), a campaign initiated by the United States in the wake of the September 11, 2001 attacks. For nearly two decades, counterterrorism was at the forefront of global security strategies, with interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq, alongside global counterinsurgency operations, constituting the primacy of non-state threats in international security discourse. This era saw Western foreign policy particularly that of the U.S., reoriented toward dismantling terrorist networks, preventing nuclear terrorism and managing so-called "rogue states" perceived to be threats to global stability (Futter & Zala, 2024). However, by the late 2010s, the GWOT began to lose its centrality as a strategic framework. Multiple factors contributed to this shift. First, there was growing disillusionment with the protracted nature and limited effectiveness of counterterrorism operations, many of which failed to yield lasting political solutions. Second, there was an observable pivot in global geopolitics: the rapid economic and military rise of China, Russia's increasingly aggressive foreign policy posture, and a general decline in Western strategic cohesion collectively signalled the re-emergence of inter-state rivalry as a core feature of the international order (Buzan & Lawson, 2023; Mangani, 2024).

Within this context, scholars such as Futter and Zala (2024) argue that the international system is undergoing a substantive reconfiguration marked by the "return of nuclear great power politics." This return

is not merely rhetorical, it is reflected in both discourse and practice. For instance, nuclear signalling has resurfaced as a tool of coercive diplomacy. Russia's veiled threats involving tactical nuclear weapons in the context of its war in Ukraine, coupled with the growing spectre of a military confrontation over Taiwan that could potentially involve U.S.-China nuclear escalation, point to a revived emphasis on nuclear deterrence and strategic posturing (Futter & Zala, 2024; Raji, 2023). Furthermore, India's evolving nuclear posture and its increasing prominence in global security frameworks suggest that the club of nuclear great powers is becoming more pluralistic and less anchored in Cold War binaries. The 2022 U.S. Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) reaffirmed this strategic transition. Unlike earlier reviews that emphasized the threat of terrorism and the proliferation of nuclear weapons to non-state actors, the 2022 NPR prioritizes nuclear deterrence in the context of great power competition, identifying China and Russia as the principal long-term strategic challengers to the U.S. security (U.S. Department of Defense, 2022).

This discursive shift represents more than just a return to Cold War logic. The concept of "nuclear great power politics" refers to the centrality of nuclear capabilities in shaping the behavior, strategies, and interactions of major powers in the contemporary global order. What distinguishes this moment from earlier periods is the way in which nuclear dynamics are not only a by-product of strategic competition but are actively constitutive of that competition itself (Zala, 2025). In other words, the mere possession and development of nuclear weapons and the doctrines governing their use are now integral to how states define and pursue power. While concern about nuclear terrorism remains part of the broader security agenda, it has been significantly deprioritized. During the GWOT era, fears of terrorists acquiring fissile material and conducting catastrophic attacks shaped both policy and public imagination. Today, however, the focus has shifted to the systemic risks posed by interactions among nuclear-armed states. These include issues such as arms race dynamics, crisis instability, and the erosion of arms control agreements like the INF Treaty and New START (Diez et al., 2023). Moreover, the increasing opacity in nuclear strategies, the modernization of arsenals, and the blurring of lines between conventional and nuclear capabilities are all contributing to heightened uncertainty. This uncertainty, in turn, reinforces the salience of nuclear weapons as tools of both deterrence and coercion in international politics (Grevatt, 2023; Proroković, 2025). The waning of the Global War on Terrorism has facilitated the return of nuclear great power politics as the dominant lens through which security threats are understood and managed. The strategic imagination of key global actors is increasingly shaped by calculations of deterrence, power projection, and balance-of-power logics framed within a nuclear context. As the world transitions into a more multipolar nuclear order, understanding the interdependence between nuclear capabilities and great power rivalry becomes essential for assessing the trajectory of global security.

During the Cold War, nuclear weapons were a defining feature of international relations, shaping the strategic calculus of both the United States and the Soviet Union. The threat of mutually assured destruction (MAD) and the development of extensive arms control regimes underscored the centrality of nuclear deterrence in global diplomacy. However, the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the emergence of a unipolar order led by the United States dramatically reshaped this landscape. In the decades that followed often referred to as the "unipolar moment" nuclear weapons receded from mainstream strategic discourse, particularly in the West. The emphasis instead shifted to non-traditional security threats and sub-nuclear challenges such as regional proliferation, terrorism, and the safeguarding of nuclear materials (Futter & Zala, 2024; Proroković, 2025). This period witnessed what some scholars described as the "Second Nuclear Age," a concept reflecting the transformation of nuclear threats from superpower standoff to a more diffuse array of risks. These included fears over the spread of weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) to weaker or unstable states, concerns about the security of nuclear arsenals in fragile regimes, and the haunting possibility of nuclear terrorism especially in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 attacks (Buzan & Lawson, 2023). Consequently, the global nuclear debate focused less on strategic deterrence between major powers and more on horizontal proliferation issues involving countries such as North Korea, Iran, Iraq, and Libya, as well as crises between regional rivals like India and Pakistan (Diez et al., 2023).

Although nuclear weapons remained significant, their presence in international affairs was often confined to the margins. Crisis narratives rarely invoked full-scale nuclear war, and when they did, such predictions

were frequently dismissed as implausible. The dominant perception was that strategic nuclear confrontation belonged to the past, a relic of the Cold War rather than a credible threat in the post-9/11 security order (Mangani, 2024). Nuclear discourse was largely preoccupied with securing loose materials, dismantling black-market networks such as the one led by A.Q. Khan, and ensuring that extremist groups did not acquire fissile material. However, the security environment of the 2020s reflects a significant and perhaps alarming reversal. Nuclear weapons have re-emerged as central instruments of international politics, both symbolically and strategically. This revival is not merely rhetorical, it is structural, doctrinal, and deeply embedded in the evolving geopolitics of the early 21st century. The reassertion of great power rivalry, particularly involving nuclear-armed states like the United States, China, Russia, and India, is rapidly reshaping global threat perceptions (Futter & Zala, 2024; Zala, 2025). Crucially, we are now witnessing the formation of what may be characterized as a genuinely multipolar nuclear order for the first time in history. Unlike the bipolar configuration of the Cold War or the unipolar dominance of the post-Cold War period, the current system is defined by multiple nuclear centers of power, each with its own strategic objectives, deterrence doctrines, and technological capabilities. This multipolarity introduces a new layer of complexity and risk, particularly in terms of escalation dynamics, misperception, and crisis instability (Grevatt, 2023). Moreover, this resurgence of nuclear salience coincides with unprecedented technological shifts that are rapidly transforming the character of nuclear deterrence and warfare. Advances in cyber capabilities, artificial intelligence, hypersonic missiles, and dual-use delivery systems are blurring the line between conventional and nuclear weapons, making strategic signalling more ambiguous and deterrence more fragile. Additionally, the global nuclear governance architecture anchored in treaties such as the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) is under increasing strain, with arms control agreements eroding and norm-based regimes failing to adapt to the changing environment (Hofman & Srinivas, 2024). Many scholars have begun referring to this transformation as the onset of a “Third Nuclear Age” a conceptual framework that captures the compounded risks of technological disruption, strategic ambiguity, and multipolar competition (Zala, 2025). In this emerging context, nuclear weapons are not merely tools of last resort but are becoming integrated into broader foreign policy strategies as states vie for regional dominance, strategic parity, or global prestige. What makes this shift particularly concerning is the apparent lack of preparedness among policymakers and analysts. After years of deprioritizing nuclear issues in favor of counterterrorism, migration, cyber threats, and climate change, strategic communities in many countries are ill-equipped to understand or respond to the re-nuclearization of global politics. While not every decision in Beijing, Washington, Moscow, or New Delhi is driven by nuclear calculations, the role of nuclear deterrence is increasingly shaping the strategic outlook and interactions of these powers often in subtle but consequential ways (Raji, 2023; Mangani, 2024). Consequently, the research argues that, the return of nuclear great power politics represents not only a shift in global threat perception but also a profound transformation in the architecture of international relations. Recognizing and responding to this shift requires a recalibration of strategic thinking, revitalization of arms control mechanisms, and renewed international dialogue to manage the complex interplay of power, technology, and deterrence in the Third Nuclear Age.

Theoretical Framework: Critical Security Studies (CSS)

Critical Security Studies (CSS) arose as a scholarly reaction to the limitations inherent in traditional security paradigms, particularly Realism and Neorealism, which often emphasize state-centric and military-oriented definitions of security. Rather than restricting analysis to state sovereignty and military threats, CSS expands the conversation to encompass diverse forms of insecurity affecting individuals, communities, and non-state entities. It emphasizes that “security” is not a neutral term but a politically constructed category shaped by historical processes, institutional power, and elite discourse (Booth & Wheeler, 2023). This critical lens is essential in making sense of the current global shift from the War on Terror era to renewed tensions rooted in nuclear deterrence and great power rivalries. In particular, CSS draws attention to how issues become framed as existential threats through securitization processes led by political elites. During the post-9/11 period, nuclear fears were primarily associated with non-state actors and so-called rogue states. CSS critiques this discourse for reinforcing Western dominance by projecting insecurity outward while ignoring

structural inequalities within the international system (Zala & Futter, 2024). As global security priorities move away from non-state terrorism to a renewed focus on great power nuclear politics, CSS encourages us to question how this shift reinforces existing hierarchies. Rather than de-escalating, the renewed centrality of nuclear arsenals in the strategic doctrines of the United States, Russia, and China suggests a re-politicization of nuclear deterrence, albeit through a discourse that legitimizes these weapons as symbols of status and necessity rather than instruments of destruction.

This shift also illustrates the broader militarization of security narratives in the current geopolitical climate. Increased investments in nuclear modernization, military budgets, and strategic partnerships among Western alliance reflect a return to state-centric approaches that marginalize human security imperatives. Such prioritization risks side-lining critical non-military threats including public health, climate change, and poverty which remain pressing for large segments of the global population, especially in the Global South (Siddi & Silvan, 2024). From a CSS standpoint, this transition underscores the way security policies reflect the interests of powerful actors while neglecting the lived insecurities of marginalized populations. Moreover, the move toward traditional nuclear deterrence has coincided with a deprioritization of the kinds of non-state threats that previously occupied center stage in global security agendas. This is not to say that terrorism or the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction has been resolved; rather, they have been reframed as secondary concerns. The change in attention reveals a broader ideological shift, one that is shaped less by objective threat levels and more by the political convenience and material capabilities of dominant states (Zhao & Jang, 2025). CSS helps unpack how this reorientation consolidates global inequality by allowing the most militarily powerful countries to define the rules of engagement while excluding weaker states and non-state actors from influential decision-making platforms.

Additionally, nuclear great power politics contributes to the reinforcement of hierarchical structures in international relations. The possession of nuclear weapons continues to be equated with legitimate global leadership and strategic credibility, effectively excluding non-nuclear states from critical security dialogues. This dynamic institutionalizes inequity and impedes inclusive governance of global security issues. CSS critiques this status quo by questioning the moral and political foundations of equating destructive capability with international authority (Doyle, 2025). It offers a framework to examine how nuclear discourse preserves privilege for a select few states while perpetuating a security architecture that is neither democratic nor universally beneficial. Another significant concern raised by CSS is the growing influence of security elites, defense industries, and technocratic institutions in shaping public discourse on nuclear threats. These actors often promote narratives that frame advanced military technologies such as hypersonic missiles, AI-enabled targeting systems, and cyber warfare tools as essential innovations in an increasingly dangerous world. However, CSS scholars caution that this discourse often serves the interests of a narrow group of power brokers, further marginalizing disarmament voices and human-centric security perspectives (Freeman & Huang, 2023). In such contexts, public debate is restricted, critical perspectives are sidelined, and policy is shaped more by technological determinism than by democratic deliberation. Ultimately, CSS provides an indispensable lens for examining the ongoing transition in global security from the terrorism-focused years of the early 21st century to a present defined by the re-emergence of nuclear deterrence among major powers. By interrogating the ideologies, power structures, and discursive practices that define “security,” CSS offers a pathway to envision alternative, more inclusive approaches. Its commitment to human emancipation and its suspicion of dominant narratives challenge us to rethink what global security ought to mean in an increasingly complex and unequal world.

The Return of Nuclear Great Power Politics and the Decline of the Global War on Terror

In the wake of the Global War on Terror (GWOT), the international community’s attention largely shifted from structured, state-level nuclear threats to diffuse dangers posed by non-state actors and so-called rogue states. Nuclear security was reframed to prioritize terrorism over traditional deterrence, as seen in the U.S. post-9/11 focus on preventing nuclear terrorism over managing state-based nuclear rivalries. Yet in recent years, there has been a perceptible shift back toward classical deterrence logics as tensions between major powers particularly the U.S., Russia, and China intensify. This reorientation represents the revival of nuclear

great power politics, albeit within a multipolar rather than bipolar global structure (Wang, 2025; Ungureanu, 2023). The politics of great powers refers not merely to material capabilities but to a set of institutionalized interactions and status recognitions within global society. Strategic relations among these powers, cooperative, competitive, or confrontational often revolve around nuclear capabilities, which shape threat perceptions and strategic calculations (Buyukliev, 2025). Though commonly referred to as “great power competition,” such relations also include arms control, deterrence, and crisis diplomacy. Nuclear concerns today continue to shape state behaviors, whether through Russia’s nuclear presence in Ukraine or the U.S. and China’s strategic manoeuvring in the Indo-Pacific (Futter & Zala, 2025).

During the Cold War, public consciousness and academic scholarship were deeply engaged with the risks of nuclear conflict. Mass mobilizations, cinematic portrayals of nuclear apocalypse, and doctrinal debates all signalled a pervasive fear of strategic confrontation. However, the post-Cold War period ushered in a marked shift. With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the perceived resolution of the U.S.-Soviet rivalry, nuclear dangers faded from public discourse and policymaking agendas (Peach, 2025). This was further compounded by the rise of new existential threats; climate change, pandemics, and cyber-warfare that crowded out nuclear risks from political attention and public concern. Nonetheless, the nuclear dimension of great power politics has returned with renewed urgency. The Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, accompanied by nuclear threats, revived concerns about the destabilizing potential of nuclear weapons in crisis scenarios. Scholars now argue that rather than an end to deterrence, the world has entered a “Third Nuclear Age,” characterized by tripolar and multipolar rivalries, more unpredictable nuclear doctrines, and blurred lines between conventional and nuclear conflict (Futter et al., 2025; Verstraete, 2025). Unlike the relatively stable bipolar deterrence architecture of the Cold War, today’s nuclear order is fragmented and unstable, making crisis management more difficult. Importantly, nuclear politics today is also shaped by new technological dynamics and regional aspirations. The modernization of arsenals, hypersonic weapons, and the proliferation of dual-use technologies are altering deterrence equations. At the same time, countries like India seek to leverage nuclear stewardship as part of their claim to great power status, indicating that nuclear capabilities remain embedded in broader geopolitical aspirations (Edmond, 2025; Sussex & Clarke, 2021). Thus, nuclear great power politics is no longer a historical relic but a resurgent phenomenon, redefined by multipolarity, technological change, and the reassertion of state-based strategic rivalries. As a result, nuclear risks have re-entered policy and academic discourse, though now within a far more complex and volatile international environment.

Furthermore, in the aftermath of the Cold War, U.S. and allied nuclear deterrence strategies underwent a significant shift, becoming more nuanced and de-emphasized as the direct threat of great power confrontation appeared to wane. This shift was most clearly evidenced by the U.S. decision in the early 2000s to withdraw from the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty, a move that demonstrated a preference for unilateral action and technological superiority over the negotiated arms control frameworks of previous decades (Jonas & Seshadri, 2024; Skrypnik, 2024). Despite formal reductions in nuclear arsenals by both the United States and Russia through the 1990s, attention increasingly pivoted away from strategic deterrence and toward new security paradigms. The growing concern was no longer mutual assured destruction but the risk of nuclear materials falling into the hands of non-state actors. As Genovese (2025) and Wang (2025) highlight, this reorientation marked a transition from traditional deterrence theory to a broader concept of nuclear security, where the threat of nuclear terrorism loomed larger than inter-state nuclear conflict. Indeed, the global security discourse by the early 2000s was dominated by fears of a nuclear detonation by a terrorist group, reflecting a new kind of nuclear anxiety in an age shaped by asymmetric threats.

Simultaneously, the extension of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in 1995 underscored a growing international consensus on non-proliferation, with the focus now squarely on preventing nuclear technology from spreading to so-called rogue states or terrorist organizations. The once-dominant “central balance” of nuclear power between the U.S. and Russia faded into the background, as regional threats and sub-state actors became the primary concern (Frantz, 2025). Scholars such as van Creveld and policymakers during the early 21st century often downplayed the risks associated with nuclear proliferation among smaller states,

instead emphasizing the existential threat posed by terrorism (Kulacki et al., 2025). The scholarly narrative during this period supported what came to be known as the “Second Nuclear Age,” a concept emphasizing that nuclear politics had shifted from great power rivalry to fragmented, decentralized threats. However, this new era also fostered complacency. As Street (2024) and Ali (2024) argue, nuclear disarmament efforts slowed considerably, and public concern over nuclear risks declined in favor of more immediate global crises like climate change and pandemics. This de-prioritization of nuclear issues in both policy and public consciousness was starkly illustrated by commentators like George Will, who referred to the 1990s as a “holiday from history.” Nonetheless, some voices continued to caution that nuclear deterrence among great powers remained relevant. Colin Gray’s mid-2000s warning that great power conflict was still a serious concern was prescient, especially in light of recent tensions and renewed competition involving China and Russia (Brandes, 2024). Today, strategic discourse is slowly shifting again. As multipolar competition intensifies, the assumptions of the post-Cold War nuclear lull are being re-evaluated in light of new geopolitical realities.

The return of nuclear great power politics represents not just a strategic shift but an ideological and institutional one. Unlike the Cold War’s relatively stable dyadic deterrence structure, today’s multipolar nuclear environment is more volatile and less governed by formal arms control regimes. As the United States, China, Russia, and others jostle for influence, nuclear capabilities are becoming a central instrument of both deterrence and diplomacy. The stakes are high, and failure to adapt could result in miscalculation or catastrophic escalation. This new nuclear age calls for reimagined frameworks of governance that reflect emerging power dynamics, incorporate non-Western perspectives, and recognize the dual threats of horizontal and vertical proliferation. Crucially, policymakers must cultivate strategic literacy around nuclear issues not just among military planners, but across diplomatic, academic, and public spheres to avoid repeating the dangerous cycles of history.

De-prioritization of Nuclear Terrorism in the Post-GWOT Era

In the years following the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT), the once-dominant narrative surrounding nuclear terrorism has shifted significantly. During the early 2000s, fears of non-state actors acquiring and deploying nuclear weapons permeated security discourses, largely driven by influential voices such as Graham Allison, who warned of an inevitable nuclear terrorist attack due to the accessibility of fissile material and institutional vulnerabilities (Allison, 2010). This period saw substantial investments in nuclear security, interdiction programs, and international coordination through mechanisms like the Global Initiative to Combat Nuclear Terrorism (GICNT) and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). However, by the 2020s, this policy emphasis had markedly diminished. As strategic concerns evolved, nuclear terrorism began to receive less attention from both policymakers and scholars. This deprioritization reflects a broader geopolitical shift toward renewed great power rivalry and the re-emergence of deterrence frameworks rooted in state-centric calculations. Analysts now argue that the international security architecture is recalibrating around multipolar deterrence logics, wherein the principal threats stem from confrontations among nuclear-armed states like the United States, China, and Russia (Dombrowski & Reich, 2024; Jackson & Brenes, 2025).

Budget allocations and political discourse reinforce this transition. Resources once directed at countering nuclear terrorism are increasingly redirected toward modernizing nuclear arsenals, developing advanced missile defense systems, and reengaging in arms control dialogues tailored to great power competition (Harman et al., 2024). As a result, initiatives like nuclear security summits have become less prominent, and the cooperative threat reduction agenda has lost momentum. Importantly, this shift does not suggest the disappearance of nuclear terrorism risks. Vulnerabilities remain, particularly in politically unstable regions with poorly secured stockpiles or the threat of insider access. Yet, as Zhao and Jang (2025) argue, such threats now occupy a lower tier in strategic calculations recognized more for their potential devastation than for their likelihood. Furthermore, strides in global nuclear security have yielded tighter oversight, institutional resilience, and technological improvements that mitigate some of the earlier concerns (Love III, 2022). The result is a global nuclear security framework increasingly defined by strategic deterrence rather

than counter-terrorism. As scholars like Omelicheva (2025) and Vasovic (2025) observe, this reflects a broader trend in international relations where great power politics, rather than asymmetric threats, shape strategic priorities. Nonetheless, the residual threat of nuclear terrorism remains a "quiet undercurrent" in global security, warranting vigilance even as attention turns elsewhere.

Reimagining Nuclear Threats in the War on Terror

In the early 21st century, particularly after the 9/11 attacks, Western strategic thinking underwent a fundamental shift in how nuclear threats were conceptualized. The dominant concern was no longer the traditional state-to-state nuclear confrontation of the Cold War, but rather the emergent specter of nuclear terrorism. Many policymakers and scholars argued that a "Second Nuclear Age" had begun, an era marked by decentralized threats and the rise of regional nuclear powers and non-state actors seeking weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) (Cimbala, 2015). The 2002 U.S. National Security Strategy was a turning point in this reimagining. It explicitly emphasized the need not just to deter but to defeat global terrorist networks, many of which were presumed to be pursuing nuclear, chemical, or biological weapons. The document declared that the threat of nuclear terrorism posed a unique danger that transcended traditional warfare: "Our immediate focus will be those terrorist organizations of global reach and any terrorist or state sponsor of terrorism which attempts to gain or use weapons of mass destruction" (National Security Strategy, 2002).

This rhetorical and strategic shift had significant material consequences. The fear that terrorist groups could acquire or engineer nuclear weapons became deeply embedded in U.S. foreign and security policy, driving enormous investments in intelligence, homeland security, and nuclear non-proliferation programs. Scholars and think tanks quickly adapted to this new framework, aligning their research agendas with the dominant paradigm of the War on Terror. As Bracken (2012) cynically observed, "think tanks have to fish where the fish are," reflecting how financial and political capital flowed toward terrorism-related security issues (Bracken, 2012, as cited in Cimbala, 2015). The mass media also played a crucial role in amplifying the perceived likelihood of nuclear terrorism. Headlines warned of imminent threats from "loose nukes," while commentators speculated that it was only a matter of time before non-state actors acquired nuclear devices. Such alarmism often overshadowed empirical assessments of actual capability or intent (Li, 2021). Moreover, scholars outside traditional terrorism studies also began engaging with nuclear terror discourse. International Relations theorist Robert Keohane, writing in the aftermath of 9/11, argued that the sheer destructiveness of nuclear terrorism demanded zero tolerance for any form of terrorism. This line of thinking helped reinforce the belief that traditional nuclear deterrence frameworks built for rational state actors were inadequate in dealing with ideologically driven, potentially "undeterrable" groups (Frost, 2005).

This conceptual linkage between nuclear weapons and terrorism, however, did more than just justify military interventions and surveillance regimes; it also reshaped public consciousness. The "nuclear terrorist" became a central character in Western security narratives, an existential threat that could only be contained through indefinite warfare, massive security investments, and global surveillance. Yet, despite decades of anticipation, there has not been a single verified instance of nuclear terrorism. While the potential danger remains, the focus is now shifting back to state-based deterrence and great power nuclear dynamics, especially amid rising tensions between the U.S., Russia, and China (Arbatov, 2019). This evolving security landscape suggests that nuclear politics is once again defined less by terrorism and more by state competition, arms control, and strategic stability. The early post-9/11 era saw nuclear terrorism elevated as a top-tier security threat, despite limited empirical evidence of non-state actors nearing nuclear capability. This threat perception was shaped less by concrete intelligence and more by a political environment saturated with fear and uncertainty. High-ranking officials like Vice President Dick Cheney epitomized this mentality, famously arguing that even a 1% chance of nuclear terrorism necessitated a 100% policy response. This perspective often referred to as the "one percent doctrine" justified drastic preventative measures, including the controversial invasion of Iraq under the pretence that Saddam Hussein might provide WMDs to terrorists (Peterson, 2025). This securitized approach was bolstered by popular media, think tank narratives, and an intelligence community highly attuned to post-9/11 threats. The Bush administration persistently framed the intersection of WMD and terrorism as an existential threat.

Hollywood films and TV dramas reinforced public anxieties with plots involving nuclear-armed terrorists. While these narratives shaped public and policy attention, intelligence agencies and nuclear scholars gradually began to emphasize the extremely low likelihood of such an attack. Studies such as those by Bunn and Roth underscored the formidable technical, logistical, and intelligence barriers non-state actors would face in constructing or acquiring a nuclear device (Bunn & Roth, 2024).

By the late 2010s, however, the urgency around nuclear terrorism had begun to fade. Improved global cooperation on nuclear material security, tighter export controls, and the dismantling of black-market networks (like the A.Q. Khan network) led to declining assessments of the threat's immediacy. Even those who had championed nuclear counterterrorism began advocating for prudence rather than panic (Lewis et al., 2025). Obama's administration maintained the focus but framed it more as part of a broader non-proliferation agenda, rather than a singular existential concern. By the time of the 20th anniversary of the 9/11 attacks, attention had clearly shifted. The dominant security narrative was no longer focused on "nuclear 9/11," but instead on the strategic challenges posed by peer competitors like China and Russia. This recalibration was driven by renewed geopolitical rivalries and technological advancements in nuclear and missile systems, which reinstated interstate nuclear deterrence as the centerpiece of U.S. national security (Peterson, 2025; Lewis et al., 2025). In summary, while nuclear terrorism shaped a generation of policy responses, it has since been deprioritized in favor of the re-emergent logic of great power politics, highlighting how nuclear threat perceptions are deeply tied to shifting geopolitical discourses.

Implications for International Order and Security

The transformation of the international security paradigm from a unipolar, counterterrorism-focused landscape to one defined by multipolar nuclear-armed great power rivalry has significant implications for contemporary strategic stability and global order. This change is not merely a reflection of shifting state interests but rather a deeper structural reorientation of the international system. The ramifications of this transformation are far-reaching, altering not only how states relate to each other militarily but also how they conceptualize security, deterrence, and cooperation. The evolution from a counterterrorism-oriented security environment to one characterized by multipolar nuclear competition represents a profound transformation of global order. It reintroduces strategic instability through increased doctrinal ambiguity, erosion of institutional safeguards, and the complex interplay of competing great powers.

The resurgence of great power nuclear politics has ushered in a volatile and increasingly complex deterrence landscape. Unlike the comparatively stable and predictable bipolar rivalry of the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union, the contemporary international system is characterized by a multipolar configuration in which several nuclear-armed states most notably the United States, China, and Russia pursue divergent strategic objectives, military doctrines, and regional ambitions. This diversification of nuclear actors not only complicates established models of deterrence but also heightens the likelihood of miscalculation, as the number of potential conflict dyads and geopolitical flashpoints continues to grow. These dynamics are further intensified by China's accelerated program of military modernization, encompassing both the expansion of its nuclear arsenal and the deployment of dual-capable missile systems capable of delivering conventional or nuclear payloads. Such developments add additional layers of strategic uncertainty and ambiguity, complicating adversaries' assessments of intent. Similarly, Russia's nuclear demonstration during its 2022 invasion of Ukraine particularly its threats involving the use of tactical nuclear weapons constitutes the destabilizing potential of nuclear coercion in regional conflicts. The absence of comprehensive arms control mechanisms and institutionalized crisis communication frameworks between major nuclear powers exacerbates the risk of inadvertent escalation or accidental conflict in this increasingly fragile security environment (Zala & Futter, 2024; Sauer & Weidlich, 2025).

One of the most prominent and concerning features of the evolving nuclear order is the increasing opacity surrounding national nuclear doctrines, a trend that poses significant challenges to global strategic stability. Russia's widely discussed "escalate to de-escalate" strategy exemplifies this shift toward doctrinal ambiguity. Under this approach, Moscow reserves the option to employ nuclear weapons in a limited, controlled manner during the course of a conventional conflict, with the explicit objective of compelling

adversaries to halt hostilities on terms favorable to Russian strategic and political interests (Acton, 2023; Freedman, 2024). While Russian officials have offered varying interpretations of this doctrine, its underlying premise that nuclear weapons can be operationalized not merely as a deterrent but as a coercive tool in ongoing conflict marks a departure from the more rigid and clearly defined deterrence frameworks of the Cold War era. This creates substantial interpretative difficulties for adversaries, who must attempt to discern the precise circumstances under which Russia might escalate to nuclear use. Such determinations are often made under conditions of extreme time pressure and high stress, leaving significant room for misjudgment and miscalculation (Kofman & Fink, 2024). The challenge is further compounded by China's evolving nuclear posture. For decades, China maintained a minimalist approach centered on a small but survivable nuclear arsenal designed to ensure assured retaliation against any nuclear aggression. This strategy, coupled with its declared "no first use" policy, was intended to signal restraint and to minimize the role of nuclear weapons in its overall security calculus (Kristensen & Korda, 2024). However, recent developments suggest a gradual but discernible shift toward a more assertive strategic orientation. Evidence of this transformation includes the construction of hundreds of new missile silos indicative of a significant quantitative expansion of its nuclear forces as well as the accelerated development of advanced delivery systems such as hypersonic glide vehicles (U.S. Department of Defense, 2023). These capabilities are notable not only for their potential to evade existing missile defense systems but also for their dual-use nature, blurring the operational boundary between deterrence and active warfighting (Tellis, 2024). The implications of this shift are far-reaching, as they suggest that Beijing may be positioning itself for a more flexible and potentially escalatory approach to nuclear operations, even if its official declaratory policy remains unchanged (Yoshihara, 2023).

The cumulative effect of such doctrinal fluidity is to erode the predictability upon which nuclear deterrence has historically relied. Clear and consistent doctrinal demonstration was a cornerstone of Cold War stability, allowing adversaries to interpret red lines and escalation thresholds with some degree of confidence. In the current multipolar environment, however, the lack of transparency in both Russian and Chinese nuclear postures undermines this stability by introducing uncertainty into threat perception and strategic calculations. This uncertainty magnifies the risks inherent in crisis situations, where misinterpretation of ambiguous signals could rapidly escalate a confrontation to the nuclear threshold. The absence of robust confidence-building measures, institutionalized communication channels, and effective crisis management protocols between the major nuclear powers exacerbates these dangers. Without mechanisms for timely and direct dialogue particularly in moments of heightened tension, the risk of unintended escalation grows significantly. Ambiguous doctrinal statements, coupled with provocative military maneuvers or the deployment of dual-capable systems, can easily be misconstrued as preparations for imminent nuclear use, prompting pre-emptive or retaliatory responses that spiral beyond control. In this context, doctrinal opacity is not merely a theoretical problem but a tangible and escalating threat to global security, demanding urgent attention from policymakers and international security institutions alike (Freeman & Huang, 2023; Zala, 2025).

The decline of the normative and institutional frameworks that have historically underpinned global nuclear stability also constitutes one of the most recognized challenges to contemporary international security. For decades, a dense network of arms control treaties, verification mechanisms, and diplomatic norms served as essential guardrails, restraining unchecked nuclear competition, enhancing transparency, and enabling crisis management between nuclear-armed states. Today, however, this architecture is experiencing a pronounced deterioration, as key agreements are either abandoned, inadequately implemented, or rendered obsolete by shifting geopolitical realities and disruptive technological advancements. The collapse of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty in 2019 is emblematic of this erosion. Signed in 1987 by the United States and the Soviet Union, the INF Treaty was a landmark accord that eliminated an entire category of nuclear-capable missiles with ranges between 500 and 5,500 kilometers. Beyond its tangible reductions in nuclear forces, the agreement represented a symbolic commitment to limiting the most destabilizing forms of nuclear brinkmanship, particularly in Europe. Its demise precipitated by persistent allegations of Russian non-compliance and evolving strategic imperatives in Washington has reintroduced the prospect of

intermediate-range missile deployments in both Europe and the Indo-Pacific. This strategic void has fuelled regional insecurities, stimulated competitive missile development among other powers, and elevated the risk of inadvertent escalation in future crises (Bodansky & Reif, 2024).

The fragility of the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START), the last surviving bilateral arms control agreement between the United States and Russia, further constitutes the instability of the current nuclear order. By imposing limits on deployed strategic nuclear warheads and delivery systems, and incorporating robust verification protocols, New START has long served as the primary foundation of strategic stability between the two largest nuclear powers (Woolf, 2023). However, compliance disputes, disagreements over verification mechanisms, and the exacerbation of geopolitical tensions particularly in the wake of Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine have cast serious doubt on the treaty's longevity (Korda & Kristensen, 2024). In the absence of a successor framework or a credible pathway toward renewal, there is a growing risk that this final constraint on U.S. and Russian strategic arsenals will dissolve, potentially unleashing a renewed arms race in both scale and sophistication (Reif & Bugos, 2024). Multilateral disarmament efforts have similarly stalled. The Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), often hailed as the cornerstone of the global non-proliferation regime, faces mounting criticism from non-nuclear weapon states. Many argue that the nuclear-armed signatories have failed to honor their Article VI commitments to pursue meaningful disarmament, reinforcing perceptions that the treaty perpetuates rather than dismantles entrenched nuclear hierarchies (Johnson, 2023; Potter & Mukhatzhanova, 2022). This growing dissatisfaction threatens to undermine the NPT's legitimacy, potentially weakening the shared international consensus against nuclear proliferation (Fihn, 2024).

Furthermore, the challenges facing nuclear governance are further compounded by the absence of comprehensive agreements to address emerging military technologies. Artificial intelligence-enabled command-and-control systems introduce novel vulnerabilities, raising the specter of automated decision-making errors, cyber intrusions, and unintended escalations. The advent of hypersonic missile systems capable of traveling at extreme velocities, executing evasive maneuvers, and bypassing existing missile defences further compresses leaders' decision-making timelines during crises, heightening the danger of pre-emptive or miscalculated strikes. Additionally, cyber operations targeting nuclear infrastructure pose the risk of disabling critical systems or generating confusion at the most perilous moments of confrontation. The lack of binding norms, verification mechanisms, or cooperative security arrangements to govern these technological advancements creates a precarious environment in which nuclear brinkmanship risks becoming normalized. Without concerted global efforts to restore the credibility of arms control, expand inclusive governance frameworks, and adapt existing regimes to the realities of emerging threats, this steady erosion of institutional safeguards will continue to undermine strategic stability. As Doyle (2025) cautions, the erosion of normative consensus in nuclear governance not only increases the probability of future crises, it fundamentally diminishes the capacity of the international system to contain and manage them when they arise.

Conclusion

The reassertion of nuclear great power politics in the 21st century represents a pivotal transformation in the global security landscape. Unlike the early post-9/11 era when international security discourse was dominated by counterterrorism, rogue states, and the specter of nuclear terrorism, contemporary strategic thinking has returned to a focus on state-centric rivalries. In this renewed context, nuclear weapons have re-emerged as central instruments of national power and geopolitical signalling. The transition away from the unipolar moment defined by the U.S.-led Global War on Terrorism (GWOT) toward a multipolar order has refocused international attention on the strategic behaviors of major powers such as the United States, Russia, China, and, increasingly, India. This reorientation reflects deeper systemic changes in global order and is reshaping the priorities of both policy and scholarship. Importantly, the return of nuclear deterrence politics is occurring in a world that is significantly more complex than the Cold War's bipolar structure. The current nuclear environment is multipolar and fluid, involving a wider range of actors, competing national doctrines, and rapidly evolving technologies. Unlike the relatively stable arms race dynamics between the

U.S. and the Soviet Union, today's deterrence landscape is fragmented, characterized by doctrinal opacity, asymmetric capabilities, and uneven transparency. These conditions heighten the risk of misperception and miscalculation, particularly in crisis scenarios involving flashpoints like Taiwan, Ukraine, or the South China Sea. Compounding these dangers is the ongoing erosion of the international arms control architecture. The collapse or weakening of key treaties such as the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty and the uncertain future of the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) have removed essential guardrails that previously helped manage nuclear risk.

Moreover, the integration of emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence, cyber capabilities, and hypersonic weapons into nuclear strategy blurs the boundary between conventional and strategic domains. This technological convergence undermines strategic stability by compressing decision-making timeframes and introducing new forms of escalation, including inadvertent or unauthorized use. The resulting environment is one in which strategic ambiguity becomes both a tool and a risk, further complicating deterrence relationships among major powers. In addressing these challenges, Critical Security Studies (CSS) provides a particularly effective analytical framework. CSS critiques traditional security paradigms that prioritize state sovereignty, military power, and rational actor models, and instead focuses on the broader socio-political, institutional, and discursive forces that shape global security agendas. In the context of nuclear politics, CSS enables a deeper examination of how norms, hierarchies, and power asymmetries structure the international nuclear order. It also sheds light on how certain states are privileged in global governance mechanisms, while others are marginalized, and how security discourses reinforce these imbalances. Thus, CSS encourages a shift away from elite-driven and state-centric approaches, advocating instead for more inclusive, pluralistic, and equitable frameworks for managing global threats.

As the global security landscape transitions into what many scholars now refer to as the "Third Nuclear Age," the international system is being reshaped by a convergence of multipolar geopolitics, rapid technological innovation, and growing ideological polarization. Unlike the relative predictability of the Cold War's bipolar framework, where two superpowers managed nuclear stability through clear deterrence doctrines and bilateral arms control agreements, today's multipolar environment is inherently more fragmented and uncertain. Major powers such as the United States, Russia, China, India, and emerging nuclear actors are now engaged in strategic posturing that lacks the institutional scaffolding that once underpinned nuclear risk reduction. In this evolving context, the stakes for international peace and security have never been higher. The diffusion of power across multiple nuclear-armed states, coupled with the acceleration of disruptive technologies like hypersonic weapons, cyber capabilities, and artificial intelligence, is fundamentally altering the dynamics of deterrence. These innovations compress decision-making windows and complicate threat perception, increasing the likelihood of miscommunication, misjudgment, or unintended escalation during periods of crisis. Moreover, the rise of dual-use technologies, systems that can serve both conventional and nuclear functions blurs the distinction between domains and increases the ambiguity surrounding adversaries' intentions and capabilities. Given these challenges, it is imperative that the global community reinvigorate and modernize arms control efforts. The disintegration or dormancy of foundational treaties such as the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty and the uncertain future of the New START agreement has left a dangerous void in the mechanisms available to regulate nuclear behavior among states. Without timely diplomatic intervention, this erosion of institutional frameworks threatens to render the international security environment increasingly volatile.

To mitigate these risks, states must urgently pursue the development of new norms and cooperative mechanisms tailored to the realities of a multipolar and technologically complex era. This includes establishing inclusive multilateral forums for dialogue, reintroducing transparency and verification measures, and building confidence among adversaries through structured communication channels and crisis prevention protocols. Equally important is the need to democratize the governance of nuclear security ensuring that emerging powers have a voice in shaping the rules and norms that guide strategic conduct. The failure to undertake such reforms carries significant consequences. The absence of robust governance mechanisms not only erodes trust but also heightens the risk of accidental or unauthorized use of nuclear weapons, strategic miscalculation during high-stakes confrontations, and the proliferation of destabilizing

technologies. Left unchecked, these dynamics could precipitate a global crisis with irreversible consequences. In conclusion, the return of nuclear great power politics is not a mere historical recurrence, it is a fundamentally new challenge shaped by the distinct characteristics of the 21st century. It demands not just renewed vigilance but a comprehensive re-evaluation of how strategic stability is conceptualized, practiced, and institutionalized in a world that is far more interconnected, competitive, and unpredictable than before.

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