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Peter Hayes

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# Trump and the Interregnum of American Nuclear Hegemony

Peter Hayes<sup>a,b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Nautilus Institute, Berkeley, California, USA; <sup>b</sup>Center for International Security Studies, Sydney University, Sydney, Australia

## ABSTRACT

Nuclear weapons are the ultimate power capacity of states. They make it possible to exterminate whole states, cities and peoples almost instantaneously. Because they are militarily unusable in almost any conceivable context, their main (but not only) use today is to deter other nuclear-armed states from using them first, by threatening nuclear retaliation. American nuclear hegemony combined the ideology of nuclear deterrence to legitimate nuclear alliances, embodied in institutional form as integrated force structures, and undergirded by uniquely threatening American nuclear forces.

Since the end of the Cold War, this hegemony has declined. The first year of the Trump Administration revealed glimpses of Trump's intention to exploit nuclear threat, formalized in his *Nuclear Posture Review* and nuclear modernization budgets. These suggest that Trump will accelerate the dissolution of residual American nuclear hegemony at all three levels of ideology, institutions, and forces. We can expect more "morbid symptoms" that reveal that we are now in a post-hegemonic interregnum wherein nuclear weapons may be used in ways that disorder the international system.

Eventually, non-nuclear states and civil society may combine to create post-hegemonic forms of governance of the threat posed by nuclear weapons, especially by the states committed to nuclear weapons abolition.

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## Nuclear Compellence, Deterrence and Reassurance

Nuclear weapons are the ultimate power capacity of states. They make it possible to exterminate whole states, cities and peoples almost instantaneously. They present uniquely destructive capacity far beyond that available from other types of weapons of mass destruction, let alone conventional weapons. The horrific nature of these means of human exterminism (as Edward Thompson 1980 called them) was demonstrated at Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Ironically, these very qualities make nuclear weapons militarily unusable in almost any conceivable context. Thus, their main (but not only) use today by a nuclear-armed state is to deter other nuclear-armed states from using them first, by threatening nuclear retaliation. Some states use nuclear weapons to deter conventional attacks as well, but ultimately this effect relies on the same threat of reciprocal annihilation once the

nuclear weapons start to detonate. When nuclear weapons are implicated in a conflict between two nuclear-armed states, this relationship may be characterized as a balance of nuclear terror once each achieves a secure retaliatory capacity, even if struck first.

The extraordinary levels of nuclear violence implied by such an antagonistic relationship not only induces caution about stepping on each other's toes politically or militarily, a state of affairs known as strategic stability; it also motivates them to implement arms control and even disarmament measures aimed at stabilizing the balance of terror, or at least avoiding nuclear arms racing that may destabilize the mutual deterrence relationship. Nuclear reassurance between nuclear-armed states then leads to a variety of confidence building measures and even formal treaties with an entire array of monitoring and verification accords. States have also attempted to force nuclear-armed and non-nuclear states to change their behavior by threatening them with nuclear attack, although such nuclear compellence is often proves counterproductive. Finally, some nuclear weapons states have extended putative nuclear deterrence to their allies to reassure them that they won't be attacked by a common enemy, another form of nuclear reassurance, but this time between partners, not enemies.<sup>1</sup>

## Inadvertent Nuclear War

Therein lies the rub in the Trump era. Nuclear weapons are the ultimate weapon the sole purpose of which, at least in dominant American conventional wisdom, is to ensure that they are never used. Trump's many contradictory campaign statements about nuclear weapons simply expressed decades of American declaratory policy, to never use nuclear weapons, while at the same time, maintaining a separate operational policy to be ready to use nuclear weapons instantly. Like his predecessors, Trump's nuclear bipolar disorder reflects the contradictory nature of the weapons themselves.

To manage the always-never tension created by nuclear weapons, the United States developed a set of positive and negative controls on the use of nuclear weapons. Although extensive, these controls were never completely reliable even in peacetime, let alone in wartime. The controls of other states are far less assured. How they interact is poorly understood (Conley 2007; Virginia Tech Applied Research Corporation 2016).

During the Cold War, the United States, the former Soviet Union and China navigated a series of nuclear war near-misses, avoiding catastrophic nuclear war as much by luck as by good management. In this region, this list includes the 1958 Quemoy-Matsu crisis, the October 1962 near-firing of Mace missiles in Okinawa at the height of the Cuban Missile Crisis, the 1969 China-Russia shootout, and the August 1976 US-DPRK confrontation.<sup>2</sup> Due to these events, the United States and the former Soviet Union negotiated rules of the road and nuclear arms control and disarmament treaties to curb the absurdist aspects of nuclear arms racing. By the end of the Cold War, the risk of nuclear war had been reduced for the most part to

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<sup>1</sup>The terms nuclear deterrence, compellence and reassurance were developed by theorists such as Thomas Schelling. See Morgan (1977) and Hayes (1990).

<sup>2</sup>The United States issued nuclear threats against China and North Korea during the Korean War, but did not deploy nuclear weapons into Korea until 1958. On the 1958 Quemoy-Matsu near miss, see Hayes, Bello, and Zarsky (1987, 25). For the Okinawan near use, see Tovish (2015). On the 1969 US-China conflict and possible use of Soviet nuclear missiles against China, see Gerson (2010). On the August 1976 near miss, see Hayes (1990). On the 2001 Kargil near miss, see Hoodbhoy and Mian (2002). For near-misses in other regions, see Lewis et al. (2014).

“inadvertent” nuclear war due to the collapse of the former Soviet Union. This implosion removed the rationale for NATO to substitute early use of nuclear weapons for conventional NATO forces to block Soviet conventional forces overrunning the Fulda Gap and heading west into Germany (Wiberg, Peterson, and Smoker 1993).<sup>3</sup>

Inadvertent nuclear war refers to the multiple pathways to nuclear war that remain after nuclear war itself is ruled out except in response to actual nuclear attack. It includes the risk that needless confrontations by one nuclear weapons state against other nuclear weapons states may ensue after accidental nuclear detonations, catalytic or misinterpreted nuclear terrorist attack, entanglement with allies overreaching against third parties, failure of command and control and early warning systems due to technological and organizational failures, hacking and cyberattacks, and fear of a nuclear weapons state that another is about to strike it first, prompting it to launch a damage-limiting, pre-emptive nuclear strike – or some combination of the above at the same time.

Keeping off and away from these pathways in the post-Cold War epoch is the most important goal of any sane nuclear commander who understands the destructive power of nuclear weapons. That this imperative appears to have diminished for nuclear-armed states in recent years suggests that how they were regulated previously is no longer fully in force and that something fundamental has changed in how nuclear threat works in inter-state relations. Trump’s personality, and the related fear that he may abuse his absolute prerogative to launch nuclear attacks in irrational or manifestly illegal ways, highlights this undercurrent and has forced the issue of American nuclear leadership to the surface in an unprecedented manner.

## American Nuclear Hegemony

During the Cold War, American nuclear leadership was based not only on its uniquely capable nuclear forces, but on a shared vision a liberal international order supported by strategic nuclear deterrence aimed at containing illiberal states, most importantly the former Soviet Union. This system evolved ultimately into the grotesque Cold War balance of terror based at its peak on 70,000 nuclear weapons in the American and Soviet arsenals. A theory of *nuclear* hegemony extends Cox’s theory of *global political economic* hegemony and applies it to the realm of global nuclear security.<sup>4</sup> Nuclear hegemony is arguably the necessary complement to economic hegemony for a global superpower.

At the peak of this nuclear hegemonic framework, the United States and its allies negotiated their divergent interests in how to offset nuclear threats by creating combined capacities and multilateral and bilateral alliances whereby the hegemonic state secured the consent of its allies to its leadership role. Hegemony combines securing consent in the form of a shared nuclear ideology with the institutionalization of nuclear extended deterrence in the form of nuclear alliances. This institutionalization resulted in the integration in command structures and force elements all the way down to low

<sup>3</sup>Associated Press, “Fulda Gap Is Key Point in NATO Defense Against Soviet Forces,” 1 March 1987. [http://articles.latimes.com/1987-03-01/news/mn-6926\\_1\\_fulda-gap](http://articles.latimes.com/1987-03-01/news/mn-6926_1_fulda-gap).

<sup>4</sup>See Hayes (1988). This paper draws on Robert Cox’s theory that is grounded in Gramsci’s theory of hegemony and is articulated in Cox (1983); and F. Schurmann’s theory of the state expounded in Schurmann (1974). For a summary of Schurmann’s theory, see Cumings (1976).

level units. To sustain the whole enterprise, the United States committed its peerless strategic nuclear forces to protect not only itself, but its allies, but always only at its own prerogative. Nuclear hegemony enabled the United States to legitimate its leadership and to exercise authority over vast bulk of the nuclear weapons aimed at the former Soviet Union which, in contrast, runs its sphere of influence – including its nuclear weapons – in an outright imperial manner.

American nuclear hegemony was never complete. Some states defected or never signed up. For example, the British and the French insisted on making their own nuclear weapons and retaining the right to use nuclear weapons independent of the United States and/or NATO. Israel's relentless acquisition of nuclear weapons required the United States to turn a blind eye to its "invisible" nuclear arsenal. In some cases, domestic civil society revolted against nuclear hegemony. For example, Japanese civil society's "nuclear allergy" displaced American weapons from mainland Japan in 1960 to US bases in Okinawa where in turn they were driven out by reversion in 1972.

In spite of these exceptions, at its peak in the mid-1980s, American nuclear hegemony encompassed North America, Western Europe and the Asia-Pacific allies in a coordinated alliance system, and provided the multi-national power basis for first containing the Soviet Union and later China, and then constructing global nuclear arms control treaties aimed at restraining horizontal proliferation, and later, limiting vertical proliferation by the then two superpowers, encapsulated in the 1968 Nuclear Non Proliferation Treaty followed by the strategic arms limitation treaties. This system integrated ideology, institutions, and force structures in a way that created dependency on the United States, but also interdependency between these essential elements that made it hegemonic, and more than merely the sum of its parts.

By the end of the 1980s, outright American nuclear hegemony was already challenged. South Korea's anti-dictatorship and democracy movement in 1987 ensured that the United States withdrew its forward-deployed nuclear weapons from the Peninsula in 1992. Tiny New Zealand was the antinuclear mouse that roared in 1984. The Philippines banned all stationing and transiting of nuclear weapons in 1988, thereby setting the scene for the US military to depart from its bases including Subic Bay where it stored nuclear weapons during the Cold War (Mydan 1988).

Such political headaches within the alliances plus needless risk of escalation involving such weapons with the Soviet Union and China led the United States to withdraw all surface naval and forward-deployed tactical and theater nuclear weapons in September 1991 (Koch 2012). The sole exception was air dropped gravity bombs that remained forward-deployed in NATO allies. Nuclear extended deterrence in the Asia-Pacific region henceforth rested on submarine launched cruise missiles stored in the United States (Acton 2009) until these too were dismantled (about 2010) (Kristenson 2013); and the threat of strategic nuclear attack henceforth rests solely on delivery by long-range missiles or bombers – a fact much lamented above all in Japan.

This process of recession and withdrawal of American nuclear forces and recession of nuclear deterrence begun by President George Bush Sr was followed by a dramatic de-emphasis on nuclear forces during the short period of American geopolitical primacy during which it prosecuted ground wars in Afghanistan and then Iraq. In turn, the US nuclear weapons complex suffered a series of shocks starting in 2005 that demonstrated its parlous state for all to see. This rapid decline matched the timing of

the global financial crisis in 2008 that initiated the near collapse of liberal political-economic hegemonic order and ushered in a non-hegemonic period of contention over ruling economic ideas and authority (Stahl 2017). These symptomatic shocks heralding that the nuclear interregnum was now current and hegemony on the wane included:

- 2005–7: Mistaken shipment MK-12 RV assemblies to Taiwan (Spencer, Ludin and Nelson 2012).
- 2007: “Doom 99,” the unauthorized transfer and loss of control for 24 hours of six nuclear warheads across the United States.<sup>5</sup>
- 2010: Launch Control Center Launch Facility Down status and lost command-connectivity with 50 missiles (Schactman 2010).
- 2014–15: USAF missileer certification cheating and widespread workplace cultural malaise (Everstine 2014; Burns 2014).
- 2014: Maj. Gen Davey fired and retired after partying drunkenly in Moscow (former Deputy Director, Command, Control and Nuclear Operations; at time, he was in charge Air Force nuclear-armed missiles).<sup>6</sup>

The parlous state of US forces led to a full-blown crisis in the American nuclear weapons enterprise, and a sustained effort after 2014 to turn around poor morale, loss of critical control, failing technology and disinterest within both military and civilian leadership – one that continues to this day.

## Nuclear Interregnum

An interregnum may be defined as a period of uncertainty, where there is deep confusion and disagreement among the dominant elite, and where former ideologies, while still having institutional power, are losing traction, leading to disagreement and disorientation. These shocks were symptomatic that the unique force structure underpinning nuclear hegemony was full of stress cracks and no longer offered reassurance to the allies that American nuclear forces were reliable and capable.

As noted above, for the entire Cold War, most US allies accepted that political and symbolic commitment to nuclear extended deterrence by the Clinton, Bush and Obama Administrations sufficed to persuade them that they could forego their own nuclear weapons. Only the French and British were exceptions (and later, Israel under the table). But even they accepted the US prerogative to lead western forces via the NATO alliance.

President Barack Obama’s 2009 speech in Prague calling for the abolition of nuclear weapons as a common aspiration and the concrete steps reflected in his Nuclear Posture Review reinforced the concerns of many allied leaders that even the central binding

<sup>5</sup>Commander Directed Report of Investigation Prepared by Major General Douglas L. Raaberg, Investigating Officer Concerning an Unauthorized Transfer of Nuclear Warheads between Minot AFB, North Dakota and Barksdale AFB, Louisiana, 30 August 2007, released under FOIA and redacted, at: <http://cryptome.org/dodi/af-megadeath-fumble.pdf>.

<sup>6</sup>See Fisher (2013) and the following. The Inspector General of the Air Force, *Report of an Investigation (S8011P)*, Maj Gen Michael J. Carey, October 2013. <http://www.foia.af.mil/shared/media/document/AFD-131219-045.pdf>. “Former 20th Air Force commander fired after Russia trip will retire as 1-star,” *AirForceTimes*, 10 April 2014. <http://archive.airforcetimes.com/article/20140410/NEWS/304100051/Former-20th-Air-Force-commander-fired-after-Russia-trip-will-retire-1-star>. MAJOR GENERAL MICHAEL J. CAREY, US Air Force. <http://www.af.mil/AboutUs/Biographies/Display/tabid/225/Article/108381/major-general-michael-j-carey.aspx>.

ideology of nuclear deterrence based on massive threat was now dubious and was no longer a guiding principle for their security. The suggestion that nuclear weapons could be replaced by conventional forces even more capable than nuclear weapons was even more distressing to putative nuclear enemies Russia and China; and they began to increase their own doctrinal emphasis on early first use of nuclear weapons (in the case of Russia) and to dilute their nuclear no-first use rhetoric (in the case of China).

Three decades after nuclear hegemony peaked and entered into decline, the result is a generalized crisis that affects all levels of nuclear hegemony. As the pre-eminent theorist of modern hegemony Gramsci stated: “The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear” (Bauman 2012, 49).

The remainder of this essay explores the thesis that we have already entered into a post-hegemonic nuclear interregnum. It examines how the Trump Administration’s policies reflect this unravelling of nuclear hegemony, and describes the contradictory trends and risk-taking that characterize this interregnum. It suggests that Trump’s policies on nuclear weapons are themselves morbid symptoms of the interregnum. It concludes with speculation on how potential counter-hegemonic strategies might reduce these risks and revive the ailing agenda of the universal abolition of nuclear weapons.

## Trump’s Attack on Nuclear Hegemony

Even before his election, Trump devalued American nuclear extended deterrence by suggesting that allies such as Japan and South Korea might do well to proliferate. After his inauguration, he battered allied reliance on nuclear extended deterrence by proposing over the heads of the United States’ hapless allies and the Ukraine, already suffering from Russian-sponsored attacks, that the United States and Russia trade lower levels of nuclear weapons in return for sanctions relief (Faulconbridge and James 2017). This signaled to the allies the immediate prospect that the United States led by Trump may sacrifice nuclear extended deterrence for gains not only far smaller than reduction of existential threats, but worse, that might increase the perceived threat to them from Russia at the same time that Trump is questioning whether US forces and nuclear weapons should be committed to protect them at all! In short, Trump is strengthening the disintegrative logic at work in American nuclear hegemony that was already in motion well before his election, but not yet explicit.

The first year of the Trump Administration revealed more unsettling glimpses of Trump’s intention in the form of public statements, tweets and appointments, expanded upon in doctrinal formalism such as the *Nuclear Posture Review* and nuclear modernization budgets. These indicators suggest that Trump will accelerate the dissolution of residual American nuclear hegemony at all three levels of ideology, institutions and forces.

First, he seems intent on jettisoning a consensual, shared vision of the future based on “a stable world of nuclear deterrence by responsible nuclear powers,” to be made safe by arms control and non-proliferation while maintaining the political fig leaf of the nuclear disarmament commitment of NPT Article 6 deferred indefinitely. Without such a vision and guiding principles, hegemony cannot be consensual and if continued, could become an exercise of outright imperial domination, reminiscent more of the Soviet Union than American nuclear hegemony realized in the twentieth century *Pax Americana*.

So far, Trump has not prefigured a “Trump doctrine” that would reframe nuclear deterrence and thereby redefine the nature of nuclear alliance with a new guiding ideology. Standard notions of nuclear deterrence ideology are at the core of his Administration’s *Nuclear Posture Review*. It restored a few destabilizing elements removed by Obama such as insistence on the US first use prerogative against states using chemical weapons, introducing the notion of deterring cyberwarfare with the threat of nuclear strikes, and argued for complete refurbishment of the entire nuclear triad with new submarines, bombers and missiles, and adding a new, low yield warhead to the American nuclear arsenal (US Department of Defense 2018). As justification, it argued that the world is a dangerous place and that a worsening international security environment demand more nuclear weapons to hedge against uncertainty and shocks – simply reiterating the Cold War era core of nuclear ideology, and advancing no conceptual innovations to motivate allies, partners, third parties or even adversaries to sustain the formerly hegemonic posture.

When combined with his many expressions of skepticism about the need for alliances such as NATO or bilateral alliances with Japan and South Korea, and overtly disrespectful treatment of key Five Eyes and nuclear allies such as Australia and Canada whose real estate (Pine Gap joint base in Australia, early warning radars in Canada) provide critical information in American nuclear command and control and early warning systems (Tanter 2016), and his outright alienation of Germany and NATO member states (Farrell 2017), the result is confusion about the strategic rationale of nuclear alliance under Trump. The resulting uncertainty is likely to lead to hedging and unpredictable behavior by allies and adversaries alike, and has already encouraged pro-nuclear advocates in South Korea, Japan, Australia and Germany to re-examine their respective nuclear weapons options (Lee 2017; Romei 2017; Walker 2018; Kühn, Volpe, and Thompson 2017).

Trump’s rhetoric also lit a fire under the counter-hegemonic movement already motivated by the risk of nuclear war and the prospective damage to the global commons and immense humanitarian, genocidal, ecocidal and urbicidal costs of nuclear war and aggression based on nuclear threats – leading 122 states to vote for the creation of the Nuclear Weapons Prohibition Treaty on 7 July 2017, a convergence stimulated in large part by the work of the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons that received the Nobel Peace Prize on 10 December 2017. Once ratified, the prohibition states represent more than a majority of states and contain about 46 percent of humanity. Should some umbrella states defect to the prohibition camp, the latter would likely become a majority of humanity living in states that challenge the core rationale of and organization of nuclear alliances led by the United States,<sup>7</sup> and would provide an alternative narrative to that of American nuclear hegemony.

Second, Trump has signaled a radical shift of US support away from the formerly US-led global nuclear non-proliferation regime, already tottering under the weight of four non-NPT nuclear-armed states. He began this process even before his election by suggesting that Japan and South Korea may do well to develop independent nuclear arsenals. By suggesting that Asian and NATO allies should pay more for the United

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<sup>7</sup>The mortal threat of the Nuclear Weapons Prohibition Treaty to US nuclear extended operations, both nuclear and conventional support to nuclear operations, is explained in detail in “UNITED STATES NON-PAPER: DEFENSE IMPACTS OF POTENTIAL UNITED NATIONS GENERAL ASSEMBLY NUCLEAR WEAPONS BAN TREATY,” AC/333-N(2016)0029 (INV), 17 October 2016. [http://www.icanw.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/NATO\\_OCT2016.pdf](http://www.icanw.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/NATO_OCT2016.pdf).

States to remain committed to its alliances, Trump prefigured that the United States might shift from nuclear hegemon to nuclear mercenary status, basically, a nuclear gun for hire by allies, one that will not hesitate to use their vulnerability as a basis for extortion on trade or other grounds.

This demand was doubly troubling for allies. His assertion that they do not pay a fair share of the cost of US forces committed to nuclear alliances ignores their existing substantial contributions, neglects to mention the strategic benefits to the United States at the regional and global level obtained from having forces forward-deployed, fails to recognize the geopolitical and domestic political cost of hosting US forces to the allies, and overlooks the fact that withdrawing them would increase greatly the financial cost to the United States of these forces (because allies would no longer contribute and because the cost of home-basing is higher than at allied bases).<sup>8</sup> Thus, Trump's threat to withdraw US forces from Korea and Japan is similar to a mafia boss threatening businesses who pay *pizzo* (protection payment) – except that he threatens to also shoot himself in the foot unless they pay more. Such internal contradictions leave the allies scratching their heads and perplexed as to his true intention. During the Cold War, allies such as Australia, Japan and Korea relied on the United States to pursue a global logic that embodied strategic stability, albeit at the risk of inadvertent global, regional and local nuclear war and nuclear accident. Absent such a strategic logic – which is clearly missing in Trump's worldview – allies are not only not reassured by US nuclear weapons, they are profoundly worried about entanglement in a-strategic, stop-start, and even profoundly dangerous US nuclear policies and postures.

Once the core consensus of nuclear hegemony is shattered, it cannot be restored intact. During the previous three decades, orthodox strategic deterrence ideology remained in force even as institutions began to fray and forces began to fall far short of their former absolute primacy. A Hillary Clinton Administration might have avoided such a rapid implosion of shared understanding and trust with the United States, although structural trends leading allies to question the fundamentals were manifest already in the first decade of the twenty-first century, most obviously in the failure of the United States to stop North Korean nuclear proliferation. A post-Trump administration might still try to reconstruct the old hegemonic ideology from the remnants. But having been squandered and devalued in extraordinary ways by Trump, trust in American leadership is no longer a stable pillar of global and regional security, and trust is a critical element of hegemonic leadership based on shared orientations and guided by a common ideology. As EU President Donald Tusk declared after Trump pulled the United States out of the 2015 deal to halt Iran's nuclear program: "Looking at the latest decisions of Donald Trump, someone could even think: With friends like that, who needs enemies?"

Added Tusk, "He has made us realize that if you need a helping hand, you will find one at the end of your arm" (Birnbbaum 2018). It is hard to think of a clearer statement of the damage done to American hegemonic leadership.

Thus, as noted earlier in this essay, Trump has forced American allies and adversaries to recognize that volatility and rupture, not continuity with past policy and strategic stability, are now permanent features of globalized, post-hegemonic

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<sup>8</sup>Assuming that the United States retains such forces at home bases rather than demobilizing them. See Park (2016) and Yoshida (2016).

era. They must now adapt to the fact that fluidity and flux, not stability and structure, constitute their external security environment. At least some are likely to be convinced by Trump that they need to move on to construct their own nuclear security rather than to rely on American nuclear weapons (Hulbert 2018; Hacke 2018), especially because China, Russia and other regional big powers such as India aspire already to assume to displace American hegemonic power, at least at regional levels. Reversion to the status *quo ante* is not an ideological option in these circumstances.

In addition to abandoning shared ideology and to stimulating nuclear proliferation, the third way that Trump has underscored American retrenchment into a non-hegemonic, purely self-interested nuclear posture was his announcement, out loud, that the United States will embark on a nuclear arms race, but not one based on a strategic rationale but rather, aiming to secure lesser benefits such as trade deals and possibly demarcation of great power zones of influence that harken back to the Cold War and even to the period of outright colonial and imperial power (as implied by his embrace of President Putin and de facto recognition of Russian occupation of Crimea and eastern Ukraine). Thus, he seems unlikely to forward deploy nuclear weapons to allied states on a NATO-risk sharing model that imply a willingness to trade Seoul or Tokyo for Guam or Los Angeles. Rather, Trump is funding more ballistic missile defense, home-based long-range bombers and missiles, an expanded navy, and space-based communication systems that make ground stations outside of the United States less important for nuclear command and control and intelligence operations, and reduce US dependence on its allies via institutional integration of bases and force deployments.

Trump's nuclear modernization budgets are certain to collide with demands to fund an increasingly unilateral, America first global posture, operating primarily from the American homeland and island outposts, using vastly expanded conventional military forces. Equally certain is if these funds are spent, the US federal budget deficit will blow out anew with resulting detrimental effects on US interest rates, exchange rates and trade competitiveness. These negative trends will compound US domestic social and economic dislocation from two generations of neglect and under-investment, thereby hollowing out the political and economic foundations of American power. Admittedly, these corrosive effects are in the future and are discounted to zero by Trump's short term political horizon. But they are certain to accelerate the decline of American nuclear hegemony due to the contraction of the industrial and technological bases of the modernization of American nuclear forces; and by reinforcing calls to focus on domestic rather than foreign policy concerns.

In the near term, the increasingly unilateral orientation of American nuclear forces under Trump may become manifestly obvious and politically unsustainable in Seoul and Tokyo as well as in many NATO non-nuclear weapon states that rely on American nuclear extended deterrence. These allies will have to make hard choices. If they choose to make their own nuclear weapons, they may find themselves pushing on an open door. Trump may welcome that the allies go-it-alone with independent nuclear forces to reduce the relative power of China or to beset Russia with additional nuclear-capable neighbors in the Far East. There is no reason to expect Trump to be consistent in supporting allied proliferation, however. He might judge Japan a useful stand-in to

confront China and Russia while insisting that South Korea not proliferate due to the dire and immediate risk of nuclear war with North Korea – a needless distraction at the global level in his transactional approach, and therefore to be avoided. In his predatory pursuit of short term benefits, creating contradictions that keeps all parties off balance is preferable to continuity and stability that creates predictability in otherwise anarchic international relations.

## Post-Hegemonic Ad Nuclear Alliances?

During a post-hegemonic era, long-standing nuclear alliances are likely to be replaced by ad hoc nuclear coalitions, aligning and realigning around different congeries of threat and even actual nuclear wars, with much higher levels of uncertainty and unpredictability than was the case in the nuclear hegemonic system.

There are a number of ways that this dynamic could play out during the interregnum, and these dynamics are likely to be inconsistent and contradictory. In some instances, the sheer momentum of past policy combined with bureaucratic inertia and the potency of political, military service and corporate interests, may ensure that residual aspects of the formerly hegemonic postures are adhered to even as formal nuclear alliances rupture. Even as they reach for the old anchors, these states may be forced to adjust and retrench strategically, or start to take their own nuclear risks by making increasingly explicit nuclear threats and deployments against nuclear-armed adversaries – as Japan has begun to do with reference to its “technological deterrent” since about 2012.<sup>9</sup> This period could last for many years until and when nuclear war breaks out and leads to a post-nuclear war disorder; or a new, post-hegemonic strategic framework is established to manage and/or abolish nuclear threat.

Under full-blown American nuclear hegemony, fewer states had nuclear weapons, the major nuclear weapons states entered into legally binding restraints on force levels and they learned from nuclear near-misses to promulgate rules of the road and tacit understandings. The lines drawn during full-blown collisions involving nuclear weapons were stark and concentrated the minds of leaders greatly. In a nuclear duel, it was clear that only one of two sides could fire first; the only question was which one. Now, with nine nuclear weapons states, and conflicts conceivably involving three, four or more of them, no matter how much leaders concentrate, it will not be evident who is aiming at who, who may fire first, and during a volley, who fired first and even who hit whom.

In a highly proliferated world, nuclear-armed states may feel driven to obtain larger nuclear forces able to deter multiple adversaries at the same time, sufficient to conduct not only a few nuclear attacks but configured to fight more than one protracted nuclear war at a time, especially in nuclear states torn apart by civil war and post-nuclear attack reconstruction. The first time nuclear weapons are used since 1945 will be shocking, the second time, less so, the third time, the new normal.

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<sup>9</sup>A “technological deterrent” means an immediately available nuclear weapons option that is understood to be such (as distinct from a “latent nuclear weapon” by virtue of Japan having requisite industrial capacities for a nuclear weapons program, but also being totally devoid of present or future intention to develop such). A senior LDP politician, Shigeru Ishida, stated in an interview with journalist Masakatsu Ota on 25 October 2011 in *Shinano Mainichi Shinbun* newspaper: “We should keep nuclear fuel cycle, which is backed by enrichment and reprocessing, cycling” in order to maintain “technical deterrence.” In Ota’s view, Ishida meant both in this interview. Personal communication, 5 October 2014.

Trump may think that the United States is already in such a world and may gain more from an untrammelled nuclear competition than from a relatively stable hegemonic world based on American nuclear leadership. He will still want the United States to have the sharpest elbows in a world crowded with nuclear-armed states, and to have more capable nuclear weapons than anyone else in order to keep everyone distant, allies and enemies included.

Perhaps more likely, Trump hasn't thought through what may follow from dismantling American nuclear hegemony. Instead, he blurts out what comes to mind each time he confronts a nuclear weapons dilemma and the incongruity of hegemonic nuclear ideology with post-Cold War strategic realities. Rather than dwelling on Trump's personal traits, therefore, it is more interesting to ask how he may bring about inadvertent nuclear war given these trends and the true complexity of the twenty-first century world system. These fundamental trends will determine the characteristics of American nuclear alliances in the interregnum more than Trump's pronouncements and actions.

### **Trump's Collision with East Asian Strategic Realities**

When Trump's political persona collides with geo-strategic reality, this conjuncture may increase greatly the risk of nuclear war during the post-hegemonic interregnum in a way that was not possible during the hegemonic era due to the international and domestic constraints on Presidential behavior. This reality also forces him to adjust his radical policies and to revert to reliance of some elements of the hegemonic era. This emergent condition of ambivalence, vacillation and transition is peculiar to the complexity that characterizes the interregnum. In it, Trump could easily overreach and catapult the world from its post-hegemonic interregnum into an era of full-blown nuclear disorder.

There are two nuclear-prone conflicts in Northeast Asia that are structured in ways that contain such escalation potential. These are between US-China over Taiwan and US-DRPK over Korea. Three other nuclear-prone conflicts in this region (India-China, Russia-China, Russia-US via Europe) indirectly involve the United States. A particularly significant risk is that Trump may start making nuclear threats against other nuclear-armed states primarily for compellence rather than deterrence. A deterrent threat tries to stop someone from doing something that they intend to do but have not yet done whereas a compellent threat tries to force someone to stop what they are already doing. The United States has found it much harder to achieve nuclear compellence even against non-nuclear states, let alone nuclear-armed states, because compellence is often attempted against states with higher resolve and greater stakes in a conflict than the United States. These factors usually outweigh the United States' lesser ability to exit from an escalation spiral and its stake in maintaining reputation if it fails to follow through on a specific threat. Using nuclear threat more for compellence than deterrence also increases the stakes of all parties in a conflict, and thereby increases risks of inadvertent war, especially in conditions of increasing complexity that multiply the way that nuclear coercion is invoked by context (Bracken 2017).

Trump exhibits a proclivity to embrace patently false theories and to invent and propagate purely fictional "facts" and a vindictive, self-aggrandizing, and aggressive decision-making style. His decision-making bias may drive him to order the United States to use military force in ways that purposely and inadvertently risk war and

nuclear war with other nuclear weapons states. Such was undoubtedly the case in his “fire and fury” threats against the DPRK, his statement that he might annihilate the entire North Korean nation, and his deployment of strategic assets in the vicinity of the DPRK (Wagner and Johnson 2017; Nakamura and Gearan 2017; Schmitt 2017). Some pundits argued that this posture – and the North Korean response – increased the risk of war in the Korean Peninsula in 2017 to 50 percent (Rudd 2017). A more informed estimate from markets is that the risk of war increased from 0.1 percent per year to perhaps 1 percent per year as a result of the increased tension and combative rhetorical and forceful threat campaigns by Trump and Kim Jong Un, the risk being the use of nuclear weapons in Korea and beyond, and a trillion dollar war with resulting potential massive disruption of global financial, energy and other markets (Kim and Lam 2017). Such risks led South Korea’s newly elected leader, Moon Jae-in, to declare publicly that the ROK must concur in any decision to go to war against the DPRK, and his officials to state that it had not intention to do so in case of a unilateral American attack on the DPRK. That an allied leader felt impelled to make such a statement reveals the extent to which hegemonic leadership has already disappeared from the US-ROK alliance.<sup>10</sup>

If Trump were to make similar explicit compellence threats against China, for example, at the brink of a war over the future of Taiwan, then he could find himself standing on the nuclear brink almost overnight. Should this occur at the same time as he makes common cause with Russia to tilt the global strategic triangle against China, thereby threatening it with the two possible nuclear adversaries able to pre-emptively attack its strategic nuclear forces, then he may force Beijing to respond with new deployments and new threats of its own, setting the scene for rapid escalation from a local military clash that catapults the two states onto one or more of the pathways to inadvertent nuclear war. This outcome is not unthinkable. China’s deployment of DF-41 ICBM units in northern China in January 2017<sup>11</sup> (timed to coincide with Trump’s inauguration) is reminiscent of its 1968–69 deployments when it traded blows with the former Soviet Union at the Amur River and the latter apparently entertained a joint Soviet-American nuclear strike to disarm China.<sup>12</sup> Putin reportedly sees no threat in these missiles and China’s main strategic concern is to reach the United States and India while defeating US anti-ballistic systems. But Russia’s prior deployment of short and intermediate range missiles along its Siberian and Far Eastern border with China<sup>13</sup> and statements about strengthening its forces in response to China’s ICBM deployments (Blagov 2017) also suggest that distrust between Russia and China is still active in the global strategic triangle.

There are other avenues to inadvertent nuclear war that Trump could find himself taking, leaving aside the most obvious flashpoint in the Taiwan Straits. For example, US allies could overreach by challenging Chinese core interests. If the June 2018 US-DPRK

<sup>10</sup>Agence France Press, “South Korean President Moon Jae-In: There Will Be No War On Korean Peninsula,” 17 August 2017, at: <https://www.firstpost.com/world/south-korean-president-moon-jae-in-there-will-be-no-war-on-korean-peninsula-3939653.html>.

<sup>11</sup>“China deploys ICBM near Russian border,” TASS, 24 January 2017, at: <http://tass.com/world/926888>.

<sup>12</sup>On 18 August 1969 an under-cover KGB agent asked an American official what the United States would do if the Soviets destroyed China’s nuclear installations, presumably with nuclear weapons. See U.S. State Department Memorandum of Conversation, “US Reaction to Soviet Destruction of CPR [Chinese Peoples Republic] Nuclear Capability; Significance of Latest Sino-Soviet Border Clash, ...,” 18 August 1969, Secret/Sensitive, at: <http://nsarc.hive.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB49/sino.sov.10.pdf>.

<sup>13</sup>“Iskander’s Reach,” *Russian Defense Policy*, 20 November 2016. <https://russiandefpolicy.blog/2016/11/20/iskanders-reach/>.

denuclearization deal collapses, South Korea could respond to North Korean covert or overt attacks with all-out war irrespective of American intention. Japan could attack Chinese warships or aircraft over contested islands, drawing US forces into military conflict with China. China might quickly use drones to attack US-Japanese joint facilities such as underwater tracking systems to protect its own submarines and to threaten American submarines supporting US aircraft carrier groups, leading to rapid fire escalation with the United States and allied military forces (Hayes 2018). That China and the United States could control subsequent escalation is certainly questionable (Ayson and Ball 2015). Nuclear terrorism is a wild card that could erupt in any of the states in the region and depending on the level of tension at the time, could catalyze inter-state conflict and lead to war involving nuclear threat and nuclear attacks.

One of Trump's core ancillary beliefs is that China has "raped" the American economy via "unfair" trade (Cowburn 2016). His apparent predisposition to exploit nuclear threats for non-existential objectives is most likely to be expressed in how he confronts China, especially as he seems determined to block the rise of Chinese hegemony. In contrast, he seems more inclined to make "deals" with Russian President Putin than to use nuclear compellence against Russia. But no-one can predict such outcomes and Trump's strategy of causing and then exploiting chaos increases uncertainty for all nuclear-armed states – the opposite of what is needed to reduce the risk of inadvertent nuclear war.

### **How Long Might the Interregnum Last?**

There are many reasons to think that a period of post-hegemonic interregnum may persist for many years, and certainly longer than even a second Trump Administration. In matters of trade, migration, infrastructure, education, no American president, no matter how powerful, can change the status quo overnight. Policies must be developed and reviewed, stakeholders consulted and coopted or crushed and neutralized, budgets reviewed and reconciled, laws passed, regulations issued, people trained, bureaucratic resistance overcome, which takes years. Similarly, it takes decades to research, develop, procure and deploy new strategic weapon systems – and to spend the federal budget into a black hole that then forces retrenchment and cutbacks in planned weapons systems or offsets in other areas of military and entitlement programs in the US federal budget.

An attempt to short circuit this democratic process that defines and funds American nuclear modernization and force recovery would entail revolutionary or what former Trump advisor Steve Bannon called Leninist changes to the United States legal and political system (Sebestyen 2017). This might be invoked as an emergency response to an event such as a terrorist attack or other national security emergency. Some analysts already anticipate just such a move by the Trump White House, possibly against a purported fifth column in the government or in the media, and similar to the internment of Japanese Americans in World War II – or worse. Trump might also call his base to arms if the Muller investigation of Russian influence in the 2016 US presidential campaign culminates in an attempt to impeach him for the dealings with Russia before the election as well as for crimes he may have committed in office. Certainly the authoritarian tendencies appear strong (Sit 2018; Rucker 2018), even untrammelled in the Trump Presidency now unleashed from restraint imposed by "senior adults" in the first year of his Administration.

Nonetheless, short of overturning the domestic American polity into an authoritarian state, Trump's immediate ability to change the existing nuclear weapons system is constrained by logistical, security, and organizational factors. In the short term, he's left with a short list of reducing or increasing alert levels, deploying nuclear weapons to or withdrawing them from overseas, implementing the modernization program for new nuclear warheads and developing and producing new delivery platforms and other costs to refurbish the nuclear weapons enterprise in the United States, pulling out of more treaties such as that on intermediate nuclear forces, and resuming the testing of nuclear weapons.

Such measures can tweak and marginally adjust the United States' current nuclear posture, but the nuclear weapons triad is quite rigid, has immense mass and inertia, and for the most part, is immune to rapid changes. Thus, the underlying force structure that fuses legacy and modern technology, is sufficiently capable to launch any strikes that Trump orders for the foreseeable future.

Similarly, the extensive institutional integration between US forces and allies, from staff exchanges, combined training and exercises, deployed forces such as battle groups at sea or units on the ground in conflict zones, not to mention in matters of sourcing, shared military science and technology, and shared intelligence, is not easy to dismantle even as Trump casts doubt and suspicion on such arrangements as potentially traitorous in nature. Multilateral structures such as the International Atomic Energy Agency or the Nuclear Suppliers Group which are central to stopping the spread of nuclear weapons technology to potential state proliferators will not collapse overnight even if the United States were to withdraw. So long as they do not obstruct immediate actions that are deemed necessary to restore Trump's vision of America First, then these arrangements likely will be tolerated by a Trump White House. Ironically, the corollary of the Trump White House not appointing many senior managers in the executive branch is that it is weak in implementation, in obtaining congressional approval for budgetary commitments, and for constructing new management frameworks that reflect Trump's views.

Officials and political appointees skilled at bureaucratic process may have succeeded in restraining Trump's worst impulses – although they failed utterly when it came to the United States' withdrawal from the Iran Deal in May 2018. But these senior figures cannot restore American nuclear hegemony without presidential leadership. Conversely, if they fail to curtail Trump's worst impulses, then the White House may start avoidable nuclear wars which would end overnight what's left of American nuclear hegemony, pitching the world into a cataclysmic future of nuclear wars.

At best, the spectacle of the Trump White House muddling through confrontations with nuclear-armed adversaries without using nuclear weapons but risking nuclear war may convince some allies that sticking with the former hegemon during the interregnum is in their strategic interest.

At worst, if it comes to light that the world averts a nuclear wars only because US civilian and military personnel disobey illegal nuclear strike orders issued by President Trump, then the damage to residual hegemonic authority would be terminal for many of the nuclear allies and security partners who may even withdraw from alliances with the United States.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup>At the height of the Cuban Missile Crisis, for example, at a Mace missile base in Okinawa and in a Soviet submarine deep under the Atlantic Ocean, American and Soviet officers refused to fire nuclear weapons when ordered to do so separated by only six hours although they were on opposite sides of the planet on opposing sides in the Crisis. Whether such officers would re-enact such restraint in a Trump-Putin-Xi era is unknowable.

In between nuclear disorder based on war and nuclear restoration based on American hegemony is a world in which these different attempts to reconstruct the old order commingle and clash. These range from shoring up the allied institutions of nuclear deterrence and non-proliferation, responding to the challenges of new technology that disrupt the old habits and procedures of nuclear war-making, and shifting to an entirely new, state-based framework that somehow improvises new ways to make nuclear threat a usable political or military capacity in an increasingly interdependent, globalized and fractious world.

Due to its complexity, the outcome of this contention in the interregnum is unpredictable. It is also subject to bottom-up, self-organizing efforts to govern and abolish the nuclear threat rooted in civil society, markets and cities and state-level governments.

### **Counter-Hegemonic Movements and Post-Hegemonic Frameworks in Northeast Asia**

If there is no shared nuclear ideology on which to base consensus and to make nuclear alliance legitimate, then the existing institutions of American nuclear alliances likely will last for a while longer due to their bureaucratic inertia and sheer momentum, but will be increasingly ineffective in managing competitive nuclear threat with American adversaries such as Russia, China or North Korea.

Conversely, the rise of the global nuclear weapons prohibition movement and the establishment of the Nuclear Weapons Prohibition Treaty that will govern more stringently existing nuclear weapons free zones suggest that allied elites may question the necessity and desirability of dependence on the United States for nuclear extended deterrence to the point that they not only doubt the legitimacy of nuclear alliance, but defect to the nuclear prohibition camp opposed to all nuclear weapons.

In one of the crucial tests of the efficacy of Trump's policies during the nuclear interregnum – the case of North Korea's nuclear breakout – social movements already played a critical role in channeling how the disorder unleashed by Trump's "maximum pressure" campaign on North Korea evolved into diplomatic negotiations and dialogue in June 2018. The election of Moon Jae-in was the direct result of the "candlelight revolution" to evict the ROK's corrupt former president, Park Geun-Hye, in part due to her confrontational approach to the DPRK that encouraged the Trump Administration's escalation of nuclear threat against the DPRK in 2017 – and the North's rapid fire nuclear and missile testing in response. Whether Moon's supporters will mobilize sufficient voters and other power assets to induce the ROK to declare an end to nuclear extended deterrence is an open question. But if a denuclearization deal that truly disarms the DPRK's nuclear forces is struck, then the ROK may indeed make this rhetorical shift, especially if a Korean Nuclear Weapons Free Zone is given nuclear negative security assurances by all nuclear weapons states, not just the DPRK by the United States. Whether the ROK signs the Nuclear Weapons Prohibition Treaty even if it does not ratify it immediately will be an important indicator of where it – and North Korea – might head in the coming years.

Thereafter, the critical issue will be to what extent eliminating nuclear threat from the Korean Peninsula is reflected in regional security structures. The United States could use this revision of its military role in Korea to construct an informal triangular

alliance with Japan and the two Koreas aimed at containing China. Alternately, it could work in concert with China to create a regional security institutional framework in which to manage security issues and to minimize and eventually abolish nuclear threat and weapons altogether. The latter option would seem required to achieve China's constructive role in investing in infrastructure development in North Korea, a key part of Trump's argument to the DPRK as to why it should disarm its nuclear weapons. Such a comprehensive security institutional framework may also be the only way to achieve legally binding verification and nuclear negative security assurances that satisfy the three most critical parties to the Korean conflict, the United States and the two Koreas. Given that the NPT itself is under threat due in part to the obduracy of the five NPT nuclear weapons states about acting on their nuclear disarmament obligations, regional states may also find it desirable to create a regional framework that buttresses global regime that are increasingly ineffective.

A successful social movement that creates alternatives to resurgent nuclear hegemony and its legacy of rigid institutions, to nuclear-armed ad hoc coalitions of the willing and unilateral nuclear aggression in the form of threats and warfighting during the post-hegemonic interregnum will address a wide range of human as well as state-based security issues. It will need to create new cosmopolitan identities that transcend nuclear nationalism and that are inconsistent with the values represented by weapons of mass destruction and the annihilation of whole cities, nations, even nature itself (Oh 2018).<sup>15</sup> A strategic question that confronts this social movement is how it will span not only the nuclear prohibition states, and those umbrella states subject to past American nuclear hegemony and now its nuclear interregnum, but also engages the independent (Israel, India) and in some cases, authoritarian (Pakistan, China, North Korea, Russia) nuclear-armed states to push for universal prohibition.

Even as they are confronted by morbid symptoms of the ending of American nuclear hegemony, and confront this immense global challenge, social movements are limited only by their vision, insight and imagination as to what can be achieved in the prevailing interregnum to abolish nuclear weapons, and who will be drawn into the struggle for truly global nuclear governance.

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## Notes on Contributor

*Peter Hayes* is Honorary Professor, Center for International Security Studies, Sydney University, Australia and Director, Nautilus Institute in Berkeley, California. His main research interests are nuclear weapons, climate change and energy security, particularly in Northeast Asia.

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<sup>15</sup>Many parallels are found in Oh (2018).

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