

**The World has an Achilles Heel:**

**A Moral Argument that  
NATO should be Dismantled**



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Those who know something of Greek epics know of the hero Achilles, whose only mortal vulnerability was at the heel of his foot, the place where his mother held him while dipping him into the river Styx. Thus, by ‘Achilles heel’ one means *a site of mortal danger*. It is asserted here that the world has a site of mortal danger. That site is in Europe.

### **Some Context**

Europe showed itself to be such a site of mortal danger for the world during the twentieth century as it was the locus of the two world wars, the second world war in Europe ending with the defeat of Nazi Germany and the historically unprecedented Nazi genocide, and the war with Japan ending with the dreadful and entirely unnecessary atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki with an estimated loss of life for over 200,000 Japanese civilians from the blasts and sequelae such as acute radiation sickness.

Thus began the so-called “nuclear age” and the continued development of these weapons of mass destruction, along with proliferation of weapons systems that has continued since. For the year 2022, the Federation of American Scientists estimates there are now about 12,700 nuclear warheads stockpiled across nine nuclear weapons states (USA, Russia, China, France, UK, Israel, Pakistan, India, North Korea). The USA and Russia stockpile the majority of these weapons, with the American inventory estimated to be 5,428 warheads (with 1,644 deployed and 1,964 in reserve) and that of Russia estimated to be 5,977 warheads (1,588 deployed and 2,889 in reserve).

If one is a proponent of *Realpolitik* and balance-of-power politics, then one is likely to believe that nuclear weapons are essential for national security and, by extension, for international security, in which case one likely finds those numbers comforting. Indeed, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), Europe’s transatlantic military alliance

with the USA, has made it amply clear in its “Strategic Concept 2022” (para. 29) that, “The strategic nuclear forces of the Alliance, particularly those of the United States, are the supreme guarantee of the security of the Alliance.” In short, with Russia as its perceived enemy number one, NATO does not envision itself as progressing towards nuclear disarmament even as it moves to expand farther eastward with the addition of Sweden and Finland to its member states. Problematic with this imminent expansion is the Russian response; for, President Vladimir Putin vows to “mirror” any weapons systems moved into these two countries, thereby “upping the ante” on the presumed NATO security enhancements.

If one is a proponent of ethics in international affairs and an advocate of nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament, however, then the number of warheads in the global stockpile is alarming for the sobering fact that it portends the *nigh global genocide of humanity* were such weapons to be used. When the scientists of the Manhattan Project anticipated the design of thermonuclear weapons, they estimated that it would take 10 to 100 “supers” (hydrogen bombs) to destroy life on Earth as we know it. At that time, however, they anticipated such bombs would be delivered much as the atomic bombs were delivered, i.e., by air force bombers. They did not anticipate that the USA would develop and deploy intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) positioned in silos hardened against penetrating attack, with MIRVed (multiple independently targeted re-entry vehicles) warheads, or develop and deploy submarine launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs) almost all of which are MIRVed. The Manhattan Project scientists also did not anticipate American B52 and B-2A bombers carrying warheads with a yield from a low of 5 kilotons TNT to 1.2 megatons of TNT. One such as Robert Oppenheimer would likely be appalled that the yield of these weapons would approach the explosive values of 300+

kilotons of TNT or the 1.2 megatons of TNT—by far exceeding the explosive yield of “Little Boy” (~12-18 kilotons of TNT) dropped on Hiroshima or the yield of “Fat Man” (~18-23 kilotons of TNT) dropped on Nagasaki. The current explosive yield numbers tell us unmistakably of an incalculable global catastrophe if those weapons are ever used.

One recalls that the reputed *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists* has the “doomsday clock” set at a perilous *100 seconds to midnight*, signaling that global humanity stand “at doom’s doorstep.” Similarly, speaking on 01 August 2022 at the 10th Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) Review Conference held in New York, UN Secretary-General António Guterres warned that, “... humanity is just one misunderstanding, one miscalculation, away from nuclear annihilation.” Then, speaking at the 77th memorial of the bombing of Hiroshima on the 06 August, Guterres repeated these words but characterized the prospect of nuclear annihilation as “Armageddon,” a term well known in the Christian prophetic lexicon to mean the end of the world as we know it. These warnings are not to be ignored especially since there is no failsafe mechanism against misunderstanding, miscalculation, or launch decision error.

These warnings are neither to be taken lightly nor otherwise to be dismissed out of hand. The prospective use of nuclear weapons has once more entered the scene of the *Realpolitik* calculus consequent to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 and Russian President Putin’s threat to use such weapons if any country or NATO decided to intervene in defense of Ukraine. Thus, yet once again, Europe presents itself for all the world to see as a site of mortal danger for global humanity. The war for Ukraine remains ongoing, with the USA and European allies obviously seeking a military victory over Russia rather than pursuing a diplomatic solution to the armed conflict.

The rhetoric and posturing by American and European leaders make it clear that—as distinguished international law expert Richard A. Falk has observed in recent *Counterpunch* essays (29 April and 15 April)—there are multiple levels of war being waged, with few searching for a way to end the conflict without either protracted military engagement or probability of escalation and miscalculation.

Problematic since the end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the Soviet Union and its associated Warsaw Pact in 1991 is that Europe did not take the opportunity to dismantle NATO, thus to diminish the potential for armed conflict in Europe. The ongoing European experiment in regional governance, through the transition of the European Economic Community to the present European Union (EU), was designed to bring a lasting peace to the nation-states of Europe. And, indeed, as most observers of European politics would concur, the experiment has succeeded.

But, as the French philosopher Jacques Derrida asked many a time, “Whither Europe?” “What is its heading?” It does not know itself, unclear as to its identity, since Russia both is and is not a European power, depending on the historical time frame and varied criteria of assessment. Up until recent months, there has been reasonable hope that the EU would be a guarantee of a working peace system for Europe, thus to overcome the scourge of being a site for the onset of world war. However, since the end of the Cold War the USA continues to see itself as a global hegemon in a unipolar world, thus prepared to direct NATO as a military alliance having “out of area operations,” and even having some like former British Foreign Secretary Lizz Truss call for a “Global NATO.” Expansion of NATO military engagements worldwide promises excessive use of military force, likely and controversially contrary to international law generally, to the law of armed conflict, and to morality such as may

be articulated from the vantage of ethics in international affairs.

NATO's Article 5 stipulates the doctrine of collective defense against any aggressor state, a doctrine that would be amplified if carried over into a Global NATO since this would entail a commitment to collective use of both conventional and nuclear weapons. It is impossible to escape the fact that various American national security personnel have championed either a counterforce or a countervalue strategic defense doctrine, with George W. Bush advocating a doctrine of preemptive first strike rather than commit to a "no first use" policy and thus allow only for a retaliatory strike preparedness. A Global NATO would very likely heighten the prospect for a global nuclear catastrophe if this meant forward-basing such weapons systems, whether strategic or intermediate range, and merely intending to assure NATO (the USA in particular) its position as global hegemon as both Russia and China challenge American claims to a unipolar world political authority.

### **The Moral Argument**

The present conflict between Russia and Ukraine and the proxy war that conflict represents between NATO/USA and Russia calls for "thinking outside the box." The German philosopher Martin Heidegger once referred to the poetry of such poets as Rainer Maria Rilke and Friedrich Hölderlin, asking the question "What are poets for?" in a time of existential crisis. Hölderlin tells us in his poem *Patmos* that where the danger is there also is to be found the saving power. Heidegger referenced these words while writing on the plight of humanity in the face of the rule of planetary technology and the prospect of a thoroughly technocratic world order installed by sundry technologies that dominate and order the human condition. Those words offer a

salient counsel in the present crisis in Europe, sufficient for a moral argument that *NATO should be dismantled* as a necessary condition for both a diplomatic solution to the Russia-Ukraine conflict and to a sustainable peace in Europe that includes Russia's national security and avoids a global nuclear catastrophe. How might this work?

First of all, it is imperative that we understand, as both Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev understood, that a nuclear war *can never be won* and *should never be fought*. If one considers the criteria for a just war provided in the just war tradition, it is clear that a nuclear war cannot be fought in any way that satisfies the criteria of just war theory, including here the *jus ad bellum* (the right to go to war) and the *jus in bello* (the right conduct of war). Moreover, any appeal to just war theorist Michael Walzer's concept of a "supreme emergency" qua existential threat to a nation somehow justifying the use of nuclear weapons is patently absurd:

- There can be no "just cause" to fight such a war when such weapons promise the high specter of global genocide. The whole of humanity has a permanent moral and legal interest to prevent the prospect of a global genocide consequent to the use of thermonuclear weapons by any nation-state or military alliance such as NATO. No nation-state such as the USA or Russia has the moral or legal authority to override this vital human interest—not by appeal to a principle of "national sovereignty" central to the logic of statecraft; not by appeal to a treaty-based doctrine of collective defense such as NATO propounds.
- The fact is that evidence to date since World War 2, the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962, and withdrawals from or reservations to important multilateral treaties that seek to regulate nuclear weapons, etc., does not promise with any confidence that a nuclear war would be waged as a "last

resort” after persistent diplomatic engagements to hold it at bay. Most national security personnel who think in terms of a doctrine of *Realpolitik* would give limited hearing to a philosopher such as Augustine of Hippo who held that it is better to sway a man with a word than to slay a man with a sword.

- The UN Charter and the recent Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons that came into effect in 2021 both make the threat and use of nuclear weapons illegal under international law. The Advisory Opinion provided by the International Court of Justice decades ago (08 July 1996) likewise held by unanimity that, “There is in neither customary nor conventional international law any specific authorization of the threat or use of nuclear weapons,” even as it further opined that, “A threat or use of force by means of nuclear weapons that is contrary to Article 2, paragraph 4, of the United Nations Charter and that fails to meet all the requirements of Article 51, is unlawful.” In short, there is no “lawful authority” for the use of nuclear weapons by any nation-state or any military alliance of states.
- If a just war is to be waged with “right intention,” have a “reasonable chance of success,” and be waged with due “discrimination of non-combatants (civilian populations) and lawful combatants,” as well as be waged with a commitment to “proportionality of means,” it is manifestly unclear how any use of nuclear weapons can satisfy these criteria. Whether the strategic defense doctrine is counterforce or countervalue, the fact is that the sequelae of thermonuclear weapons blasts at the current yields of 300+ kilotons of TNT would be devastating for most of the planet Earth, such that it would be absurd to think there could be any “restoration of the peace” in a post-war global wasteland manifesting



nigh total ecological catastrophe. There will likely be billions of human deaths from the targeted blasts in the northern hemisphere, acute radiation sickness, radiation-induced diseases, genetic mutations and congenital malformations in descendants of survivors, nuclear winter with unprecedented below-zero F. ambient temperatures, subsequent deadly solar radiation from a damaged ozone layer, global famine from massive destruction of agricultural land, loss of flora and fauna, etc.

- It is morally objectionable that, considering itself a nuclear military alliance (given its Strategic Concept 2022), NATO refuses to assure the world community that it will not employ either strategic or tactical nuclear weapons in the event of war with Russia. This is so despite American President Biden warning Russian President Putin against using tactical (intermediate range) nuclear weapons as he prosecutes his war against Ukraine.
- In the absence of any failsafe mechanism in the manner in which nuclear launch decisions are to be taken, in the interest of (a) assuring the survival of the human species and (b) safeguarding our planet Earth from global ecological collapse—*a duty we have to future generations*—therefore, NATO should be dismantled.
- A “partial win-win” outcome of the current Russia-Ukraine conflict (as Richard Falk has counseled should be sought) may well and reasonably include the following elements of a negotiated solution—
  - A total ceasefire on all sides, including halt to military weapons transport and deployment into the Ukraine;
  - A negotiation for total Russian withdrawal from Ukraine’s

sovereign territory, including from the Donbas region and the Crimea with mechanisms in place to be responsive to human rights concerns of the Russian majority in eastern Ukraine;

- Rejection of applications from Sweden and Finland for NATO membership;
- Rescindment of the increase in the NATO Rapid Response Force from 40,000 to 300,000;
- Agreement among Ukraine, NATO, and Russia that Ukraine will not join NATO while acceptably joining the EU for purposes of trade and commerce;
- Agreement between the USA, NATO, and Russia to negotiate a gradual movement of American strategic and intermediate range nuclear weapons systems and forward bases out of Western European countries;
- A negotiated timetable for a mutually verifiable nuclear disarmament in Europe with subsequent American-Russian strategic reduction talks such as occurred earlier with SALT and START; and,
- Therefore, the dissolution of NATO and recognition of Russia as a legitimate European state without being castigated an “enemy” of Europe.

While some may argue from a “pragmatic” or “realist” perspective on international relations that such a proposal is “dangerous,” the counter to that premise is that, in view of the high prospect of global genocide from the use of nuclear weapons and the dire need to “think outside the box,” therein is to be found “the saving power,” i.e., saving humanity from a “crucible of tragedy and catastrophe” that Richard Falk warned about when he published his ever informative *This Endangered Planet* (1971). Tragedy unfolds when we unwittingly bring disaster upon ourselves, even as catastrophe will obtain when irreversible decisions to use nuclear weapons lead to global

genocide and making our planet a global wasteland. That is the present plight of humanity. “Whither Europe?”—hopefully, it shall not be the world’s Achilles heel, though time is of the essence for the USA, NATO, Russia, and the world.

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