



# Editorial Foreword

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Co-Series Editor: *African Political Science and  
International Relations in Focus*

“Now, I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds.” J Robert Oppenheimer, known as the ‘father of the atomic bomb’, uttered these words after witnessing the Trinity test, the first detonation of a nuclear weapon, on 16 July 1945. There have been well over 2,000 nuclear tests since then.<sup>1</sup> As remote instruments of death, the ability of these weapons to spread enmity, discord, destruction and fear is extensive.

Despite key international instruments being implemented to curb nuclear non-proliferation – such as the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) (1968), the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (1996), the United Nations General Assembly’s declaration of the International Day Against Nuclear Tests (2009), and the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) (2021) – nuclear weapons remain an obstacle to international peace and security. It is an obstacle that has intensified as the international community enters a time of great uncertainty.

This air of uncertainty is cultivated by leadership styles that are best characterised as unpredictable and fluid. Such approaches to world leadership make it difficult to predict choices and outcomes. This stark reality is concerning when one considers that the world’s two largest nuclear arsenals are under the custodianship of President Vladimir Putin of Russia and the US’s President Donald Trump. While President Putin has demonstrated his preference for war over diplomacy with the invasion of Ukraine in 2022, President Trump has maintained an ambivalent stance on nuclear weapons. During

1 Kimbell, D. 2025. The Nuclear Testing Tally. Washington, DC: Arms Control Association [November 2025]. <https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/nuclear-testing-tally>



his first term (2017 – 2021) as president, he dismantled the Iran Nuclear Deal and continues to threaten Iran following Operation ‘Midnight Hammer’ on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of June 2025. Likewise, via his Department of Government Efficiency, President Trump stripped the National Nuclear Security Administration of key human resources – thereby undermining the US’s ability to safely maintain its nuclear arsenal – while also recently deploying two nuclear submarines following Russian antagonism, which was fuelled by ultimatums President Trump had made to Moscow over a ceasefire with Ukraine in August 2025, an escalation that the world has not seen since the Cuban Missile Crisis.

In light of this ardent posturing on nuclear issues, it’s difficult to imagine President Trump opting for nuclear disarmament. Nonetheless, this is what occurred in February this year when he proclaimed that the three leading nuclear weapons states (Russia, the US and China) were spending “too much” on their nuclear weapon arsenals, and subsequently proposed that they trim their defence budgets by cutting back on these arsenals. While President Trump’s track record is questionable, the business-savvy nature of this proposal may compel him to make a sincere effort at its attainment. It remains to be seen whether this proposal will stagnate or proliferate in its own right.

Regardless of the decision the US president opts for, nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament are tarnished by two additional factors. Firstly, the continued rise of far-right political parties undermines non-proliferation and disarmament commitments. This is because these political leaders have a preference for turning their policy focus inward, resulting in disengagement and, sometimes, withdrawal from key multilateral forums.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, far-right political leaders appeal to the emotions of the electorate, often resulting in the adoption of a hands-on stance on issues of defence and security. Nuclear weapons and associated technologies fall within this discourse. This suggests that governments where far-right political parties

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2 Meler, O and Vieluf, M. 2021. Upsetting the Nuclear Order: How the Rise of Nationalist Populism Increases Nuclear Dangers. *The Nonproliferation Review*, 28(1-3): 13-35.

are present would prefer to maintain nuclear stockpiles for the sake of deterrence.

Secondly, the world continues to see rapid technological innovation, and the emergence of artificial intelligence (AI) and associated technologies is no exception. In his book *Leadership: Six Strategies in World Strategy*, prior to his death, former US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger warned of this phenomenon. He wrote that AI would enable weapons “to launch themselves based on their own calculations.”<sup>3</sup> Turning to such weapons (or even entertaining the threat of them) with relative ease creates the potential to “turn a crisis into a war or transform a limited war into a nuclear one through unintended or uncontrollable escalation.”<sup>4</sup>

As the world ponders the future of in(security) and (un)predictability, it is important to keep an eye on the 2026 NPT and TPNW Review Conferences, where states that are party to these treaties will meet to assess their implementation and progress. South Africa will chair the latter Review Conference. Citizens must carefully consider their own agency within this discourse by reflecting on how their political choices could have a direct impact on the international security landscape. Similarly, political parties that are now in opposition and seek political power must recommit themselves to a world free of nuclear weapons, and find ways to understand and address the needs that fuel the politics of emotion on the far-right.

Present circumstances could result in nuclear weapons becoming more commonplace. One nuclear weapon going astray could cause hundreds of thousands of deaths in populated areas and would have a detrimental environmental impact on future generations. Future policy discourses must address the issue of political trust, the regulation of technology for weapons purposes and the quality of political leadership.

Amidst all of this uncertainty, Coetzee’s volume provides us with an opportunity to reflect on Africa’s position within the nuclear politics discourse. Essential here is Africa’s position as

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3 Kissinger, H. 2024. *Leadership: Six Studies in World Strategy*. New York: Penguin, 410.

4 Ibid.

the world's latest nuclear weapons-free zone. The absence of nuclear weapons leaves the continent free to explore its hand at nuclear energy to meet its energy needs. This volume brings together an insightful cohort of emerging and established scholars who grapple with many of the contemporary debates pertaining to Africa's nuclear energy domain including: nuclear energy as a driver for regional development, the complimentary roles of the non-proliferation and peaceful use regimes, geopolitical murmurs, untapped nuclear desires, and nuclear governance.

While this volume underpins the importance of African agency in the nuclear energy debate, readers are also reminded of the limits of such agency which have come to include untapped nuclear desires, political instability, and poor governance. This realistic account of Africa's position vis-à-vis nuclear politics does not only provide a comprehensive overview of the 'state of play', but also serves as launch pad to further research and debate.