

# **Revisiting The Nuclear Balance Of Power Amidst Conflict In Eastern Europe And Western Asia**

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## **Table of Contents**

<b>Abstract</b>	
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>The History of Nuclear Power Development</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Balance of power approach - International relations</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Nuclear Proliferation</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>a. Nuclear Proliferation - Middle East</b>	
<b>Case study - The Effects of the Ukraine War on the European Balance of Power</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Geo-political relationship between Europe and Western Asia</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>a. Changing Geopolitics</b>	
<b>Measuring Power and Assessing Balances</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Recommendations</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>References</b>	<b>14</b>

## **Abstract**

Every nation tries to grab the opportunity to gain power and authority through conquest and war. The modern state has provided the weak with strategies of resistance and engagement to influence the dominant state. Diplomats and politicians throughout history have used the balance-of-power concept in many different circumstances.

It has been observed that to gain any global order, two conditions need to be fulfilled. First, confluence among the major powers, and second successfully presenting the outcome as a global public good to the rest of the world. The Global Nuclear Order (GNO) was no exception but at present it is under strain. This paper seeks to understand the specific challenges nations face to balance the conquest of power. The geopolitical relationship between Europe and Western Asia is evaluated based on their effectiveness in improving the overall nuclear balance of power. Lastly, the paper sheds light on the amendments needed in the international system to improve the security among nations.

*Keywords:* Nuclear Power Development, Balance of Power, Nuclear Proliferation, Global Nuclear Order (GNO).

## **Introduction**

The present era has witnessed wide-ranging changes in regional security and patterns of regional conflict. However, in some conflict-prone regions, an encouraging process of conflict resolution started in the late 1980s (Southern Africa, Southwest, and Southeast Asia, and Central America), violent conflicts have erupted in places that had been calm at least since the end of World War II (in the former Soviet Union, such as the war between Armenia and Azerbaijan)<sup>1</sup>. In Western Asia, a major international crisis erupted and escalated to the Gulf War (1990 - 1991), when Iraq invaded Kuwait. The post-Cold War era has also witnessed a major U.S.-led initiative to advance the previously dormant Arab-Israeli peace process.

The significance of regional conflicts has been increasingly prominent since the end of the Cold War. Militarily, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and the means of their delivery will eventually pose a threat to regional security. Regional conflicts will eventually endanger Western access to markets and resources, an essential resource being the Middle Eastern oil. For instance, in Europe, local conflicts may accelerate massive flows of refugees and thereby reinforce the power of anti-foreigner extremists, which in turn will challenge political stability even in

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2600907>.

leading countries. Great power involvement in regional conflicts will have regional and international security implications.

At present, the United States has successfully countered Russian influence in the former satellite states of Eastern Europe, and its approach has contributed to the rising conflict in the region. The support of the US for Ukraine has emboldened its government to take a more aggressive stance towards Russia, leading to an extreme level of human tragedy. In addition to the human cost, the world economy has endured rising energy prices and a sharp decline in the production of fertilizers and food produced in that region.

### The History of Nuclear Power Development

Nuclear power is said to have emerged from the exclusive atmosphere of the laboratories, as its “scientific” glamour diminished. As it was transformed during the 1970s into a hard industrial reality, the public became increasingly aware, interested, and concerned. Association with the bomb, destruction, danger, invisible radiation, secrecy, and fear of the unknown added to the disfavor towards nuclear power<sup>2</sup>.

In 1979, the first major accident in any nuclear power plant occurred in the United States, the Three Mile Island (TMI) plant. This shook up the nuclear industry worldwide. The negative trends of the late 1970s were further reinforced, and though installed nuclear capacity kept increasing as plants went into operation, new construction starts became fewer and many projects on order or even under construction were canceled. On 26 April 1986, the world’s worst known disaster in nuclear power plants occurred at Chernobyl, in Ukraine, with loss of life and many releases of radioactivity that crossed national frontiers. The impact of this accident was strongly felt worldwide. Environmental concerns have increased sharply, mainly in highly industrialized countries, and environmentalist organizations blossomed and quickly turned their attention to nuclear power as a suitable target to be attacked.

Nuclear weapons play a major role in persistent diplomacy against minor powers. The Pentagon has sought and obtained the capability to strike any military target anywhere on Earth within one hour. Israel - which strongly prefers to maintain its nuclear monopoly in the region was prevented from launching precision strikes against Iranian nuclear enrichment facilities. If Iran obtains a nuclear deterrent, the United States will be able to intimidate it, due to its enormous apparatus intended for escalation dominance against major power rivals.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.iaea.org/sites/default/files/publications/magazines/bulletin/bull29-3/29304781925.pdf>.

## **Balance of Power Approach - International Relations**

The balance of power is one of international relations's most influential theoretical ideas. The “power” balanced in the pre-nuclear balancing process was military power to take or hold territory.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, territory, its human and material resources, were the predominant power source. The motive for engaging in the balancing process was to prevent any single state or bloc from holding all the power to make territorial conquests with indemnity and eventually achieve hegemony over the other states. The objectives were, first to deter the potential disturbance from initiating war by forming alliances and building up military equipment sufficient to defeat the aggressor. Second, if deterrence fails, to defend or restore its balance by engaging in war. Nuclear weapons, long-range aircraft, and missiles have super-imposed a new balancing process over the old. The new balance is referred to as the “balance of terror”.

There are various salient levels of “balance” in the balance of terror. For instance - Second-strike deterrence of Nuclear attack. A country is considered to have a minimum second-strike deterrent when it has just enough nuclear striking power after subtracting the forces that the potential aggressor would be able to eliminate in a surprise attack and by its air defenses to cause damage to the opponent's economy and population thereby more than offsetting the value which the opponent places on its objective. The balance of terror is quite distinct from the balance of power. All major powers have the capital to obtain a second-strike capability. Unless a state attains nuclear primacy, the balance of terror is remarkably egalitarian.

The United States has achieved ‘ escalation dominance’ in technical jargon. In a diplomatic and political crisis with another nuclear-armed state, the US has less exposure and considerably greater room for movement at every step of the escalation ladder. The US will share the risk of escalation with a nuclear rival, but most of the risk will be borne by the adversary. The US is considered to have more bargaining power at each level, having to some extent solved the problem of the egalitarian nature of balance of power.

## **Nuclear Proliferation**

The Global Nuclear Order was started in the shadow of the Cold War, with the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. leading the Western and socialist blocs<sup>4</sup>. As the two nuclear superpowers, they needed bilateral mechanisms to prevent tensions from escalating to a nuclear war. Nuclear weapons are dangerous and hence their spread should be prevented. This convergence created the Global

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2435525>.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/the-global-nuclear-order-is-under-strain/article67699339.ece>.

Nuclear Order.

To control proliferation, the U.S. and the U.S.S.R initiated multilateral negotiations in Geneva in 1965 on a treaty to curb the spread of nuclear weapons. The Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) opened for signature three years later. The Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) opened for signature three years later. It began with less than 60 parties but at present, it is widely described as the cornerstone of the global nuclear order with 191 adherents<sup>5</sup>.

a. Nuclear Proliferation - Middle East

No nations are likely to start a nuclear war by attacking the other out of the blue. It is more likely that a conflict between two disputed nations would escalate tensions to a global scale leading to a nuclear war.

The Middle East has been a hot spot for nuclear proliferation for five decades. Driven by security fears, regional ambitions, and nationalism at least seven - Middle Eastern States have sought to acquire a nuclear weapon capability. Israel was the first and so far the only successful candidate and has repeatedly demonstrated its determination to maintain its monopoly on nuclear weapons in the region. Most estimates suggest Israel has a substantial number of sophisticated nuclear weapons that can be delivered by aircraft (F-15Is), missiles (Jericho), and submarine-launched cruise missiles<sup>6</sup>.

Egypt, Iraq, Algeria, and Libya all made unsuccessful nuclear attempts in the past. Initiated by Saddam Hussein under the semblance of a civilian nuclear program in the mid-1970s, Iraq's main French-supplied nuclear research reactor was destroyed by an Israeli raid in 1981. The demise of Iraq's nuclear effort was more violent as the United States invasion of 2003 has extinguished Iraq's ability to revive its nuclear program for the foreseeable future.

Iran being the second interested party in developing nuclear weapons in the Middle East after Israel has a deeply rooted fear of being attacked by strong powers, after witnessing the U.S - UK invasion of Iraq and the Israeli bombing of Syria. The event sent out signals that if they did not have a nuclear deterrent they could be attacked by stronger powers. Although Iran has historical aspirations to assert its regional importance, its nuclear program has become intertwined with national pride and ambition.

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/the-global-nuclear-order-is-under-strain/article67699339.ece>.

<sup>6</sup> [https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/12\\_nuclear\\_proliferation\\_riedel.pdf](https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/12_nuclear_proliferation_riedel.pdf).

Further to add to the dispute, foreign power such as the United States goes after an inconsistent policy on nuclear proliferation in the Middle East - which effectively protects Israel's nuclear monopoly. That encourages the diplomatic upheaval to pressure Iran to pursue its nuclear ambition. This problem has no particular solution because Israel is not prepared to abandon or limit its nuclear weapons program as part of a diplomatic effort to address the Iranian nuclear issue. If Israel agreed to sign the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), that would ease Iran's plan to develop an enrichment capacity under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. However, The EU-3 + 3 countries will have to portray a diplomatic agreement with Iran as a step toward achieving the ultimate objective of a Middle East free of nuclear weapons and the U.S. support should be reaffirmed for this ultimate objective.

However, the toughest diplomacy and sanctions may not be sufficient to keep Iran from crossing the nuclear threshold. This is even more the case because the Tehran agreement (2003) is seeking an ambiguous crossing to acquire a latent capability to produce weapons-grade fissile material without actually producing such material and building nuclear weapons, at least for a certain period. Using force is an unappealing option with high risks and limited gains. Still, the next administration needs to convince Iran that it is a serious threat, and whether diplomacy will be successful.

History demonstrates Israel will use force to protect its monopoly on nuclear weapons in the region. Israel views a nuclear-capable Iran as an existential threat and is prepared to run high risks in exchange for imposing even limited damage on Iran's nuclear program. The U.S. administration may not be able to discourage Israel from attacking Iran, but they should not leave Jerusalem uncertain as to the United States' views. The administration should consider offering Israel a credible security alternative based on deterrence and missile defenses and backed by formal commitments.

If Iran acquires nuclear weapons, it is likely to behave like a "normal" nuclear weapons state, not recklessly using the bomb or giving it to terrorists, but trying to extract maximum leverage from its nuclear deterrent to increase its influence and defend itself from external threats. This action will include trying to intimidate other states, especially the small Gulf states, and perhaps providing a nuclear umbrella to Iranian allies, such as Hezbollah in Lebanon or less likely the Hamas state in Gaza. In such circumstances, the danger of nuclear use arises not from recklessness but from possible escalation of conventional conflicts, plus the possibility of accidental or unauthorized use.

### **Case Study - The Effects of the Ukraine War on the European Balance of Power**

The Ukraine War has greatly disrupted the delicate balance of power in Europe, rendering the

continent almost unrecognizable when compared to its condition before 2022<sup>7</sup>. In a short period, Germany's foreign policy completely reversed perspectives. Before the Ukraine War, Germany sought ways to avoid being a mere follower of American policies in global politics. It advocated for a new Germany that would counterbalance American policies, lead a united Europe, and mold an alternative to the United States in world affairs through collaborations with like-minded states such as Canada and Japan, emphasizing the importance of multilateralism.

But, a notable aspect of Germany's pursuit of an independent foreign policy was the significant emphasis placed on fostering close cooperation with Russia. The German government had historically maintained a sympathetic stance towards Russia and exhibited no hesitation in severing energy ties with Russia and eventually increasing defense spending. This major shift in foreign policy is rarely witnessed in history<sup>8</sup>.

According to some perspectives, Germany failed to recognize the subtle growth of Russian aggression. Had the Ukraine War not erupted in 2022, Germany's billions of euros would likely still be flowing into Russia today. France and the Netherlands behaved no differently than Germany regarding this matter. Hence, the Ukraine War shook Europe's power dynamics, resulting in a new Europe's emergence. While the US military leadership seems to have returned to Europe, the World has evolved significantly. The United States now perceives its greatest security threat as originating from outside Europe and seeks to redirect its focus toward a new competitor, namely China, without expending all its resources in regions like Europe.

### **Geo-political relationship between Europe and Western Asia**

The Middle East has a significant legacy of European colonialism, which has included periods of brutal occupation, exploitation, and violence. The imperial powers controlled the process of state formation in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) during the interwar years, with European influence over the area continuing until well after the end of the Second World War<sup>9</sup>. The European powers have played an important role in shaping the political and socio-economic development of the modern Middle East and North Africa by laying the foundations of politics and unequal trade relations.

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<sup>7</sup><https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2023/06/22/the-effects-of-the-ukraine-war-on-the-european-balance-of-power-from-dream-world-to-reality/>.

<sup>8</sup><https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2023/06/22/the-effects-of-the-ukraine-war-on-the-european-balance-of-power-from-dream-world-to-reality/>.

<sup>9</sup> <https://academic.oup.com/book/39890/chapter/350671684>.

European colonialism's history still impacts the contemporary relations between Europe and the Middle East. For instance, Europe's colonial past is the reason for large immigrant communities and their descendants from the Middle East in some European countries. The European Union and the US have shared the view that enhancing the economic welfare of people in the Middle East will help stem extremism and promote liberal political and economic reform in the region. Intraregional trade in the Middle East is among the lowest in the world. For example, In 2004, intraregional merchandise exports amounted to 5.6% of the region's total exports, down from 7.6% in 2002 (*UNCTAD statistics, 2005; Arab Monetary Fund statistics, 2005*).

### Changing Geopolitics -

Concerns about the rise of a G2 world and its implications for the European Union focus particularly on high technology areas, such as artificial intelligence and robotics. These technologies will likely determine not only the future distribution of power in the world but also the formation of societies and their value systems. Currently, most of the top companies in these areas are American or Chinese<sup>10</sup>. Europe has fallen behind and faces the risk of becoming dependent on external players. To be in power, Europe will have to urgently ramp up its research and development efforts and review its rules on state aid and its approval process. These actions will encourage the emergence of companies that can compete internationally in these fields.

Today's nuclear world is no longer a bipolar world. The United States faces a more assertive China, determined to regain influence, regionally and globally. China has resented the U.S.'s naval presence in the South China and East China Seas and since the last Taiwan Strait crisis in 1996, has gradually built up its naval and missile capabilities<sup>11</sup>.

Changing geopolitics has taken its toll on the treaties between the U.S. and Russia. In 2002, the U.S. withdrew from the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty and in 2019, from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty on grounds that Russia was violating it (*Sood, 2024*). As U.S. relations with Russia went into a nosedive, the U.S. is facing a new situation of two nuclear peer rivals who are exploring new roles for more usable weapons. Furthermore, Russia's nuclear saber-rattling to warn the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and the U.S. against escalation in Ukraine has revived nuclear concerns. The old definitions of strategic stability no longer hold.

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<sup>10</sup><https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/blogs/voices/redefining-the-power-balance-between-the-west-and-the-east/>.

<sup>11</sup>

<https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/the-global-nuclear-order-is-under-strain/article67699339.ece>.



The greater external pressure of the geopolitical era produces both converging and diverging dynamics. In some respects, solidarity among European Union member states is weakening, whereas in others, the union appears to be resilient and capable of stronger collective action. The European Union's traditional business model, which evolved at a time when an external protector absolved Europeans of the need to concern themselves with autonomy and resilience, is not fit for a world of power politics.

### **Measuring Power and Assessing Balances**

The balance of power has attracted more scholarly effort than any other proposition about international politics. Notwithstanding the many ways it has been defined over the centuries, the concept has a core meaning: 'that hegemonies do not form in multistate systems because perceived threats of hegemony over the system generate balancing behavior by other leading states in the system'<sup>12</sup>(Levy, 2004: 37). The sanctions imposed by the West on any country doing business with Russia are causing significant disruption in the global supply chain. The West, specifically the US, has continued to pressure India to support the sanctions levied against Russia. However, the two countries have enjoyed a very close relationship since the 1950s, have collaborated on military and security-related matters, and are interested in maintaining a multipolar world order. India and Russia also have strong economic ties and cooperate in various areas, such as energy, trade and investment, space, and technology.

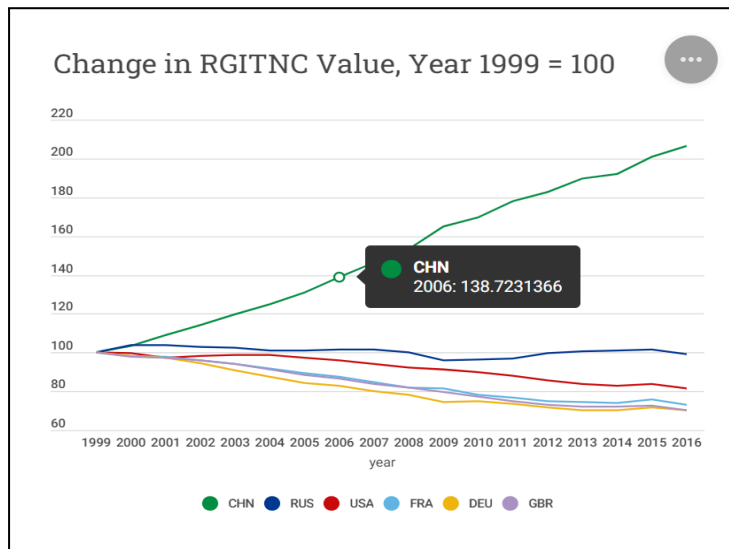
Even without the United States, Russia and China should be reasonably balanced in their neighborhoods by other major powers. Japan and India have been looking to solidify trade and security ties among Asian nations precisely to be in a better position to counterbalance China. As pointed out in the wake of Chinese pressure, India has formed "limited coalitions with the United States, Japan, Australia, and some ASEAN countries." The Indian concept of the "crescent of cooperation" - an ongoing effort to create a more durable diplomatic base with SEA nations, is meant to provide a counterbalance to China's "string of pearls" and promote closer security ties throughout the region.

The "Revised Geometric Index of Traditional National Capabilities (RGITNC), which includes "countrywide population, urban population, energy consumption, military expenditures and value-added manufacturing," that Russia's national power has remained constant between 1999 and 2016 (0.98 % decline); whereas, "the power of Italy, Germany, Britain, France and the U.S. decreased, respectively, by 34.17%, 29.6%, 29.6%, 26.85%, and 18.47%. The same period saw the

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<sup>12</sup> <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/1354066107076951>.

power of China and India grow by a huge amount. China is defined as an “emerging superpower” based on an analysis of military capabilities, economic resources, and diplomatic relationships by the Lowy Institute’s criteria.



[Gvosdev, N. K. \(2020, August 5\). \*Russia’s Impact on US National Interests: Maintaining a Balance of Power in Europe and Asia\*. \*Russia Matters\*.](#)

Based on the above graph we can conclude that - the balance of power in Europe and Asia has been in Russia’s and China’s favor. Still, neither Beijing nor Moscow can exercise decisive hegemony at this time. However, China and Russia can overshadow one other major power in Europe or Asia.

### Recommendations -

1) A more suitable solution to the conflict in Ukraine is a shift toward a more balanced global power structure. This could be achieved through a partnership between Russia, India, China, and Japan, which would help to create a new world order. Such a partnership will help - a) reduce tensions between the West and the East. b) It would also promote greater cooperation and collaboration on trade, security, and climate change issues<sup>13</sup>.

On an individual basis, each country would benefit. Russia would benefit from increased trade and investment with Asia. Similarly, it can be argued that China’s continued isolation and threats of sanctions from the West would harm its economy and hinder its progress.

<sup>13</sup><https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/blogs/voices/redefining-the-power-balance-between-the-west-and-the-east/>

Concerning India, a partnership could deliver increased trade and investment. It would also help resolve the long and complex history of China. It will reduce military tensions between the two countries, potentially reducing military spending and a greater focus on social and economic development. As for Japan, along with the economic benefits, a partnership between the four countries could help address regional security concerns about - terrorism, nuclear proliferation, and maritime security.

2) There needs to be a stronger commitment from the existing international coalition (primarily the EU-3+ 3 plus Japan and the other EU countries) to confront Iran with a clear choice. To muster this support, especially from reluctant partners like Russia and China, the new administration must make Iran a central issue in overall relations with those countries<sup>14</sup>. Faced with the threat of serious international sanctions and political pressure (and the implicit threat of force), Tehran may feel forced to accept delays and limits on its nuclear program. This would not represent a fundamental shift in Iran's nuclear ambitions but rather a tactical adjustment to avoid risks and penalties. To make this tactical adjustment more likely and to play on internal divisions within Iran), the United States should be prepared to offer a fundamental improvement in bilateral relations if Iran makes nuclear concessions.

3) To achieve a stable relationship with other nations, India's relations with countries like Indonesia, the United States, Japan, and Australia will soon be important in making strategic goals and achieving the right position in the Indo-Pacific Region. Indian maritime strategy requires the adoption of a more liberal and inclusive approach, such as the Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR), India's Maritime Military Strategy (IMMS-2007), and Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) when dealing with foreign nations. In conclusion, collective action with these nations, rather than solely based on one's capability, needs to be the new characteristic of India's larger maritime policy.

4) Berlin needs to take into consideration the long-term effects of Russia's war of aggression and threatening gestures. Its attempt to shield the invasion from outside intervention by using nuclear deterrence will have negative consequences. The German government which is supporting Ukraine by supplying arms and equipment, has a strategic interest in preventing this outcome.

Germany should continue to focus on balancing deterrence. Berlin should not only play an active role in reassuring the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) frontline states and in the

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<sup>14</sup> [https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/12\\_nuclear\\_proliferation\\_riedel.pdf](https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/12_nuclear_proliferation_riedel.pdf).

recently adopted repositioning of the alliance, but it should also continue to strengthen Ukraine's resilience<sup>15</sup>.

5) The Global Nuclear Order needs to be improved. The role of nuclear weapons should be less concerned with relative position, and strategy, and more with the global nuclear order. Arms control as part of security cooperation should be revived. Large reductions in the nuclear arsenals of the great powers would qualify as such. This would increase the trust of non-nuclear powers in the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), 1968, and measures to extend it.

Further, the development of a nuclear world order creates new possibilities for multilateral cooperation in other fields, mainly the growing common problems of humanity such as climate change, economic and financial structure, environmental degradation, epidemics, etc<sup>16</sup>.

The Nonproliferation Regime needs to be improved. If the nuclear order, including the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) regime, falls apart it would give a strong impulsion to further nuclear proliferation. The development of nuclear technology and trade networks already makes complete prevention of proliferation impossible at present. International political arrangements are essential and need to be improved upon. It should be strengthened to improve the balance between the costs and benefits of going nuclear.

## **Conclusion**

Industrialization, globalization, the spread of nuclear weapons, and the different collectively held ideas have doubtlessly altered patterns of interaction today from those that characterized past systems. For nearly three centuries the baseline expectation about how the balance-of-power theory has provided multi-state systems work. Concentrated power is simply not 'unnatural'. The unipolar structure of the current international system is neither historically unusual nor theoretically surprising.

International relations theory must come to terms with the weapons revolution and the logical place to start is the balance of power concept. The modern balance of power is multi-dimensional, with each dimension having different characteristics. National Security is directly related to the survival of the state. The state tries to create a favorable balance of power to address its security concerns. Big power states are fundamental players in this balancing game. However small states also should know the rules of the game and prove their credential for existence. Only the fittest

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<sup>15</sup> [https://www.swp-berlin.org/publications/products/comments/2022C29\\_RussiasNuclearThreats.pdf](https://www.swp-berlin.org/publications/products/comments/2022C29_RussiasNuclearThreats.pdf).

<sup>16</sup> [https://carnegieendowment.org/files/taming\\_great\\_powers.pdf](https://carnegieendowment.org/files/taming_great_powers.pdf).

state could survive in the anarchic international system. Small states should demonstrate their security strategy by being mindful of the contemporary balance of power equation.

The conflict between Ukraine and Russia and the United States' influence both there and in Asia is a manifestation of the border imbalance in the geopolitical power between the West and the East. While the United States has taken advantage of this imbalance to advance its strategic interests, a more suitable solution to the conflict would require a shift towards a more balanced global power structure. An agreement between Russia, India, China, and Japan could achieve this goal, promoting greater cooperation between the West and the East and reducing worldwide instability.

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