# The New Cold War?

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When I hear this symposium title about a new Cold War, the question mark at the end intrigues me the most. It suggests that this is not a definitive conclusion—that we are in a new Cold War—but rather an open question. I challenge us to think critically about this metaphor and consider how it might limit our understanding and actions. I am generally skeptical of the notion that history repeats itself. This metaphor can lead to a deterministic mindset that discourages proactive efforts to change our future. Believing the past will inevitably repeat itself often leads to a sense of futility—what is the point of trying to change anything if the outcome is predetermined? I strongly believe that the world is still worth saving and that our actions can make a difference. When we discuss the Cold War, we must acknowledge that it was only "cold" for the superpowers. For many people around the world, it was incredibly hot, bloody, violent, and deadly. The majority of the world, used as pawns in the Cold War, experienced intense suffering. Referring to it as a "Cold War" is a colonial framing that ignores the devastating impacts felt globally. Therefore, it is crucial to challenge this perspective and recognize the true nature of the conflict.

I also believe that one important lesson we have learned from our friends and allies in the queer liberation movement is that binaries don't serve us well—they leave out most of us. The concept of a Cold War, which divides the world into East versus West, Communists versus Capitalists, and safe versus dangerous hands for nuclear weapons, imposes a simplistic framing of singular villains and heroes, excluding the majority. When I reflect on the work of the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons, I see our work as effective because it is inclusive and invites participation. We begin with the principle that we are here to help each other, that crises can be survived through collective action, and that we can choose not to abandon one another.

When we talk about nuclear weapons, we are addressing something horrific. This is not a metaphor for those who have been tested on, who have survived nuclear detonations, or whose lands have been mined for uranium. These are the real issues at the heart of nuclear weapons discussions. In this sector, we continually confront the grim realities of nuclear warfare. A nuclear detonation would kill

millions, cause widespread radiation sickness and suffering, and lead to devastating climate impacts. Focusing solely on these catastrophic outcomes might drive us to think only about individual survival rather than prevention. However, nuclear war and conflict are deeply preventable. So, what do we do? One key lesson we have learned in this work is the importance of acknowledging how the world has actually changed. By recognizing these changes, we can better address and prevent the threats posed by nuclear weapons.

If we examine the role of nuclear weapons during the Cold War, I have some surprisingly good news. One unexpected aspect of my approach to discussing nuclear weapons is that I often frame them in terms of good news. This does not mean we do not desperately need your action, but it allows us to invite you into this work with a sense of hope and excitement. During the Cold War, there were about 70,000 nuclear weapons worldwide. Today, that number has decreased to around 12,700. While this is still a significant number, it is encouraging to see such a reduction. I always emphasize that even one nuclear weapon is too many, but it's hopeful to note this progress. However, we must also acknowledge that nuclear weapons are modernizing, making current ones much more powerful than those used in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Russia and the U.S. account for about 90% of nuclear weapons. Therefore, when considering where action is most needed, U.S. citizens play a crucial role. There is much you can do, and I will discuss this further in a moment.

When examining the state of nuclear weapons during the Cold War, it is crucial to acknowledge the ancestors on whose shoulders we stand. Tremendous activism against nuclear weapons occurred throughout the 60s, 70s, 80s, and early 90s, much of it outside the so-called 'great powers'—whom we should stop referring to as "great," as they are not inherently great at all. Significant activism took place, including in the United States, where in 1982, a million people gathered in Central Park to demand nuclear weapons reductions. Globally, there was a notable increase in nuclear weapons-free zones. For instance, in 1959, Antarctica became officially nuclear-free, a significant achievement in geopolitical cooperation. In 1967, Latin America established a nuclear weapon-free zone. In 1968, the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) came into effect, becoming one of the most effective mechanisms for countering the rise of nuclear weapons. In 1985, the South Pacific became nuclear-free. In 1991, South Africa gave up its nuclear weapons, leading to the establishment of a nuclear weapon-free zone across Africa. These historical milestones offer much to be hopeful about and provide a foundation of political work and advocacy upon which we can build.

According to the *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists*, the risk of nuclear weapon use is higher now than at any point since the Cold War. It is important to think critically about the language we use. For instance, a simple yet impactful action you can take to add complexity to our discussions about nuclear weapons is to challenge the phrase "tactical nuclear weapons." If someone uses this term, feel free to interrupt them.

Although it may seem a bit rude, there is no such thing as a tactical nuclear weapon. A tactical nuclear weapon is just as devastating as any other, and the terminology diminishes the severe consequences associated with their use.

Looking at one year, nuclear weapons states spent $82.9 billion on nuclear weapons. That's not over time. That is within a single year. We have crises around infrastructure, around climate, around poverty, where money that could be used to address structural issues of unhoused people, food insecurity in this country and around the world is being diverted to nuclear weapons.

The other thing that gets erased a lot of times when we're talking about this is that the detonations of two nuclear weapons in Hiroshima and Nagasaki were not the only detonations of nuclear weapons. In addition to the havoc, the shock, which is the name that we use for the survivors of the nuclear detonation in Japan, there are global hibakusha in the Pacific, Aboriginal people in Australia, survivors in Kazakhstan, and the Marshall Islands. Nuclear weapons are an integrated system. The testing of nuclear weapons, as well as their use in war and the mining of them, which predominantly happens on indigenous lands. Many of the people living in those areas suffer the same kind of impacts as other survivors of nuclear detonations.

That all sounds very grim, however, there is so much that we can do about this. Let me say something about the international campaign to abolish nuclear weapons. There's never a non-awkward way to bring up in conversation that we won the Nobel Peace Prize. People are often like, you should say that more. But we didn't win a Nobel Peace Prize for being fun and being hopeful. Although we are both fun and hopeful, and we won a Nobel Peace Prize because we helped write and pass a binding piece of international legislation, the treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons of 2017.

When we look at framing the world in terms of great powers, what the treaty of prohibition, the treaty and the prohibition of nuclear weapons did was look at everybody who wasn't included in the word great. And it turns out that people are pretty annoyed and tired of waiting and waiting and waiting and waiting and waiting for a handful of countries to follow the obligations that they agreed to in the NPT and actually said, yeah, that's enough. I think we are actually going to ban these weapons, and we're not going to wait for you to just reduce your stockpiles.

We are going to actually change international law. And so the majority of countries in the world don't like nuclear weapons, don't have nuclear weapons, and wish that the rest of us also didn't have them. So the thing that the treaty does was say, what if it really matters if you're a survivor? What if you actually get more of a say if you've suffered from impacts firsthand?

What if we center the story of survivors and sort of decentering the story of politicians? The treaty has victim assistance in it, which is a form of reparations that is legally obligating people who have been impacted by nuclear weapons to have support for things like cancer care. And it also includes

environmental remediation. So it's building on a whole history of other disarmament treaties called humanitarian disarmament treaties, like the Landmine Ban treaty and the Cluster Munitions Treaty.

This treaty is going great, if I can say that, is it has provided new hope and new energy and new optimism around what is otherwise a sort of disintegrating conversation happening in some international forums on nuclear weapons. This, November, we're having the second meeting, the second meeting of states parties. And the best thing about I can is that you're invited to.

So what can you do right here, right now? From wherever you sit, one of the things you can do is change the narrative. everything is a story. You've got to help people find themselves in the story. If horrible facts changed people's minds, we would have ended nuclear weapons, white supremacy, and the climate catastrophe already. We have the facts. We have to change behaviors. And changing behaviors means changing the story. Nuclear weapons are not inevitable. They were created by human beings. They can be dismantled by human beings. And nuclear war is not happening right now. I think one of the things we have to be really cautious about is also not driving forward a narrative with anxiety.

Right now, we are not in the midst of a nuclear war. We're in the midst of banning nuclear weapons. That's the energy that you can join in on. There's a new poll by the International Committee on the Red Cross that demonstrates that the majority of millennials oppose nuclear weapons and actually think it's kind of a weird question that they're even being asked what their opinion on it is.

This is the point in the in the talk where I will say why I'm not talking about *Oppenheimer*. I'm just going to be honest with you here. I have not seen *Oppenheimer*, and I don't plan to. And here's why. From the beginning, when this movie was announced, the producers of this movie were strongly urged to meet with survivors. That is, they were encouraged to meet the people most impacted by nuclear weapons and center their stories, but instead they made *Oppenheimer*, which is based on a fantastic book. I won't I don't want to debate the merits of the cinematography as I am sure from a cinematography point of view, it's a wonderful film, but it is also a fixation on an origin story of a person who created a bomb and was troubled by it. Like you probably should be. So it features a normal human reaction, not an extraordinary normal reaction. But the story of the people who are most affected, whose lands were mined, whose homes and bodies were used as experiments, are not a central part of the *Oppenheimer* story.

We need to question the fetishization of masculine scientists struggling with their brilliance, which is not as compelling of a story actually as collective narratives of communities. So thinking about whose story gets told and why that matters and how we sit with those voices is something very practical that we can do. I'm not asking you to boycott the *Oppenheimer* movie. If you saw it, I think you're still a good person, but we can question it.

Another thing we can do is support divestment efforts. There are very practical actions you can take in your university, in your places of worship. Look at the institutions that you care about and ask where their money is invested. I have lots of great resources for you on this.

If you're interested, I can share a resource called “don't bank on the bomb,” where we report every year on which banks are investing money in nuclear weapons, and we publish a sort of list of shame and list of fame. There are so many good things that you can do, whether or not the United States signs the _____, although I live in full hope and belief that we one day will. Until that time, we are not trapped. We can actually cause the treaty to come into effect in the United States by working through divestment, which is a tactic that is powerful here.

We have 5069 ratifications as of last week and 93 signatories. we made this one. We got 50 ratification. I am continuing to update it, but the final thing that you can do right where you are right now is work from the perspective of the local. You can pass city council resolutions. It is not a hard thing to do. I will help you. I personally will help you get in touch with me and you can make nuclear weapons illegal, beginning with your city council, so we don't actually have to wait for the federal government to do this.

We can make this effective from where we are right now. I am going to leave you with this quote from James Baldwin that I think actually grounds the ideas of ISIS quite nicely. James Baldwin wrote, “One discovers the light in the darkness. That's what darkness is for. But everything in our lives depends on how we bear the light.”[1]

NOTES

1. James Baldwin, *Nothing Personal* (New York: Beacon Press, 2021).