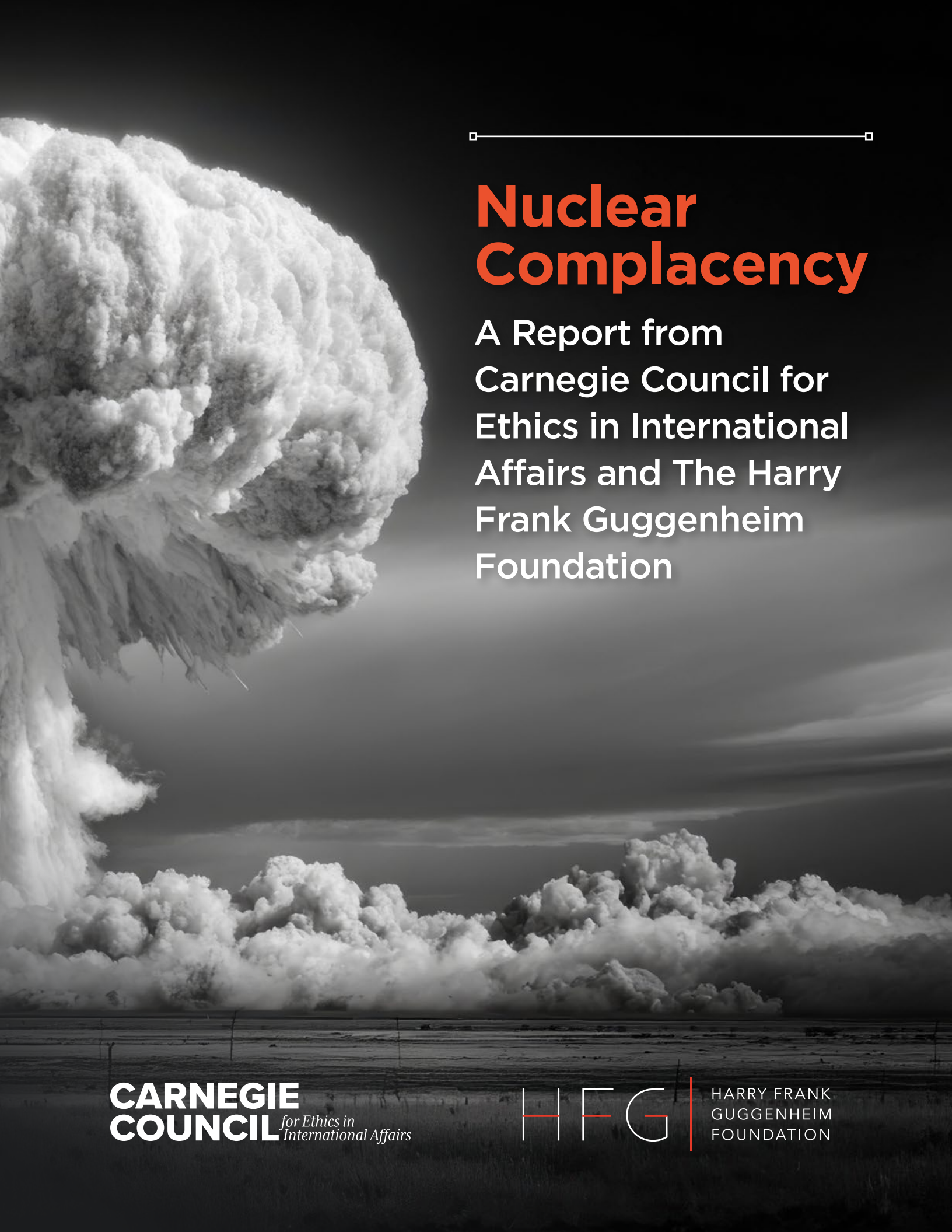


A large, billowing mushroom cloud from a nuclear explosion dominates the left side of the image. The cloud is white and textured, with a dark, smoky column rising from the ground. The background is a dark, overcast sky with some lighter clouds near the horizon.

Nuclear Complacency

A Report from
Carnegie Council for
Ethics in International
Affairs and The Harry
Frank Guggenheim
Foundation

**CARNEGIE
COUNCIL** *for Ethics in
International Affairs*

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Executive Summary

This report highlights the findings of a one-day convening of experts who addressed a particular aspect of the current international strategic nuclear environment—nuclear complacency.

Participants were asked to reflect on why complacency has emerged as an unexpected and difficult challenge, and what steps can be taken to address it. The results were both descriptive and prescriptive, sketching a new political reality and new paths to international peace and cooperation.

Nuclear weapons pose the threat of a mass casualty event, every day. What prevents catastrophes is the prudential judgment of leaders, based on a set of principles, including deterrence, non-proliferation, and just war.

In recent years, nuclear capabilities have grown, while restraints are weakening, and principles are eroding. Restrictions on the development and deployment of nuclear weapons used to be among the highest national and global priorities. Today, the opposite appears true as countries including South Korea, Japan, and Poland [openly consider pursuing nuclear options](#).

Memories of “duck-and-cover” drills, the specter of a nuclear winter, and the voices of survivors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki are receding, replaced by passive acceptance of a new arms race. As geopolitical instability grows, complacency around the nuclear issue is now a puzzle to be solved and a challenge that humanity must address together.

On April 15, 2025, Carnegie Council for Ethics in International Affairs in partnership with The Harry Frank Guggenheim Foundation brought together a community of researchers,

academics, practitioners, journalists, and religious leaders for a one-day convening to discuss, assess, and evaluate the current international strategic nuclear environment.

The goals of the workshop were to:

- Revisit the logic, ethics, and normative weight of deterrence
- Evaluate the collapse of arms control
- Assess the future of non-proliferation—while accounting for the increasing demand for nuclear energy
- Create research questions that can animate and inform a more secure set of arrangements over the short and longer run
- Chart a path to reduction and stability, considering new factors such as artificial intelligence, and expansion of capabilities in cyberspace and outer space

Participants were asked to reflect on why complacency has emerged as an unexpected and difficult challenge, and what steps can be taken to address it. The results were both descriptive and prescriptive, sketching a new political reality and new paths to international peace and cooperation.

The workshop was convened under the Chatham House Rule. This report presents a high-level summary of key insights and takeaways from the convening. The views expressed herein do not necessarily represent those of the meeting participants, The Harry Frank Guggenheim Foundation, or Carnegie Council.

Overview: Deterrence, Arms Control, and Non-Proliferation

What happened to the days when treaties were signed, and weapons were destroyed?

The discovery and use of humankind's most deadly weapon, the atomic bomb, was followed by decades of treaties, scholarship, social movements, and public discussion on who should have these weapons, and how, and in what manner (if ever) these weapons ought to be deployed, stockpiled, and tested.

This report is not a comprehensive accounting of the history of nuclear debates and corresponding diplomacy. Rather, it evaluates the current international strategic nuclear environment and national strategic nuclear environment and identifies a distinct normative shift—nuclear complacency—in which the robust scholarship, activism, and diplomacy of the past 80 years have been replaced by public indifference, political de-prioritization, and military buildup of these weapons.

Recent conflicts in Ukraine-Russia and India-Pakistan highlight the precarity of the nuclear environment. Here we see nuclear-armed states engaged in direct conflict amid decades of strained relations. In both cases there have been many tense days and the threat of nuclear escalation has loomed. As bloody as these hostilities have been, they have, fortunately, remained conventional and nuclear weapons have yet to be used; but these conflicts highlight the volatility of the moment.

This report evaluates the current international strategic nuclear environment and **identifies a distinct normative shift—nuclear complacency**—in which the robust scholarship, activism, and diplomacy of the past 80 years have been replaced by public indifference, political de-prioritization, and military buildup of these weapons.

Against this background, the biggest nuclear powers—the United States, Russia, and China—appear to be entering into a new arms race. At the beginning of his second term, President Donald Trump expressed a desire to restart nuclear arms control talks with Russia and China as part of an overall effort to cut defense budgets in half. But as of this writing, no new major efforts have been undertaken by the U.S. nor have structures been put in place to advance this agenda. If anything, leadership in Washington, Moscow, and Beijing promise policies that promote greater competition with little or no restraint in the use of military force. In recent months, more time, attention, and money have been spent on military parades than arms control.

With Russia's [departure from New START](#) (Strategic Arms Limitations Treaty) after its invasion of Ukraine, there are currently no treaties limiting the numbers of strategic nuclear weapons. As of today, there is no nuclear ceiling—and worse, there is no plan to establish one.



Strategic Nuclear Arms Control Agreements by the U.S. and Russia

Treaty Name	Terms	Status
New START	Limit each to 1,550 strategic nuclear warheads deployed on 700 strategic delivery systems & limit deployed and nondeployed launchers to 800	2023 Russia suspended participation
Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty (SORT)	Reduce deployed strategic arsenals to 1,700-2,200 warheads each	Expired in 2011
START III	Reduce deployed strategic warheads to 2,000-2,500	Never Negotiated
START II	Reduce deployed strategic arsenals to 3,000-3,500 warheads & ban destabilizing multiple-warhead land-based missiles	Never Entered into Force
Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START I)	Reduce deployed strategic arsenals to 1,600 delivery vehicles, carrying no more than 6,000 warheads	Expired 2009

Source: “[U.S.-Russian Nuclear Arms Control Agreements at a Glance](#),” Arms Control Association
 Currently there are no comprehensive strategic nuclear arms control treaties between the U.S. and China

These are startling developments, confirming that the strategic nuclear environment is changing fast, with little concern for the possible mass violence that a new nuclear buildup could unleash.

Nuclear complacency represents a marked change from the past.

After the madness of Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD) and the dash for atomic and nuclear capabilities in the early Cold War, arms control agreements, such as the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, the Non-Proliferation Treaty, Strategic Arms Limitations Treaties, and other similar efforts tempered U.S.-Soviet competition along the way.

But it was not until the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991 that the need for an endless arms race seemed to be over. Landmark treaties like START I significantly reduced nuclear stockpiles and lowered the threat of nuclear war.

As time went by and Cold War leaders began to retire from active duty, some wanted to make sure their experience in managing nuclear weapons would yield lessons learned. Four of the most senior U.S. policymakers—former Secretaries of State Henry Kissinger and George Shultz, former Secretary of Defense William Perry, and former Senator Sam Nunn—weighed in heavily. It was time, they said, to think seriously about nuclear abolition. They made their case, famously, in a 2007 *Wall Street Journal* op-ed titled “A World Free of Nuclear Weapons.”

The “four horsemen of the nuclear apocalypse,” as *Time* magazine called them, argued that the massive destructive capacity of nuclear weapons rendered them unusable. Central to their argument was that the bipolar “balance of terror” could no longer be assumed as the Soviet Union dissolved and “the growing number of nations with nuclear arms and differing motives, aims, and ambitions, pose(d) very high and unpredictable risks and increased instability.”

As Kissinger, Shultz, Perry, and Nunn knew better than most, the bane of national security is instability. As a result, they worked hard on arms control. By the time the New START agreement went into force in 2011, numbers had been reduced by tens of thousands, stabilizing at around 15,000 worldwide.

The first 80 years of the nuclear world were far from perfect. But these years were punctuated by occasional breakthroughs. There were moments when treaties were signed, weapons were destroyed, and the future looked calmer and brighter.

Now, the multilateral and bilateral disarmament agreements have been dismantled. Political actors appear apathetic while policy shifts support a ratcheting up rather than a winding down of weapons of mass violence. How did we get here? And what accounts for the complacent acceptance of a new arms race?

”**“Our moral obligation to ourselves and to future generations is to avoid large risks now—of either war or the sacrifice of freedoms—and to try to ensure future choices by trying to gradually reduce our reliance on nuclear weapons whenever we can do so without unacceptably increasing current risks.”**

Joseph Nye, writing for Ethics & International Affairs with “Nuclear Ethics Revisited” (2023)

Session 1: Is This the End of Extended Deterrence?

What is distinct about this moment in 2025?

The workshop opened with a pointed provocation: Extended deterrence, as an organizing principle and cornerstone of the international system, is dead.

To begin the conversation, one participant argued, and many agreed, that the public should have been concerned about the state of extended deterrence long before 2025. The U.S. commitment to both nuclear and conventional deterrence has been receding for some time, and it is only now that a heightened sense of urgency can be seen, especially in Europe, [with increased military spending](#) and cooperation. Multiple participants pointed to remarks by Vice President JD Vance at the February 2025 Munich Security Conference as a watershed moment, in terms of Europeans recognizing the reality of changing U.S. commitments and the need for self-reliance on the continent.

Speaking from the European perspective, one participant noted, and many others agreed, that politicians are modeling for at least 12 years of this type of U.S. leadership. The America First policy of the current administration is not going away.

Most detrimental to the principle of extended deterrence is the credibility of the commitment. Multiple participants emphasized the question of political will. Leadership is about making the case to people and making a clear assessment that extended deterrence is worth investing in. With the current U.S. administration's commitments, alliances, and values unclear, extended deterrence dies. Some viewed world leaders as actively dismantling extended deterrence versus passively being noncommittal. Though one participant did offer a counterpoint that "promises to protect" have always been purely speculative.

When the principles and promises of extended deterrence were first established in the 1940s, the global distribution of power was different. Today, both China and Europe hold significantly more influence, which changes the nuclear equation.

This changing balance of power is the most important element in understanding the current environment and whether extended deterrence is dead, dying, or alive. In addition to the balance of power, one participant noted the deep structural changes to the conditions of American life. Politics and culture in America have been transformed dramatically by polarization and the rejection of social solidarity.

Around the table there was further debate on whether the death of extended deterrence is a negative outcome. A participant argued that the presidency of Donald Trump could be a larger representation of unsustainable overseas commitments. A policy of restraint, not absolute isolationism, could reduce casualties in conflict.

Others disagreed with this point, citing the well-known [debate](#) between Professors Scott Sagan and Kenneth Waltz. In a counterpoint to increasing the number of nuclear states, Sagan, as summarized by workshop participants, contends that the very process of increasing the number of nuclear states will be destabilizing and filled with increased risk.

Conversation then returned to the fundamental problem of commitment. Extended deterrence, as originally conceived, included NATO's [Article 5](#) on collective defense which filled a strategic gap and strengthened political alliances. Alliance and protection were then extended to bilateral agreements with Japan and South Korea. As one participant outlined, the case for additional extension in the example of Taiwan further blurs commitments. What is unique about this moment, as argued by the participant, is the frequency and unpredictability with which the current U.S. administration's commitments change.

“The part of extended deterrence that is the most problematic now is the credibility of the commitment.” – *Workshop participant*



Session 2: What Happened to Arms Control?

Can arms control be revived? Or does it need to be reinvented?

Building on insights from the earlier conversation, the second session aimed to answer the question: What happened to arms control?

To start, there was consensus that the nuclear arms control architecture is in pieces with few agreements left standing. The focus of discussion then turned to identifying reasons why the once robust structure of treaties was dismantled and discussing how it can be rebuilt. Two participants led interventions to answer this prompt and guide the conversation.

One participant underlined the key point that the marker for success, the treaties of the 1990s, is too high. Many members of the public and politicians look to the post-Cold War period of 1994-2010 as the ideal but the world has changed. The number of treaties during this period also led many to believe that the nuclear question was solved.

Another participant noted that, in addition, the bilateral agreements of the early years cannot be replicated as power dynamics among nuclear states are much more complex today. For arms control to be robust, the participant argued, the agreements ought to reflect an equality of standing among the competitors, in contrast to the ones from the 1990s when the USSR had recently collapsed.

In rethinking arms control for the conditions of today, participants referenced ideas from scholar Mallory Stewart’s [“Are Treaties Always Necessary?”](#) Multiple participants agreed that successful arms control does not always need to be a legally binding treaty. There have been examples of political agreements that reduce nuclear buildup with reputational cost for states as insurance. The challenge, as seen with the [Iran nuclear deal](#), is future-proofing non-legally binding agreements. Looking beyond consensus-based entities, though, could expand the arms control architecture to reestablish moderation and dissuade proliferation.

Reimagining could also include delinking arms control from expectations of numerical reductions. Working on substance rather than numbers, one participant pointed out, can also be effective. There is a need to create different avenues to establish norms and patterns of behavior. Engaging with people’s sense of morality and their values system, another participant noted, would strengthen the appeal. The [Nuclear Security Summits](#) offered a different form of non-legally binding or consensus-based arms control architecture. These summits, in addition, allowed for more direct engagement with the private sector and helped give political impetus to leaders.

Another factor identified as contributing to the weakness of the current arms control structure is the absence of public pressure. Participants agreed with the moderator’s assessment that a sense of urgency is missing. This complacency is driven by leaders seeing little political value in prioritizing arms control. In fact, a participant specified, leaders in Washington, rather than being complacent, are looking to build up the nuclear stockpile.

□

The lack of public attention to nuclear arms control is unsurprising, argued several participants, given the inundation of world crises: climate change, democratic backsliding, prolonged and protracted wars, etc. The public is asked to care about all these other issues, and as a result, arms control becomes difficult to prioritize. One participant offered the metaphor of a meteor to describe the arms control problem; nuclear weapons are an impending threat and, like meteors, are out of sight and if one hits, it will be impossible to escape the fallout. Worrying about nuclear weapons, then, feels pointless.

”

“If you want any hope, it’s that the biggest arms control victories have come out of periods of crisis and instability. And we are heading into a period of potential crisis and instability.”

– Workshop participant

One participant cited a recent [study](#) by the Nuclear Threat Initiative and Ploughshares, which found that a supermajority of Americans do care about nuclear weapons and support forms of arms control. Echoing the points made before, the participant summarized that the key missing component to further public action is a sense of agency; the public needs to be empowered to reaffirm that they can do something about reducing the nuclear threat. The fact that the number of nuclear weapons has been reduced before serves as an important reminder.

The second intervention of the session raised another critical, frequently asked question: Can the world get rid of nuclear weapons? The participant shared that often the questioner is looking for a response in the negative to absolve one’s responsibility for finding a solution. Instead, solutions for arms control ought to be oriented around time limits and conditions. If the time scale were, for example, getting rid of nuclear weapons in the next 80 years, one can start backwards planning. The same can be said, the participant argued, for treaties. On the question of time, the moderator emphasized the framing for the workshop itself, noting that the leaders of the original arms control architecture are gone and that there is a gap and a space for innovative ideas.

Despite the current state of arms control there is reason for hope, several participants argued. The foundational arms control agreements sprung from periods of crisis and instability. The historic example of the [Cuban Missile Crisis](#) actively mobilized deeper storytelling about restraint, negotiation, and arms control that were mythologized from that event. When the next moment of nuclear crisis arises, there needs to be immediate capture of change of momentum. The [near-nuclear catastrophe](#) and real nuclear threat during the invasion of Ukraine in 2022 or the [North Korean missile crisis of 2017](#) were examples of the arms control community not being ready to capture attention and offer solutions. Though there have been missed opportunities, there is still time to retell these stories and the lessons learned. By telling a deeper account about the imperative for arms control there is a chance to reengage the public.

Session 3: What is the Future of the Non-Proliferation Regime?

Is the regime dead, dying, or alive?

The following session examined the third fundamental pillar of nuclear diplomacy and limitation: non-proliferation. The conversation opened again with two interventions from participants to frame and guide the conversation.

The opening remarks responded directly to the prompt categorizing the non-proliferation regime as being deliberately manipulated and offered insight into this distortion. Non-proliferation, the participant contended, is no longer a unifying priority for the [five permanent members](#) of the United Nations Security Council. The de-prioritization of non-proliferation stands in stark contrast to the diplomacy and reduction of the 1990s and early 2000s. Instead, states are increasingly making exceptions to long-held non-proliferation norms and using the rationalization of national security to justify these actions. The participant pointed to [Russia's support of North Korea's nuclear program](#) as a prime example of the degradation of accountability for non-proliferation violations. Norms have eroded on both sides, as seen with the [United States offering Saudi Arabia technical assistance](#) with nuclear enrichment.

The normative and geostrategic shift away from non-proliferation underlines the need for leadership, another participant added. Looking specifically at the current U.S. presidential administration, one participant remarked, progress on non-proliferation cannot be made unless there is a president who is committed to some version of arms control and to some support for the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT). Leadership could also come from the United States Congress, but it takes time to build expertise, and with the current state of polarization, leaders cannot waste time on abstract issues.

In addition to degradation of the non-proliferation regime, the agreements that do exist may also need to be reworked. One participant pointed to the transactional nature of the bargains pursued by the United States to address proliferation threats. Those deals, though, are held to a transformational standard. The example raised again was of the Iran nuclear deal, or the [Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action](#), which demonstrated the disconnect between transactional and transformational goals. The deal was intended to address nuclear risk but the standard it was judged against was modifying Iran's behavior in the region. Again, this deal underlines the problem of future-proofing any new arrangement given the changing geopolitics of the region.

The non-proliferation risk today also has a fresh look, both on the technical and political levels, a participant contended. Traditionally, the non-proliferation regime was meant to disincentivize states from developing covert nuclear programs. Now states increasingly move closer to the threshold of nuclear weapons while remaining with the appearance of being in good standing. As another participant agreed, nuclear enrichment is no longer contingent upon technical or financial resources as most states now have the scientific and monetary capabilities to develop nuclear weapons. The [recent actions of South Korea](#) offer an example of a state teetering on the threshold. The country has eliminated the technical barriers to nuclear weapons without triggering any of the accountability mechanisms for violating the NPT.

The participant continued that the technical threshold question leads to political risks for the non-proliferation regime. Historically, outlier countries, those working against NPT norms, were easy to isolate. The typical tools of non-proliferation are more effective in isolated scenarios. The act of pushing the nuclear thresholds, as seen in South Korea, raises deep questions on accountability; would the United States be willing to sanction South Korea to the same extent that it has sanctioned rogue countries like Iran or North Korea?

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The second intervention focused more on the treaty itself. Recalling the themes from the first session, the participant argued that European allies should not be surprised that the NPT is under strain. Another participant added that there were clear reasons why Europe was not focused on nuclear non-proliferation, pointing to the migrant crisis, Brexit, and the COVID-19 pandemic.

The NPT process is fundamentally stuck, argued a participant. The process, as it stands now, is consensus-based with the meetings yielding little time for real negotiation, often causing lowest common denominator results. Instead of focusing on long-range outcomes at the NPT Review Conferences, for example, dialogue should be forward-thinking, looking at impact 10 to 20 years hence and planning backward from there. These reform ideas should be part of a broader modernization of multilateral diplomacy.

Reframing successful non-proliferation deals to include deep listening to find potential alignment will be key to moving forward and reducing numbers. Promoting deep listening and democratizing the discussion, the participant emphasized, will help to identify overlapping interests, rather than ideological positioning, and to have people engage in joint problem solving.

Another participant lamented that a reinvigorated multilateral diplomacy is not representative of the world as it is now. Others in the room agreed, emphasizing that the NPT is not irrelevant but other mechanisms are needed to address today's challenges and bring in experts from other fields to find solutions.

Less formal tools, such as commitments or pledges, could be viable options for reducing nuclear proliferation. Nuclear summits were raised again as an example of an alternative high-level, non-proliferation mechanism that allows a coalition of the willing to focus on specific interests that affected them. Commitments and pledges can help these discussions move beyond the status quo, which then create and build norms that bring along more reluctant states.

Overall, the participant argued, there is a need to locate the nuclear discussion within the broader conversation about great global challenges, including climate change, human rights, and public health. Making the discussion around nuclear non-proliferation more encompassing will help identify common interests and linkages. There was wide agreement within the group that putting the nuclear threat in the box of big global challenges is essential.

With the theme of adding the nuclear question to the basket of global catastrophic scenarios, the moderator raised the example of the [Bulletin of Atomic Scientists' Doomsday Clock](#), a well-known tool used to measure impending nuclear catastrophe. The clock newly incorporates climate change into its countdown calculation. This is a prime example of a more multi-disciplinary approach to the nuclear problem.

One participant raised the question about what is lost in including climate, arguing that the metaphor of a clock does not work well for the climate crisis but works better for nuclear peril, as the number of warheads rises and falls. Nuclear proliferation can seem like a fixable, human problem, while climate can feel existential and out of the control of humans. Another participant responded that the inclusion of climate in the Doomsday Clock is reflective of the mandate to address Pandora's box of modern science, expanded to include AI threats and pandemics.

Lumping nuclear challenges with other issues like climate change increases salience. Multiple participants linked this to the concept of a polycrisis, or the convergence of multiple crises that when combined compound each other. By connecting nuclear risk to issues that communities view as existential threats, the public is more likely to pressure leaders to act. An example illustrated climate change as a driver of instability which can then cause the use of nuclear weapons. Alternatively, one could underline the climate effects of using nuclear weapons. The connection helps to identify a constituency base and push discrete action.

“How do we design processes that allow for countries to engage in deep listening with each other so that they can identify where are the interests, where are the values, and where is there potential for alignment?”

- *Workshop participant*

Session 4: What Ought to be Done?

A new research agenda? New thought leadership for the policy community? Community building? New educational resources for expert and general audiences?

With the first three sessions taking stock of the current state of nuclear complacency, the final prompt centered on forward-facing solutions. The last session offered a collaborative exchange of ideas to address the problems identified.

The first intervention summarized the major challenges facing nuclear diplomacy, disarmament, and non-proliferation. The first challenge is the current geopolitical environment which is unfavorable to negotiations not only between the traditional nuclear powers but also including China. The second challenge is a public which is not engaged in the nuclear issue as compared to previous generations. The third challenge, as summarized by the participant, is the technological change in conventional weaponry which will impact the future of nuclear escalation.

On the third point, several participants offered ideas about the changing technology of conventional systems. One participant suggested that outer space, particularly the low-Earth orbit satellite networks being developed for command and control, ought to

be part of the nuclear conversation. This would mean including non-state and commercial actors in these discussions, as these entities are significant players in outer space.

Related to this theme, another participant mentioned the wide concern about AI and its use for nuclear command and control. This participant contended, though, that the most important problem with AI will be its impact on escalation. Large language models (LLMs) are trained on data, namely events in recorded history which are full of examples in which tensions and the use of force escalated. The participant cited a [study](#) at Stanford University's Institute for Human-Centered Artificial Intelligence showing that LLMs have a bias toward escalation. In war-game scenarios the models privileged *the nuclear option* rather than arms control agreements. Therefore, it will be vital to give practitioners methods to recognize this bias.

Another participant added that a recent article from Carnegie Council, “[Risking Escalation for the Sake of Efficiency: Ethical Implications of AI Decision-Making in Conflicts](#),” also underscores the tradeoffs and diffusion of responsibility in using AI in warfare. To further this point, a third participant underlined that AI only looks backward and does not have the imagination for the kind of problem-solving needed for nuclear diplomacy. There was wide agreement amongst participants that much of the research on nuclear issues needs to consider technology and conventional weapons over a 10- to 20-year timeline.

Other solutions offered by participants focused on funding. Many in the workshop contended that the field of nuclear deterrence, disarmament, and non-proliferation is underfunded, siloed, and complacent with no formal mechanisms for cooperation, coordination, or co-funding. Additional participants agreed, pointing to the divide between academics and advocates, and entrenched debates based on ideological positioning and deterrence vs. disarmament, rather than solution finding. Therefore, stronger collaboration among funders is needed, as well as allowing space and dialogue for the next generation of new thinkers to solve the challenges of today. Amplified transparency and community building will increase chances of being impactful. Collaborative resources, as referenced by participants, include the Arms Control Association's [calendar of events](#) and the Outrider Foundation's [Nuclear Expert Source List](#).

On public engagement, it was widely agreed among participants that there is a need for greater support of media and multimedia storytelling. The [historic example](#) of the TV movie *The Day After* in 1983 and its effect on President Ronald Reagan illustrates, one participant agreed, the influence media can have on how the public perceives the nuclear threat. Climate catastrophes, such as ozone layer depletion, can offer examples on how to engage the public on a global crisis. The key, one participant emphasized, is that there needs to be a perceptible result, the issue must be personal, and one needs to provide practical solutions for the public, so they know how to react. Another participant added that instead of framing the issue as waking up the public, it might be better to use the metaphor of public enlistment or enrollment on the nuclear problem.

A concluding idea offered by participants particularly salient to Carnegie Council was the need to reinject ethics into the nuclear policy conversations. One participant concluded that using the framing from religious traditions or secular ethics could push conversations forward. This framing represents a gap in the policy space. Another participant underscored the importance of starting with empirical reality as the foundation before moving to the normative analysis. Michael Walzer's [Just and Unjust Wars](#) and works by ethicist Paul Ramsey offer robust examples of scholarship on ethics and strategy. Another participant pointed to the classic question posed to high schoolers in the United States about whether to drop the bomb in World War II. The framing on this question creates a falsely simplistic and bifurcated just war theory for the use of violence against civilians; as an aside, another participant clarified that Walzer makes an exception for the use of the bomb in the case of supreme emergency. A reframing of this question to include multiple and varied answers is key.

”**“Can we think about how we’re injecting questions of morality and ethics into policy conversations? And that to me seems to be a gap right there.”** – *Workshop participant*

Conclusion

The looming end of extended deterrence combined with the lack of serious arms control efforts and a faltering NPT structure suggests great uncertainty for world order.

Complacency around these issues is as alarming as the nuclear threat itself. The confluence of the changing balance of power internationally and the polarization of politics domestically yields a curious acceptance of an ever-worsening status quo.

What will it take to shake leaders and the public into action? In the past, it took leaders who recognized the opportunities presented by new power arrangements (as in the end of the Cold War), and a public awakened by politicians, public intellectuals, and popular culture to the real possibility of nuclear annihilation.

Will we await the next near miss, or catastrophe? This is the challenge of complacency. As the participants in this convening pointed out, arms control and weapons reductions have been possible in the past. The impediments to a better, more stable future are not scientific and technical but rather political and ethical.

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Joel Rosenthal is president of Carnegie Council for Ethics in International Affairs. As a nonprofit leader, scholar, and teacher he works to empower ethical action, with a particular focus on U.S. foreign policy, issues of war and peace, human rights, and pluralism. At Carnegie Council, Rosenthal leads a team that identifies critical ethical issues, convenes experts, and produces agenda-setting resources to educate and activate communities globally. Rosenthal is editor-in-chief of the *Ethics & International Affairs* journal published by Cambridge University Press. His first book *Righteous Realists* is an examination of the political realists who shaped post-WWII America in the nuclear age, including Hans Morgenthau, Reinhold Niebuhr, and George Kennan. His current writing and commentary can be found at the President's Desk. Rosenthal is the recipient of numerous awards including the Distinguished Scholar Award from the International Studies Association for his lifetime achievement in international studies and an Honorary Degree of Doctor of Social Science from the University of Edinburgh. He received his Ph.D. from Yale University and BA from Harvard University.

Appendix: Related Readings and Resources

[“The Challenge of Peace: God’s Promise and Our Response,”](#) National Conference of Catholic Bishops, May 3, 1983

[“The Ethics of Choosing Deterrence,”](#) Sharon Weiner, *Ethics & International Affairs*, April 2023

[“Global Nuclear Stockpiles,”](#) Ploughshares, October 2025 (last accessed)

[“Just and Unjust Nuclear Deterrence,”](#) Scott Sagan, *Ethics & International Affairs*, April 2023

[“The Myth of ‘Just’ Nuclear Deterrence: Time for a New Strategy to Protect Humanity from Existential Nuclear Risk,”](#) Joan Rohlfing, *Ethics & International Affairs*, April 2023

[“Nuclear Bomb Blast Simulator,”](#) Outrider, October 2025 (last accessed)

[“Nuclear Ethics Revisited,”](#) Joseph Nye, *Ethics & International Affairs*, April 2023

[“Risking Escalation for the Sake of Efficiency: Ethical Implications of AI Decision-Making in Conflicts,”](#) Max Lamparth, Carnegie Council, July 30, 2024

[“Walking a fraying nuclear tightrope,”](#) Joel Rosenthal, *Politico*, September 25, 2024

[“An Unreliable America Means More Countries Want the Bomb,”](#) Debak Das & Rachel A. Epstein (University of Denver), *Foreign Policy*, March 14, 2025

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