

Europe's Mixed Message

Eamon Murphy

I FIND Angela Merkel rather likeable. The German Chancellor has cultivated well the image of the compassionate and humane stateswoman, a rhetorical champion of multilateralism and a rules-based international system. In Germany, she is known as 'Mutti' (Mummy) among much of the population. She may even be quite sincere on the principles she advocates. However, I'm increasingly coming to see her as something of a stumbling block in achieving some of the goals she espouses.

Politicians with power, and particularly those who are heads of state of large economic and political powers such as Germany, must balance several priorities, many of which are competing. What should Frau Merkel do when taking a principled stand on an issue has the potential to conflict with hers and her country's self-interest?

For example, China's growing disdain for international rules and its bullying of its neighbours is obviously not something to be encouraged, but is it such a problem that foreign policy principles might overtake the interests of German industry? It would appear not, with Berlin taking the lead in pushing through the EU's recent investment agreement with China, despite everything we know about Beijing's lack of regard for democracy and human rights. It seems the importance of German exports trumps concerns around such matters.

Closer to home, Hungary is an important manufacturing hub for the German car industry. Despite Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orbán marching the country steadily towards authoritarianism, undermining democracy and the rule of law, Merkel is a key figure in blocking anything stronger than disapproving rhetoric from the EU to counter this development.

The Nord Stream 2 pipeline, which will bring Russian gas under the Baltic to Germany, is now nearing completion. Scrapping the project would show serious intent on the part of the west to uphold a law-based order, deny strategic economic security to the Kremlin, and show solidarity with the Ukraine. However, it would also have significant implications for the German economy and its energy security.

As I've noted, the German Chancellor is a proponent of multilateralism, and Germany, with its massive trade surplus, is a country that benefits hugely from a world where countries cooperate and trade more or less openly with each other. Yet the rules-based world order she champions appears to come second to the concerns of the German economy.

Too often Merkel is the voice of caution when the conversation turns to enforcing the rules, occasionally mixing up the need for moderation with hesitation and tentativeness. This sometimes sends the message to those with autocratic tendencies that they can act with relative impunity from the EU, so long as key strategic German interests are upheld. None of us should then be surprised when the best the EU can do in response to the recent disgraceful behaviour of the government of Alexander Lukashenko in Belarus barely amounts to a trifle.

Lukashenko likely assumed impunity when he ordered the effective hijacking of a Ryanair passenger jet in order to imprison and torture journalist Roman Protasevich, a vocal critic of his regime. On the evidence of the response so far, he was probably right. The EU's response to this flagrant flouting of the rules-based order has been to advise airlines to avoid overflying Belarus and to bar Belarussian state carrier Belavia from European airports.

Some in the Lukashenko regime may also face travel bans and asset freezes. These measures are inconvenient, no doubt. But they are scarcely a threat to the power of a dictator. The response to Lukashenko's flagrant rigging of the most recent national election was even more tame.

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There seems an increasing perception among many autocrats that, however much lip service western democracies give to upholding international rules and norms, they rarely put their money where their mouth is. Occasionally some economic action may be taken, but sanctions are rarely enough to provoke real change, at least not in any way likely to alter the cost-benefit analysis of autocrats who will fix elections, arrest political opponents, invade neighbouring territory, sponsor cyberattacks, or kidnap journalists in acts of air piracy. Indeed, these weak economic reprisals often simply feed into the narrative that their countries are forever under threat from western aggression, something often used to great effect at home.

Lukashenko is a close ally of Russian President Vladimir Putin. Is the west capable of sending a strong message to these two that they are not free to act as they choose on the international stage without real repercussions? The EU is never going to find it easy to reach agreement on a response. Its members have different interests and different histories in dealing with the behemoth to the east. For some, economic opportunities in Russia are of paramount importance. For others, scarred by decades of Soviet rule, security is uppermost in the mind. So long as key figures appear to prioritise their own interests above fair play, democracy and human rights, Europe will struggle to send the right message. □

The Nuclear Gamble

Seven decades without nuclear war provides as much evidence for God as it does deterrence

Craig Shrives

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YOU can set your watch by that boy cleaning his shoes on the doorstep”, said the lady over the road to her husband. She was right. As the BBC News pips sounded at 8 o'clock, I would leave the house to polish my school shoes. I didn't want clean shoes. I wanted to avoid the news. The headlines of the late 1970s detailing the various standoffs between America and the Soviet Union scared the 10-year-old me to distraction. I'm now in my 50s, and, having recently ended a career as a government intelligence officer, those fears of nuclear Armageddon are not as crippling, but they remain. Allow me to explain.

Have you ever thrown three sixes with three dice? No? Try it. I promise it won't be too long before you answer yes to that question. You'll know that this is simply an analogy to help me explain time's cumulative effect on risk and why nuclear deterrence is bound to fail. Since the 1945 Hiroshima bomb, the world has seen several face-offs and proxy wars between nuclear weapons states (NWS), but none of these has escalated into a nuclear war. Of course, advocates of deterrence theory would insist that nuclear weapons are to thank for 76 years without WWII, but others, like me, argue that as we continue to roll the dice, our '666' event is inevitable.

Keep in mind that there are lots of recent examples of non-NWS acting militarily against NWS. This is useful to remember because it focuses the argument by limiting the benefits of nuclear weapon ownership to enjoying a special status among nations and to preventing only wars that would lead to 'mutually assured destruction (MAD)'.

Even though nuclear war has so far been averted, deterrence theory ought not to be relied upon to assure our futures, for it has many paths to failure. We have already taken some steps down a number of these paths since 1945, but so far we have not stepped on the nuclear trigger. These paths to failure include:

An Irrational Leader

Deterrence theory assumes that every leader holding a nuclear button is a rational thinker. Furthermore, it requires these leaders to remain cognitively sound under extreme stress and for their whole tenures. Now, look eastwards. Look westwards. Look around you. That is quite an assumption.

A False Alarm

The risk of a NWS 'retaliating' to a false alarm of a nuclear attack is difficult to quantify, but we must assume that, on any one day, it is minuscule. The problem, however, is that false alarms, which are typically caused by

software glitches or misinterpretations of natural events, are common. Notwithstanding the consequent cumulative risk, a false alarm sounded during a heated face-off between two NWSs would increase the risk of an unjustified retaliatory strike considerably.

An Accidental Nuclear Event or Strike

Since 1945, the US Defense Threat Reduction Agency has documented hundreds of 'broken arrow' incidents. This term refers to an accident involving nuclear weapons or their components (e.g., accidental detonation, jettisoning, theft, loss) that does not create the risk of a nuclear war. The term for such an accident that *does* create the risk of a nuclear war is 'nucflash'. Given the nature and regularity of broken arrow events, it is hard to describe a nucflash event (e.g., accidental or unauthorised launch) as an impossibility.

Escalation from Tactical Nuclear Weapons to Strategic

Not all nuclear munitions are big, strategic, city-flatteners like those used against Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Commanders have much smaller, more precise, tactical 'nukes' at their disposal now. Think of them as village-flatteners with a 300-mile range. Faced with a crisis, commanders could be tempted to deploy their tactical nuclear arsenal to change the momentum of a battle, and, once they've been used, it is easy to imagine the protagonists upping the ante to larger weapons.

A Compulsion to Strike First

As technology progresses so too does the notion that a country might be capable of destroying an adversary's nuclear weapons either before they can be deployed or while they are airborne. It is easy to imagine such a capability being delivered with a pre-emptive cyberattack, and it is easier still (because it nearly existed) to imagine it being delivered with a network of sophisticated anti-missile missiles.

Let's not forget America's Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) in the 1980s. The purpose of SDI (also called the 'Star Wars program') was to create an anti-missile shield over America. Of course, the initiative was eventually postponed because the then-technology rendered it ineffective. However, such aspirations still exist, and today's technology could deliver them.

As nations' defence strategies are updated to consider the possibility of a 'painless' pre-emptive nuclear strike, so deterrence theory erodes. More specifically, future standoffs between NWSs will become dangerously unstable as both the aggressor and the potential victim will feel compulsions, borne of either their over- or under-confidence, to strike first. —>

Remember that every single dalliance on one of these paths to failure is a roll of those three dice. Pushing my analogy to the bounds of its usefulness, it is also probable that our dice are becoming loaded towards their 6s. A quick horizon scan of contentious issues involving today's super powers highlights some looming, potentially dangerous scenarios. In the near future, we should expect Russia 'to invade', in US parlance, the Ukraine or, in Russian parlance, 'to protect its ethnic community'. We should expect Russia to continue 'destabilising' or – depending on your viewpoint – 'stabilising' Syria. We should expect tensions between the US and China to heighten as China creeps towards the top spot and widens its influence, and we should expect US-Iranian tensions to escalate as Iran becomes increasingly frustrated with the NWSs' failure to disarm in line with the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, commonly called the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT).

What's more, the confidence-building, weapons-inspection regimes have now been abandoned, and communications between the big powers are currently at an all-time low. It seems that recent events have taught state leaders that blatant denial, even in the face of undeniable evidence (e.g., the Yuri Skripal and Jamal Khashoggi cases), goes unpunished on the world stage. Worryingly, today's leaders are not engaging on contentious issues with the same ideology-themed reasoning as previously. Today's style involves less reasoned debate and more Tweeting. If this continues, I expect that sound bites comprising fewer than 280 characters will prove to have been a poor tool for averting war.

So, if we agree that time's cumulative effect on risk will eventually see our luck run out, then the only way to avoid a nuclear exchange is to ensure that no such weapons exist. On this point, there is good news and bad news. The good news is that an international treaty exists to stop the proliferation of nuclear weapons by non-NWSs and to kickstart the disarmament process by NWSs. The bad news is that this treaty, the NPT, is a weasel-worded ream of avoidable pledges, particularly its Article VI, the pillar which encourages the NWSs to disarm.

In fact, the NPT's Article VI fails on its first noun. Here's the opening line: "*There exists an obligation to pursue in good faith and bring to a conclusion negotiations leading to nuclear disarmament in all its aspects under strict and effective international control*".

"There exists an obligation...". This is odd wording. My suspicion is that the non-NWSs wanted "Signatories are obligated [legally required]", while the NWSs wanted "obliged [morally required]". Both sides likely settled for obligation, which covers both options, effectively booting the issue of legal adherence into the long grass. If you don't agree with this observation of Article VI's first noun, look at its first adverb, 'in good faith', and then the rest of the sentence structure. Clearly, the NWS signatories had no intention of signing a treaty that established a law requiring them to disarm, and so it has proved.

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The NWSs' lack of adherence, as the non-NWS signatories see it, is causing frustration among those signatories that would, were it not for the treaty, have had nuclear-weapon aspirations, and the first one (North Korea) has now left the treaty and developed its first nuclear weapons, further loading our dices towards their 6s.

And, as the NWSs continue to do nothing on disarmament and even update their arsenals, we should expect others to follow North Korea out of the treaty.

As any actuary will confirm, deterrence cannot save us forever. We can of course pray to God to prevent that '666' roll, but if we

keep rolling, then He will eventually abandon us. □

IRISH FREETHINKERS AND HUMANISTS

It is hoped to resume meetings on Thursday 9th September in the Holiday Inn Express, University Street, Belfast. Members will be informed as soon as possible.

Details will also be given in the September-October edition of this magazine, for which articles and letters are welcome – deadline 12th August.

HUMANIST ASSOCIATION OF IRELAND MEETINGS

14th July:

Joanne O'Riordan speaks about her life and work as an activist for people with disabilities.

11th August:

Humanists at Risk Coordinator for Humanists International Emma Wadsworth-Jones addresses the Association.

8th September:

The Doula. Nikki Kavanagh gives a presentation about her work as an End of Life Doula.

Meetings are via Zoom

For further details, please visit

www.humanism.ie/get-involved/events/

Religious Oaths out of Step with Modern Ireland

Brian Whiteside

AS we marked the tenth anniversary of the Queen's visit here on May 19th, I recalled two other events which happened that same day. Garret Fitzgerald died. And Enda Kenny held a meeting which I attended along with the religious leaders of our country.

This plenary meeting was part of the Structured Dialogue Process which had been set up in 2007 as a platform for leaders of the various religions and other "non-confessional philosophical groups" to make the government aware of any issues they might have. It was felt that, with the religious leaders congregated in Dublin to dine with the visiting monarch, it would be a good opportunity to hold such a meeting.

I had attended a number of bilateral meetings with the government as I was, at the time, a director of the Humanist Association of Ireland. We had presented a document entitled *Equality for the Non-Religious* and distributed it to all participants in this dialogue process. The document set out very clearly those areas in our Constitution, our laws and in custom and practice, where non-religious people were discriminated against.

Very little progress was being made and there was a growing frustration that this might simply be a talking shop. But then the invitation came for the plenary meeting of May 19th 2011. This meeting, attended by politicians, senior civil servants and leaders from all the different religions, would, we hoped, be an opportunity to air some of our issues with the other participants.

Enda Kenny welcomed everyone and said how wonderful it was for such a diverse group to be assembled in the same room; this reflected a new Ireland, a more tolerant and

pluralist country. He then invited the Catholic representative to speak, and he thanked the Taoiseach and said how wonderful it was, indeed, for us all to be gathered together on this occasion. There followed a recitation of the same platitudes from the rest of the religious leaders.

Eventually the Taoiseach turned to me and asked, "Brian, would you like to add anything from a humanist perspective?" I reiterated how good it was for all of us to meet like this and then added that, as the only representatives of the non-religious community, we probably had more on our agenda than any other

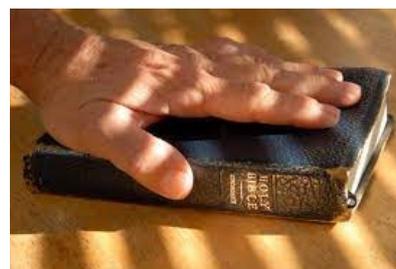
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group. I referred to our *Equality for the Non-Religious* document and said that I would like to focus on just one topic. We were in the midst of a presidential election campaign at the time so I asked:

"How embarrassing would it be for our State if in November we elected a president who declined to take up office because he/she could not in all conscience take the religious oath required by the Constitution?"

This was followed by a period of silence as I looked around the room at these eminent religious leaders pondering something which, to them, up to that moment had probably been utterly unthinkable. Then Enda Kenny leaned over his Secretary General and addressed his Minister of Justice. "You'd better take a note of that, Alan".

We're still holding our breath.



Some people wonder why I get so incensed with this. What harm does it do? Are there not more important things to worry about? Well, I believe this is important; a sizeable and ever-growing percentage of our population no longer subscribes to any religious belief – are they to be ignored?

Similarly with members of the Council of State and our judges, a religious oath is required on taking office. At a meeting in 2007 I challenged the then Minister for Justice, Brian Lenihan, on this point. He replied that he knew 'lots of judges' who were not in the least religious who had no difficulty taking the oath. When I pointed out how disingenuous and hypocritical this was he conceded that I had a point.

Some time ago I met with a very senior Catholic churchman who told me he found it extremely offensive for non-believers to take religious oaths; he favours change. Going home that evening I reflected on Garret Fitzgerald's life and his ambition for a Constitutional Crusade. I remembered the last time I met him when Garrett told me he was 'nearly a Humanist'.

It is now only four years till our next presidential election. As Ireland becomes ever more secular the chances of a non-religious citizen being elected is growing all the time.

This situation has been known for a very long time and was highlighted at the meeting on the day the Queen came to Dublin ten years ago. Is four years enough time to get our house in order or are we headed for a possible constitutional crisis?

Brian Whiteside is a humanist and a funeral celebrant. He is a former member and director of the Humanist Association of Ireland.