



Revisiting Nuclear Anxiety on the International Day Against Nuclear Tests

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On 29th August 2020, the tenth anniversary of the International Test Ban Day was commemorated; a day that is aimed at enhancing public awareness concerning the negative effects of nuclear weapon tests/explosions and the need for achieving a nuclear weapon-free world. This day was proposed by Kazakhstan in 2009 to mark the closure of a former Soviet Test Site (Semipalatinsk-21) in 1991. In fact, the month of August this year also marked the 75th anniversary of the Atomic Bombings on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Both the dates can be viewed as a reminder of the negative humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons. Related to this is another reminder—the withering away of two important nuclear norms a) non-use of nuclear weapons and b) norm against nuclear testing in the current global nuclear environment. In this context, revisiting one of the psychological effects of nuclear weapons is timely.

Nuclear war anxiety or the fear of nuclear war, defined as the “heightened fear produced exclusively by the prospect of nuclear war”¹ is regarded as one of the negative psychological effects of nuclear weapons. Historically, the threat of nuclear war remained an issue of concern for a vast majority of the public in general. Additionally, in the US several public opinion surveys conducted throughout the 1970-1980s had consistently highlighted a “high level of concern about the threat of nuclear war”². Several early surveys and studies conducted during this period validate that the fear of nuclear war “significantly impact(ed) the feelings and increase(ed) anxiety among the population at large”³. Studies have demonstrated that the fear of nuclear war became a common anxiety among children and adults in the US to a point of affecting individual personal saving rates.

Additionally, public interest in the subject was said to have “reached an unprecedented level in 40 years of history of nuclear weapons” in the early nuclear era.⁴ In fact, as early as 1960

the demand for nuclear fallout shelters boomed in the US as “local contractors reinvented themselves and miraculously became overnight, fallout shelter specialists”⁵. This panic trend emerged immediately after President Kennedy’s televised speech on 25 July 1961 that spoke exclusively about public mass shelters in an event of a nuclear talk in the context of deteriorating Soviet-American relations. It was in the early 1960 that the Cold War was at its most tense phase, during which the idea of individual preparation for fallout shelters gained serious attention in the US.

In subsequent years, it became evident that, owing to a substantial distrust towards government led civilian defence preparedness during the Cold War, a subculture of ‘preppers’ emerged and continues even today, that shares direct linkages with the fear of nuclear warfare. Popularly referred as ‘preppers’, ‘survivalists’ or ‘doomsdayers’ are the individuals who prepare for their own survival as they view State’s preparedness towards the existential threats such as nuclear warfare as minimal. In recent times, this unique subculture has even led to a trend, which the author of ‘*Disarming Doomsday*’ (2019)-Becky Alexis Martin, has called “...disaster capitalism, that includes the rise of ‘bourgeois bunkers’ (high-tech, luxurious, private bunkers) to... outlive a nuclear catastrophe...”⁶ It is noteworthy that ‘prepping’ has become a multi-billion dollar year industry in the US, with close to 3.7 million Americans self-identifying

themselves as survivalists, as per the survey conducted by 24/7 Wall Street in the year 2013.⁷ One may argue that the fear of nuclear (war/use/attack) or nuclear anxiety has played its part in adding to this prepping culture.

In most recent times, two occasions seemed to have brought back nuclear anxiety among Americans, albeit for a brief period. The first of these was the nuclear crisis on the Korean Peninsula in 2017 and the second one was an accidental alert in the State of Hawaii, about an incoming ballistic missile the very next year. On 13 January 2018, an accidental nuclear alert in Hawaii triggered anxiety for many as the text message read, “...ballistic missile threat inbound to Hawaii...seek immediate shelter...this is not a drill...”⁸ One can argue that the Hawaiian island’s proximity to North Korea; the Supreme leader’s resolve to demonstrate the country’s advance nuclear capabilities in 2017 and the casual (Trump-Kim) narrative surrounding nuclear weapons use, while nuclear diplomacy between the two countries was nowhere in sight, may have resulted in resurgence of nuclear anxiety. *The Atlantic* highlighted, “...in the second week of August 2017, the American public began to do something that felt distinctly 20th-century: consider the consequences of a nuclear war....”⁹

Additionally, one may argue that nuclear weapons’ use imagery, in general, is embedded in public perception, not only in the US but elsewhere too, that despite withering away of the Cold War (nuclear) tensions as well as renewed

and clear understanding of nuclear weapons, a mushroom cloud is inevitably linked to a possible nuclear use. More so because such a possibility exists even today. Quite recently, the explosion in Beirut on 04 August 2020, though non-nuclear, was immediately labeled as “a fifth of the size of Hiroshima bombings”.¹⁰ Even the governor of Beirut - Marwan Abboud, referred it as a “national disaster akin to Hiroshima.”¹¹

This could be attributed to two factors, one- the immediate blast effects that turned the ground zero littered with debris, killing almost 172 people and injuring over 4000 people and two -the explosion was heard at the distance of 110 miles, resulting in the damages of up to six miles. As per the claims made by the local reports; the explosion resulted in leaving up to “250,000 people homeless, further causing damages around £5billion”.¹² While in reality, the Beirut explosion was close to the one at Halifax (1917)¹³ as both were non-nuclear and accidental; the timing and imagery of a giant mushroom cloud and immediate blast effects inevitably became etched in the psychological memory, matching that of atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Indeed, the Beirut blast added a fresh reminder to the public imagery of what a nuclear use might look like.

Finally, it is in the context of preventing any nuclear use in the future, that the memories of Hiroshima-Nagasaki and the nuclear anxiety narrative should be revisited. Because even though, nuclear weapons scholarship, tensions,

technology may have shifted from the traditional focus of ‘nuclear use’ to ‘nuclear taboo’; newer challenges remain and current nuclear diplomacy with regard to proliferation-deterrence issues such as North Korea, as well as Iran, have not yielded concrete results. . Additionally, in the current nuclear order, when it comes to nuclear use, the strongest existing restraint is a ‘norm’ of nuclear taboo and not binding treaties. Moreover, none of the nuclear armed States have joined the recently concluded Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW). Thus, nuclear anxieties very much remain not only at the individual level but also at the State level, and it is only with the constant reminders of these nuclear anxieties, that a greater push towards removing them can be achieved.

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])

Notes

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² James A. Polyson, David M. Stein and Barbara K. Sholley (1988), “Survey of Psychologists' Nuclear War Attitudes”, *Political Psychology*, Vol. 9, No. 1, pp. 25-39, Published by International Society of Political Psychology

³ Xi Xie (2013) “Fear of Nuclear Threat”, 25 March 2013, Available at <http://large.stanford.edu/courses/2013/ph241/xie1/>, Accessed on 04 August 2020

⁴ Ibid James A. Polyson, David M. Stein and Barbara K. Sholley (1988), “Survey of Psychologists' Nuclear War

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⁵ Bradley Garrett (2020) “Doomsday Preppers and the Architecture of Dread”, *Geoforum (Article in Press)* made available by US National Library of Medicine National Institutes of Health, April 2020, Available at <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7151311/>, Accessed on 16 August 2020

⁶ Becky Alexis-Martin, (2019) “After Nuclear War”, in “Disarming Doomsday: The Human Impact of Nuclear Weapons Since Hiroshima”, Publishers Pluto Press, pp. 69-78

⁷ Bradley Garrett, (2020) “We Should All Be Preppers”, *The Atlantic*, 03 May 2020, Available at <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/05/we-should-all-be-preppers/611074/>, Accessed on 19 August 2020

⁸ Jeremy Lybarger (2018), “The threat of Nuclear War “, *American Psychological Association*, Vol. 49, No. 3, March 2028, Available at <https://www.apa.org/monitor/2018/03/nuclear-war>, accessed on 19 August 2020.

⁹ Robinson Meyer (2017), “Nuclear Anxiety Returns to America”, *The Atlantic*, 12 August 2017, Available at <https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2017/08/nuclear-anxiety-returns-to-america/536640/>, Accessed on 04 August 2020.

¹⁰ Tom Michael and Jon Lockett, “ Hunt for Loved Ones”, Beirut Blast Updates, *The Sun*, 05 August 2020, Available at <https://www.thesun.co.uk/news/12316501/beirut-explosion-search-survivors-trapped-rubble/>, Accessed on 10 August 2020

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Read more about the explosion at Helifax here, Ahamad Fuwad, “Beirut Blast: How does yield of 2,750 tonnes of ammonium nitrate compare against Halifax explosion, Hiroshima bombing?”, *DNA World*, 06 August 2020, Available at <https://www.dnaindia.com/world/report-beirut-blast-how-does-yield-of-2750-tonnes-of-ammonium-nitrate-compare-against-halifax-explosion-hiroshima-bombing-2836137>