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REVIEW

Nuclear war: a scenario

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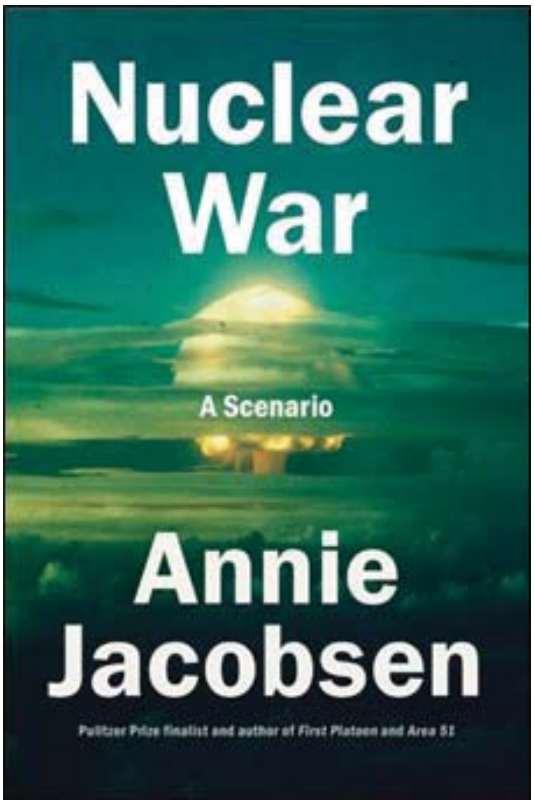

After dominating the Cold War, nuclear weapons appeared to have fallen into a state of strategic decline, which suggested that their importance would diminish until they ended in a sort of obsolescence as a means of wielding power. It was the post-Cold War period, the end of history announced by Francis Fukuyama, of Krauthammer's unipolar moment, and of the definitive globalisation under the same principles shared by all (meaning the great powers). Thus, from 1991 to 2018, the nuclear arsenals of the two great powers were reduced from absolutely gigantic numbers to 13,400 nuclear warheads, ninety-two percent of them held by the United States and Russia as the only internationally recognised successor of the defunct Soviet Union.

Additionally, a series of treaties (now almost completely dismantled) consisting of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF Treaty) of December 1987, the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaties (START Treaties) of July 1991 and April 2010, the Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty (Moscow Treaty) of May 2002 and the Treaty on Open Skies of March 1992, together with a very important set of declarations, gave legal form to this new global scenario, known as the strategic stability regime based on the principles of bilateralism and nuclear parity. Thus, the danger of nuclear war between great powers receded, while globalisation rapidly expanded the benefits of the so-called post-Cold War "peace dividend", which reached communist China itself. The existence of a nuclearised North Korea in this period did not change the overall scenario and it could even be contained by means of coordinated action by the major powers within the UN Security Council.

However, the conflict in Ukraine renewed the relevance of nuclear weapons as a mechanism of pressure to achieve political ends by major nuclear powers, precisely those who are called upon to guarantee international peace and security; and it is precisely this responsibility that explains and justifies their right of veto.

Currently, both the United States and Russia are engaged in costly modernisation programmes for their respective nuclear arsenals (the famous nuclear triad) amounting to hundreds of billions of dollars, plus more hundreds of billions of dollars in life-cycle operating cost, under the premise of maintaining deterrence. In turn, China, which has become the emerging great power in political and strategic terms, is increasing its own nuclear arsenal while maintaining a policy of not being bound by any international agreement that could restrict its ability to arm itself to at least the level of the US or Russian capacity to generate mutually assured destruction in the event of a direct confrontation. Although six other states possess nuclear weapons, only those three have the capability to initiate a war of catastrophic proportions for the whole of humanity. Or at least that is what most experts think.

This is where the book by journalist Annie Jacobsen (Middleton, Connecticut, 28th of June 1967), which is the subject of this review, comes in. In her Introduction, the author states that the book is the result of research she started during the COVID-19 lockdown in Washington. During this time, she had the opportunity to hold lengthy discussions with senior US national security officials, debates with leading specialists from different scientific disciplines (nuclear physicists and engineers, electronic,

computer and systems engineers, meteorologists and oceanographers), and consult with historians and the heads of State archives and repositories, to shape the theme of the book's title: building a nuclear war scenario. An initial section of the interviews identifies these experts by name and speciality.

In a surprising twist, she reveals the outcome of this scenario in the prologue, i.e. she begins by detailing the terrible consequences of a nuclear attack on the Pentagon (the headquarters of the US Department of Defence) with a megaton of explosive power, which has devastated the US capital, Washington D.C., caused the immediate death of a million people, and injured as many to varying degrees of severity. This is why she rightly calls it "Hell on Earth". It is thus an impact scenario in the terms of scenario generation.

From this initial situation, the author builds, chapter by chapter, a timeline encompassing a period of hours, which give each chapter its title, from the launch of an intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) against the United States. In these chapters, the author explains the rationale for the attack, how it came about and, much later, the motivations that led to the decision to attack the political and administrative heart of the United States. The reader will discover, strikingly, that it was neither Russia nor China that carried out the strike, despite the fact that each has its own interests and areas of confrontation with the global hegemonic power. This responsibility lies with the North Korean regime, the sole and exclusive decision of its leader, Kim Jong-un, reviled by the West but deified in his own country. The attack on the Pentagon by a newly developed North Korean ICBM, whose launch was detected but could not be intercepted by the very limited and ineffective missiles of the Alaska-based ballistic missile defence system (*Ground-Based Midcourse Defence* or GMD), is part of a coven of destruction launched by North Korea against the United States. This is followed by an ICBM against the Pentagon, then a submarine-launched ballistic missile (SLBM) against the only nuclear power plant on the coast of California, named the "Diablo Canyon" (or Devil's Canyon in its original geographic name in Spanish), and the detonation of a nuclear warhead in space designed to completely override the US electrical system through the effects of a high-energy electromagnetic pulse (EMP). She also mentions briefly a fourth ICBM, which failed in flight and had no direct destructive consequences.

The activation of the nuclear response plan (*Single Integrated Operational Plan* or SIOP) highlights fundamental issues that require detailed explanations by the author. On one hand, the lack of time between the attack and response that is required for a measured decision (remember the Cold War incidents, from the Cuban Missile Crisis in October 1962 to the NATO exercise Able Archer-83 in November 1983) and, at the same time, the physical inability to bring the top political leadership, including the US President and his surrogates (including the official presidential succession list of twelve senior officials in order of precedence) to safety in the event of a devastating attack on the federal capital. On the other hand, it highlights the brutality of the US's own reaction within the framework of the nuclear response plans, which seeks to raze North Korean territory and its crazed leader (Kim) to the ground, but without

measuring the immediate consequences of such acts; let alone the global consequences for humanity or the climate. The nuclear decision-makers, i.e. the President and his civilian and military advisors, know that US missiles (some 50 of them) will fly over Russian territory via the Arctic Ocean to reach their targets in North Korea, but do not inform the Russian side of such launch; significantly, the well-known "Red Phone" with Moscow is not used in advance, highlighting the need to maintain permanent communication channels at various levels. But they also ignore the destructive consequences of a response of such magnitude (a total of eighty-two nuclear warheads) on the populated Chinese cities near the North Korean border, which will inevitably suffer hundreds of millions of casualties from the collateral effects of dozens of nuclear explosions.

Here, in what she aptly calls Armageddon (after the final battle announced in the Book of Revelations), the author plays with the failures and manifest errors within the US nuclear command and control system, with the inability of those in charge to make rational decisions in the face of the pressure of response times. But it also relies on the supposed irrationality of Russian leaders (who were forewarned by their own warning systems of US launches), who launch a massive nuclear response to what they believe to be the onset of a nuclear attack on their own territory (their systems observe hundreds of US warheads flying towards Russian territory from the Arctic and Pacific Oceans). This fulfils the maxim enunciated by the Soviet and later Russian leaders that a nuclear attack on their country will always be met with a massive response. It is the fundamental principle of nuclear deterrence in a system of two or more actors, and when it fails, any scenario is possible. Incidentally, only two pages of the book's 373 are dedicated to the annihilation of Europe.

In reality, this is but one scenario of many that may occur. The end result is however clear: a nuclear war will be a war of global destruction. In doing so, Jacobsen builds a case against the idea that it is possible to win a nuclear war and, consequently, destroys the fallacy of limited nuclear war, a notion that has been advocated by Western policymakers, military and academics since the 1970s during the Cold War. By creating a terrifying and desolate scenario (the destruction of human civilisation itself), the book makes a profound reflection in favour of the thesis of nuclear abolition, which extends far beyond arms control or nuclear disarmament, both of which are insufficient to free the world from the catastrophe of war, as Jasmine Owens recently argued in a controversial but timely article published in the *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists* (11th of July 2024).

It is worth noting that this is a very well-written story, easy to read and gripping at times, precisely because the author does not hold back on the details of every decision to use nuclear weapons and the terrible consequences they shall have for civilians and the environment. While it also makes an important educational effort that includes nine explanatory sheets throughout the book (called history lessons), as well as explanatory tables and images, it is a work intended for specialists (policy-makers, civil servants and analysts). On one hand, this is because of the amount of information regarding the functioning of the US and Russian nuclear warfare command and

control systems, the nuclear capabilities of major powers and their nuclear strategies on advanced developments with applications in the field of nuclear warfare that have been obtained from the interviews mentioned at the beginning. On the other hand, due to the abundance of technical data on the use of nuclear and non-nuclear systems, the physical consequences of nuclear detonations, as well as on the functioning of emergency systems in the event of a disaster, which will ultimately be completely useless in caring for the millions of survivors of a nuclear war.

It is precisely this target audience (the specialists) that Jacobsen hopes to reach and possibly to attempt to change consciences or the dynamics of individual and group thinking by US policy makers, as glimpsed at various points in the book because, according to the author herself, the others (both Russians and North Koreans) are driven to total destruction by their own paranoia. However, it also raises the question that all rationality and technological capacity of a political system that considers itself intrinsically superior to all others (the famous American exceptionalism) is incapable of preventing its own destruction and thus of others as well. And the prospect of applying Artificial Intelligence to nuclear planning does not seem to bode well either, as Cameron Vega and Eliana Johns have argued in a recent article in the *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists* (22nd of July 2024).

All in all, this is a book for specialists that must be read and reflected upon in depth, all the more so in today's times where nuclear leaders fantasise about an escalation game that cannot be played, because the end result is always complete annihilation.

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