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Diplomacy and Limits



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It's called The Gadget. It's hauled to the top of a steel tower. The Trinity Test.

Nothing like it has been seen in the Earth's 4.5 billion-year history. A vast explosion. We've set free energy trapped in small amounts of matter.

We've gone beyond the limits of science.

Just weeks later - Hiroshima and Nagasaki. We go beyond the limits of war.

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That first fateful Trinity Test opened the way to the huge benefits of peaceful uses of nuclear technology.

But it created new, existential questions.

At the limits of science. At the limits of policy-making and diplomacy. At the limits of ethics and responsibility. At the limits of human nature.

How to control all this? Who decides?

Those two stark questions are still with us, 80 years later.

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These words are from the speech given on 16 July last year by Dr Robert Floyd (Executive Secretary of the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty Organisation). That day was the 80th anniversary of the Trinity Test – the world's first nuclear explosion. Dr Floyd was addressing an Assembly of Nobel Prize Winners: in 1945 over two dozen current or future Nobel Prize winners were working in one way or another with the astonishing new science that allowed the Test to happen.

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The theme of his speech was *Limits*. Diplomacy has both formal and informal limits.

Formal limits are typically what's written down in treaties, protocols, MOUs and so on. In international law terms these limits mainly emerge from the global and regional arrangements set up after WW2 (above all the United Nations and its many subsidiary bodies). They set the legal and policy framework for everything else.

In diplomatic practice, informal limits are no less influential. They come from shared expectations and shared instincts. They reflect how world leaders and government officials interpret the rules and discreetly agree how things are to get done and (important) what level of risk is sensible when pushing new policies.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 Russia's astute young Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev and the then UK Foreign Secretary Douglas Hurd worked hard together in these bewildering but optimistic times. Kozyrev pressed Hurd to agree one specific informal limit for their own relationship: '*No surprises*'. They would publicly disagree on some awkward issues. But Kozyrev did not want to learn about an unwelcome new British position from the media. This suggestion was agreed. Such informal micro-limits oil the planet's diplomatic gears.

In diplomacy as in anything else, limits are a subtle idea. Who sets them, and why? Are they wise? Does everyone support them? Above all, what happens when they're broken?

Enter Presidents V Putin and D Trump. They each represent veto-wielding UN Security Council members with huge nuclear weapons arsenals and global policy ambitions. And they each give the rest of us plenty of reasons to think that they are (in different ways and for different reasons) happy to see the end of those post-WW2 formal and informal limits that define global peace and security.

President Putin hankers after Russia regaining lost Soviet territories. If that means defying the most fundamental principle of the UN Charter by committing international aggression to seize land from another state that Russia has long recognised as such, too bad. His brutal lunge at Ukraine has been disastrous for both sides. But how to stop and not look fatally weak and stupid? He's now in Macbeth Mode: *I am in blood stepped in so far, that should I wade no more returning were as tedious as go o'er*.

President Trump's approach to limits appears ... quixotic? He's had one splendid success in brokering the deal between Armenia and Azerbaijan. But otherwise he's been a grumpy bull espying a long row of elegant long-established china shops and rampaging through one after another. Greenland! NATO no, Putin yes! Tariffs! Nab the President of Venezuela! Bomb Iran! Bomb Iran lots more! Traditional allies and relationships? Boo. Hurrah to MAGA! President Trump channels his inner Joker: *I'm an agent of chaos. And you know the thing about chaos? It's fair*.

So are all the limits on dangerous behaviour set by international law and the whole UN system as we've known them since WW2 dead or dying? And if so, what?

They are under huge pressure. If two states with UN Security Council veto powers act as if they can do whatever they like by attacking or invading other states, might other states do the same and cause global mayhem? A massive legitimacy crisis?

Or do subtle shock-absorbers in the system make that much less likely? After all, the worse the behaviour of the biggest powers, the more it suits all other states to insist on international law as the only sane way to run things.

And for the most part on they run. Both the USA and Russia join in the myriad practical transactions and negotiations and discussions that trundle on every day around the world in the confident expectation that international legal norms are working and set to last. For all the MAGA attacks on the UN system, it's still there. Not least because it's hard to imagine how any rival arrangement with comparable global legitimacy could be set up.

Dangerous, unsettling times. But are there limits on demolishing limits?

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Dr Robert Floyd's speech *Testing Limits* supported by Charles Crawford was the 2026 Cicero Awards Grand Winner. It can be read [here](#).

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