

## **PUGWASH Bx 2 April 2025 webinar presentation**

by Hans Blix of his book 'A Farewell to Wars'

(Cambridge University Press 2013)

As delivered

I am glad to have this opportunity to speak online with fellow members of Pugwash. I shall explain some of the ideas I have presented in my book '**A Farewell to Wars**'. It has the subtitle '**The growing Restraints on the Interstate Use of Force**'.

At a time when Russia's war against Ukraine dominates the news, the title of the book has made some shake their heads and cite the Swedish saying that 'when the devil gets old, he becomes religious.'

Well, I am as indignant as others about the Russian brutality and aggression in Ukraine. I am also concerned about the erosion that the action brings to the legal order laid down in the UN Charter.

I disagree with those who casually say that 'there have **always** been and always **will be wars**.' The comment ignores that the world has changed, that its legal order has developed and that war with nuclear weapons may threaten our existence.

I have wanted to **assess** how in this modern world **incentives** and **restraints** to the **interstate** use of force have changed. (I am not talking about civil wars).

**My study**, I am glad to report, **finds** that several **long-term trends** point to a world with less of traditional warfare, more of cooperation and a **switch** to interstate competition **by other means than the use of armed force**.

One factor contributing to these trends has been what I would term the **'public mind'**, including global awareness of what the Russell-Einstein Manifesto calls **'the perils of the development of weapons of mass destruction'**.

*I shall return later to the role of the public mind .*

*I shall also explain why I don't think Russia's **'special military operation'** in Ukraine will break the long-term trend away from traditional kinetic warfare.*

I **begin** my study by **noting** that the **geographic areas of the world in which interstate armed conflicts currently are going on are limited mainly to Ukraine and the Middle East.**

**North and South American states** have long ago said farewell –to interstate war.

In **Africa**, colonialism was in some cases ended by 'wars of national liberation' and there are many armed **internal** conflicts but there are remarkably few interstate wars.

In **Asia, apart from** the major conflicts fought in Korea and Viet Nam, lesser wars have erupted involving India/Pakistan/China/Viet Nam/Cambodia. There was also a brief armed conflict between China and Russia.

In **Europe**, remarkably after millennia of war, the states have **united** in a union for peace and co-operation. Equally remarkable, the **breakup of the Soviet Union** resulted in a peaceful liberation of European states and peaceful emancipation of many states in Central Asia.

The Russian war on Ukraine and the armed struggle between Armenia and Azerbaijan, have been exceptions to this peaceful devolution.

To this geographic overview I should add that we have now had **80 years** without world war, while only 20 years passed between the First and Second World War. The League of Nations existed for only 20 years while the **United Nations** has now been in operation for 80 years. It remains the primary **world forum** and an instrument for peace -- when the participating musicians are ready to use it.

The **Russel-Einstein Manifesto** was **not** written to register peaceful areas of world **geography but to warn** of the novel immense threats. It states that **the primary tasks** are the '**renunciation of war**' and finding 'peaceful means for the settlement of disputes'.

It notes that it is **illusory** to think that 'war may be allowed to continue provided modern weapons are prohibited'. Yet, it says, to '**abolish war is 'difficult**' and it urges the **renunciation of nuclear weapons** as part of a general reduction of armaments' -- as a '**first step**'.

The demand for this first step **that is easy for all to understand**, has helped to forge and sustain a strong world opinion. It has helped to generate valuable agreements on arms control, and we should recognize that it has been **vital to help maintain 80 years of non-use** of nuclear weapons.

**My book** notes the importance that the '**public mind**' has had, for instance, for the abolition of slavery, for decolonization, for human rights, for the prohibition of torture and the abolition of death penalty. It stresses the **continued importance** of public opinion for **nuclear disarmament** and for the **fundamental** demand that **armed force shall not be used** in interstate relations.

More specifically the book seeks to identify ***incentives existing today to the interstate use of armed force. disincentives , and***

## ***alternatives today to the use of armed force***

I describe how **traditional strivings** for regional or global **hegemony** may generate incentives for the interstate use of armed force.

I also note that some **new risks** may create incentives to the use of interstate of force -- **terrorism, competition in space and a potential further spread of nuclear weapons.**

I note **on the other hand**, that **some** incentives to the interstate use of armed force have **disappeared** or will not materialize:

-- With the dismantling of **colonialism** there are no incentives for **wars of liberation** – unless we see the Palestinian struggle as such a war.

-- With monarchies disappearing there are no incentives for **wars of succession.**

--Religions remain powerful forces, but **no religious block** of states will embark on world **jihads**,

--Increased coherence is predicted between Russia, China and ‘the South’ but it is unlikely to cause **an armed ‘clash of civilizations’.**

-- The **conquest of land is** no longer seen as glorious and as creating incentives to war.

The occupation of the **Crimea** and threat against **Taiwan** have not been caused primarily by hunger for land, but by hurt **pride.**

The **major part of my book** seeks to identify **disincentives** that now exist to the resort to armed force between states.

**The first disincentive** is the possible **cost in lives and property** and the risk of **defeat.**

**It is therefore understandable that military strength – deterrence -is the primary means that states employ to** create disincentives to the use of force against themselves.

Before **discussing** military **deterrence**, I shall focus on two other factors designed or likely to be disincentives.

**One factor is legal norms and institutions.**

In our **national communities** –states- citizens are told by rather precise laws what they are prohibited to do. For instance, not to use force against their neighbours. For the most part the added threats of penalties for violations are not needed. The legal rules are respected without threats of sanctions as they reflect long existing social norms.

**In the community of states**, the situation is somewhat different. From time immemorial communities have felt **no social norm** demanding of them to refrain from using force against each other. **War was legal.**

It was not until the adoption of the Covenant of **the League of Nations** in 1920 that an agreed written prohibition of the interstate use of force came into being. It was **confirmed** and amplified in the **UN Charter in 1945** – and international criminal law has added personal responsibility . This is a tremendous **evolution** – and the ‘public mind’ has been an essential factor in bringing it about. We know, *of course*, that the **Security Council is not an effective** mechanism for condemning violations and taking enforcement action. Yet, I submit, **there is value** already in the world **community defined prohibition** of the interstate threat or use of force. It is known by all and may together with condemnations of violations by General Assembly or Security Council, create reactions in the world community. Violations affect the reputation and standing of

violators. **The rule forms by itself a certain -admittedly insufficient -  
-disincentive to violations.**

Another **factor** is the accelerating **interdependence of states**. **Globalization** adds important disincentives to any interstate use of force. Great dividends are derived from more interstate trade, communication and division of labour. Ripping apart profitable cooperation and trade through the use of force or war is costly and painful.

I return now to **military deterrence**.

**I believe with Darwinists** that **one reason** why our species of man turned out to be the fittest to survive and thrive **has been** that among our genes were some that made us **ready to use force to grab** and defend **resources and territory for surviving** and living. **Smart for survival** was and is also to **refrain from the use of force** when there is certainty or high risk of defeat--perhaps loss of life or freedom.

The conclusion - that we find self-evident—follows that **a principal way to prevent attacks has always been to deter by showing superior – or at least significant – force.**

It works at all levels of development. In the past, **clans** discouraged acts of violence against their members by threatening collective revenge.

Today, great powers publish **nuclear posture reviews** that warn which actions may trigger them to use their nuclear weapons. This may be an effective deterrent. However, **between states** that have a **second-strike nuclear capacity** nuclear deterrence is more complicated.

The Cuban crisis in 1962 made the US and the Soviet Union painfully aware that the use of nuclear weapons by either could **trigger a second strike** and a nuclear Armageddon. This awareness led President Kennedy and the Soviet leadership to negotiations that resulted in Soviet naval and nuclear withdrawal from Cuba. American commitment to withdraw missiles from Turkey allowed Chairman Khrushchev to retreat from his reckless adventure without completely losing face.

The mutual possession of second-strike nuclear capacity and the awareness that its use could lead to what is termed '**mutually assured destruction**' was a key factor and led to diplomacy.

Ever since the Cuban affair the US has sought **to create immunity** against nuclear attacks, including the risk of a second strike. Billions of dollars have been and are still being spent on **missile defense -- 'star wars', now termed 'a golden dome'**.

Yet, these efforts have failed and the risk of mutually assured destruction (MAD) in a nuclear war remains. So does the conclusion that has been drawn that '**a nuclear war cannot be won and must not be fought**' .

Yet, despite this oft repeated and welcome affirmation the risk remains that they **can** be used - - so long as any nuclear weapons remain.

In my view, this risk is leading to **restraints in NWS to embark upon or allow themselves to be drawn into any conflicts that may through escalation or spread become nuclear**. Uncertainty about how new methods of warfare like Cyber, Space, AI and autonomous weapons may impact probably strengthens this restraint. The restraint, if real, is welcome and should naturally comprise the eschewing of all nuclear brinkmanship play and it should, logically be supplemented by a **reduction of the stocks** of nuclear weapons.

If I am right in believing that restraints arise on embarking on or joining **traditional armed conflict due to** concerns about risks of horizontal or vertical nuclear escalation, a significant question arises. Namely: **how** - if not by kinetic force - will the competition be pursued and the underlying conflict be solved? **The good answer should naturally be: By diplomacy** — But I think it is likely that **hybrid war measures** will be used or threatened **to back** the diplomacy

The **signs**, I humbly – some of you may say naively - suggest, **already** point to an ongoing switch to **hybrid – non-kinetic - war, notably between the major blocks of states.**

I am tempted to citing a quote I recently saw from **George Orwell**. In 1945 he wrote: **“the atomic bomb is likely to put an end to large-scale wars at the cost of prolonging indefinitely a peace that is no peace.”**

**Currently**, we can follow the wrestling that is taking place on the **economic and financial battle fields** –economic **sanctions** and blockades. Even if not lethal these forms of contest may cause **great pain.**

There is, further, an increasing **use of cyber** to disturb important or indispensable industrial or social services. Supply of electricity or water may be sabotaged, air traffic disturbed, cables under the sea and pipelines for oil and gas can be damaged. We have seen operations to impact on elections, support of political parties, toppling of governments through coups. Will such measures – as I am inclined to think --be replacing or merely add to kinetic warfare ?

The **influencing of public opinion** is an increasingly important part of the competition between blocs. We see a kind of ‘beauty contest’ in which **one side** paints Western liberal, political and cultural patterns as decadent and perverse **and the other side** criticizes Russia’s and China’s political systems as inhumane, authoritarian, indifferent to



the rule of law. Even such matters as which system has been superior in space exploits or poorest in combatting Covid 19 are invoked in the world competition about public opinion. The activities span from generally accepted open ways of influencing opinion to subversive, deniable actions, engineered insurrections and political murders.

They are conducted by other agents than men in uniforms. Some of the practices were pursued by both sides already during the Cold War. I would suggest that although the US and other Western countries have agencies like the CIA that are skilled in and practice subversion, the **Russian model** of deep state is exceptionally well adapted to hybrid warfare. It has been formed over a long time by large --partly underground --agencies like the Tjeka, later KGB and now FSB.

The development and pursuit of different forms of hybrid warfare will raise a need for **supplementing the laws war** by international rules on what is accepted as legitimate competition and what is stamped as impermissible **intervention**.

Such rules can emerge through state practice, judgments of the UN and of the International Court of Justice.

There seems to be broad agreement that the laws of war apply to cyber conflicts and the US has even indicated that nuclear weapons could be used in retaliation for cyber-attacks of a gravity comparable to that of a prohibited weapon of mass destruction.

I will now conclude. First by some comments on the **Russian aggression** I Ukraine. Then with some reflections on **the role of diplomacy** to forestall and prevent the interstate use of force.

Let me recall that during the Cold War the West established NATO as a part of a **policy of containment** of what it saw as an attempted

Soviet Communist expansion in Europe. After the disintegration of the Soviet Union, we have seen the **play in reverse**: Russia has sought to pursue a policy to contain Western NATO expansion. The **NATO decision in Bucharest 2008** that Georgia and Ukraine were to become NATO members marked the failure of Russia's efforts in the rooms of diplomacy. The decision contributed, I believe, to trigger the Russian armed **intervention in Georgia**.

And some years later Ukraine's economic and political drift to the EU, but above all the **prospect of Ukrainian integration into NATO** and the possible stationing of NATO forces on Russia's doorsteps generated the incentive to occupy the Crimea in 2014 and to invade Ukraine in 2022.

In my view, the invasion in Feb 2022 was not intended to be a **full-scale war but a Crimea II** --a smart 'special military operation' that would quickly topple a regime that was deemed unrepresentative and in power through a Western supported coup. **The 'operation' failed** as it was based on erroneous Intelligence and a lack of understanding that the majority of Ukrainians wanted independence and emancipation from Russia and from an increasingly unattractive economic and political system.

I see the Russian action as a disastrous '**aberration**' and deviation from **but not** an end to the long-term evolution from interstate war.

### **Now about diplomacy:**

I find it depressing that states spend billions on intricate military planning to deter possible adversaries from conceivable armed actions and so little effort on understanding other states, their interests and ambitions and on searching for non-violent approaches to differences. The human **defense genes** are easily triggered while demands for diplomacy, dialogue and détente are likely to be branded as meek.

To read the sometimes shifting intentions of foreign regimes may also be **more difficult** than conjecturing possible actions from the size, possession, character and location of their armed forces. It requires much knowledge, experience, intelligence and, in addition, empathy.

Sometimes-- when armistices are reached after years of fighting --we hear it said that the '**conflict had no armed solution**'. We cannot help but wonder if that reflection could not have come earlier and led to a solution by diplomacy.