

## Abstract:

The paper develops, and discerns between, the conceptual securitisation moves of nuclear deterrence and a securitisation 'of humanity'. These competing moves of deterrence vie for legitimacy, manifested as inertia in the arms control regime, in the absence of major nuclear disarmament by the N5. The paper applies the nascent framework of existential security and utilises select securitisation theories to present an argument in favour of the securitisation of humanity against the nuclear threat. The piece is situated at the intersect of critical nuclear scholarship and work on deterrence's securitisation. NATO's re-securitisation of Russia serves as the contextual frame of the theoretical argument. The conception of securitisation depth is developed, with potential implications for future disarmament proposals. Ultimately, if the securitisation 'of humanity' is to succeed, it must seek means of overwhelming the securitisation of nuclear deterrence. A symbolic existential threat to the state is conflated with the objective existential threat to the species, which imperils its long-term future with civilisational collapse. I conclude that a plan for global nuclear control should receive greater scholarly attention despite its marginal prospects for success under resurgent great-power competition.

## The Competing Securitisation Moves of Nuclear Deterrence and Humanity's Survival

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*"neither individual nor international security exists...  
the concept of security refers to the state"<sup>1</sup>*

### Introduction

This paper develops and discerns between the securitisation moves of nuclear deterrence and a securitisation of 'humanity'. Its conceptual and theoretical contribution responds to Amir Lupovici's (2019) developments in *Toward a Securitization Theory of Deterrence*. Lupovici notes a limited engagement in relating deterrence and securitisation theory (ibid. 179). Addressing this research gap, I draw from Rita Floyd's (2019; 2024) securitisation theories and studies of desecuritisation (Aradau, 2004; Hansen, 2012; Austin and Beaulieu-Brossard, 2018) to infer theoretical developments relating to the desecuritisation process. This is shown to hold policy implications, such as the practicability of major nuclear disarmament. The need to elucidate these concepts is immediate given the resurgence of great-power competition and heightened nuclear risk (e.g. Vicente et al., 2023). NATO's re-securitisation of Russia (Sperling and Webber, 2017) serves to contextualise these theoretical elements, though these could be readily applied to deepening Sino-American competition.

Whilst the 'Copenhagen School' developed securitisation theory initially (ST) (Wæver, 1995; Buzan et al., 1998; Buzan and Wæver, 2009), this paper contributes to the post-Copenhagen School securitisation scholarship (Balzacq, 2011; Vuori, 2008; Stritzel, 2007; Floyd, 2010; 2019; 2024) and work which bridges securitisation theory and deterrence studies (Vuori, 2008; Villumsen Berling 2011, 391; Lupovici, 2019 in Stritzel 2014). By merging select literatures, the paper develops a normative argument that critiques the de-securitisation of deterrence, requested by disarmament advocates. Here, certain disarmament proposals are considered a de-securitisation of deterrence practice and a return to 'normal politics', as opposed to a 'securitisation of humanity'. The deterrence system's very existence is normalised whilst the extreme existential threat of nuclear war is justified to the electorate of nuclear-weapon states. My project of formalising the implications of *existential security* in security studies utilises the nascent framework to interrogate the securitisation moves of

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<sup>1</sup> Wæver (1995: 48-49) in Rychnovská (2014).

deterrence (see Sears, 2020; 2021). The tension between the national and existential security frames remains apparent due to the existent threat of nuclear winter, demonstrating the redundancy of the national security frame at the onset of the ‘Third Nuclear Age’.<sup>2</sup> Whilst existential security incorporates aspects of human security it remains at odds with most national security approaches (see Sears, 2020: 258-9). Appraisals of ‘risk’ as the ‘new security’ problematises this endeavour, however, as risk politics is claimed to be distinct from securitisation (Corry, 2011). Status quo deterrence approaches are highly contested by critical nuclear scholars (e.g. Walker, 2000; Pelopidas, 2016; 2017; Ritchie, 2013; 2019; Kurosawa, 2018; Egeland, 2020; Vaughan, 2024). Some of these approaches bolster the argument for prioritising existential security in global policy, though not all. The tension between the national, human (humanitarian) and existential security paradigms problematise moves towards nuclear disarmament, inhibiting the recognition, then establishment of, existential security.

The paper aims to dispute the normalisation of deterrence’s securitisation moves whilst considering a competing securitisation ‘of humanity’ – which constitutes existential security.<sup>3</sup> This securitisation ‘of humanity’ against the nuclear threat must *overwhelm* the securitisation of deterrence to guarantee collective survival. Here, overwhelming refers to replacing the deterrence system and establishing a new Global Nuclear Order (GNO).<sup>4</sup> This may require the formation of a supranational body capable of consolidating thermonuclear weapons, likely the UN security council (UNSC) – as will be developed herein. The paper holds policy implications insofar as disarmament paths via devaluing and delegitimising nuclear weapons (e.g. Ritchie, 2013; Kurosawa, 2018) are highly problematic and may even be normatively negative relative to ‘establishing’ existential security. Disarmament advocates often request the desecuritisation of deterrence practice without requesting the securitisation of humanity. This may hold distinct political effects such as ineffective disarmament efforts and the general failure to eliminate the objective existential threat to the species of nuclear war and nuclear winter. To summarise, there are discernible securitisation acts elaborated upon herein: 1) securitisation moves which sustain nuclear deterrence, perpetuated by the deterrence regime; 2) the macrosecuritisation of the nuclear threat to humanity – invoked by existential security.

### ***Ethicopolitical Dilemmas of Deterrence***

If the Russo-Ukrainian war corresponds with a developing ‘Second Cold War’ (Buzan, 2024), securitisation theory may better articulate the political moves at play. NATO-Russia relations could deteriorate further, heightening nuclear risk. Protracted tensions in the Indo-Pacific also raises concern over a possible Sino-American conflict in future (e.g. Krepinevich, 2024). The prospect of *any* ‘hot war’ between nuclear-weapon states poses a direct threat to existential security as the effects of nuclear winter constitutes a planetary scale threat. Why is this risk tolerated? Securitising deterrence

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<sup>2</sup> On the ‘Third Nuclear Age’ concept see Futter and Zala (2022).

<sup>3</sup> Deterrence is securitised, not politicised, despite speech acts which normalise and partially politicises deterrence practice. Here, the comparative ethicopolitical value of competing securitisation moves is brought to the fore in analysis, rather than the speech acts themselves. A focus on the speech act may confirm the silencing of the threat to humanity which the deterrence regime perpetuates.

<sup>4</sup> On the GNO see Walker (2000), Roberts (2007). For a reading of the GNO in lieu of the Russo-Ukrainian war see Bollfrass and Herzog (2022); Vicente et al. (2023).

involves inter-related moves: the macrosecuritisation of humanity competes with the sustained securitisation of nuclear deterrence, producing a hegemonic ‘nuclear control order’ (see Ritchie, 2019) which overwhelms competing moves. Nick Ritchie rightly states “the material presence of nuclear weapons with command and control systems capable of rapid and unprecedented violence has now become a permanent feature of global politics” (ibid. 416). The material characteristics of thermonuclear weapons, or simply their immense destructive potential, renders analysis of deterrence practice particularly problematic.

Some securitisation scholars seek to develop securitisation theory as an ethical frame of inquiry (Aradau, 2004, Floyd, 2019; 2024). Rita Floyd’s (2019) inclusion of Just War theory criterion in her *Just Securitisation Theory* (JST) facilitates such an approach. Shifting further away from the ‘speech act’ – otherwise the scholarly focus of ST – is appropriate in the nuclear context as deterrence practice is securitised ‘silently’. Jef Huysmans (2011) calls for greater focus on the ‘act’ itself rather than the centrality of speech in the securitisation process, favouring the concept of a ‘security act’ (ibid. 378). Meanwhile, Floyd emphasises that “an exclusive focus on the constructedness of security means that securitization scholars tend to ignore whether or not the threats that inform securitization are real or otherwise” (Floyd, 2019: 10) – a central concern for appraisals of deterrence also. Classifying ‘real threats’ as ‘objective existential threats’ is crucial to the reading of securitisation theory formalised in JST (see Floyd, 2019: 9-11). Floyd judges that “if the ethical goal of securitization analysis is that securitizing actors take responsibility for their actions, then a better strategy is to begin by (helping them in) judging the objective existence of a threat, because unless there is a real threat, securitization is most definitely the wrong political and ethical choice” (ibid. 11). In the realm of nuclear politics, the legitimization of deterrence practice involves a conflation of *symbolic* and *real* threats. This holds distinct ethicopolitical implications. A constructed *symbolic* threat to national security may be obscured by a *real* threat of mutual extermination. In Floyd’s JST only real threats may constitute ‘just reason’ for securitisation (ibid. 10). Whilst NATO may now view Russia as a ‘real threat’, and vice versa, the objective threat to the species must be placed as the top rank threat. Without comparative moral judgement here, we cannot deliberate between the competing securitisation moves of deterrence. If the securitisation of humanity is of greater moral value than the securitisation of deterrence, this holds implications for the discourse on NATO-Russia re-securitisation – the empirical case in this piece – but also for great-power competition more broadly.

Amir Lupovici (2019: 178) notes that “theoretical work on deterrence lacks the ability to capture the dynamics that lead actors to adopt, or abandon, deterrence strategies”. Can securitisation theory do so either? The securitisation of deterrence encompasses all securitisation moves which sustain the deterrence regime. There are political effects to the securitisation moves of deterrence: nuclear-weapon states oversee deterrence adoption, proceeding to sustain and entrench the practice of nuclear deterrence. Lupovici develops the definition of deterrence securitisation as “relying on deterrence strategy or issuing a deterrent threat in a specific domain or with specific means (for example, cyber or nuclear)—[to] legitimize the adoption of this strategy by constructing a threat as existential” (ibid. 181). Given the existential risk inherent in nuclear use – that of deterrence failure and nuclear war – legitimising the institutionalised practice of deterrence, which is a preparation to *use* thermonuclear weapons, may be the most extreme move a state can enact short of war. The securitisation process usually defines measures short of direct conflict, though in the case of a proxy war, NATO is not in direct conflict with Russia, but Ukraine *is*. The non-use of nuclear weaponry must then be layered onto this conception as nuclear non-use corresponds to *deep securitisation* but it may suggest a shift towards the threshold: to nuclear use *itself*.

The utilisation of Rita Floyd's JST (2019; 2022: 248) and its re-development under 'morally mandatory securitisation' (2024) could be of significant value here. Despite securitisation theory's focus on threat construction (Floyd, 2022: 250, F.9), JST judges the *moral permissibility* of securitisation moves: "JST offers emancipation from 'poor security practice towards a more just and enlightened security practice'" (Floyd, 2022: 279 in Floyd, 2024: 4). JST facilitates a comparative assessment of the risk and expected cost of respective competing securitisations. If the securitisation of deterrence is immoral, does this, in turn, legitimise a securitisation of humanity against the nuclear threat? Does the aggregate risk of deterrence entrenchment outweigh the risk of securitising humanity? Floyd (2024: 249) observes:

"(1) it seems reasonable to hold that the use of extraordinary emergency measures is at least sometimes morally permissible... and (2) that we – as a discipline – do not have a systematic normative theory that enables us to distinguish between securitisations that are morally justifiable, and those that are not".

In Floyd's theory of 'mandatory securitisation' she develops JST further, arguing that "obligation entails permissibility" as "no one can have a duty to do something unless that something is also morally permitted" (Floyd, 2024: 16). This re-development may aid us in discerning the competing securitisation moves at play here. One reservation for securitising humanity, however, is that it is 'forcible' security and there may be significant securitisation risks as such. If action is taken at the 'system-level' (the global level), any adverse effects would also be felt at this scale, apparent in calls for a world state – a radical solution to the nuclear dilemma (see Craig, 2019).

Floyd's observation of discerning 'perceived' from 'real' threats – absent in Wæver's (2011) developments – is key. Floyd states "securitization cannot be morally permissible, let alone required, unless there is a real existential threat" (2024: 17). The re-focusing on 'real threats' in JST could be analogous with 'real-physical' threats of annihilation, which I develop herein. These threats must be discerned as the legitimization of deterrence may be premised on a conflation of symbolic and 'real-physical' existential threats, as developed in group behavioural psychology (Hirschberger et al. 2016). Societal and/or civilisational collapse is a real-physical threat of annihilation whereas those symbolic threats to the state, perceived as existential, are a construct of national security. This involves the Self (the in-group) 'deterring' the Other (the out-group), leading to greater securitisation 'depth' during heightened security competition.<sup>5</sup> The 9/11 attacks led to the Global War on Terror but rested on the securitisation of a symbolic threat to Americans: "events that may seem physical because of their violent nature, but never posed a threat to group existence", this involves threats to "important group symbols of government, economic and military dominance" (Hirschberger et al., 2016: 16). A deterrent threat is powerful – perhaps the greatest threat to state survival, but this is understood as a 'positive' deterrent effect. Here, those that claim states will not risk mutual annihilation under deterrence are resting their assumptions on the *manageability* of nuclear risk (see Pelopidas, 2017). Pro-deterrence narratives neglect the risk of a catastrophic deterrence system failure. A real-physical threat of collective annihilation is imperilled by city-targeting in a nuclear war. This threat should overwhelm 'symbolic' threats to nuclear-weapons states. Without discerning perceived *symbolic* threats from their *real-physical* counterparts, the existential threats which warrant the respective securitisations of deterrence or humanity, respectively, cannot be distinguished. It follows that the success of humanity's securitisation may rest on this contestation. Only by acquiescing to the scale of the nuclear threat can we adequately respond to the ethical stakes at play. This may warrant radical disarmament measures like the formation of a world government.

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<sup>5</sup> Developed further in the final section.

Regional or ‘limited’ nuclear wars seem to present more nuanced scenarios of nuclear use but could still impact humanity’s long-term future if uncontained. Under Seth Baum *et al.*’s (2019: 9-10) ‘catastrophe trajectories’ concept a nuclear exchange *need not be* an extinction-level event for it to impact humanity’s long-term trajectory. An ‘existential catastrophe’ could impede humanity’s secure future as advanced civilisation may be *irretrievable* following a major nuclear war, or in their words “the success of post-catastrophe human civilization is not guaranteed, with the recovery of industry being a particularly strong impediment” (ibid. 27). Major nuclear war could inflict such global devastation as to effect a permanent setback on humanity. The nascent framework of existential security should, therefore, seek to scrutinise *any* forecasted nuclear catastrophes which could impact humanity’s long-term prospects. Whilst this argument seizes ‘humanity’ as the referent object, the nuclear threat also compromises national security *as much as* existential security here. By placing state survival above collective survival – as deterrence does – national security is paradoxically threatened. City-targeting follows a logic of annihilation. Consider Reinhold Niebuhr’s comment that “no one can be sure that a war won by the use of the modern means of mass destruction would leave enough physical and social substance to rebuild a civilization among either victors or vanquished” (Niebuhr 1952: 2 in Rock, 2018: 14). The potential loss of ‘advanced civilisation’ likely warrants a securitisation of humanity against the nuclear threat, warranting extraordinary moves. It remains, however, antithetical to national security at present.

### ***The Nuclear Threat to Humanity***

Are disarmament scholars seeking a successful securitisation of humanity against the nuclear threat or do they pursue a desecuritisation of deterrence? I claim disarmament proposals present distinct forms of *desecuritisation*. These moves have historical precedence. They are the culmination of all activism, scholarship and policy thus far, effectively work of ‘counter-hegemony’ against the nuclear order (see Vaughan, 2024). However, non-proliferation theory and practice fails to contribute to this endeavour as the non-proliferation ‘complex’ proposes reformist solutions to the ‘revolutionary’ nuclear dilemma (Craig and Ruzicka, 2013: 344-6). Ultimately, “nonproliferation and global zero fail because they are reformist solutions to a revolutionary problem” (Deudney, 1995 in Craig and Ruzicka, 2013: 244). Problematically then, main-stay disarmament approaches may pursue an unproductive desecuritisation of deterrence rather than a macrosecuritisation of humanity. If *morally mandatory*, as per Floyd (2024), this macro-move *must* overwhelm the deterrence system – entrenched in the Global Nuclear Order – replacing it entirely. Afterall, the failure to securitise humanity against the nuclear threat would only be realised *post*-nuclear war. In this case, the formation of an effective world government with a monopoly of nuclear force, able to eliminate the objective existential threat to the species may, in turn, also be morally mandatory.

Existential security should always take precedence when mutual annihilation is threatened. A powerful symbol of the securitisation of the nuclear threat to humanity is the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientist’s* ‘Doomsday Clock’ – a global referent object (Vuori, 2010). Buzan and Wæver (2009: 255) outline a precedent for the macrosecuritisation of humanity but also issue a cautionary note:

“attempts have been made to construct all of humankind as a security referent: most notably in terms of shared fate during the Cold War with the fear of nuclear annihilation, but increasingly now in the context of environmental fears. So far, however, the system-level has rarely been able to compete with

the middle-scale, though this does not mean that it will not become more attractive in the future as international circumstances change”.

The failure to securitise at the system (global) level is, in part, due to a lack of a supranational authority – an actor at the system-level – capable of ensuring its success. There are some actors at the state-level that are already pursuing of existential security, however. Mexico’s role in the 1967 ‘Treaty for the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons in Latin America and the Caribbean’ (the Tlatelolco Treaty) serves as one notable example. Ultimately, however, without a supranational actor like a world government there is no authoritative actor to *enforce* nuclear disarmament. An unproductive long-term project to delegitimise or devalue thermonuclear weapons (see Ritchie, 2013; Kurosawa, 2018), cannot greatly diminish the existent existential threat of nuclear war, neither can the management of their possession, under a ‘global regime of nuclear restraint’ do so either (contra. Tannenwald, 2020). Renewed great-power competition problematises arms control whilst the deterrence continues to *exist*, threatening collective annihilation.

A securitisation which goes beyond the ‘middle level’ of world politics, towards ‘higher order’ securitisations, defines a ‘(macro)securitisation’. If nuclear-weapon states respond to existential insecurity by initiating a macrosecuritisation of humanity this might compel a total replacement of the present nuclear order (the GNO). The successful securitisation of deterrence perpetuates its ‘mandatory’ character. For their part, critical nuclear scholars scrutinise the institutionalised practice of deterrence. Tom Vaughan (2024) calls for engagement in ‘counter-hegemony’ and ‘post-nuclear worldmaking’. Moreover, if the contemporary nuclear order is understood as ‘hegemonic’ (Ritchie, 2019), it contextualises the securitisation of deterrence which stifles or obfuscates the competing securitisation of humanity. Non-state actors clearly pursue a desecuritisation of deterrence though they do not necessarily invoke existential security – which requires the securitisation of humanity itself. According to Buzan and Wæver (2009: 256), historic ‘macro’ processes have involved “aspirations to provide an overarching securitisation that relates, organises and possibly subsumes a host of other middle-level securitisations”, such as the Global War on Terror and the “Cold War securitisations of East and West”. With the former, 9/11 led to an ‘overarching’ securitisation within the Liberal Order against the symbolic threat from terrorism. The latter, however, is due consideration as it involved the security blocs of the US and USSR sustaining nuclear deterrence – via securitisation – against the ‘other’ bloc, as the basis of a global security system. Deterrence requires the securitisation of the Other as an existential threat to the Self – the nation-state: “deterrence assumes a threatening Other who can be deterred” (Corry, 2011: 247). Under this reading, deterrence sustains a great-power stalemate not a lasting global peace.

Deterrence is framed as security-providing, whilst disarmament is consistently framed as ‘utopian’, demonstrating a ‘self-censorship’ in nuclear studies (Pelopidas, 2016).<sup>6</sup> Scholars have argued that this warrants a rejection of ‘risk reduction’ measures entirely (Pelopidas and Egeland, 2024), favouring the pursuance of radical, rather than reformist, solutions to the nuclear dilemma (Craig, 2019: 349-353). Does this ‘counter-hegemony’ by critical nuclear scholars constitute a desecuritisation of deterrence, or should it be understood as a securitisation of the nuclear threat to humanity? This may be a critical aspect to discern. If both are equivalent acts this is unproblematic, but if the latter – by taking humanity as the referent – differs from the former, it demonstrates the deterrence system’s resilience. Consider that “rejecting a securitizing move... may indeed reflect the prevailing social (and obviously political) attitudes toward security legitimacy in a given context.”

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<sup>6</sup> Further consider the problematic funding sources and conflicts of interest in nuclear policy-making, which restricts scholarly independence (Egeland and Pelopidas, 2022).

(Ruzicka, 2019: 368). This contextualises the work of ‘orthodox’ disarmament scholars. Buzan and Wæver (2009: 257) clarify:

“macrosecuritisations have a more complicated structure than ordinary ones. Because they contain both higher and lower level securitisations they embody permanent tensions across the levels, and are vulnerable to breakdowns not just by desecuritisation of the macro-level threat (or referent object) as at the end of the Cold War, but also by the middle level securitisations becoming disaffected with, or pulling away from, subordination to the higher level one, such as the Sino-Soviet split”.

By their appraisal, the anti-nuclear movement is framed as a global or system-level macrosecuritisation. These macro-moves are “necessarily launched as candidates for top-rank threats (though they may not make it: for example, geo-economics, terrorism, nuclear proliferation)” (ibid. 259). Buzan and Wæver claim that ‘national security’ is a unit level securitisation. Nonetheless, it overpowers the system-level (global) securitisation of humanity, sustaining nuclear deterrence practice. The securitisation of humanity against the nuclear threat will be highly contested, it must confront the Global Nuclear Order and, unfortunately, contradicts some disarmament proposals. Indeed, existential security’s uncomfortable revelation is that it *can* provide a distinct form of security for the species, if at significant cost, as Nathan Sears (2020: 262) outlined.

Whilst existential security contests the national security frame (Sears, 2020: 261), it also meets national security’s core premise of *collective survival*. Existential security is a series of securitisations which seize humanity as the referent and guards its survival as a privileged condition. In nuclear ethics, this is similarly understood as ‘common security’ (Doyle, 2020: 68; 161-9), which requires a “minimally just international nuclear order” (ibid. 16). Existential security must supplant or overwhelm national security if it is to guard humanity. It should be immediately concerned with eliminating existential threats to humanity, with the nuclear threat remaining foremost. This effort must garner a decent probability of success as successful securitisation demands (Ruzicka, 2019: 370). The nuclear deterrence system compromises existential security by its *existence*, perpetuated via the successive securitisation of deterrence.

### ***The Desecuritisation of Deterrence***

Whilst Amir Lupovici (2019) outlines the various securitisation moves of deterrence, its desecuritisation process remains under-theorised in ST scholarship. Continued deterrence practice by the nuclear-weapons states attest to the failure to desecuritize deterrence, also epitomised by the non-proliferation complex’s failure in ensuring disarmament (see Craig and Ruzicka, 2013).<sup>7</sup> The success of the disarmament movement in future holds major ethico-political implications. Deterrence’s successive securitisation could be interpreted as a simultaneous failure to securitise humanity against the nuclear threat. This remains apparent in the risk of general nuclear war and its severe long-term effects, namely nuclear winter (e.g. Baum, 2015). Existential security invokes this failure in requesting a securitisation of humanity. In real terms, this may involve radical moves towards disarmament as nuclear weapons are incompatible with interstate anarchy (see Craig, 2019: 352). By this reading, reformist measures at disarmament may only contribute to a partial

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<sup>7</sup> Jan Ruzicka (2019) makes the case for studying cases of failed securitisation.

desecuritisation of deterrence, problematising an effort to overwhelm and replace the deterrence system – a competing securitisation.<sup>8</sup>

Austin and Beaulieu-Brossard (2018) argue that securitisation and desecuritisation processes can occur simultaneously, rather than the standard appraisal in ST which sees desecuritisation as a post-securitisation ‘return to normal politics’. A nuclear-weapon state may participate in the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) whilst *simultaneously* re-securitising its nuclear deterrent, with its related political effects. It also frames entrenched deterrence practice as a historic failure to securitise the species and civilisation itself against the nuclear threat, in the move towards collective security that Thomas Doyle (2020: 68; 161-9) identifies. This contestation also necessitates a rebranding of ‘nuclear security’ as a system-level *insecurity*.

Ole Wæver favours desecuritization “whereby securitization is reversed, and issues are moved out of ‘the threat — defence sequence and into the ordinary public sphere’ where they can be dealt with in accordance with the rules of the (democratic) political system.” (Buzan et al. 1998: 29 in Taureck, 2006). For those that consider deterrence unjust (e.g. Doyle, 2020: 180), a desecuritization process to follow deterrence’s securitisation seems preferable, or in an ethico-political sense is now *morally mandatory* (Floyd, 2024). These desecuritisation moves are present in the disarmament discourse, exhibited in calls for devaluing or delegitimising nuclear weapons (Ritchie, 2013; Kurosawa, 2018). Nick Ritchie outlines how disarmament occurs “when the value assigned to nuclear weapons falls below a context-specific threshold such that nuclear weapons have insufficient intersubjective value to warrant continued possession for a polity” (Ritchie, 2013: 146-7). Humanitarian imperatives have not compelled nuclear powers to disarm but existential security should emphasise the prospect of a nuclear winter and civilisational collapse. We should also advertise humanity’s emergency state of *existential insecurity*. The existent capabilities to wage a global nuclear war which could alter humanity’s trajectory.

Under renewed great-power competition, we are actively failing to desecuritise deterrence. The failure here is our inability to contest the hegemonic nuclear order to the extent that ‘Global Zero’ is achieved. A separate – competing – securitisation may be needed to overwhelm the successive securitisation moves of deterrence. In lieu of this aspect, I contend that deterrence’s re-securitisation contributes to a *failing* securitisation of humanity, apparent in heightened NATO-Russia security competition and Sino-American tension. As Jan Ruzicka (2019) contends, failed cases of securitisation are often neglected in our analysis. Pursuing these disarmament strategies (exclusively), then, may contribute to the continuous failure to securitise humanity against the nuclear threat (i.e. it is normatively negative). These competing moves differ in their political effects: pursuing disarmament by invoking human security and eroding the socio-political ‘value’ attributed to nuclear weapons, or the legitimacy of possession or use, would not *necessarily* establish existential security. A useful indicator of existential (in)security is the existent threat of nuclear winter (see Baum, 2015; Xia et al. 2022). Only once this threat is eliminated can we speak of *existential security* in the nuclear context. Unsuccessful disarmament could prove highly destabilising, however, as Charles Glaser

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<sup>8</sup> Contrarily, Olaf Corry (2012: 256) notes that calls to de-securitise that which is ‘riskified’ shifts the issue from a “risk-paradigm towards a normalising or non-politicised logic” (unwittingly). Corry also claims risk politics is claimed to be distinct from securitisation (see Corry, 2011). As Corry might have it, then, what is here defined as de-securitising deterrence may be a *riskification* of the nuclear threat, instead. This may suggest why attempts to devalue or delegitimise nuclear weapons have proven ineffective at compelling major disarmament.

(1994) argued. Calling for an authoritative world government capable of global disarmament would likely prove deeply unpopular, it also involves unknown or unknowable securitisation risks.

Lene Hansen's (2012) defines four 'political forms' of desecuritisation in her typology: *change through stabilisation, replacement, rearticulation, and silencing*. Hansen's definition of a 'replacement' desecuritisation may fit the effort to securitise humanity against the nuclear threat, which seeks to overwhelm the securitisation of deterrence. Devaluing or delegitimising nuclear weapons may be an effort to desecuritize via 'rearticulation', that is: "when an issue is moved from the securitised to the politicised" (ibid. 529). This remains a risk-tolerant strategy as it involves an unspecified timescale and has not *ended* the practice of nuclear deterrence, which remains liable to re-securitisation. Nick Ritchie concedes a similar point "nuclear weapons could be stripped of much of their value but still be considered legitimate weapons to possess and use in extremis" (Ritchie, 2013: 149).<sup>9</sup> Whilst the securitisation of humanity will involve emergency measures it responds to the over-riding threat to collective survival – a fundamental tenant of existential security. This is a move to secure humanity's 'long-term' future, the ethico-political value of which is believed to be immense, (e.g. Ng, 1991). Existential security moves to secure this value. In real terms this necessitates an elimination of extreme scenarios like general nuclear war and nuclear winter – which are also fundamentally incompatible with the dominant security frames. By this interpretation, radical moves towards disarmament may be permissible or even morally mandatory.

The Copenhagen School's (CoS) preference for desecuritisation was for a shift out of emergency mode, towards *politicisation* (Hansen, 2012: 545). Existential security, however, must be premised on an emergency mode and a macrosecuritisation of humanity against the existential threat of nuclear war. Here then, we shift away from CoS' project over some specific objections. Responding – adequately – to the extreme character of the nuclear threat reveals a glaring tension between divergent approaches to nuclear security, or security broadly defined. Whether securing humanity requires the prior desecuritisation of deterrence remains conjecture, but a successful move away from deterrence practice will not occur whilst nuclear-weapon states are re-securitising their security competitors. If desecuritisation requires "a loosing of the friend-enemy distinction" in which "the enemy' shreds its identity" (Hansen, 2012: 533) this aspect is poised to present a major hurdle in the desecuritisation of NATO-Russia relations post-Ukraine. This could also be said of the Sino-American nuclear dyad. Hansens' contention that desecuritisation "must instantiate the non-threatening identity of the Other" (2012: 533) remains salient here. The overlying moves involve securitising an adversary (the deteree) whilst re-securitising the nuclear deterrent of the deterrer. Russia's present position as a warring state with a (clearly securitised) nuclear arsenal may yet lead to nuclear use despite the norm of non-use (the so-called 'taboo').<sup>10</sup> The formation of an authoritative world government to consolidate thermonuclear forces could trigger a major desecuritisation of great power relations. If, at the onset of the Third Nuclear Age, the underlying tension in great-power competition is the possession of thermonuclear weapons capable of ending nation states then the consolidation of nuclear power by a supranational authority, like the UNSC, could alleviate the nuclear dilemma.

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<sup>9</sup> Ritchie notes, further, that delegitimizing and devaluing are not necessarily synonymous concepts.

<sup>10</sup> The concept of 'securitisation depth' may be of relevance here (see Abulof, 2014), insofar as the depth of securitisation, of either move noted, directly impacts the success of the desecuritisation process.

## *Securitisation Depth*

In the literature on disarmament, greater scholarly attention centres on the desecuritisation of deterrence rather than the effects of its present re-securitisation. Greater integration with studies on the security dilemma could redress this. Deepening securitisation may resemble security dilemma dynamics, they model a similar deterioration in relations. If securitisation is a state of affairs past the politicised, lacking successful desecuritisation but short of war, the security dilemma model may be applicable. Without the initiation of desecuritisation, NATO and Russia might remain in a security dilemma prone to spiralling as mistrust and misperceptions take hold (e.g. Wheeler, 2008; 2009). Assuring competitors could alleviate some of the worst excesses of these dynamics (see Christensen, 2002). In Robert Jervis' interpretation of the security dilemma, however, structural factors are incorporated but the dilemma does not account for all recourse to war (Jervis, 1978; Tang, 2009: 591-3).<sup>11</sup> Jervis' emphasis – that the *severity* of the security dilemma may be determined by physical/material factors and psychological/perceptual factors – augments the theoretical development of securitisation depth further.

If the dilemma resembles a spiral due to the self-reinforcing mechanics, can desecuritisation moves (trust building and reassurances) untangle the deepening spiral, preventing war? If we recall Hansen's models, desecuritisation as 'rearticulation' best describes attempts to alleviate the security dilemma. This might also define attempts to devalue or delegitimise nuclear weapons. We should note, however, that "securitisations, which have become institutionalised to such an extent that they no longer are in need of explicit articulations to justify their status, pose a particular challenge for desecuritisation attempts" – particularly relevant for the institutionalised practice of deterrence. Moreover, the "...absence of speech acts seems to make them less susceptible to 'being taken back' through desecuritisation" (Buzan et al., 1998: 27 in Hansen, 2012: 532). This offers some indication as to why the deterrence system was not desecuritised to the extent that major disarmament was actioned post-Cold War. The centrality of speech act in ST analysis is not essential in this case. Applied to great-power competition at present, efforts to devalue or delegitimise nuclear weapons could end in failure or are *actively failing* to contest the successive re-securitisation of nuclear deterrence whilst simultaneously securitising security competitors, like NATO's re-securitisation of Russia (Sperling and Webber, 2017). This holds implications for arms control and disarmament prospects, which does not rest on specific speech acts, but rather the securitisation risk involved, itself – chiefly that of nuclear winter and a global famine (e.g. Xia et al. 2022).

Uriel Abulof (2014) developed the concept of 'deep' securitisation in the context of Israeli-Palestinian relations, which unravelled with catastrophic effect following the October 7<sup>th</sup> attack, 2023. At its core, deep securitisation requires an "all-pervasive discourse on 'existential threats'" (Abulof 2014: 397), that meets the "elusive discursive threshold of 'existential threat'". Its relevance here is three-fold: firstly, the securitisation of nuclear deterrence (*itself*) – goes some way to explaining *why* we suffer the nuclear deterrence regime, despite its risk of mutual annihilation. Secondly, nuclear-weapon states may be subject to a deep securitisation *themselves*, particularly in their foreign policy apparatus in times of heightened security competition. This deepening securitisation may facilitate an extreme move – nuclear use (e.g. Lupovici. 2019: 181). This may be conceptually defined as a 'deep securitisation of a nuclear-weapon state'. Thirdly, the macrosecuritisation of humanity against the nuclear threat must overwhelm both these deeply securitised functions of deterrence to establish existential security for humanity.

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<sup>11</sup> For Alexander Wendt's constructivist appraisal of the security dilemma and critique of the structural realist position see Wendt (1992: 392; 407).

The referent objects of deep securitisation are “identity, polity (often the state), authority (regime/government), and policy” (ibid. 399). Furthermore, the framing of threats to the “very survival of the collective” legitimises the strategy of retaliation, despite simultaneously threatening the very survival of the collective. Securitisation’s exact definition aligns with the study of existential threats. This definition refers to ‘*survival*’ and those cases in which it is perceived that “if the problem is not handled now it will be too late, and we will not exist to remedy our failure” (Buzan et al., 1998: 23-27 in Abulof: 2014: 398) – accurately encapsulating the securitisation of humanity against the nuclear threat but also warning against *riskification*, as Corry (2012) would have it (see footnote. 13). Even if the securitisation of humanity is better understood as riskification, along these lines, it may still be *morally mandatory* relative to the forecasted cost of deterrence failure and a major nuclear war.

Deep securitisation moves respond to threats to the “*very existence of the nation/state*” (Abulof, 2014: 397, original emphasis). Consequently, “ST’s blurred boundaries can be clarified along a spectrum of securitization’s scale (*referent object* and the *severity of the threat*), scope (the extent to which *discourses of dangers pervades the society*), and sort (the *security sectors evoked*” (ibid. 411-12, original emphasis). In my estimation, securitisation depth is more intimately related with the severe threat of nuclear use than the broad category of deterrence’s securitisation. More accurately, it is an indicator of the depth of deterrence’s securitisation rather than an exclusive category. This depth is defined by the deteriorating psychological state of a nuclear-weapon state and could lead to a state resorting to nuclear use – an extreme move. Accordingly, this process is ‘unjust’, but it is framed as ‘mandatory’ by nuclear powers. Whilst deeply securitised, a state’s sense of ontological and physical security reveals its insecurities. Greater depth of securitisation may alter a state’s reliance on nuclear threats or even lead to the *use* of nuclear weapons. Preventing this depth then – thus the worst excesses of the security dilemma – is all-important as it may act as a nuclear risk multiplier.

### ***Securitisation Depth in NATO-Russia relations***

The deterioration of NATO-Russia relations may be compromised by Russia’s ‘deep’ securitisation, enacted by its security-defence nexus. This could prove destabilising and Russia may resort to use of thermonuclear weapons if it believes its existence is threatened in a crisis. Such an extreme move could occur in the ongoing war, or in a wider NATO-Russia conflict should it develop. Put another way, nuclear use ultimately *confirms* securitisation depth, heightening the risk of a wider nuclear war, and could mark a passing of the threshold past securitisation, to war itself. In the NATO-Russia context, ‘depth’ of securitisation seeks to integrate factors which contribute to uncertainty and greater nuclear use risk: an emergency state beyond the ‘ordinary’ securitisation of deterrence (e.g. Sperling and Weber, 2017). Nuclear deterrence risks deterrence failure – producing sudden securitisation depth in nuclear crises. Nuclear first-use would rapidly securitise the deterrer against the deteree. Nuclear retaliation, then, is an exceptional measure. Consider that whilst nuclear first-use initiates retaliation, nuclear retaliation is, simultaneously, a *failure to securitise humanity*. In the broadest sense this implies NATO’s nuclear planning goes beyond the purview of collective security and compromises existential security. The normalisation of nuclear threats over the course of the Russo-Ukrainian War may reflect deterrence’s idiosyncrasies as “the way to prevent an existential threat (a nuclear attack) is to legitimize two extraordinary measures—threatening an opponent with nuclear annihilation but also exposing your population to such a threat” (Lupovici, 2019: 181-2). Deterrence operates under a state of paranoia, brought to the fore during renewed great-power competition.

Can we identify securitisation depth in NATO-Russia relations since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine (February, 2022)? A gradual process, it has developed since the Russian annexation of Crimea (2014) but spiked during the full-scale invasion. How does Russia's foreign policy elite view the developing animosity against 'the West' and how could this demonstrate securitisation depth? The journal *'Military Thought'* is published by the Russian Defense Ministry, offering insights into securitisation depth. As a recent example:

“the armed conflict on the territory of the former Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic is a battle in Russia's global war with modern Western liberal civilization, with the values that the West has been imposing on our people and the world for decades. This turn in the perception of the current situation as **a war of the West against Russia** is the first and perhaps the most important result of the Special Military Operation (SMO) for Russian society” (Ilnitsky, 2023: 5, original bold type).

The Russo-Ukrainian war may have altered the psyche of the Russian foreign policy elite, provoking a depth to its securitisation of deterrence, indicative in statements like “wars have become a form of existence in society” (ibid.1). This ‘guaranteed existence’ is tied to the state’s nuclear capabilities: “SMO solves the most important task - to prepare the Russian state and society for a decade of life in a collapsing world order, while the Armed Forces and the Russian nuclear triad guarantee national security” (ibid.12). A spokesman for the Kremlin – Dmitry Peskov – stated that NATO and Russia are now in “direct confrontation” (ISW, 2024). NATO may ignore such provocation, but it surely represents deepening securitisation. Whilst such speech acts may suggest a trend towards securitisation depth – warranting extraordinary measures like deterrent threats – it does not inform us as to the true securitisation risk at play. In the case of deterrence this includes the risk of major nuclear war. Moreover, depth of securitisation may run in parallel with the security dilemma. Aspects of both intersect, altering nuclear risk. Here, NATO and Russia issue deterrent threats whilst securitising their nuclear deterrents – entrenching deterrence practice.

To what extent could the Russian nuclear triad ever be used and what implications does this hold for securitisation depth? Nuclear threats by Vladimir Putin and Dmitry Medvedev (Deputy chairman of the Security Council) are well documented (Mills, 2023: 3-4). Nuclear threats are attempts at nuclear coercion: they advertise an actor’s ‘red-lines’ – which NATO may be steadily eroding (Blank, 2023). Russian information operations should be discerned from their genuine insecurities (see Bugayova, 2024). Sinovets and Schultz (2023) adopt the position that Russia’s recent nuclear rhetoric has not matched its nuclear posture, though this does not warrant optimism. Russian attempts at nuclear coercion are moves which betray a deeply securitised condition, which *makes permissible* the issuance of explicit threats to use extraordinary nuclear force.<sup>12</sup> As a ‘deep securitisation’ is defined as when “discourses of ‘existential threats’ engulf a society” (Abulof, 2014: 396) it is discerned from deterrence’s ‘standard’ securitisations, as an indicator of emergency measures or a state of emergency. If the Russo-Ukrainian war is considered a protracted nuclear crisis, it is surely indicative of Russia’s deepening securitisation against NATO. The volume of nuclear threats over the war’s course, and their direct nature, broadly confirms this. NATO has not escaped the phenomenon of deepening securitisation, however, nor has it radically altered its mainstay ‘mode’ of security provision. NATO relies on its deployment of thermonuclear weapons and the extended deterrence provided by the United States, the so-called ‘umbrella’. In turn, this undermines ‘existential security’ – *its* establishment is the only ultimate guarantee of collective survival.

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<sup>12</sup> As the deterrence system is an ‘exterminist structure’ (see Pelopidas and Mian, 2023), it is beyond the realm of ‘normal politics’ in an extreme sense.

The NATO Alliance relies on deterrence whilst constructing Russia as an existential threat to Europe. The Latvian President Edgars Rinkēvičs said recently “Russia must be defeated. Russia *delenda est!*” echoing Cato the Elder’s repeated call in the Roman Senate ‘Carthage must be destroyed’ – a provocative statement considering such deep securitisation *did* lead to the total annihilation of Rome’s adversary. The President’s statement coincided with the Prime Minister Evika Siliņa’s support for sending troops to Ukraine (Grinichenko, 2024), itself in response to the French President Emmanuel Macron refusal to rule out such a move (Goury-Laffont, 2024). This takes an extreme example but demonstrates that NATO is participating in a ‘collective securitisation’ of Russia whilst accepting, implicitly, greater degrees of nuclear risk.<sup>13</sup> NATO Military Committee Chairperson, Admiral Rob Bauer, stated on the 21<sup>st</sup> of March, 2024 that “Russia’s war against Ukraine has never been about any real security threat coming from either Ukraine or NATO”. In contrast, the Institute for the Study of War assesses that “Putin invaded Ukraine in 2022 not to defend Russia against a non-existent threat from NATO but rather to weaken and ultimately destroy NATO — a goal he still pursues” (Evans et al, 2024; Bugayova, 2023). This reading may neglect some of Russia’s significant insecurities regarding NATO’s capabilities, such as its missile defence system which it views as ‘offensive’ (Diesen and Keane, 2018), though this is not necessarily present in its speech acts. NATO leaders have their part to play in ensuring this securitisation of Russia does not lead to a hot war, which would hold profound implications for the Global Nuclear Order (see Vicente, 2023; cf. Bollfrass and Herzog, 2022).

Even when symbolic threats lead to the ‘actual’ use of force, like a terrorist attack (e.g. 9/11) they “never posed a threat to group existence” (Hirschberger *et al.*, 2016: 16). This is also a defining characteristic in deep securitisation of a nuclear power. Such moves are misguided as they are premised on *symbolic* threats to the ‘in-group’: the state or alliance. By its very existence, the nuclear deterrence system issues *real-physical* threats of annihilation. It could eradicate ‘the state’ (or states) in a protracted nuclear war involving city-targeting. This threatens state survival, and in a broader sense humanity’s collective survival – an obfuscated truth of deterrence. Nation-states can be understood as ‘in-groups’ (the Self) that securitise ‘out-groups’ (the Other) to justify, or make morally mandatory, the securitisation of deterrence. NATO may now view its character as a nuclear-armed alliance, then, as increasingly critical to its security, justified due to a threatening ‘out-group’: Russia. The full-scale invasion of Ukraine indicates a threat to European security, illustrated by reciprocal NATO-Russia deterrent threats. However, under mandatory securitisation, securitisation refers “*not* to the construction in language of issues into security threats, but to the adoption of exceptional, often issue-specific security measures following rhetorical threat articulation” (Floyd, 2024: 18). Advocates of nuclear retaliation (e.g. Ratiu, 2020) securitise the threat and envisaged use of retaliation to a hypothetical Russian (or Chinese) first-use strike, favouring exceptional measures. This view prioritises Russia’s perceived threat to Europe over the nuclear threat to humanity – exemplified by the threat of nuclear winter and an unprecedented global famine.

The key implications gleaned from applying securitisation theory to this case are that the deterrence system is not undergoing major de-securitisation. In fact, the war in Ukraine and great-power competition at large exacerbates nuclear insecurity and effectively blocks moves towards major disarmament. Set against the more abstract concept of existential security, particularly in reference to the risk of a major nuclear war and an ensuing nuclear winter, these developments must be treated at the global scale. The consolidation of thermonuclear weapons by the UN security council

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<sup>13</sup> This phenomenon, whilst treated here in terms of securitisation theory, may be rooted in the security dilemma. Realists assert that there is no escape to the nuclear dilemma, at least in an anarchial international system (e.g. Craig, 2007).

remains a possible solution, if underdeveloped. It does, however, respond to the need for de-securitisation post-Ukraine and anticipates a future crisis over Taiwan.

## **Conclusion**

Great-power competition inhibits the pursuance of *existential security* – an ideal state of being for the species. Not only are the securitisation moves of deterrence and ‘humanity’ in direct competition, but the desecuritisation of deterrence is sought simultaneously, as exhibited in efforts to devalue or delegitimise thermonuclear weapons. The type or form of desecuritisation pursued, as Hansen outlines, may dictate the success of humanity’s securitisation against the nuclear threat. Whilst theorising in security studies and securitisation theory may leave us with abstractions only, the objective existential threats of a major nuclear war – causing nuclear winter – should surely be ranked as *the* top-rank threat in global security. Policymaking must implement a recognition of this objective existential threat to the species. This would effectively amount to existential security overwhelming other approaches to security. Nonetheless, it would provide immediate ontological and physical security for nation states by providing assurances of long-term state survival. The great hurdle remains the exceptional measures warranted when we invoke existential security, which may seem extreme relative to status quo approaches to deterrence. The nuclear dilemma may warrant a supranational authority tantamount to a world government. At present, only the UN security council could consolidate nuclear control and form this authoritative body. Even if established, it would initially present itself as hegemonic global power with a monopoly of nuclear force as the UNSC permanent members already include all the nuclear-armed great powers.

If existential security seeks to overwhelm the securitisation of deterrence, there are distinct securitisation risks involved in such a move. In taking humanity as the referent object, the scale and scope of the securitisation risk increases proportionately. Deterrence advocates will likely take issue with the securitisation of ‘humanity’ as they assert that re-securitising deterrence is a mandatory act for national or collective defence. They may recognise the securitisation of humanity as partially legitimate whilst simultaneously re-securitising deterrence. Instead, they should prioritise radical disarmament plans which could provide long-term physical security.

I contend that the securitisation of humanity *must* be framed as a competing securitisation move, rather than de-securitisation, to reflect humanity’s emergency condition. The concept of securitisation ‘depth’ developed above elucidates the need for this securitisation of humanity. It may also share similar dynamics with the security dilemma’s ‘spiral of hostility’. Naturally, this holds negative connotations for the stability of the Global Nuclear Order at present and prospects for future nuclear disarmament. Divergent thought on disarmament follows separate logics; most disarmament proposals should be classed as de-securitisation moves whilst radical moves which seek to replace interstate anarchy are not (e.g. Craig, 2019; Deudney, 2019). Rather, they request a securitisation of humanity against the nuclear threat. Moreover, delegitimising or devaluing thermonuclear weapons constitutes the de-securitisation of deterrence practice. I have claimed, however, that this contestation is markedly different from securitising humanity against the nuclear threat. This is not demonstrative of an apathy for other disarmament strategies but scepticism over their timeframe when the nuclear threat’s immediacy is now apparent.

Developing an emergency condition for humanity may offer divergent solutions from efforts to debase the value of thermonuclear weapons, whilst recent developments in global affairs show us that this value remains constant. Proposals that look to establish a supranational authority capable of

nuclear disarmament, reminiscent of the Baruch Plan (1946), should not be so readily dismissed (e.g. Craig; 2019). Consolidated thermonuclear control by the UN security council could eliminate the risk of a major nuclear war – the objective existential threat to the species. Establishing this new nuclear order is warranted as humanity exists in an emergency condition of existential insecurity, demanding the immediate macrosecuritisation of the nuclear threat to humanity. There will be no benefit of hindsight. The nuclear threat remains the foremost existential threat to our species.

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