

End the insanity: For nuclear disarmament and global demilitarization

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While the perils of climate breakdown and Artificial Intelligence garner and even monopolize attention today, humanity and its leaders neglect addressing other formidable dangers – notably, nuclear war and militarism more broadly. Not only is the existential threat of nuclear war real and pressing, but, at this historical juncture of multiple planetary crises, humanity cannot afford investing in any aspect of the military machine. Here, the authors press for the collective recognition of the imperative of nuclear disarmament and of the abolition of all war and its material and ideational infrastructures.

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Dedicated to Daniel Ellsberg, in loving memory.¹

No one believed Katrina would happen before Katrina happened. No one believed Fukushima would happen before Fukushima happened. Virtually no one believes a nuclear war will happen before it happens. But a nuclear war happening is not a disaster: it is a holocaust. Nuclear war must be averted, and most countries have already taken steps to opt out of nuclear madness. However, nine nation-states cling to their nuclear arsenals, throwing the planet and all its beings into devastation's way.

In 1946, Albert Einstein wrote that “the unleashed power of the atom has changed everything save our modes of thinking and we thus drift toward unparalleled catastrophe”. What dysfunctional modes of thinking are most pertinent in this regard? First, denial that nuclear war is possible. Second, the

wishful thinking that since a nuclear war has not yet happened, it will continue to not happen in the future. Third, blaming the foe – Americans, Russians, Chinese, Islamists, and so forth – who ‘force’ us (whoever ‘us’ is) to need weapons of mass destruction. Fourth, that nuclear weapons keep us safe. Finally, there’s the specious notion that a limited nuclear war is feasible and ‘life will go on’ after it’s over. Routing out these murky assumptions, humanity must unite to pre-empt nuclear war today through the wisdom of foresight, the clear understanding of its consequences and a realistic expectation of our own agency.

Existential threats

It is in the nature of humans to think in alignment with others, be it one’s in-group or cultural trends at large. We tend to conform to social grooves of thought and concern, streaming our own voices into pre-set channels. Perhaps no concern has a bigger grip on lay citizens and scientists alike than global heating. With solid reason: anyone paying attention to climate change science and weather-related upheavals sees the writing on the wall. The planet’s energy balance is skewing catastrophically and the climate is changing too rapidly for nonhumans and humans to have time to adjust (Ripple *et al.*, 2020).

Despite a real climate emergency, a distortion of vision occurs when all eyes focus on one existential threat. Climate breakdown is narrowly framed as *the* problem, bypassing its root cause, which is driving equally grave yet regularly side-lined emergencies. The root cause of today’s polycrisis is the relentless growth of the human enterprise (Steffen *et al.*, 2015). Human expansionism has bulldozed the Earth through economic overproduction and consumerism, human population growth, the explosive rise of the *über*-wealthy and the global middle class, ecosystem takeover for food production, skyrocketing ‘livestock’ numbers, all manner of contaminants and the sprawl of the technosphere that now weighs more than all living things. Earth’s climate and biodiversity systems are shattering while the world is increasingly contaminated from this multiscale onslaught.

The fixation on climate breakdown as *the* problem skirts scrutinizing its root cause and marginalizes equally formidable crises. Four existential threats (that we know about with certainty) menace life: global heating, biodiversity collapse, worldwide toxification and nuclear war. While the breakdown of climate, biodiversity, and planetary health are occurring rapidly on a geological timescale, all three would be trumped by a nuclear confrontation that can start on a morning and be over by the afternoon (Hughes, 2023). Nuclear war (and militarism, to widen the focus) is the existential threat *par excellence*.

Groupthink also distorts vision by inclining people to jump on bandwagons of collective fixations. We are witnessing this with Artificial Intelligence (AI), heralded variously as a benevolent technological tool, usher of the Singularity, harbinger of unimaginable calamities and even a portal through which God’s Adversary will reign (Ribeiro, 2022; McKibben, 2019; Kingsnorth, 2023). Two commentators, keen to underscore the unprecedented dangers posed by this latest technological juggernaut, compare AI to nuclear weapons: “Nukes don’t

make stronger nukes,” they state. “But AIs make stronger AIs” (Harris and Raskin, 2023). This exemplifies how fixating on the unknowns of cutting-edge technologies can blindside us to perils of more familiar ones. The comparison between AI and nuclear weapons – as a device to foreground AI’s astronomical power – is misleading. Nukes do not need to be capable of making stronger nukes: Detonating just a fraction of the currently existing global arsenal would be endgame.

The point of resisting the tendency to circle the wagons around single issues (like climate change or AI) is that we become distracted from other fateful things that are emotionally repellent or less sci-fi worthy: for example, the consequences of deteriorating planetary health from massive pollution by fertilizers, herbicides, biocides, garbage, e-waste, sewage, factory-farm sludge, mining tailings, pharmaceutical waste, plastic, lost fishing gear and industrial chemicals. The degradation of Earth’s epidemiological environment is brewing disease conditions for all beings, including boosting human chronic and infectious illness. Is the collapse of planetary health less ominous than the unfurling of AI – or just less glamorous?

The threat of nuclear war

Our specific intention is to highlight how focus on singular issues may be diverting us from pondering *war*, and nuclear war in particular. Aside from select news outlets and activist groups, this existential threat is not yet in collective view. There are indications this may be changing, a salutary turn we seek to reinforce (*e.g.* Krieger, 2018; International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War, 2023).

Nuclear war has had its sci-fi heyday of (by now) hackneyed narratives of billowing mushroom clouds always on some distant horizon. The blockbuster movie *Oppenheimer* has kept the chattering classes busy, while avoiding explicit images of the horrors unleashed at Hiroshima and Nagasaki. If contemplating nuclear war generates ‘pre-traumatic stress disorder’, we seem to cope with our fears by projecting them onto fictions and movies, combined with selective inattention.

Unless one is in it, conventional warfare appears as a quotidian affair – a reality-TV spectacle of battles, bombings, villains, heroes, intrigues and the like. War is what few want to think about deeply or contest. “Give Peace a Chance” sounds dated if not sentimental. We gaze upon war with jaded eyes, with a shiver down the spine or a shrug of the shoulders at ‘incorrigible human nature’. Regarding *nuclear war*, if we think about it at all, we are prone to cross our fingers and hope that reason will prevail.

But if reason is failing to address climate change (where reason should patently carry the day) and is also failing to slow down and regulate AI (urgently called for), then why do we think that human reason will succeed at preventing nuclear war? And why do we think that reason is necessarily relevant? Just as likely as some ‘level-headed’ decision-maker setting off doomsday (to pre-empt a first strike or in deluded hopes of winning), nuclear war could be triggered by *no* decision-maker (computer error or

false alarm) or by a madman capable of crossing the Rubicon that should never be crossed.

The moment this event occurs would be when all other existential woes (and delights) become moot. Without further ado, a nuclear holocaust will break the climate, cause mass extinction and induce global radioactive toxification for the long haul (Turco *et al.*, 1983; Robock and Toon, 2012; Scouras *et al.*, 2023). People who remain alive after nuclear immolation will be agonizing over survival and completely uninterested in what Artificial Intelligence might have to say on the topic of nihilism.

Bottom line: no matter how jaded we are about war and how much we hope it will not happen (or happen only on our news feed), we must put our collective thinking cap on and think wide-awake about war – the whole kit and caboodle.

The dismissal of nuclear war, and billions of people sleepwalking toward annihilation, is not only the product of unexamined assumptions but also of governmental propaganda falling on receptive ears. Human beings can only imagine limited amounts of horror. We believe in the tenacity of our everyday worlds and slip our fears into nightmares we forget upon awakening. It is unbearably painful to think of the deaths of loved ones, but it is also searing to contemplate mass fatalities; as a result, many people simply avoid doing so.

The planet has come terrifyingly close to nuclear war at least 33 times since 1950, due to computer errors, human malfeasance or carelessness, and failed communication, all of which have been documented (see <https://is.gd/l9xc3e>). Some of us recall the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962, probably the closest humanity has come to nuclear conflict. One of the results was the Atmospheric Test Ban Treaty signed in Moscow in 1963, which has benefited all Earthlings (Alvarez and Mangano, 2023). Yet the non-visibility of nukes has also given a sinister spin to the adage ‘out of sight, out of mind’, fostering an illusory surety about the absence of threat. The atmospheric test by the United States on 17 July 1962 was the last time people could watch a nuclear explosion in the atmosphere.

The pro-nuclear political and military establishment holds that, however dire the consequences of their potential use, nuclear weapons deter adversaries and that their deterrence utility has been demonstrated. To be sure, all out nuclear war has not happened: this could well be because there was no issue sufficiently grave to trigger it, no leader foolish enough to instigate it or simply due to luck, as former US Secretary of Defense Robert MacNamara believed (Blight and Lang, 2017). More pointedly, logic suggests a problem in congratulating nuclear weapons for the fact that we have not blown ourselves up with them: Had we done so, we wouldn’t be around to thank them. The logic that nuclear weapons provide deterrence parallels the sick joke of the person falling from the Empire State Building, exulting en route “So far, so good!”. The clearest perspective on nuclear policy rationalizations was offered by Daniel Ellsberg: “What is missing is the recognition that what is being discussed is dizzyingly insane and immoral” (quoted in Hughes, 2023).

What is striking is the number and kind of wars that nuclear deterrence has *failed* to prevent. Nuclear-armed states have engaged in numerous wars with

conventionally armed countries; in many cases, the latter have won. Moreover, states lacking nuclear weapons have not been deterred from attacking nuclear-armed opponents: for example, China's incursion against US forces in Korea in 1950, Argentina's attack on the Falkland Islands / Malvinas in 1982, and Iraq's lobbing missiles against Israel in 1991. In short, the myth of nuclear deterrence conveys great risk and no benefit (Barash, 2020).

The insanity of the military machine

During the last decade, global military investments have been eerily on the rise, including military budgets, arms production, expansion of autonomous weapons systems and nuclear warhead upgrades. According to the latest publication of the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, the world's nuclear-armed states "continue to modernize their nuclear arsenals and several deployed new nuclear-armed or nuclear-capable weapons systems in 2022". Their press release headline warns: "States invest in nuclear arsenals as geopolitical relations deteriorate" (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 2023). It's a sentence not to gloss over.

Why is the world – especially academic, media, political, environmental and spiritual leaders – paying virtually no attention? Do we feel so impotent before the military machine that we are unwilling to even think about it, let alone push for its abolition?

The military machine enjoys two dominant frames that serve it brilliantly: invisibility and normalization. As long as warfare is not conspicuous in the global arena (and wars are often made invisible if they occur 'peripherally'), all of warfare's prerequisites (budgets, corporate contracts, research, conscriptions, etc.) are not deemed knowledge-worthy developments. The military machine gets partially unveiled when a newsworthy war breaks out (as in Ukraine and Gaza), at which point war becomes normalized. In other words, when the military machine is unveiled (through war), it is immediately re-veiled by being processed for consumers through 'normal' and even exciting streams of reports on battles, strategies and other machinations.

We call for ending the conventional invisibility and normalization of the military machine. Organized warfare has always been irrational: No person in their right mind wants to die prematurely or to kill without grave cause. Warfare, moreover, has always been unjust: outsourced to *dispensable people* enrolled by force, enticed by pay or bullied by propaganda. War has also been unjust to uncountable and unmourned nonhumans forced into the terrors of battle – horses, dogs, elephants – or suffering and dying as bystanders (Nibert, 2013).

While historically war has been irrational and unjust, today it is full-blown insanity. For example, the price tag of the US military budget (the world's largest) is in the ballpark of one trillion US dollars a year. Yet not only should the United States come to terms with its dire national deficit, but a bill of one trillion dollars must be judged against the urgent demands and costs of climate breakdown, public healthcare, refugee crises, species extinctions, as well as education, pensions, family planning and other social services. Humanity must

loudly deplore the dissonance of allotting exorbitant resources to death technologies in this time of reckoning.

We can no longer afford the pseudo-normality of the military machine and its inevitable wars, nor find solace in nuclear deterrence. There are eight billion people on the planet, bustling to make ends meet amidst climate disasters and nature destruction. The basic resources humans need – arable land and freshwater – are maximally exploited and polluted. In this world-historical situation of looming scarcities, nation-states contend – with ludicrously bad manners – cheek to jowl as they have parcelled Earth up like a cookie-cutter. Hundreds of millions of people will be dislocated in this century by mega-fires, droughts, floods, sea-level rise, conflicts and other threats. Present circumstances have humanity, along with all Earthlings, perched on a pyre. A spark from any direction – the Middle East, South Asia, Russian borders, China, the Koreas, or elsewhere – can set off an inferno. It is therefore utterly irrational to maintain the military machine, never mind escalating it. The machine itself cannot perceive the spurious nature of its quest for ‘security’. The rest of us, however, know that our safety and well-being, and the lives of our nonhuman kin and future generations, are on the line.

Given that every large-scale Earth system is in crisis, how dare the global political military machine chug along with its demonic research, obscene budgets, armament trading, modernization of nuclear weapons and patriotic drivel? The immense waste of lives and resources, malfeasance in allotting taxpayer money, and Orwellian rhetoric of homeland security, motherland or fatherland glory, and global empire building, is a travesty. Life is imperilled. Humanity must look to what is *real* – the splendour and joy of living – which is being defiled under our jaundiced watch.

There’s never been a better time than now to jettison the military machine. The extreme precarity forecast by socio-ecological upheavals (Miller and Heinberg, 2023) offers the clearest backdrop of war’s obsolescence: We simply can no longer afford any war or preparation for war, even discounting World War III. We call for the global recognition of this slim historical window to abolish the military machine.

We understand that this sounds like a pipedream. But the abolition of slavery – an institution as ancient as militarism and deeply entangled with it – also once sounded like a pipedream. Ditto for the divine right of kings, duelling and apartheid. We are profoundly capable of recreating ourselves when human conscience lights up with understanding and an unambiguous mandate. War is neither a social nor a biological necessity – it is a millennia-old historical custom that prevailed through conquest and imitation. It can no longer continue without endless bloodshed, ruination of nature, perpetual cycles of trauma and hatred, and ultimately holocaust.

We must eliminate the military machine. The convoluted equation of the 21st century will be difficult enough to solve without it. We know that what is coming – regardless of sociocultural identity or economic status – is coming for all of us. We need to gather together to keep each other and all Earth’s

beings safe. That will be impossible so long as we tolerate the military machine and shelter it in invisibility and normalization.

Call to Action

We who love this planet, love life, and are astonished at the splendour of existence, rise against the military machine.

We call for immediate military de-escalation. All nations' military investments can be slashed by half for starters (Klein, 2019). Nations can, moreover, choose the path of complete demilitarization (Lipton and Barash, 2018). Freed resources must be repurposed toward education, family planning, healthcare, preventative medicine, law enforcement against child trafficking, child marriage, and child labour, enforcement against wildlife poaching and trafficking, universal basic income, meaningful employment, pensions, protected areas of nature, conservation projects, ecological restoration and regenerative agriculture. These endeavours will catch human and nonhuman worlds in safety nets, avert a mass extinction event, soften the blows of climate upheaval and start to undo Earth's contamination by agrochemical and industrial pollutants.

We celebrate the UN Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, signed by nearly half the world's countries in 2021, and urge all countries to join. Knowledge of this treaty should become widespread and act as a thorn in the side of the nuclear-armed states. Most especially, we single out the Big Three, the wannabe empires. Big Three, you should know what you look like from out here in the bleachers. You look like the Three Stooges auditioning for a Game of Thrones: neither funny nor entertaining, but preposterously unreal. The international community and its leaders (environmental, scientific, political, business, religious, academic) can join their voices to compel global nuclear disarmament. Research into modernizing nuclear weapons – and upgrading them with AI – must stop (see <https://is.gd/430pSL>).

We appeal to news media to break frame with business-as-usual journalism: cease reporting on war in the guise of 'dry facts', as spectacle, and in pseudo-moral idioms of 'bad guys' versus 'good guys'. Also cease the pseudo-morality of decrying 'war crimes' – as if war is not *the* crime and as if war is not the cause of war crimes. Free your thought and recognize the ringleaders of war – most especially the nuclear-armed ones – as forces holding us captive and threatening all life.

We call on conscientious objectors worldwide to refuse military summons. It's a question for all of us: which reality do we choose – ephemeral nationalistic divisions, illusions of security and power or timeless Earth unity? We should all jump ship from a system whose core identity has been conquest and militarism – for see, now, where it is taking us.

The advocacy movements for ecological sustainability, social justice and world peace need to unite for the realization of our common aim: to chart a new human history through substantially downscaling the human enterprise and reorienting it in harmony with Earth (Rees, 2023; Krieger, 2018; Hickel, 2021). Such a coalition for peace refuses all weapons: weapons of war, weapons of hate, weapons against plants, forests, and animals, and the weaponized

extraction of energy sources from Earth's crust and seabed. We call for a broad, grassroots Peace Movement that gathers to safeguard humanity, nonhumans and nature's places from the hardships here and coming.

Notes

¹ On Daniel Ellsberg's remarkable life, see Falk (2023).

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