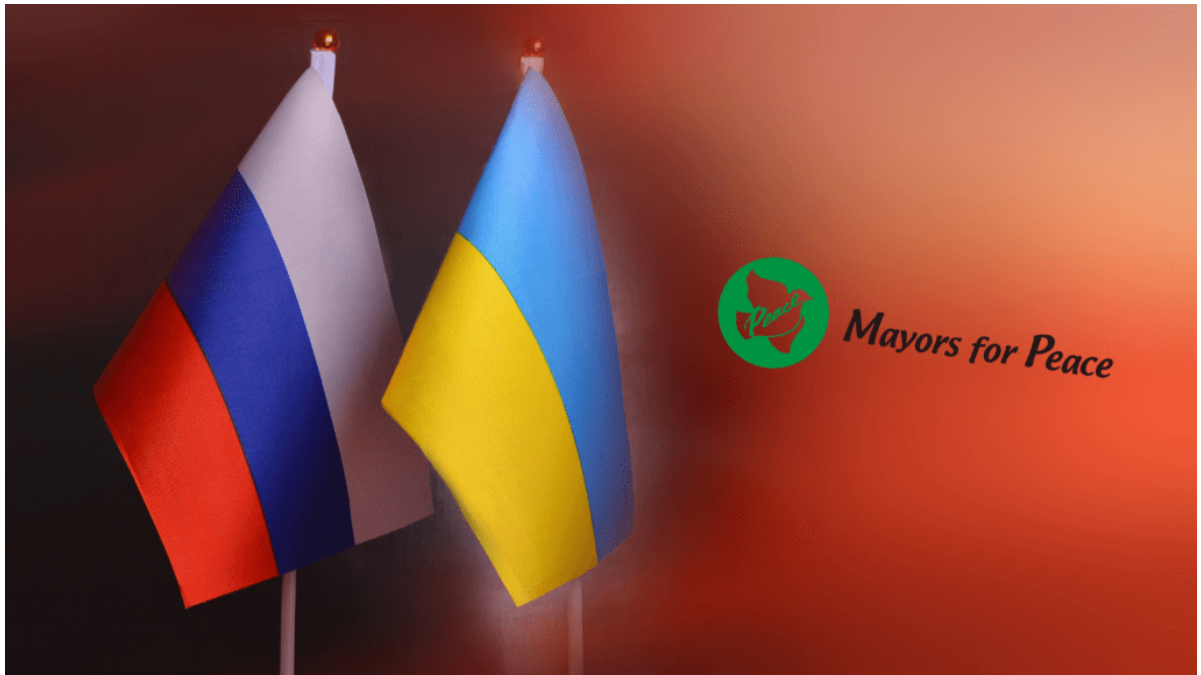


Ukraine War, Nuclear Threat on the Horizon and Mayors for Peace - Seven Erdoğan



The ongoing war in Ukraine, which began with Russia's invasion in February 2022, has significantly altered the global security landscape. In addition to its impact on global geopolitics, it has exposed significant weaknesses in the international security framework, particularly with regard to nuclear disarmament and the global nuclear threat. This commentary seeks to analyse the role of the war in Ukraine within the broader debate on nuclear disarmament and the response of the transnational network of cities, Mayors for Peace, to the increasing potential for nuclear war.

The end of the Cold War was also seen as the end of a nuclear race or an era of

deterrence, even though there were no efforts by the nuclear powers to destroy their nuclear capabilities. Despite the continued growth in the number of nuclear powers and nuclear capabilities, the perception of the security threat posed by nuclear weapons has remained significantly low, and the tendency to see nuclear weapons as a deterrent mechanism has prevailed, creating a high level of ignorance about the catastrophic consequences of nuclear weapons.

In the 1994 Budapest Memorandum, Russia was one of the countries that provided Ukraine with security assurances in exchange for relinquishing all nuclear weapons inherited from the Soviet Union. However, during the war in Ukraine, Russia, as one of the legally recognised nuclear powers in the current international political system, not only acted against its commitment under the Budapest Memorandum, but also used the nuclear weapon card at its disposal several times, in particular to send a strong message to the Western powers supporting Ukraine financially and militarily.

Russia's frequent references to its nuclear arsenal and its use of it as political and military leverage have brought the forgotten possibility of nuclear conflict to the fore. Although these claims have mostly been legitimised by Russia as a defensive strategy aimed at forcing the West to stay out of the war, they have also reignited discussions about the effectiveness and future of nuclear non-proliferation, disarmament and deterrence strategies. But it has also led to a questioning of existing arms control treaties, especially the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), in terms of controlling and limiting the behaviour of nuclear powers.

In such an environment, there are even those who argue that Russia's behaviour towards a non-nuclear state has led to the re-popularisation of nuclear weapons as a guarantee of national security, which is clearly counterproductive to nuclear non-proliferation efforts. This has also worked to the detriment of nuclear disarmament by creating a reluctance to negotiate reductions in nuclear capacities. The deterioration of relations between the United States and Russia led to the suspension of Russian participation in the 2010 New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) in February 2023. It also removed one of the few remaining channels of dialogue between the parties at a time of rising nuclear

risks and further exacerbated fears of a renewed arms race.

Mayors for Peace, a global network of more than 8000 local governments committed to peace and the abolition of nuclear weapons, has consistently advocated nuclear disarmament and sought to reduce the risks posed by nuclear weapons since its launch in the early 1980s, pioneered by the mayors of two atomic bombed cities, Hiroshima and Nagasaki. From the outset, the network has emphasised that cities targeted by nuclear bombs during the Second World War are particularly vulnerable to the consequences of nuclear war because of their concentration of population, infrastructure and economic activity. The network has therefore led its members, particularly those in the nuclear powers, to put pressure on their governments to work towards the total abolition of nuclear weapons. They have also lobbied extensively for a nuclear-weapon-free world at the United Nations, which has played a leading role in global disarmament processes.

Because of the higher loyalty of the mayors to the cause of a nuclear weapon free world, Mayors for Peace found the Russian threats to use nuclear weapons extremely alarming, as once again in history cities from Ukraine were under the threat of a nuclear attack. Mayors for Peace has responded to these threats with a consistent message underlining that the use of nuclear weapons in any form and under any circumstances is unacceptable. The network has issued several statements and called on international leaders to reaffirm their commitment to nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation.

Mayors for Peace have also joined global efforts to prevent the further militarisation of nuclear weapons and to reduce nuclear tensions in the Ukraine crisis. Their advocacy aims to remind the world of the catastrophic consequences of nuclear war and the risks nuclear weapons pose to global security, and stresses that the global community must prioritise diplomacy and peaceful solutions over military escalation. They called for greater transparency, communication and arms control measures to prevent unintended nuclear escalation.

During this period, one of the network's key actions has been its continued support for the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW), which seeks to establish a legally binding international norm against the possession, use and threat of use of nuclear weapons. While many nuclear-armed states, including Russia, have not signed the treaty, Mayors for Peace is pushing for its wider adoption as a means of strengthening the global norm against the use of nuclear weapons, and has used the urgency of the Russian nuclear threat as an opportunity to demonstrate the importance of this treaty and, more generally, of a functioning global nuclear-weapon-free regime.

In addition to supporting multilateral disarmament treaties, Mayors for Peace has called on regional and international leaders to de-escalate tensions in Ukraine through diplomatic channels. Using its global network, Mayors for Peace promotes dialogue between states and stresses the importance of upholding international laws and agreements that promote peace and security. The organisation also highlights the role of local governments in peacebuilding and advocates for action at the local level that can contribute to broader peace efforts.

In conclusion, the war in Ukraine has had profound implications for nuclear disarmament and the global nuclear threat. The heightened risk of nuclear conflict in the Ukraine war, coupled with the increasing likelihood that nuclear weapons will be involved in future conflicts, has created an urgent need for multilateral cooperation on nuclear disarmament and the establishment of more robust and enforceable international norms against the use of nuclear weapons. The way forward will require sustained diplomatic efforts to rebuild the arms control framework, strengthen the credibility of non-proliferation agreements, and address the realities of nuclear deterrence in a rapidly changing global order. Leaders should therefore be more responsive to the calls of the Mayors for Peace initiative.



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