

This column by PCI Vice President, Tom Plate, appeared in the South China Morning Post on Tuesday, May 3, 2022.



*Opinion*

## Threat of Russian nuclear attack shows why China's no-first-use policy should be global standard



- While nuclear weapons use is often labelled unthinkable, after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, that option now seems to be on the table
- China has long had a clear no-first-use policy, but the US does not commit to this, stressing nuclear deterrence instead

**Tom Plate**

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Illustration: Craig Stephens

The topic of nuclear war is no joking matter, but I was rather tempted to cry out “Get me rewrite!” while dipping into my old book on the nuclear arms race. So much is changing now. My published tome had been premised on the nuclear-age dynamics between the US and the Soviet Union. But that was five decades ago; China is now included in the top tier.

As times change, sometimes profoundly, so must our thinking and analysis, sometimes radically. Once, it was axiomatic that the use of nuclear weapons of any sort – any crossing of the clear red line between conventional and nuclear warfare in conflict – would escalate into apocalypse.

Now the world has to take into account a leader of a major nuclear power who [has indicated](#) the red line will be crossed if he feels the need.

To be sure, for all Russian President Vladimir Putin's atomic arrogance (or bluff), the United States remains in history as the first user and, so far, the only one. This occurred at the end of the war against Japan, and an unforgettable [tragic ending](#) it was.

The only sliver of a silver lining was the birth and surge in the United States of a substantial anti-nuclear intellectual class that has brought moral force to US thinking.

Those in China or elsewhere who believe Americans are imperialist warmongers might take special note of organisations such as the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, committed to reducing the possibility of nuclear warfare and, over time, national nuclear arsenals.

Founded by Albert Einstein and University of Chicago scientists who worked on the Manhattan Project that helped develop the first atomic bombs, the organisation's contributing physicists, engineers and other scientists, have, in their writing, speeches and interviews, campaigned against risking nuclear combat in any way whatsoever.

They make the compelling case that [global doomsday](#) could arise from strategic miscalculation, a command-and-control accident, or an impulsive order from a maniacal leader. As former British prime minister Winston Churchill warned, the doctrine of nuclear deterrence "does not cover the case of lunatics or dictators in the mood of Hitler when he found himself in his final dug-out".

Among the US' most notable anti-nuclear intellectuals is Siegfried Hecker, one of those inspiring scientists who rise above the forbidding peaks of their disciplines to ponder moral and humanitarian implications.

A professor at Stanford University, Hecker is also director emeritus of the Los Alamos National Laboratory, having served as its head from 1986 to 1997. The laboratory was founded during World War II to coordinate the work of the Manhattan Project. He is an expert on North Korea's nuclear programme and has worked for nuclear stability with Russian scientists since the end of the Cold War.

In an interview with the Bulletin, Hecker said that the major question right now is "whether Russia, meaning Putin, is going to use nuclear weapons in Ukraine". Admitting that he didn't really know, he added that "the chances are certainly non-zero".

Hecker continued: "But what I do know is that he's blown up the global nuclear order that has been developed over the last 70 years, for the most part by the United States and Russia.

"That order has helped to allow the world to take advantage of the benefits of nuclear energy – such as nuclear electricity and nuclear medicine – while avoiding the worst potential consequences, everything from nuclear weapons use, to lots of countries seeking nuclear weapons (we have fewer than 10 today), to nuclear terrorism, and nuclear accidents. The global order has allowed us to have the benefits outweigh the risks of nuclear energy."

Hecker pointed out that the [nuclear non-proliferation treaty](#) was the central element around which the current global nuclear non-proliferation regime was built, and that "it is embedded in a fabric of other agreements, practices, and norms that require international cooperation – and leadership from the big

nuclear powers”. He highlighted the key role that Russia has played in the non-proliferation regime and the International Atomic Energy Agency.

“It’s going to be difficult to see how we’re going to live with an international system, where we have a formerly responsible nuclear state that’s now become a pariah state – a country we can no longer count on to be responsible in nuclear matters – but is still so actively involved in the nuclear arena...”, Hecker said.

By contrast, consider China’s present doctrine: to never use nuclear weapons [unless someone fires first](#) on China. The Xi Jinping government hasn’t changed this, yet. This policy should remain the standard.

The US policy, which is to maintain and build its arsenal for deterrence, does not occupy the same moral high ground.

While nuclear weapons use is often labelled unthinkable, since Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, that very option has been receiving a frightful amount of thought. This change in the air is not good.

Robert Oppenheimer, the physicist who was director of the Los Alamos laboratory when the first atomic bomb was tested, caricatured “mutually assured destruction” as “two scorpions in a bottle, each capable of killing the other, but only at great risk to his own life”.

But what if three scorpions are in the bottle, and one is a deathstalker-type, itching to strike. What should the other two do? According to Hecker, we are at a turning point in world nuclear affairs as momentous as the dissolution of the Soviet Union. One might add that not just citizens of China but all citizens of the world have an existential interest in Xi’s scorpion strategy.

**LMU clinical professor Tom Plate is vice-president of the non-profit Pacific Century Institute, which in 2020 honoured Dr Hecker at its annual awards dinner in Los Angeles**