

THE GLOBAL NUCLEAR ORDER AND A CRISIS OF CONSENSUS

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Introduction

In light of increasing volatility in the global order, the United Nations General Assembly's First Committee on Disarmament and International Security recently adopted 72 texts on a wide array of global issues.¹ One of the key issues was the implementation of nuclear disarmament by all concerned states and mitigating the impact of autonomous weapon systems. Broadly these 72 measures call for a return to multilateralism and finding consensus, a concept that seems increasingly elusive in current global politics.

The global nuclear order is in crisis. Escalating nuclear threats² from Russia; the rapid increase in instances of testing of nuclear-capable delivery systems by North Korea,³ China,⁴ and India;⁵ and

the crumbling arms control architecture in the U.S. and Russia,⁶ and its complete absence in regions such as South Asia are worrying trends that can be attributed to a lack of *political* and *legal* consensus on crucial issues among key stakeholders. This absence of a consensus exists on three levels: between the nuclear and non-nuclear armed states; among the great nuclear powers or the Permanent Five (P5); and finally, between the P5 and the regional nuclear armed as well as nuclear threshold states. There are also rising uncertainties around the use of emerging and disruptive technologies within this arena especially with regards to what they constitute and how their use should be regulated within the rapidly changing security and strategic landscape of the 'third nuclear age'.

What does a closer examination of these three levels of consensus deficit reveal about institutions

¹ United Nations. 2024. [Threat of Mass-Destruction Weapons in Space, New Technology in Military Domain Inform General Assembly's Adoption of 72 First Committee Texts](#). Seventy-Ninth session, 43rd and 44th meetings, 2 December.

² Jochecova, Ketrin. 2024. ["Russia revises nuclear strike threshold against NATO members, Ukraine"](#). *Politico*. 19 November.

³ Yim, Hyunsu. 2024. ["North Korea's Kim oversees delivery of new tactical ballistic missile launchers"](#). *Reuters*. 5 August.

⁴ Ng, Kelly and Mao, Frances. 2024. ["China's long-range missile test sparks concerns"](#). *BBC News*. 25 September.

⁵ Khan, Abdul Moiz. 2024. ["India's Agni-V Test: Implications for Regional Strategic Stability"](#). *The Diplomat*. 18 March.

⁶ Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS).

Damopoulos, Nicholas. 2024. [The Uncertain Future of U.S.-Russia Arms Control](#). 14 February.

that uphold the nuclear order? What challenges do they produce? And how can these challenges be resolved to create and maintain a peaceful and stable international order?

Lack of political consensus

Between nuclear and non-nuclear armed states

The Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT), the cornerstone of the nuclear non-proliferation regime, was adopted in 1970. The ideation of the global nuclear order and the NPT was premised upon varying but complementary goals⁷ of nuclear non-proliferation, arms control, peaceful uses of nuclear energy, and eventual disarmament. The treaty concretised these goals but with different priorities allotted to each one.

For the Nuclear Weapon States (NWS)—U.S., Russia, U.K., France and China—prevention of horizontal nuclear proliferation was of utmost importance in order to prohibit new states from acquiring nuclear weapons. Meanwhile, the Non-Nuclear Weapon States (NNWS) agreed to practice nuclear abstinence in return for the promise of arms control and eventual disarmament by the NWS along with the freedom to pursue nuclear technology for peaceful purposes. For non-NPT nuclear armed states such as India and Pakistan, the nuclear order became a key site for manifesting their rising power ambitions, translating into their demand for recognition of their nuclear-weapons-state-outside-of-the-NPT status. With time,

⁷ Horsburgh, Nicola. 2015. "Introduction: Global Nuclear Order in Conceptual and Historical Perspective". In Horsburgh, Nicola (ed.) *China and Global Nuclear Order: From Estrangement to Active Engagement*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

however, these varying goals have failed to reach fruition and in fact have come into contestation with one another. Thus, although the NPT was successfully adopted, consensus on how these goals should be prioritised and practiced has been absent from the beginning.

For instance, the eventual failure⁸ to arrest nuclear proliferation compounded by growing regional tensions has resulted in potential or impending nuclear crises⁹ in the Korean peninsula, the South Asian subcontinent, as well as West Asia. Meanwhile, growing tensions between the twin goals of deterrence and disarmament has left a majority of the NNWS in a lurch as they are dissatisfied¹⁰ with the progress being made towards nuclear disarmament and arms control as promised under Article VI of the NPT.¹¹ Additionally, non-NPT nuclear armed states such as India and Pakistan have continually expressed their discontentment¹² with institutions such as the NPT and export control groups like the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) over their failure to heed their calls for membership. The inability of such antiquated structures to accommodate the growing interests and demands of rising nuclear powers is

⁸ Abe, Nobuyasu. 2020. "The NPT at Fifty: Successes and Failures." *Journal for Peace and Nuclear Disarmament*. Vol.3(20): 224-233.

⁹ Messmer, Marion. 2024. "[Why a stalling NPT is a wake-up call for global security](#)". *Chatham House*. 10 January. Accessed on 3 January 2025

¹⁰ International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN). 2023. *G7 Hiroshima summit fails to deliver progress on nuclear disarmament*. 19 May.

¹¹ 2005 Review Conference of the Parties to the Treaty on the Non-proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT). 2005. *THE TREATY ON THE NON-PROLIFERATION OF NUCLEAR WEAPONS (NPT)*. 2-27 May.

¹² Hibbs, Mark. 2024. "[Will India and Pakistan Ever Join the Nuclear Suppliers Group?](#)". *Arms Control Association*. November. Accessed on 8 January 2025.

partially responsible for the incomplete integration of actors such as India into an evolving nuclear order. The result of these tensions and unfulfilled promises is a flailing vision of the future of the global nuclear order and shrinking avenues to reconcile these varying goals.

Among the P5

The agreement among the P5 on the general rules and norms that govern the functioning of the nuclear order institutions and the behaviour of actors within remains foundational for the sustenance of this architecture. Two such key norms are that of non-use of nuclear weapons by states possessing nuclear weapons and non-proliferation of nuclear weapons materials and technology to non-nuclear weapon states. However, the binding consensus among the P5 on the importance of upholding these cornerstone principles seems to be fraying. There is a perplexing lack of interest among the P5 in upholding the nuclear norms that *they* helped foster in the first place. The most glaring example of this is Russia's growing nuclear threats¹³ and aggressive nuclear posturing¹⁴ towards a non-nuclear state like Ukraine as well as the U.S. The norm¹⁵ against use or threat of use of nuclear weapons is the bedrock upon which the goal of eventual complete disarmament rests. Russia's

blatant disregard¹⁶ of the norms carries the risk of unravelling the progress made so far on establishing and sustaining the nuclear taboo.¹⁷

Additionally, both Russia and China have been accused¹⁸ of engaging in proliferative activities by supporting North Korea's nuclear weapons programme. The recently concluded mutual defence treaty¹⁹ between Russia and North Korea in November 2024 seeks to strengthen military cooperation and engaging in an exchange of peaceful atomic energy between the two countries. The treaty however, has raised concerns in the U.S. and South Korea over Russia's export of sensitive technology to aid North Korea's "nuclear and missile programs"²⁰ in return for North Korea's deployment²¹ of soldiers in the Russia-Ukraine war. Similarly, China is said to have aided²² Russia in its war efforts by providing components for refurbishing, "Soviet-era combat vehicles and technologies, including artillery, tanks, and missiles."

¹⁶ Maslen, Stuart Casey. 2022. "[Russia and the prohibition on threatening to use nuclear weapons](#)." *Nuclear Weapons Ban Monitor*. 28 September. Accessed on 18 November 2024

¹⁷ Burroughs, John. 2024. "[The Inadmissibility of Nuclear Threats](#)." *Arms Control Today*. April. Accessed on 20 November 2024.

¹⁸ Roth, Andrew. 2024. "[North Korea tells UN it is speeding up nuclear weapons programme](#)." *The Guardian*. 5 November. Accessed on 24 December 2025.

¹⁹ Al Jazeera. 2024. "[North Korea ratifies landmark mutual defence treaty with Russia](#)." 12 November. Accessed 16 December 2024.

²⁰ Kim, Hyung-Jin and Tong-Hyung, Kim. 2024. "[South Korea and EU worry about Russia's technology transfer in return for North Korea troops](#)." *AP*. 4 November. Accessed on 21 December 2024.

²¹ Gatopoulos, Alex. 2024. "[What do we know about the North Korean troops joining Russia's war?](#)." 13 November. *AlJazeera*. Accessed on 21 December 2024.

²² Bergmann, Max, Snegovaya, Maria and Fenton, Nick. 2024. "[Collaboration for a Price: Russian Military-Technical Cooperation with China, Iran, and North Korea](#)." *Centre for Strategic and International Studies*. 22 May. Accessed on 4 January 2025

¹³ Dickinson, Peter. 2024. "[Moscow escalates nuclear threats as Ukraine erases Russia's red lines](#)." *Atlantic Council*. 3 September. Accessed on 22 December 2024.

¹⁴ Mao, Frances. 2024. "[Putin proposes new rules for using nuclear weapons](#)" *BBC*. 25 September. Accessed on 2 January 2024

¹⁵ International Court of Justice. "[Legality of the Threat or Use of Nuclear Weapons](#)." Accessed on 3 January 2025.

Violation of nuclear non-proliferation norms by the great powers ties back to an absent consensus on the fundamental principles that (should) govern the nuclear order as well as state behaviour. Such a consensus deficit puts considerable strain on existing institutional mechanisms and exposes vulnerabilities in nuclear deterrence and abstinence systems that have so far undergirded the global nuclear order.

Between the P5 and regional nuclear armed and threshold states

A deep divide exists between the P5 and regional nuclear weapons states on accommodating regional geopolitical and security imperatives into this equation. The disinterest of the P5 in accounting for regional security concerns of rising nuclear powers can be gauged from a recent statement made by the U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary for Nuclear Affairs, Alexandra Bell, at the 2024 EU Non-Proliferation and Disarmament Conference. In her statement Bell emphasized the importance of prioritising global security over regional goals to achieve stability. As important as global stability is, it is worth noting that the key nuclear flashpoints in the recent decade can be traced, to a large extent, to the exacerbating and unresolved pockets of *regional* security tensions and its direct impact on global stability.

For instance, in light of the on-going escalation between Iran and Israel, Iran is anticipated to withdraw from the NPT. Since the Gaza conflict began in 2023, Iran has indicated its growing resentment at the failure of the NPT and the P5 in addressing the existential threat that Iran faces in

the region. Kamal Kharrazi, adviser to Iran's Supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, lamented,²³ "when they [the West] disregard our [Iran's] sensitivities, especially regarding the territorial integrity of the Islamic Republic of Iran, there is no reason for us to consider their concerns." It is doubtful²⁴ that Iran will actively seek to build nuclear weapons if it withdraws from the NPT. However, Iran's statement is symptomatic of the growing distrust of regional threshold nuclear powers in the security assurances that were promised to them and the grand bargain of nuclear abstinence that they agreed to when they signed the NPT.

Similar trends of distrust can be observed in the North East. South Korea has taken an emboldened stance²⁵ on security and has stated that it can "no longer entrust [its] diplomatic and security interests to American considerations alone." Amidst a dangerous rise in North Korean missile tests²⁶ and a second Donald Trump presidency in the U.S, popular opinion in South Korea seems to be in favour of nuclear latency and "limited armament."²⁷ In a positive development, U.S. President Biden and his South Korean counterpart,

²³ Almendral, Aurora, Khodadadi, Amin and Jones, Andrew. 2024. "[Iran says it has the capacity to make nuclear weapons; supreme leader threatens U.S. and Israel.](#)" *NBC News*. 1 November. Accessed on 4 January 2025.

²⁴ Kwong, Jamie and Grajewski, Nicole. 2024. "[Will Iran Withdraw from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty?](#)" *War on the Rocks*. 1 November. Accessed on 9 December 2024.

²⁵ Kim, Jeongmin. 2024. "[Trump victory sets off renewed calls in ROK to go nuclear to counter North Korea.](#)" *NK News*. 7 November. Accessed on 10 December 2024

²⁶ McCurry, Justin. "[North Korea missile test reaches record height and duration, says Japan.](#)" *The Guardian*. 31 October. Accessed on 20 December 2024.

²⁷ Kim, Jeongmin. "[Trump victory sets off renewed calls in ROK to go nuclear to counter North Korea.](#)" *NK News*. 7 November. Accessed on 10 January 2025.

Yoon Suk Yeol, signed a declaration²⁸ in April 2023 that aims to enhance planning and training around the use of U.S. nuclear weapons, and greater visibility of U.S. strategic assets in the Korean peninsula to prepare against a North Korean attack. While this declaration might provide respite to South Korea's security anxieties, uncertainty²⁹ around the credibility of the declaration and how it will be operationalized persists, especially under the new Trump administration, especially since Trump has been a long-time critic of U.S.-extended deterrence commitments. Ukraine has also raised doubts over U.S. security commitments and Ukraine's continued adherence to the NPT when they have largely failed to address its dire security needs against Russian aggression.

Meanwhile, the South Asian subcontinent is also seeing a growing arms race without the necessary arms control mechanisms. A nuclear trilemma³⁰ or strategic chain³¹ binds China, India and Pakistan in a complex deterrence relationship which has resulted in differing threat perceptions and rapid modernisation of conventional and nuclear arsenals. This includes India's Multiple Independently targetable Re-entry Vehicle (MIRV)³² technology mounted on its Agni-V intercontinental

ballistic missile, the launch of its latest class of ballistic missile submarine codenamed S4*, and a new class of nuclear-powered attack submarines;³³ Pakistan's tactical, low-yield nuclear weapons including the Nasr (or Hatf-9) missile; and finally, China's recent test-firing³⁴ of an intercontinental ballistic missile which is believed to have landed in the South Pacific, along with its plans to build a nuclear-powered aircraft carrier,³⁵ currently only possessed by the U.S. and France.

The P5's indifference towards regional security predispositions is not new. Historically, nuclear-armed states such as India and Pakistan have made their discontentment³⁶ known while addressing their regional security issues when they were at the cusp of nuclear weapons ascendancy. The inability of the P5 and rising nuclear-armed states to reach a compromise that accommodates regional security dynamics in global nuclear governance points to a worrying trend that must be addressed in order to achieve regional and global stability.

Lack of legal consensus

Lax regulation of emerging and disruptive technologies (EDT)

The nuclear order also faces a deficient legal consensus among nuclear and non-nuclear armed

²⁸ The White House. 2023. [Washington Declaration](#). Briefing Room, 26 April. Accessed on 8 January 2025.

²⁹ Gallo, William. 2024. ["Facing Trump's return, South Korea tees up for alliance strains."](#) VOA News. 14 November. Accessed on 10 January 2025.

³⁰ Thakur, Ramesh, Shetty, Shatabhisha and Sidhu, Waheguru Pal Singh. 2022. "Introduction: China-India-Pakistan Nuclear Trilemma and the Imperative of Risk Reduction Measures." *Journal for Peace and Nuclear Disarmament*. 5 (2): 215-223.

³¹ Einhorn, Robert and Sidhu, Waheguru Pal Singh. 2017. ["The strategic chain: Linking Pakistan, India, China, and the United States."](#) *Brookings*. 2 March 2017. Accessed on 14 February 2025.

³² Rehman, Huma. 2024. ["What India's MIRV test adds to the 'strategic trilemma' in South Asia."](#) *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists*. 3 May. Accessed on 10 January 2025.

³³ 2024. ["India prepares to build two nuclear-powered attack submarines."](#) *Reuters*. 10 October. Accessed on 12 January 2025.

³⁴ Ng, Kelly and Mao, Frances. 2024. ["China's long-range missile test sparks concerns."](#) 25 September. Accessed on 11 January 2025.

³⁵ 2024. ["China Builds Test Version of Nuclear Reactor for Navy."](#) VOA News. 14 November. Accessed on 10 January 2025.

³⁶ Singh, Shivani. 2023. "Exploring 'Accommodation' to Understand the Behaviour of Rising Powers in the Global Nuclear Order: The Cases of India and Brazil." *The International Spectator*. 58 (4): 110-127.

states on the regulation of emerging technologies and its impact on conventional nuclear deterrence that defined the first and second nuclear ages. In what experts³⁷ are calling the third nuclear age (TNA), use of Strategic Non-nuclear Weapons (SNNW) such as Precision Guided Munitions (PGM) and Hypersonic Glide Vehicles (HGV) is expected to become a common feature of a states' strategic calculus.

The certainty of hitting targets with precision and taking out the nuclear command and control systems of adversary states will potentially increase risk-taking behaviour thereby increasing the likelihood of nuclear use. The use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in nuclear decision-making and eliminating human judgement from this loop will compress decision-making time, thus increasing the chances of miscalculation and misinterpretation of the adversary state's intentions. The deployment of AI also has the potential to make command and control systems of states vulnerable to cyber-attacks. The unique entanglement of conventional weapons with nuclear weapon systems in this new nuclear age increases the risk of inadvertent escalation. While a normative threshold for nuclear use exists among nuclear powers on a bilateral and global level, such an understanding is wanting in the case of SNNW.

Innovation often precedes regulation, and the nuclear domain is no exception. Unfortunately, regulatory frameworks have been slow to adapt to the rapidly changing technological landscape.

³⁷ Futter, Andrew and Zala, Benjamin. 2021. "Strategic non-nuclear weapons and the onset of a Third Nuclear Age." *European Journal of International Security*. 3 (6):257-277.

Conversations around the use of new technologies have been initiated on a bilateral level in mostly track 1.5 dialogues between states. These include the discussions on self-assessment frameworks for emerging and disruptive technologies organized³⁸ by the European Leadership Network in partnership with the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs on the side-lines of the 2024 Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT) Preparatory Commission; a series of workshops³⁹ conducted by the Stimson Center, a Washington-based think-tank, in partnership with the U.S Department of Energy on addressing the threat of emerging technologies in nuclear security as well as the recently adopted non-binding U.N. General Assembly resolution⁴⁰ on making new technologies such as AI "safe, secure and trustworthy."

While these efforts are commendable, conversations around the implications of using emerging technologies are limited to internal discussions within states and bilateral forums and have failed to make it to effective, global, nuclear regulatory institutions such as the NPT. A glaring example of this is the marginal reference, without concrete, operational guidelines on how to mitigate

³⁸ European Leadership Network. 2024. [The European Leadership Network at the 2024 NPT Preparatory Committee](#). 8 July. Accessed on 12 January 2025.

³⁹ Andrews, Ian, Earnhardt, Rebecca and Roth, Nickolas. 2021. "[A MULTILEVEL APPROACH TO ADDRESSING EMERGING TECHNOLOGIES IN NUCLEAR SECURITY](#)." Proceedings of the INMM & ESARDA Joint Virtual Annual Meeting. 23-26 August and 30 August-1 September. Accessed on 13 January 2025.

Kubiak, Katarzyna and Mishra, Sylvia. 2021. "[Emerging & disruptive technologies and nuclear weapons decision making: risks, challenges and mitigation strategies](#)." *European Leadership Network*. 7 December. Accessed on 13 January 2025.

⁴⁰ 2024. "[The UN adopts a resolution backing efforts to ensure artificial intelligence is safe](#)." *The Hindu*. 22 March. Accessed on 13 January 2025.

the risks, to the issue of emerging technologies in the 2022 NPT Review Conference⁴¹ (RevCon). The NPT has not addressed the issue which can render pledges of nuclear non-use and norms against nuclear proliferation redundant. This could instigate an arms race leading to re-armament and leaving the long-standing goal of disarmament⁴² in the lurch.

Roadblocks to consensus on regulating EDT

The problem of creating a consensus on the regulation of emerging technologies within the NPT is twofold. First, there is widespread apprehension,⁴³ among both nuclear and non-nuclear states part of the NPT, that including emerging technologies in the non-proliferation and disarmament agenda might derail the nuclear disarmament agenda. They therefore believe that it is best to limit any such discussion in a bilateral setting. There was an observable reluctance among many states during the adoption of the Treaty on Prohibition of Nuclear-Weapons (TPNW) under the NPT. Building consensus on curbing the use of technology that is still evolving and is in its formative stages is a challenge. What constitutes 'emerging technologies' is yet to be clearly defined which makes the process of regulation difficult.

Secondly, in an increasingly uncertain external

⁴¹ NPT Review Conference. 2022. "[2020 Review Conference of the Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons.](#)" 25 August. NPT/CONF.2020/CRP.1/Rev.2. New York. Accessed on 13 January 2025.

⁴² 2005 Review Conference of the Parties to the Treaty on the Non-proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT). 2005. [THE TREATY ON THE NON-PROLIFERATION OF NUCLEAR WEAPONS \(NPT\)](#). 2-27 May 2005. New York. Accessed on 5 January 2025.

⁴³ Williams, Heather. 2020. "[Remaining relevant: Why the NPT must address emerging technologies.](#)" August. *Centre for Studies and Security Studies, Kings College London*. Accessed on 28 December 2024.

security environment, regulating SNNWs might deprive non-nuclear weapon powers,⁴⁴ such as South Korea and Australia as well as North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) countries, of the strategic advantage⁴⁵ to counter the security threats that they face. The use of such advanced weapon systems will significantly alter any strategic relationship between two states that have a conspicuous asymmetry in power and capabilities. This is especially true for regional asymmetric power dyads such as India⁴⁶ and Pakistan⁴⁷ in South Asia, both of whom are making heavy investments in this domain. SNNWs could become the power equalisers of the 21st century, akin to nuclear weapons during the Cold War, albeit not as destructive in scale as nuclear weapons but carrying the potential to inflict significant harm to an adversary's counterstrike capabilities.

Building consensus on regulating emerging technologies among the P5 or the great nuclear powers, the non-nuclear weapon states, and regional nuclear armed and nuclear threshold states is a herculean task. However, given the dangers that the new nuclear age portends and the unrestricted, almost democratic access to such technologies to a wide range of actors is precisely

⁴⁴ Hoffman, Fabian and Alberque, William. 2022. "[Non-Nuclear Weapons with Strategic Effect: New Tools of Warfare?](#)" March. *The International Institute for Strategic Studies*. Accessed on 14 January 2025.

⁴⁵ Hoffmann, Fabian. 2021. "[STRATEGIC NON-NUCLEAR WEAPONS AND STRATEGIC STABILITY – PROMOTING TRUST THROUGH TECHNICAL UNDERSTANDING.](#)" November. *Fondation pour la recherche stratégique*. Accessed on 14 January 2025.

⁴⁶ Dasgupta, Victor. 2024. "[Big challenge for Pakistan, China: AI, Hypersonic Ballistic Missiles, and MIRV Technology: How India is strengthening its defense capabilities.](#)" 13 November. *India.com*. Accessed on 10 January 2025.

⁴⁷ Ansari, Usman. 2024. "[Pakistan's Air Force says it has a hypersonic-capable missile.](#)" 18 January. *Defense News*. Accessed on 10 January 2025.

why a concerted, global effort needs to be made.

This will only be possible by engaging in constructive dialogue to mitigate both old and new risks to stability and security and more importantly, by translating such discussions into actionable, binding frameworks under the current global nuclear order. Ignoring fast-paced technological developments is only likely to make the existing institutions irrelevant over time.

Conclusion

While it is challenging to universally agree to a common, singular vision for the nuclear order, these attempts are imperative and so is the practice of implementing varying goals in tandem to cater to the needs and aspirations of both nuclear and non-nuclear weapon powers. Bringing about a mutual political consensus on how to rank each of these goals while also upholding the norms of nuclear non-use and non-proliferation is key. It would be crucial to hold the great nuclear powers accountable to their commitment towards nuclear disarmament while curbing instances of nuclear proliferation among non-nuclear weapon powers. Additionally, regional geopolitics and concurrent security dynamics must be duly accommodated within the nuclear architecture to prevent any future instances of resistance by emerging nuclear powers. Their vision of and expectations from the nuclear order institution need to be given due cognizance.

Finally, as one steps into the 'third nuclear age', a legal consensus on regulating emerging

technologies must be found. The changing strategic landscape will affect all states irrespective of their nuclear-weapon status. Taking pre-emptive measures such as open and transparent discussions on EDTs and their implications on states' threat perspectives and strategic doctrines will be crucial to foster trust and ensure stability in times of crisis.

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