



Seed Idea: The Crisis of Containment – Time for a New Approach?

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In a recent discussion in the WAAS working group on Existential Threats to Human Security, David Harries, former chair of Pugwash Canada and associate executive director of Foresight Canada, raised the concern that the conventional approach to threat containment, based to a large extent on early warning, is becoming obsolete. In the wake of technological innovations such as AI but also as a consequence of increasing proliferation and speed of creation of new threats such as biological weapons, “state actors, state agents, public and private organizations and individuals are now more than equipped to escape ‘containment’ and defeat ‘early warning’,” he noted.

“Everyone wants the most murderous form of AI, the deadliest biotech or other weaponizable technology under their control—first, before their opponents beat them to it. There is no scope for regulations in such a war; there is no time to apply a precautionary principle.”

This situation, it seems to me, is brought about by a process of technological innovation now completely out of our control. This is not the result of an oversight or an accident, but a function of geopolitical struggles that have fuelled the race for ever more extreme tech capabilities since the dawn of history. Once a slow and meandering trickle, it is now a raging torrent advancing at bewildering speed, most recently driven by super-human machine intelligence.

Tech innovation is a war machine. Technology is intrinsically about power and control over nature or other people. It intrinsically lends itself to hubris. Perhaps not necessarily, but evidently so.

Stop and you will be destroyed! So of course nobody is going to stop, even if they know a particular piece of tech innovation is able to kill all of humanity or all life on earth. *Au contraire*: All the more reason to push ahead with it relentlessly! Everyone wants the most murderous form of AI, the deadliest biotech or other weaponizable technology under their control—first, before their opponents beat them to it.

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This situation has escalated in the course of the industrial revolution and more recently the digital revolution. It is now so untenable that it calls for a fundamental rethink of the way security is to be achieved.

To my mind it seems obvious that only voluntary restraint or ‘inner containment’ will save us from ourselves. Physical containment, based on out-innovating or pre-empting your opponents, is what is driving the game. It is not going to end it.

Inner containment is an ethic not necessarily based on intrinsic benevolence. It assumes merely the insight and genuine conviction that life requires containment, moderation in dealing with others and their interests. It is a commitment to law, and to the maintenance of effective mechanisms for correcting the incorrigible—law enforcement.

A functional and durable system of international law and order cannot be imposed. For a law to be loved and jointly upheld, not just feared and obeyed under duress, it must be built on voluntary commitment. That can happen only if laws are just and hence acceptable to all, and desirable as well, with all actors made aware of the truth that security and even survival are not achievable long term in today’s world of ubiquitous killer technology without commitment to lawful behaviour. This is the stance I refer to as inner containment. Such inner containment is the only way to de-escalate.

This is not some farfetched proposition but arguably already the majority position. As it is, most nations would be quite content to live safely under a just international law, just as most individuals are happy to live under a just national law, or would be if they had the opportunity. There are some national actors, however, who think themselves exceptional or entitled to rule, and others who feel a need to avenge past wrongs, or simply wish to indulge their lust for more power, all in the name of their nation. These actors cannot be policed at present; their operations have the character of organised crime, ruthless and secretive and very well funded, and that is what gives them impunity. I say ‘actors’ rather than ‘peoples’ because the majority of people do not want war, except if they are forced to fight under desperate conditions or whipped into a frenzy with deliberately incendiary propaganda authored by well-organised criminal actors.

We have never had a comprehensive global concord, based on the insight that humanity can no longer afford to live without inward containment. But we do have a rudimentary and partly unjust international legal structure that continues to evolve. Recent events in Ukraine and Gaza are instructive as to the limited effectiveness of taking matters to the International Court of Justice or War Crimes Tribunal, after the event. This is not a precautionary approach. On that front, however, there are some interesting precedents. Nuclear weapons control treaties, despite their failures and rapidly increasing fragility, are an instructive case because, until now at least, they have prevented a nuclear Armageddon. We now need to respond much more broadly to the fact that physical containment is a self-defeating process that is quickly becoming untenable.

We do not yet seem to be approaching such a concord, except perhaps by the painful and dubitable route of calamity. History shows that innovative frameworks for regulating human relations tend to emerge and gain wide acceptance after a conflagration. But there is no genuine precedent for the current and emerging state of war technology. A global conflagration today could take multiple forms and be initiated by numerous state and non-state actors, and it could be very hard or impossible to come back from such a disaster. Waiting out the cycles of history may seem ok, if one chooses to adopt a detached long-term perspective, but we cannot count on such cyclical developments any more. History may end with the next downward turn, but not at all as Samuel Huntington had hoped.

The duty of scientists and all other rational thinkers and champions of peace is to lay out pathways toward de-escalation. We are not doing this, or not systematically and publicly enough. The vast majority of people and nations would welcome a genuine rule of law, so we should be networking and emboldening them. WAAS would do well to organise a brainstorming session over several days on the question of how the war technology machine can be stopped, and how the usurpation of lawful government by organised crime can be stopped. Various UN reform options need to be discussed in such fora, drawing on lessons learnt from experiments such as the recent push for a universal nuclear weapons ban by non-nuclear armed nations, which is exemplary of this kind of approach.

The world may just be ready to embrace inner containment. It certainly needs to be tried.

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