Abstract: This paper defines and develops an existential security approach to nuclear politics. Its findings suggest humanity suffers an emergency condition by the objective existential threat of nuclear war. The Liberal International Order has not addressed this existential (in)security, prioritising liberal internationalism and the maintenance of the nuclear order. Current prospects of a severe NATO-Russia war, a Sino-American conflict, or an uncontained iteration of either, could warp into a systemic war leading to mutual extermination. This would fatally unravel the legitimacy of the US-led world order and its reliance on national security, collective defence, and deterrence practice. If existential security is imperilled by the risk of nuclear war – explicitly – why does the recognition of this threat not warrant a re-ordering of the LIO? The dangerous routine of nuclearism provides states with ontological security internationally, which undermines the liberal or decent self-identity, domestically. A reordering of the international system offers one escape from these contradictions. This would involve a restoration of great power relations in a 'common security' arrangement.

Addressing Humanity's failure to establish Existential Security

Rhys Lewis-Jones

"We are here to make a choice between the quick and the dead. That is our business…

…if we fail, then we have damned every man to be the slave of fear."

Bernard Baruch: June 14, 1946.[1]

Introduction

Existential security (ES) is an emergent security studies framework and the driving theoretical approach of this paper. It positions itself as an alternative to national security – a concerted response to emergent anthropogenic existential threats to humanity which define our era (see Sears, 2020). ES recognises humanity as a single group worthy of collective survival. In the nuclear context, the securance of ES – as a state of 'high security' against threats to humanity – likely rests on the imperative of nuclear abolition. The state of present 'civilisation', which we perceive as 'advanced' in historical terms, must be guarded against collapse or else permanently alter humanity's future.

The totality of nuclear armaments' destructive potential suggests an extreme development in warfare and international politics. This transformation must be reflected in our analyses. The threat they pose to the species is what sets them apart from conventional weaponry – a threat which was absent throughout human history. The Liberal International Order fails to provide ES due to the catastrophic risk it incurs. The LIO is defined herein as the security architecture of the US-led Western world order, situated in a broader tradition of restrained and accountable power in the Westphalian system (Deudney, 2007: 136-160). This architecture rests on certain assumptions of collective security and nuclear deterrence. The LIO is, therefore, a fractured element of an international nuclear order, or a 'Global Nuclear Order' (see Walker, 2000).[2] Deterrence failure represents a critical physical insecurity which compromises the legitimacy of national security logic. If both national and

[1] In Williams (2005).

[2] Daniel Deudney and John Ikenberry (1999) coined the term 'liberal international order' though they did not argue it was global in scope. William Walker (2000: 723) notes that the "only nuclear order that we have… is unambiguously dedicated, for practical as well as moral reasons, to the elimination of nuclear weapons".

existential security is imperilled by the risk of nuclear war, explicitly, why does the recognition of this threat not warrant a re-ordering of the LIO? Nuclear powers pursue an ontological security logic, internationally, even when this contradicts their national security and the existential security of humanity as a whole. 'Ontological Security' (OS) represents a state's psychological aspirations, which affirm its "self-identity" and "*consistent* self-concepts" (Steele, 2008: 2-3). Disarmament poses a threat to a nuclear power's 'self-identity' as it does not align with its self-concept of nuclearism. Robert Lifton and Richard Falk (1985: ix) coined the term 'nuclearism' to refer to "psychological, political, and military dependence on nuclear weapons, the embrace of the weapons as a solution to a wide variety of human dilemmas, most ironically that of 'security'". Whilst the nuclear order offers OS internationally, it contradicts the domestic requirements of OS, of both liberal and non-liberal states. As Thomas Doyle (2015a) argues, liberal nuclear-weapon states exhibit a moral incoherency which renders them 'outlaw states'. Consequently, an adherence to an OS logic obstructs but also offers an opportunity for the attainment of ES. An opportunity to realign the states' self-identities domestically and move towards a 'common security' arrangement internationally.

The paper's first section re-develops the theoretical framework of ES in a nuclear politics context, defining it as an emergent paradigm which competes with national security. In the second section, this theoretical approach is deployed to critique the Liberal International Order, which operates on national security, collective defence, and deterrence logic. The third section then surveys the existent world government solutions to this dilemma (e.g. Craig, 2019; Deudney, 2019). The fourth section conceptually integrates OS into this discussion, arguing that OS is an inhibiting factor in nuclear power's unwillingness to disarm. These implications of OS and the necessity for reordering is outlined in the final section. This chiefly involves a restoration of great power relations and movement towards 'common security' which better adheres to ES.

Existential Security: Nuclear Risk and Humanity's Trajectory

This section conceptually develops the paradigm of 'existential security' in nuclear politics. ES is distinct from national security as it guards against the collapse of advanced civilisation and looks to the survival of humanity. These paradigms are often intertwined, however. The failure to operate on ES logics will prove catastrophic whilst also fatally undermining the core tenet of national security: *survival*. The discourse of national security has been heavily influenced by the strategic culture of rival great powers, providing intellectual justification for deterrence (e.g. Johnston, 1995), and obscuring ES' counter-narrative. Ultimately, the success of ES depends on states formulating it in their own national security interests.

Existential security has a long history, at the onset of the Atomic Age thinkers like Albert Einstein and J. Robert Oppenheimer feared the transformative character of the nuclear revolution. Campbell Craig (2003) identifies how Reinhold Niebuhr and Hans Morgenthau built upon the realist concepts of fear and survival, leading them to consider some form of world government as the solution to the nuclear dilemma. Morgenthau (1961) wrestled with the transformative effects of this threat to humanity's very survival, recognising that "civilization itself" might "perish". Morgenthau also wrote "we continue to think and act as though the possibility of nuclear death portended only a quantitative extension of the mass destruction of the past and not a qualitative transformation of the meaning of our existence" (ibid.,) (see also Craig, 2007: 54-73; 93-116). This is a revelation of ES, specifically, as it takes humanity's very existence as the referent. ES differs from other competing paradigms insofar as it seizes *humanity* as the referent, rather than the nation-state. In Sears' words this "challenges the established truth about the primacy of national security in international politics, and suggests that security and survival in the age of existential threats is about *the survival of*

humanity" (Sears, 2023: 18-19, emphasis added). The absence of ES then, condemns humanity to an emergency state of being. Early nuclear realism exhibited a radical and activist tradition, that van Munster and Sylvest (2014: 533) associate with Günther Anders, John H. Herz, Lewis Mumford and Bertrand Russell.[3] Such critiques of national-military security reflect later arguments in critical security studies (ibid., 534), and the 'common security' concept that Doyle (2020: 55-90) articulates. The ideal of common security dates back to the 1982 Palme Commission by the UN General Assembly (ibid., 72-76). If nuclear realists were, and are, ultimately concerned with the "survival of the species" (van Munster and Sylvest, 2014: 535) this heritage of thought is surely compatible with the guiding imperatives of ES. Van Munster and Sylvest (2014: 539) observe that "nuclear realists understood that real security could only be achieved by transcending national security". If nuclear annihilation remains a near-term prospect at the onset of what Barry Buzan (2024) calls a 'Second Cold War', a central premise of ES, then, is that we are a "modern civilization incapable of confronting the moral and existential dimensions of military force in the nuclear age" (ibid., 537).

A core premise of existential security is that a nuclear war – which inflicts a severe nuclear winter – could condemn humanity to *irretrievable* civilisational collapse (e.g. Baum, 2015; Xia et al. 2022). ES privileges the referent objects of 'advanced civilisation' and the long-term trajectory of the species (itself). Here, the securance of humanity's 'long-term future' is paramount. This is not a hyperbolic turn of phrase but a technical one: a 'nuclear collapse' (e.g. Mian and Pelopidas, 2023) *is* capable of inflicting a catastrophe trajectory on humanity. A global catastrophe of this magnitude would condemn humanity to a failed future. In Baum *et al.*'s (2019) "*Long-term Trajectories of Human Civilization*" they consider:

> "there are risks to the loss of advanced human civilization that contemporary decisions can affect, and survivors of such catastrophes are unlikely to recover advanced civilization" (ibid., 26).

A nuclear war could, almost uniquely, inflict such a catastrophe on humanity. Baum *et al*. state pertinently "extinction would result in the loss of all future generations" (ibid.) and that this fact should drive "both academic scholarship and societal decision-making" (ibid., 27). The "permanent loss" of advanced human civilisation holds an almost unimaginable moral catastrophe.

ES dismisses the value of human futures in which 'advanced civilisation' has collapsed. In the emerging literature on existential and catastrophic risks, Nick Bostrom (2013) and Maher & Baum (2013) argue for the reduction of any catastrophic risk which could inflict long-term harm to human civilization. Others have argued for prioritizing the reduction of human extinction risk specifically (Sagan, 1983; Parfit 1984, in Baum, et al. 2019: 6). Eddie Ng (1991) considers decision-making on risk which may alter the likelihood of the continued survival of the human race. Whether gains from public policy which affect our long-term survival outweigh the anticipated ethico-political value lost in a civilisational collapse scenario depends on the "loss we place on non-survival or the value we place on continued survival" (ibid., 79). This line of reasoning necessitates a consideration of nuclear wars which inflict a nuclear winter effect rather than 'just' nuclear use per say. Ng considers a 'conflict' "between the present and future generations" (ibid., 80). This well illustrates the tension between national and existential security approaches, indicating why ES is not the present way of *doing* nuclear security. Humanity's long-term future may include billions or even trillions of 'future lives'. Dependent on the ethical theories we privilege, we can prioritise either the "total quality of life aggregated across the population", the "average quality of life of members of the population," or "improvements for the less well-off members of the population" (e.g. Ng 1989; Arrhenius 2000; Adler 2012 in Baum et al. 2019: 4). Moreover, if nuclear deterrence is premised on a gamble, which Pelopidas labels as 'nuclear luck' (see Pelopidas, 2017; 2020; Pelopidas, and Lebow, 2023), this realisation should draw our attention to humanity's fragile existence and its uncertain future – one

[3] See also Wheeler (2008) on Herz' contribution.

which is *made* uncertain by continued deterrence practice. Deterrence creates an uncertainty over humanity's survival which the ES paradigm cannot accept.

A complex relationship exists between existential and national security. National security refers to the operating logic of deterrence: it involves security 'against' a threatening 'other' that must be deterred. Collective defence arrangements – NATO for example – operate on an expanded form of this logic, as exhibited in nuclear sharing and extended deterrence. The success of ES relies on states transitioning to its operating logic whilst framing it in terms of their national (and collective) security. Without this framing, ES ultimately will not succeed. This presents a paradox: a nuclear catastrophe – such as nuclear winter – ultimately threatens not only ES but also national security as state survival. Without attaining ES states are left in stasis with the uncertainty of deterrence failure. So, why do states not frame ES in terms of their national security? This shall be addressed in the remainder of the paper. Any transformation of the global system (towards ES) is dependent on states formulating ES in their own national security interests. If ES guards humanity's survival, then national security is fundamentally dependent on it.

Whilst ES's imperatives may, at times, be distinguished from national security and its associated frameworks in the nuclear politics context, its securance is highly dependent on states formulating ES in their own national security interests. A major nuclear catastrophe threatens not only ES but national security as state survival. The following section unpacks the failure of the Liberal International Order – an order that operates on national security assumptions and deterrence logic – to provide ES.

Existential (In)security and the Liberal International Order

This section develops a critique of the Liberal International Order by applying existential security, as outlined in the previous section. If the LIO is defined as the security architecture of the US-led Western world order, it also rests on certain assumptions of collective security and nuclear deterrence. Collective security (as collective defence) operates amongst NATO members whilst deterrence is deployed against their adversaries. This section argues that the LIO cannot attain ES as presently structured, thus it should be replaced entirely.

The LIO's collective security orientation bears the seeds of its own defeat by embracing a "security against" logic that an alternative common security logic could overcome (see Doyle, 2020: 67-70). This applies to the US' extended deterrence to Europe – the so-called 'nuclear umbrella'. Collective security (or 'defence'), as provided by NATO, then, is an expansion of national security to include a wider non-threatening in-group. So, whilst liberalism advances a theory of 'liberal peace' or 'cooperative security' premised on the "pursuit of mutual security protection" (see Ikenberry, 2020: 38-40; Doyle, 2024) its findings are inconsequential, here at least, as illiberal challengers to the LIO are not fully incorporated into this international order. This facilitates nuclear coercion and may lead to deterrence failure. This critical failure of the LIO is exhibited by nuclear risk in the Russo-Ukrainian war (e.g. Blank, 2023) and developing risk of a conflict over Taiwan (e.g. Krepinevich, 2024). The United States now faces two near-peer adversaries with an emboldened Russia and an ascendant China, so forecasts of enduring US hegemony were misplaced. Great-power competition could lead to a 'systemic war': a conflict involving great-power adversaries or all the great powers (Lebow, 2010: 261). Whilst US' influence may have prevented a Chinese challenge to Taiwan in the past, greater uncertainty informs the agenda at present (e.g. Coker, 2015; Heath et al., 2022; Chan, 2023; Goldstein, 2023; Krepinevich, 2024). Sino-American security competition is a major,

seemingly insurmountable, obstacle. Ho-fung Hung (2022) investigates China's ascendancy and the development of Sino-American trade relations. Concerningly, Hung identified a reflection of the "interimperial rivalry among the great powers at the turn of the twentieth century" with Sino-American competition over the last decades. NATO-Russian relations are also poised to deteriorate further, needing de-escalation post-Ukraine – undoing the 're-securitisation' of Russia (see Sperling and Webber, 2017). The US is faced with a deceptively simple grand strategic dilemma: attempt to re-establish its preponderance of power or concede a new multipolar world order. Here, overoptimism over the 'manageability' of nuclear risk (see Pelopidas, 2017) may be responsible for US policymakers' self-assuredness. A systemic war with China or Russia is forecasted to involve severe conflict and immense nuclear risk.

The strategic studies literature substantiates major nuclear escalation risks in NATO-Russia and Sino-American 'hot war' scenarios (e.g. Larsen and Kartchner, 2014; Talmadge, 2017; Acton, 2018; Hiim et al. 2023). Chinese strategists are concerned over US non-nuclear strategic capabilities that threaten China's nuclear forces (see Futter and Zala, 2021; Hiim et al. 2023). Acton also assesses non-nuclear attacks on nuclear forces or 'command, control, communication, and intelligence capabilities (C3I)', concluding that they would be "highly escalatory" – amounting to 'escalation entanglement' – which may even spark a nuclear war (Acton, 2018: 56; 97-99). The prospects of a volatile 'limited nuclear war' follows a logical progression of this escalation, as confirmed by wargames. A recent collaboration of teams from the Centre for Strategic & International Studies and Massachusetts Institute of Technology sought to assess these scenarios. In their wargame of a US-China conflict over Taiwan, of 15 game iterations 3 deteriorated into a strategic nuclear exchange, with hundreds of millions of casualties. Their key takeaway being "the difficulty [is] predicting how nuclear escalation will end" (Cancian et al. 2024: 45). This renders the worst-case scenarios – involving an all-out 'strategic' (i.e. high-yield) nuclear exchange and city-targeting – a distinct possibility. Ultimately, decision-makers are faced with a difficult decision: "agree to an adverse settlement, accept defeat, or use nuclear weapons" (ibid. 48). Even a *contained* reginal nuclear war could still incur fatalities comparable to all of those worldwide in World War II, with significant climate changes (Robock et al., 2007: 2007; cf. Xia et al. 2022). There is a developing urgency over renewed great-power competition and complex escalation risks.

Deterrence – an entrenched practice of national security – assumes state survival, tacitly accepting the risk of mutual destruction. Reliance on deterrence is a dominant feature of the LIO, however. NATO characterises itself as a 'nuclear-armed alliance', for example. The perpetuation of an envisaged future in which the US-led international order *persists* problematises the establishment of ES. Consider that the "maintenance of US nuclear weapons is a central tenet of the ideology of nuclear order, so the futures envisaged by non-proliferation timescaping entail US nuclear dominance" (Egeland, 2021 in Pelopidas, *et al*., 2024: 5). The LIO, itself, is a threat to ES insofar as its reliance on deterrence could lead to a global catastrophe. Whilst the 'blame game' is often futile, here it illustrates that the liberal/illiberal divide in world politics is effectively meaningless or will be *made* meaningless by a nuclear catastrophe. ES contends that the nuclear dilemma cannot be sidelined and should rank as the central concern during renewed great-power competition. Rather than guaranteeing global peace, the deterrence system – an embedded feature of the LIO – and the norm of non-use (the 'nuclear taboo') may collapse in the next systemic war (e.g. Gibbons and Lieber, 2019).

Should NATO and Russia engage in a hot war in future there may come a day when NATO retaliates to Russian non-strategic nuclear weapon use, triggering a general nuclear exchange (e.g. Schneider, 2018). A report by Euro-Atlantic Security states that the prospects of controlling escalation or "terminating a conflict according to any preplanned scenario" are "disturbingly small" (Kulesa, 2018: 1). Military-strategic logic would compel nuclear retaliation in this scenario as NATO would seek victory in a conventional war with Russia (arguably the purpose of the Alliance). This scenario blatantly threatens state survival. The possession – and preparation to use – nuclear weapons ensure

existential insecurity, with no guarantee of national survival. Adam Biggs (2024: 26) uses two historical case studies to infer that "changed decision-making throughout great power conflict creates an escalating chance of nuclear weapons use such that a nuclear attack is more likely at the end of a war than at its outset". This compounds risk in any conflict involving a nuclear power. The war in Ukraine demonstrates, further, that nuclear coercion remains a strong under-current in international politics. A NATO-Russia 'hot war' has not been inconceivable during escalations of the Russo-Ukrainian war, like Western-leaders decision to permit Ukraine to use long-range missiles deep into Russian territory (Grand, 2024). Moreover, Krepinevich (2024) outlines the scenario of a protracted Sino-American hot war in an article of *Foreign Affairs*. These challengers to the liberal order clearly possess a 'hard-counter' to Western power in the form of amassed nuclear weapons, apparent in an emerging Sino-Russian 'dragonbear' alliance (see Tchakarova, 2015).[4] Great powers neglect the nuclear dilemma and these, now apparent, security dilemmas at their own peril.

John Ikenberry's work (e.g. 2011: 2020) presents an argument in defence of the liberal international order. Ikenberry defends the project of liberal internationalism, which he believes will "foster international order in a way that protects and facilitates the security, welfare, and progress of liberal democracy", making the world safe for democracy (Ikenberry, 2020: 287). By this argument, the LIO has not failed and is the sole guardian of democracy – a dangerous proposition as liberal nuclear powers exhibit traits of 'outlaw statism', incompatible with this claim. Doyle's (2015a) 'liberal nuclearism' and 'nuclear despotism' (2013) concepts demonstrate that liberal democracies that choose to sustain the nuclear deterrence system exhibit a form of moral incoherency, corresponding to this 'outlaw statist' behaviour, made apparent by emergent nuclear escalation risks. Doyle (2015b; 2020) sets this incoherency against illiberal nuclear powers' lack of moral authority. An inadequate US-led 'non-proliferation complex' perpetuates the power-dynamics of the nuclear 'haves' and the non-nuclear 'have-nots' (see Tannenwald, 2024). This regime has proven ineffective at nuclear disarmament, electing to maintain the status quo, thereby confirming the hegemonic position of the national security paradigm. Ikenberry (2020: 287) states that "liberal democracies… can be secure only together, but not alone. That is the elemental insight that drives liberal internationalism". This assertion is not compatible with the evidence provided above, either, which exposes the risk of great-power conflict and the distinct scenario of major nuclear war. Western nations are left insecure whilst also imperilling non-nuclear weapon states. Ikenberry recognises China and Russia as direct challengers to the liberal project, but an acknowledgment of the nuclear threat is essentially absent in his work. Instead, the LIO represents a project of American liberal order-building. The challenge of disentangling hegemony and international order is recognised insofar as "the liberal international project has become deeply entangled with the exercise of American power" (ibid., 302) – but the contestation of that power poses an existential threat to the US and the LIO due to nuclear risk. If the liberal character of democracies is devalued due to nuclear possession (e.g. Doyle, 2015a) – integral for nuclear-armed alliances like NATO – what does the LIO offer us in the nuclear age? ES rebukes a liberal international vision of the world order as it fails to incorporate the existential dimension of nuclear risk in its reasoning. The argument represents the aspiration of the US to maintain its dominance within the LIO and its global position in the world order, attempting to subdue revisionist challengers like Russia and China.

The LIO and its assumptions of deterrence-based collective defence fails to provide existential security: the nuclear dilemma cannot be over-ridden by partial state interests. The literature on nuclear one-worldism accepts the limitations of the LIO in securing humanity and offers alternative proposals, to which the article now turns.

[4] China and Russia need not form a military alliance for this argument to remain broadly salient.

Nuclear One-worldism: Competing Proposals

If the Liberal International Order fails to attain existential security, how would an alternative international order respond to its imperatives? Recent discourse on nuclear one-worldism, particularly engagement by Campbell Craig (2019) and Daniel Deudney (2019), addresses this aspect directly.[5] The shared premise of nuclear one-worldism is that *a form of global government is required to avert nuclear extermination*, in effect ending interstate anarchy. Whilst this discourse implores the urgent formation of this supranational authority, thus adhering to the ES paradigm, Craig does not explain why the recognition of the nuclear threat has not led to this transformation. Other contributions remain problematic as they framed this move as 'inevitable' (Wendt, 2003) or 'probable' (Deudney, 1999: 102), respectively.

World government is often associated with utopianism (Wendt, 2003: 528), though Benoît Pelopidas (2020: 467) asserts: "the current bet on another 70 years of absence of unintended nuclear explosion should be called a technological utopia given that such a record of control of nuclear weapons technology has not been achieved". Neil Renic (2023: 130) also identifies the "utopian" character of the present nuclear order – sustained via securitisation (see Lupovici, 2019). Less scholarly attention is given to the radical transformation of this 'order'. An – otherwise radical – world government solution could respond to the scale and extreme character of the nuclear threat to humanity. Alexander Wendt (2003) argues that a world state will form 'inevitably', contrary to Deudney's 'probability' of global integration (Deudney, 1999: 102 in Wendt, 2003: 508).[6-7-8] Irrespective of its inevitably, could it form in time to prevent a nuclear catastrophe? In Vaughn Shannon's (2005: 581) response to Wendt, he asserts "by focusing on the inevitable World State, Wendt detracts from debate about agency and conditionality that could make a world state *possible*" (original emphasis). Shannon emphasises the importance of "making agents believe what Wendt has argued".

Daniel Deudney (2020) argues that the nuclear threat violates 'planetary security'. His definition of planetary security refers to "comprehensive restraints on technological superpowers combined with the neutralization and selective employment of orbital space" (Deudney, 2020: 227). Here, 'planetary security' is mostly analogous with my reading of ES. Whilst his framing of a planetary-scale threat is constructive, Deudney's (2019) proposal is for a regime of strong arms control. If completed, this regime would offer an exit from interstate anarchy but "does not entail the erection of a world state" (ibid., 380) and that this is deemed necessary as "a sudden civilizational *crash* remains a distinct possibility" (ibid., 381). Whilst we know great-power competition problematises even modest arms control measures (e.g. Kühn, 2020), Deudney's proposition considers that all states, regardless of their political ideologies, hold a primary interest of physical survival and

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[5] Craig's (2007) "*Glimmer of a New Leviathan*" and Deudney's (2007) "*Bounding Power*" are earlier treatments of this topic. Joseph Baratta's work is grounded in an interest in the world federalist movement (1985; 1999). See also his (2004) two volume "*The Politics of World Federation"*. Heikki Patomäki's (2024) *World Statehood: The Future of World Politics* is a more recent treatment.

[6] Of direct relevance is James Yunker's 2011 article. Wendt's (2003) "Why a World State is Inevitable" also received considerable attention (e.g. Shannon, 2005).

[7] In political theory, cosmopolitan theorists have advanced an ideal world state that could ensure 'global justice' (Cabrera, 2004). Global political integration is viewed as necessary by other cosmopolitans like Luke Ulaş (2016a), who anchors its possible motives on economic self-interest, prudent self-interest and democratic self-interest. Ulaş also defends this full world state against intermediary proposals (2016b). Pavel Dufek (2013) asserts that a 'strong moral cosmopolitanism' does require a world state, even if it requires coercive powers.

[8] Wendt's claim of 'inevitably' may have been deliberately provocative (see Wendt, 2005).

that it is "far more likely that states will agree to mutual verifiable reductions in armament than that they would create a central world organ and endow it with decisive military power" (see Deudney, 2019: 381-2). These ideas follow from his (2007) monograph *Bounding Power*. Deep arms control could satisfy the imperatives of ES if it reduced the civilisational threat that nuclear arsenals pose in a major nuclear winter. A mutually restraining world government, premised on arms control, could satisfy the immediacy that Deudney outlines, though he acknowledges that 'real-state approaches' (status quo national security) will likely prevail.

Campbell Craig (2019: 363) argues that a Weberian world state – requiring a monopoly over all war-making weaponry – is now necessary to establish ES. Its formation would involve "cooperating, and compromising, with other great powers" (ibid., 362). This corresponds with Craig and Ruzicka's (2013: 345) assertion that "if the inherent instability of anarchy undermines all other attempts to prevent nuclear war, then the obvious conclusion is to eliminate anarchy by developing an entity that can acquire and control all nuclear technologies". Craig is sympathetic to Deudney's federalist and non-hierarchical proposal but argues that an overtly liberal US-led world government would not succeed. Craig then posits that "a policy of waiting represents the opposite of urgency, and does nothing to contend with the possibility that Fukuyama was wrong, something that recent events suggest is likely" (ibid., 361). Francis Fukuyama's 'The End of History?' (1989) thesis argued that the US and its ideology of liberal democracy had triumphed, a premature assertion in hindsight. Craig implores compromise amongst the great powers:

> "if solving the nuclear dilemma is a matter of urgency, it can only occur by acts of political compromise among the large nuclear powers, compromise driven by the recognition, common to all states, that the continuing status quo of interstate anarchy poses an existential threat to all of them and to humanity at large" (Craig, 2019: 362).

Crucially, he argues that "the *existential nature* of the nuclear threat means that a compromise to eliminate anarchy cannot take place after a nuclear war" (emphasis added, ibid.,). Nuclear powers recognise 'nuclear danger', implicitly, by stating their interest in diminishing the role of nuclear weapons. For example, the US' 2022 Nuclear Posture Review recognises that "deterrence alone will not reduce nuclear dangers" (US DoD, 2022: 1), recommending renewed arms control, non-proliferation and risk-reduction efforts. What if their recognition of nuclear 'danger' *does* recognise its existential nature as long as these measures can be incorporated into a narrative of national self-interest? Afterall, on Craig's view it was '*nuclear fear*', not any 'inherent' stability of bipolarity, that ultimately prevented the United States and Soviet Union from initiating war and instigating mutual destruction (Craig, 2003: 170). If so, this begs the question why has this recognition not materialised into an enduring compromise? The logic of national security fails at this point; it is internally incoherent and fatally threatened by nuclear war. Some of the tensions apparent in Craig's (2019) debate with Deudney (2019) indicate this will not necessarily take us much further towards some actionable plan for a nuclear-free world. Both Deudney and Craig recognise the absence of ES in global security – amounting to insecurity for humanity – but this makes reordering the LIO and the global nuclear order all the more crucial.

The nuclear one-worldism literature advances the need for a world government to avert nuclear extermination, emphasising its urgency. It is less clear why the recognition of this threat has not compelled the attainment of existential security; particularly when nuclear weapons pose a direct threat to state survival. Why do states rely on nuclear deterrence when it gambles with their physical survival?

Ontological Security and the Disarmament Paradox

States maintain deterrence despite catastrophic scenarios of deterrence failure. Their operating logic cannot be survival because state survival is explicitly threatened by deterrence practice. Why, then, do states engage in practices that threaten not only their existence but also humanity as a whole? Ontological security studies offer an answer here. Building on the work of Jennifer Mitzen (2006), Brent Steele (2008; 2024) and Thomas Doyle (2020), this section argues that nuclear-weapon states have failed to respond to the existential nature of nuclear risk due to OS-seeking, rather than a national security logic committed to survival.

Ontological security is a concept of security whose "fulfilment affirms a state's self-identity (i.e. it affirms not only its physical existence but primarily how a state sees itself and secondarily how it wants to be seen by others)" (in Steele, 2008: 2-3). By Steele's definition, states seek OS to maintain 'consistent self-concepts', maintained through "a narrative which gives life to routinized foreign policy actions" (ibid., 3). For nuclear powers, these self-concepts rest, at least in part, on the renewal of deterrence policy and its associated narrative. Steele outlines how these routines can be disrupted "when a state realizes that its narratived actions no longer reflect or are reflected by how it sees itself" so that "when this sense of self-identity is dislocated an actor will seek to re-establish routines that can, once again, consistently maintain self-identity" (ibid.,). Disarmament poses a threat to a nuclear power's 'self-identity' as it does not align with its self-concept of *nuclearism*. For NATO, the declaration "as long as nuclear weapons exist, [NATO] will remain a nuclear alliance" (e.g. NATO, 2023) is illustrative of the self-concept that nuclear possession and nuclear sharing confers. Steele argues that OS is more important to states than physical security as they look to maintain *"consistent* self-concepts" – a stable narrative of the self. Doyle develops this in the nuclear politics context by drawing from Booth and Wheeler's (2008: 65) notion of 'ideological fundamentalism', arguing that it became the "chosen means of ontological security for the United States" (see Doyle, 2020: 79; Wheeler, 2018: 93-96). This form of OS is obtained by opposing an ideological foe. Ideological fundamentalists may seek to "threaten or destabilize their adversary states' identity conception" whilst stabilising their own national identity, thus their OS (see Doyle, 2020: 79). This involves 'security against' a threatening 'other': a friend-or-foe distinction which otherwise defines security competition (ibid., 78). States are thus conditioned to seek OS despite the risk of a break-down in relations towards conflict and deterrence failure. Doyle provides the example of how the US set the Soviet Union as the ideological foe during the Cold War, which resulted in arms racing and the entrenchment of nuclear deterrence. Their logic cannot have been national security – as survival – even if all parties recognised, and feared, the existential threat inherent in deterrence practice, exemplified by the Reagan-Gorbachev joint statement "a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought" (Reagan Library, 1985). As ideological fundamentalism guided Cold War-era nuclear deterrence, it is imperative that contemporary foreign policy does not invoke such an ideological struggle at the onset of a 'Second Cold War'. Ideological fundamentalism predicated on 'security against' postures persisted after the end of the Cold War, particularly against Russia (see Doyle, 2020: 80). By this failure the LIO's security architecture balances a tense nuclear security dilemma 'against' illiberal great powers. This failure neglects the national security framework's own precepts of physical security whilst risking humanity's survival. Mitzen's work offers one explanation for this paradox: security dilemmas, themselves, offer a dangerous form of OS for nation-states.

Mitzen (2006: 347) argues that "ontological security is perfectly compatible with physical insecurity". This is since dangerous routines, here the security dilemma, can provide OS (Mitzen 2006, 361-363). If we incorporate this into Doyle's insight on the nuclear security dilemma, in how self-identity is constructed against a threatening 'other', we begin to consider why this OS-seeking is overtly negative and harmful, or in this case potentially catastrophic. In a 'conventional' security dilemma this is self-defeating and can lead to conflict, but in a nuclear security dilemma it contributes to catastrophic risk as its breakdown could lead to deterrence failure. Mitzen argues that "conflict may

benefit a state's identity even as it threatens its body" (ibid., 365). Nuclear-weapon states maintain their nuclear arsenals – a dangerous routine – despite the physical insecurity of deterrence failure, which surely constitutes a "'hard' or 'fundamental' uncertainty" (ibid., 346). This, then, goes beyond the 'survival assumption' in IR, which both Mitzen (2006: 364) and Steele (2008: 2) problematise. The routine of deterrence satisfies the psychological aspirations of these powers. Nuclear powers are OS-seekers insofar as they pursue a project of risk-reduction: a major feature of the US-led non-proliferation 'complex'. Pelopidas and Egeland (2024) argue that this risk-reduction project, centred around modest arms control, is failing, exposing the failure to respond to the physical insecurity of nuclear risk. Nuclear powers are aware of this dilemma, clear in the Reagen-Gorbachev statement, and yet they adhere to the routine of deterrence practice and arms control. OS-seeking overrides the imperative of survival. By emphasising the psychological needs of nuclear powers, including stable routines which re-affirm self-identity, this offers an alternative explanation for the (otherwise inexplicable) irrationality of national security operating on deterrence logic. This offers an explanation as to why the LIO relies on deterrence, and why the US is caught in a trap as the LIO's nominal leader. This is not a critique of liberal nuclear powers, exclusively. Rather, it recognises them as 'outlaw states', as Doyle does, in effect equating them with illiberal nuclear powers (see Doyle, 2015a).

Both Doyle and Mitzen (indirectly) offer useful critiques on the flawed premise of deterrence for nuclear security. Doyle (2020: 78) states that 'security against' logic "under girds both mainstream national security and ontological security frameworks in spite of their other core differences", rooting ideological fundamentalism – which conditions states to pursue OS – in 'security against' reasoning. Mitzen's argument states that conflictual relations can provide OS. Nuclear states are invested in their identity as nuclear states, despite an objective existential threat, whilst OS logic suggests that there is an attachment to nuclear identity which contributes to deterrence entrenchment. This holds a net negative effect as OS is *compatible* with physical insecurity. If we are to mitigate the nuclear security dilemma, then, we must confront the deeply-rooted psychological needs of nuclear powers.

Can a status quo which perpetuates the dangerous routine of deterrence change? The literature on OS has been accused of holding a status quo bias, rather than facilitating new – and potentially more just – orders (see Rossdale, 2015). This is also seen to limit a more 'radical' politics (see Steele, 2024: 4). OS studies are not necessarily biased against the status quo, as Steele (ibid., 16) argues in a recent piece, stating that "the key going forward is to consider the difficult ways in which *reorderings* can proceed that recognize the necessity of some disordering (which generates anxiety) for the ultimate tradeoff of more just orders". On the one hand dangerous routines offer OS, on the other hand they cause ontological insecurity in liberal states – a contradiction. The liberal state's ontological security internationally (meaning in relation with foes or illiberal adversaries) is premised on Mitzen's *dangerous routines*, whereas the liberal-self suffers an ontological and moral incoherence – domestically. Neo-realists believe that liberalism operates domestically, deriving from Kenneth Waltz' own political commitment to liberalism (see Bessner and Guilhot, 2015: 87; 115-116), but power politics drives the international sphere. Liberal states must perceive different standards domestically (or between themselves) and internationally for this to occur, simultaneously. Doyle articulates this in his reasoning by emphasising the security-with/against distinction, advocating instead for a common security arrangement which could resolve this contradiction (e.g. Doyle, 2020: 55-90; 159-181). Times of crisis, posed by challenges to the LIO, generate anxiety. Nevertheless, they could also be an *opportunity* to regain the liberal-self and end the domestic/international dichotomy. Steele recognises that if "existing orders need to be constantly renewed, revised, reformed, and made more inclusive of previously ostracized others" they must still follow the "'conservative' principle of maintaining order to ensure the possibility of healthy, and positive, OS seeking" (Steele, 2024: 15). The goal, therefore, is not to abolish order but to renew it, revise it, and make it more inclusive, in-line with the realities of ES but also the liberal self.

Engagement with OS studies indicates that states seek OS, even if at the detriment of their physical survival, this is what inhibits a radical transformation of the LIO, towards ES. Here, the OS-seeking of nuclear powers is disruptive as it compromises national security as survival whilst preventing reordering of the international system. The following section outlines the implications of the shift from national security to ontological security on the requirements of re-ordering the international order.

Reordering: Implications

What are the implications of the analysis above for the international order? A re-ordering of the international order should be premised on the recognition that the nuclear order perpetuates dangerous routines on the international level that offer OS to states, whilst posing a threat to their national survival and an existential threat to humanity. Meanwhile, on another – domestic – level, as Doyle (2020: 112) argues, a commitment to nuclear deterrence produces a liberal ontological and moral incoherence which contradicts the liberal self-identity.[9] The key to persuade states, particularly great powers, of the requirement for re-ordering is therefore to, first, emphasise that dangerous routines do not offer physical security but OS. Second, that the nuclear order, whilst it offers OS internationally, contradicts the domestic requirements of OS.

Liberal nuclear powers must forgo dangerous routines, such as the security dilemma, which undermine their domestic identity, rejecting the nuclear order and thereby returning to the liberal self. Doyle (2020: 112) argues that "liberal ontological and moral incoherence is produced by liberal nuclearism" and that "liberal nuclearism induces ontological dissonance in the liberal state". Reliance on deterrence capabilities subverts the liberal identity and renders a liberal state an 'outlaw' in Rawlsian terms (ibid., 116; Doyle, 2015a). Liberal states must come to accept, therefore, that nuclearism is incompatible with liberalism. A restoration of the liberal self via disarmament offers a powerful form of OS domestically. Steele (2024) values order as it offers states a sense of stability and routine. An international order which better adheres to the liberal commitment to human rights and the rule of international law, then, can offer states a routine that stabilises liberal self-identity. The failing assumptions of nuclearism can create space for mutual agreement: illiberal states could also subscribe to broader ideals of justice and order if their national power is ensured.

If liberal nuclearism equates to outlaw statism, then it follows that illiberal nuclear powers reside in a similar incoherent state of self. Drawing from John Rawls (1993: 50-56), we might envisage that disarmament eliminates *illiberal nuclearism* as well, thereby making "decent and hierarchical peoples" of the LIO's chief contenders. Their illiberalism is less stark, here at least, as Doyle's (2015a; 2020) argument essentially renders *all* nuclear powers outlaw states. Shifting away from outlaw statism is a positive development for illiberal powers, which can transform into Rawls' 'decent and hierarchical peoples', at least in one important sense. If this transformation made nuclear powers less overtly threatening to each other, it could facilitate meaningful trust-building. The distinction to be made here is that all nuclear powers (or outlaws) could become liberal or decent, respectively, via disarmament. This transformation offers OS for nation-states; domestically by restoring the moral and ontological incoherency of nuclearism, and internationally by forming a common security arrangement predicated on disarmament.

[9] Doyle's argument can be extended to non-liberal states: the nuclear order also threatens the latter's identities as Rawlsian decent hierarchical societies.

Liberal or decent powers which seek OS domestically could be associated with common security internationally. A common security order could offer a highly stabilising routine for states, premised on *mutual survival*. Doyle (2020: 121) states that "if the moral imperative of common security were to effectively organize great power politics, then nuclear defense and deterrence policies would no longer be necessary and a corresponding opportunity would be opened for nuclear abolition to proceed without objection". Afterall, "'security against' conceptions function as a principle of conflict, instability and disorder in international security" and are the "seed of intractable security dilemmas and paradoxes alike" (Doyle, 2020: 173). The world's most powerful states could maintain their position in a new international order – recognising "equal rights of survival, security, and sovereign status" (ibid., 174). This diminishes their ontological anxiety domestically by maintaining the stabilising self-concepts which their national power confers internationally. Restoring great power relations offers greater prospects of physical survival for nation-states, and humanity itself, whilst minimising the uncertainty that re-ordering poses. This alleviates the ontological incoherency that nuclearism generates for all nuclear-weapon states.

Emilie Hafner-Burton argues that state leaders will violate human rights until they come to realise – for themselves – that effective human rights promotion is in their own national (or personal political) interests. For great powers to enable this transformation it must be 'sustainable politically' (see Hafner-Burton, 2013: 176). A common security arrangement by the US, Russia and China would go some ways in satisfying the national and existential security concerns at the root of great-power competition. It recognises the crucial role of powerful actors in the international system and looks to the restoration of international law. The first step to persuade national leaders that it is in their national (and personal political) interests to adopt an existential security logic is to show to them that deterrence logic may be psychologically satisfying but does not guarantee what it promises: the survival of the state. This applies whether or not the national leaders perceive the states they represent as liberal. As such, if the re-election of Donald Trump signals the retreat of liberalism it does not invalidate the argument but rather indicates a new phase in the decline of the LIO, incurring greater insecurity.

Conclusion

The risk of catastrophic nuclear war problematises the desirability, or necessity, of the Liberal International Order as the world order. Our understanding of what the LIO represents must be corroborated with our understanding of the nuclear security dilemma and the complex effects of OS on nuclear powers. A re-ordering of the international system offers one escape from these contradictions in nuclear politics. Whilst a radical transformation, it better responds to the extreme threat of deterrence failure and the prospect of a nuclear holocaust. A new, more inclusive, international order can diminish the risk of an omnicidal great-power war by eliminating the friend-enemy distinction which drives intractable security dilemmas. For a new international order to succeed, however, it would need to replace the OS which nuclearism confers to states. The provision of OS from dangerous routines internationally should be shifted to stabilise the domestic identities of liberal and non-liberal nuclear powers, thereby addressing their outlaw statism.

The nuclear dilemma imperils our very existence as a species. Its central premise then is the unwillingness of nations to sacrifice (what they perceive to be) their survival for the survival of mankind (see Niebuhr, 1963: 8). If the LIO imperils the very survival of nations and humanity by entrenching deterrence, it surely warrants re-ordering. The evidence provided above outlines the developing risk over a great-power 'hot war' and with it the prospect of nuclear war, itself. Clearly, re-

ordering could be security-providing if it diminishes the risk of collective annihilation. The twentieth century was defined by two world wars and a prolonged Cold War with numerous nuclear crises. We may yet see a terminal conflict that suddenly ends humanity in the twenty-first.

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