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## Comparing the Cold War Nuclear Crisis and the Climate Crisis: National Self-Interests as Barriers to International Cooperation

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*“Our world is at present faced with two unprecedented and supreme dangers. One is a danger not just of nuclear war but of any major war at all among great industrial powers – an exercise which modern technology has now made suicidal all around. The other is the devastating effect of modern industrialization and overpopulation on the world’s natural environment. The one threatens the destruction of civilization through the recklessness of selfishness of its military rivalries, the other through the massive abuse of its natural habitat.” – George F. Kennan, *Morality and Foreign Policy* (1985)<sup>1</sup>*

### Introduction

In the 1980s, Realist scholar George Kennan identified two cases of ‘supreme emergency’ wherein states have a moral duty to set aside their short-term national interests in an effort to achieve global cooperation. In the contemporary context, those cases can be understood as nuclear war and human-caused climate change.

Though expansive bodies of research examining these crises exist individually, there is limited scholarship discussing them together. National self-interest can be a barrier to cooperation on both nuclear weapons and climate change, making analysis of the specific national interests at stake important for better understanding international cooperation facilitation. This brief summarizes the

relevant national interests for each of the permanent five members of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC P5), and classifies them as cooperative, semi-cooperative, and uncooperative with respect to their actions and policies related to the Cold War nuclear crisis and the contemporary climate crisis.

In this brief, I first identify three elements of national self-interest that posed barriers to cooperation across both crises: national security, economic self-interest, and national identity. I then outline the international behavior and policies of the UNSC P5 related to each crisis. Ultimately, I find that national security interests were most important to driving cooperation in the nuclear crisis, the role of economic self-interest is the key difference between the two crises, and national

identity is a barrier that can be successfully overcome in time. In the next section, I outline the main analysis from each state's policy decisions. I then distinguish which factors of national self-

interest are most critical for explaining each state's behaviour, concluding with the key takeaways from comparing the crises together.

## National Interests of the UNSC P5

The United Nations Security Council Permanent Five (UNSC P5) – China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom (UK), and the United States of America (USA) – are five of the most powerful states in the world. These UNSC P5 are the only states legally recognized as nuclear weapon states under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and are also responsible for a majority of historical and contemporary greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. Each possess a veto over the decisions of the UN Security Council, making them key actors for the effectiveness of the UN system and multilateral cooperation in the broader international order. Their cooperation is thus critical to effectively addressing both the crises of nuclear weapons and of climate change, making them a logical grouping for analysis.

In this brief, I breakdown national self-interest into three variables: national security, economic self-interest, and national identity. National security is concerned with safeguarding the state's territorial integrity and political sovereignty against any form of external or internal threat.<sup>2</sup> Economic self-interest is pursuit of economic development to enhance a state's ability to excerpt influence through trade or other economic means. Finally, national identity is how a nation (both the government of a state and its population) views itself based in culture, history, or ideology. National identity shapes a state's worldview and influences

its international behavior, and affects its expectations for the future.<sup>3</sup>

### USA

The USA prioritized its national security during the Cold War period, chiefly defending its physical integrity and national identity through its ideological conflict with global communism and the USSR. In the post-Cold War period, the USA has stressed its economic self-interest, which is closely tied to its national identity rooted in a long history of natural resource extraction and industrial production. These areas are often condensed geographically and identify with their economic reliance on extractive industries; a colloquial example is Texas proudly adopting the self-identification as the land of 'black gold'. This amalgamation of economic self-interest and national identity creates a combined 'petro-masculine'<sup>4</sup> barrier to international cooperation that is more formidable than either variable alone, often undermining the USA's role in global climate negotiations.

### Russia/USSR

Russia, and its predecessor the USSR, adopts a 'zero-sum game' approach to international cooperation, often pushing back against the perceived American and Western sphere of influence in multilateral negotiations. During the Cold War nuclear crisis, national security and national identity built on communist ideology acted

affected the USSR's approach toward nuclear arms control. Russia is more resistant to international organizations after their defeat in the Cold War, often seeing them as rooted in Western ideologies and influence. Today, all three national self-interest variables are barriers towards Russian cooperation on climate change: national physical security concerns make Russia distrusting of the West and defiant toward perceived Western institutions; a heavy economic reliance on extractive resources, particularly fossil fuels; and a 'petro-masculine'<sup>5</sup> national identity that intertwines this resource extraction with traditional patriarchal values.

## **UK**

The UK entered the nuclear weapons crisis as a past colonial power. Although their global influence had declined, there was a significant amount of pride following the UK victory in World War 2. The legitimization on their physical security and the positive impact it had on their national identity supported their willingness to cooperate through the nuclear weapons crisis. The UK's actions in the Cold War crisis are an example of how historical momentum can guide state cooperativeness. UK government has turned to global cooperative leadership positions as an effort to buttress global influence. This along with historical momentum of past cooperativeness reinforce the UK's national identity as world leader in global cooperation. The relative lack of economic reliance in fossil fuels allowed for a generally seamless road to cooperation with the climate regime.

## **France**

France was also a declining colonial power coming out of WW2. The major difference being that had its physical security violated in a major way coming out of WW2 with the German occupation of France. This left a prominent shadow on the French

national identity. As a result, France sought nuclear leadership as a way of demonstrating power on the global stage. This violation of national security and the implications it had on France's national identity were major barriers of national self interest on the nuclear weapons issue.

The climate crisis saw a change in France approach to global cooperation. As members of NATO, France has been able to rely on American defence commitments for their national security, making their national identity as former imperial powers seeking to maintain a prominent role in global politics more central to their foreign policy behaviour. Low economic commitment to fossil fuel extraction has reduced the amount to which these two factors act as barriers to international cooperation.

## **China**

The nuclear weapons crisis saw national physical security and economic self interest as the two key variables through the period. China grew its nuclear weapons program and resisted arms reduction efforts as a way to assert its physical power on the world stage.

China's national identity deeply intertwined with pragmatism assessed through economic self-interest. For the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) economic growth is the center piece of regime legitimacy. As China has combined different communist influences with free market economics, the long-term legitimacy on the one-party system is backed by long run global economic dominance. Economic growth ensures stability, reduces potential social unrest, and, in the CCP's view, prevents foreign powers from exploiting internal weaknesses. This is another example of the

intertwining between economic self interest and national identity.

## Categorizing the UNSC P5

Three distinct categories emerge for categorizing states' international actions and policies towards multilateral regimes: cooperative, semi-cooperative, and non-cooperative. **Cooperative** states actively support international treaties related to nuclear arms control, especially non-proliferation and disarmament efforts. They discuss their nuclear capabilities with relative transparency and work to maintain international peace and security.<sup>6</sup> **Semi-cooperative** states recognize the

value of nuclear control but prioritize their own national interests over the global nuclear regime. They engage in treaty negotiations but may resist or defect if they feel their own national security will be compromised.<sup>7</sup> **Uncooperative** states evade international standards, maintain opacity on their nuclear capabilities, and resist arms control negotiations.<sup>8</sup> Though drawn from research on nuclear arms control, I adapt these terms to assess the actions of the UNSC P5 with respect to the nuclear and climate crises, summarized in Table 1 and Table 2. While broadly stable, the categorization of the UNSC P5 can vary over time, particularly in the shift from the Cold War to the post-Cold War periods.

**Table 1: UNSC P5 Cooperativeness During the Cold War Nuclear Crisis**

UNSC P5	Level of Cooperation	Notes
USA	Semi-Cooperative (during CW) Cooperative (post-CW)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Looking to assert ideological dominance during Cold War</li> <li>USA signed and abided by key nuclear treaties with USSR</li> <li>Post-Cold War established USA as hegemonic power; led global nuclear cooperation efforts</li> </ul>
USSR	Semi-Cooperative (during CW) Non-Cooperative (post-CW)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Looking to assert dominance/push back against USA dominance</li> <li>Key agreements with USA to avoid nuclear conflict shows a semi cooperative level of engagement.</li> <li>After the end of the Cold War, explicitly pushed back against USA hegemony and expansion of US-led regimes (e.g. NATO)</li> </ul>
UK	Cooperative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Sought to maintain national identity as global leader post-WW2</li> <li>Consistent compliance with international treaties and norms</li> </ul>
France	Non-Cooperative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>National identity post-WW2 occupation desired show of strength</li> <li>Several actions contrary to international agreements and norms</li> <li>Series of illegal nuclear tests 1966-1996</li> <li>Illegally sank Greenpeace <i>Rainbow Warrior</i> protest ship in 1985</li> </ul>
China	Non-Cooperative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>National self-identity as an independent nuclear power from USA and USSR</li> <li>Little compliance with international treaties both by not ratifying, or ratifying then not complying</li> </ul>



**Table 2: P5 Cooperativeness During the Climate Crisis**

UNSC P5	Level of Cooperation	Notes
USA	Non-Cooperative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Economic self-interest and ‘petro-masculine’ national identity</li> <li>• Withdrawal from multilateral climate change agreements</li> <li>• Mixed, often contradictory energy policy -some commitment to reducing emissions but also heavy investment in furthering extractive infrastructure.</li> <li>• ‘Whiplash’ from republican to democratic government approaches to international climate cooperation</li> </ul>
Russia	Non-Cooperative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Economic interests over environment.</li> <li>• Lack of ambitious climate targets / Renewable energy goals.</li> </ul>
UK	Cooperative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Less economy reliance on fossil fuel production.</li> <li>• National historical identity as global leaders</li> <li>• <i>Future uncertain</i>: recent post-Brexit challenges, new conservative government parties calling for non- cooperation with global climate regime</li> </ul>
France	Cooperative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Large established nuclear energy sector</li> <li>• National identity as global climate leader: hosted COP 21 leading to Paris Climate Agreement</li> </ul>
China	Cooperative (under Kyoto Protocol) Non-Cooperative (under Paris Climate Agreement)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Government interested expressly in economic self-interest seen as a means of maintaining regime stability</li> <li>• Status as ‘developing nation’ in KP with different responsibilities and expectations – led to full cooperation with low responsibility</li> <li>• Full responsibilities in PCA – corresponded with uncooperativeness</li> </ul>

## Discussion

This analysis finds that a defining difference between the nuclear and climate crises is the pronounced role of economic self-interest in the latter. While the financial implications of maintaining nuclear arsenals were substantial, they did not significantly sway state decisions during the Cold War. However, in the climate context, P5 states with economies deeply entrenched in fossil fuels, notably the USA, Russia, and China, are often the least cooperative. There’s a noticeable correlation between states heavily dependent on fossil fuels and their reluctance to participate in the global climate regime. The ambition of each state’s Nationally Determined Contributions (NDC) under the Paris Climate Agreement is a reasonable reflection of the relative commitment they are willing to make to the international climate governance regime.

During the Cold War, national security of the state’s physical territory stood as the paramount concern, driving major geopolitical decisions. In contrast, the economic costs of creating and maintaining nuclear arsenals, while large, were never a major barrier to state decision making during the nuclear weapons crisis. In the climate crisis, the immediate implications for national security appear less acute, due to the time lag separating emissions from their physical consequences. It’s essential to recognize, however, that climate change does pose significant national security threats, from rising sea levels to increased frequency of extreme weather events. Many global actors acknowledge this looming security challenge, but translating this recognition into policy has been challenging. Further complicating the landscape is the potent economic lure of continued natural resource exploitation, particularly fossil fuels. Together, these factors

have made fostering meaningful international cooperation on climate change particularly challenging.<sup>9</sup>

## **USA**

The USA demonstrated semi-cooperative action in its policies during the Cold War nuclear crisis. I classify it as semi-cooperative only because the USA was looking for opportunities to achieve a competitive edge against the USSR. After the Cold War, American behaviour became more cooperative as it exercised leadership in international cooperation on nuclear weapons issues like non-proliferation. Some critics label American actions as hegemonic and infringing on other states' spheres of influence. While the USA's actions were driven by the goal of expanding its influence on the world stage, American contributions to international nuclear weapons control denote cooperative action, such as cooperative threat reduction program (Nunn-Lugar Amendment, 1991), Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START II, 1993) and Proliferation Security Initiative (2003).

Through the climate crisis, the USA has been uncooperative. Democratic presidents have traditionally exhibited a more cooperative stance than their Republican counterparts. However, Even Democratic polices however, fall short of being fully cooperative when benchmarked against other UNSC P5 states such as France and the UK. The policy 'whiplash' of moving from semi-cooperative Democratic leadership to uncooperative Republican leadership results in a net uncooperative effect. This uncooperative stance is re-enforced by the USA's persistent reliance on and investment in fossil fuel infrastructure. While most states still depend on fossil fuels, the U.S. stands out for its vast domestic fossil fuel industry,

encompassing both traditional oil reserves and a growing sector centered around fracked natural gas. Additionally, the USA boasts an emissions-intensive manufacturing sector, which is resistant to incurring costs associated with emission reductions. The influence of these industries on policy decisions means that even under more cooperative leadership, there are substantive economic and political barriers to full American cooperation on climate change.

## **Russia/USSR**

The threat of nuclear conflict with the USA was enough to motivate semi-cooperative action on nuclear cooperation by the Soviet Union during the Cold War, such as agreeing on key bilateral arms control treaties. After the Cold War, Russia's actions shifted to uncooperative. This change was largely in response to perceived American dominance of international. Russia opposed the growth of US-led international entities such as NATO, seeing them as extensions of American influence. Consequently, Russia's foreign policy often acted in opposition to broader global collaborative endeavors. Examples of this are the 2019 Russian withdrawal of the Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, and recent Russian ambivalence in extending the New START treaty between Russia and the US.

Russia's uncooperative stance against Western-led international organizations extends into its stance on the climate crisis. Its international policy has sidestepped making any meaningful commitments to reduce GHG emissions. Notably, Russia set its base year for emissions reductions as 1990 in the Paris Climate Agreement (PCA), when the Soviet Union was at peak extractive capacity covering a larger industrialized land mass than current-day Russia. Russia has not changed its base year

comparison in the PCA. This maneuver enables Russia to raise its GHG emissions from the time of its pledge and yet remain compliant with the PCA, despite the not having to lower emission levels from the date of the commitment in 2015. This demonstrates the low Russian commitment towards reducing its GHG emissions as part of international cooperation on climate change.

## **UK**

The UK's is categorized as cooperative in the nuclear weapons crisis. Throughout the Cold War, the UK engaged in no illegal nuclear testing and actively reduced the size of its nuclear arsenal, indicating a tangible commitment to nuclear disarmament.<sup>10</sup>

In the climate context, the UK has been similarly cooperative. UK government initiatives have made meaningful investment in renewable energy. The UK's initial NDC under the Paris Agreement was to achieve at least a 68% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by 2030, compared to 1990 levels,<sup>11</sup> showcasing the country's ambition in contributing to the international effort against climate change. There is still some current investment being made into fossil fuel infrastructure as well as political uncertainty after BREXIT. Notably, there have been steps taken by conservative government to scale back climate ambitions and retract previously established goals. National identity factors have been and will likely continue to be the driving variable impacting cooperation in the UK. These moves risk reclassifying the UK from its role as a leader in climate cooperation to one of decreased commitment to international climate objectives.

## **France**

On the Cold War nuclear weapons issue, France is categorized as uncooperative due to its insistence

on maintaining a large nuclear arsenal to address its national identity crisis following the breach to its national security in WWII. This made the variables of national security and national identity large motivators for France during the Nuclear Weapons crisis. France's possession of nuclear weapons was not just a strategic necessity in this context, but also an emblem of national resurgence after the war. As a result, France insisted on maintaining a relatively large nuclear arsenal and had several international incidents that garnered negative attention, like illegal nuclear tests in North African and the South Pacific, and the sinking of the civilian Greenpeace vessel, the *Rainbow Warrior* in 1985 as Greenpeace had been protesting the environmental impacts of French nuclear testing.

France's prominent cooperative role in the climate crisis, particularly in exceeding its original Paris Climate Agreement NDC of a 40% reduction of GHG by 2030, can be linked to its robust nuclear energy infrastructure, which generates nearly 70% of its electricity. This reliance on nuclear power facilitates France's cooperative stance in global climate efforts. The nation's consistent approach aligns with its national identity as a leader in energy innovation and environmental responsibility, reducing the economic incentive to support fossil fuels. France's status as a net electricity exporter, particularly to higher-emitting neighbors, reinforces its economic self interest and enhances its capacity for leadership in international climate governance.

## **China**

Throughout the Cold War nuclear crisis, China's actions were unilateral and uncooperative towards nuclear arms control. This is because of China's broader resistance to the global dominance of both the USSR and the USA. This was influenced by Mao

Zedong's principles of foreign policy, including his 'leaning to one side' alliance with the USSR, followed by de-Stalinization and the Sino-Soviet split, which led to the withdrawal in July 1960 of Soviet nuclear experts assisting with the development of China's nuclear program. This led to China perceiving itself as the third point in the 'strategic triangle' that included the USA and the USSR. Ultimately, China's nuclear policy often was driven more by strategic considerations to assert itself as a third prominent actor in what was perceived to be a bipolar world. China shirked the disarmament ethos that underpinned arms controls treaties of the time.

In the climate context, China has consistently adjusted its level of cooperation based on economic self-interest. Under the Kyoto Protocol, China was considered a developing country and so was not required to reduce its GHG emissions. This made it consistent with China's economic self-interest to cooperate with the global climate regime. This changed in 2015 with the Paris Climate Agreement, which requires China to set binding emissions reduction targets. China original NDC in the Paris Climate Agreement failed to set a cap on GHG emissions but committed to peaking emissions by 2030. They further tied their carbon dioxide emissions reduction to a 'per unit of GDP' instead of an outright commitment to reduction, this marked a succinct shift to uncooperative on climate cooperation.

## Conclusion

An analysis of the international behavior and policy of the UNSC P5 on Cold War era nuclear weapons and the climate change suggests three conclusions: 1. National levels of cooperation can shift over time; 2. While all states play an important role in

contributing to international cooperation, a small number of states play the most pivotal roles in determining the success of collaborative efforts; 3. The emergence of economic self-interest in the context of climate change makes it fundamentally harder to overcome national self-interest and achieve effective international cooperation. There are many examples of a state's level of cooperation shifting across crises and even within crises. For example, France's uncooperativeness with the international nuclear weapons regime did not carry over into the climate crisis. This is due to a shift in their national identity, which was the primary variable of national identity limiting their cooperation in the nuclear crisis. China is an example of behavior shifting in the opposite direction within the same crisis.

The second conclusion is the pivotal role of a select few states in addressing each crisis. For example, during the Cold War, the actors most important to nuclear cooperation were the USA and the USSR. Today, climate policy similarly pivots around the decisions of the USA and China. This justifies extra care in understanding the key variables of national self-interests of states that are paramount to the successful management of these crises.

The third conclusion is the increased importance of economic self-interest as a barrier to international cooperation in the climate crisis. Economic self interest was not the primary driver of cooperation in the nuclear weapons crisis. In the climate crisis, however, states with economies deeply entrenched in fossil fuels are the least cooperative of the P5: the USA, Russia, and China. This suggests a correlation between states heavily dependent on fossil fuels and their reluctance in the global climate regime. This highlights economic self-interest as the most important national interest



variable to address in order to better respond to the current climate crisis.

Ultimately, state action can shift in its degree of cooperativeness over time. Historically uncooperative actions do not cement future uncooperative action and vice versa. Despite these differences and the enormity of the challenge, the international community has demonstrated a capacity for cooperation in the face of existential threats. The path to cooperative action on global

issues is challenging but not impossible. Through committed diplomacy, the fostering of trust, and the balancing of responsibilities, powerful states in the international community can navigate these complex landscapes, if they are prepared to change.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> George F. Kennan, *Morality and Foreign Policy* (1985), 216.

<sup>2</sup> S. M. Walt, "The Renaissance of Security Studies," *International Studies Quarterly* 35, no. 2 (1991): 211.

<sup>3</sup> P. J. Katzenstein and R. L. Jepperson, "Norms, Identity, and Culture in National Security," in *The Culture of National Security*, P. J. Katzenstein, ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996).

<sup>4</sup> Cara Daggett, "Petro-masculinity: Fossil Fuels and Authoritarian Desire," *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 47, no. 2 (2018): 25-44.

<sup>5</sup> Daggett, 2016.

<sup>6</sup> Barry Buzan and Lene Hansen, *The Evolution of International Security Studies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

<sup>7</sup> Jacques E.C. Hymans, *The Psychology of Nuclear Proliferation: Identity, Emotions and Foreign Policy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

<sup>8</sup> Nina Tannenwald, *The Nuclear Taboo: The United States and the Non-Use of Nuclear Weapons Since 1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

<sup>9</sup> UN News, "Climate change recognized as 'threat multiplier', UN Security Council debates its impact on peace," accessed November 6, 2023, <https://www.un.org/peacebuilding/news/climate-change-recognized-%E2%80%99threat-multiplier%E2%80%99-un-security-council-debates-its-impact-peace>; Andrew R. Hoehn and Thom Shanker, "Climate Security Is National Security," *Defense One*, June 30, 2023, <https://www.rand.org/pubs/commentary/2023/06/climate-security-is-national-security.html>.

<sup>10</sup> Rebecca Johnson, *Unfinished Business: The Negotiation of the CTBT and the End of Nuclear Testing*, (Switzerland: United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research, 2009): 21-32. <https://undir.org/files/publication/pdfs/unfinished-business-the-negotiation-of-the-ctbt-and-the-end-of-nuclear-testing-346.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> UNFCCC, "NDC Registry," n.d. <https://unfccc.int/NDCREG>.

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