

## Proliferation's Rising Threat

By

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Although scholars readily acknowledge that the international order is under serious attack from Russia and China, they do not pay much attention to the task of detailing those attacks in the nuclear sphere. Yet doing so is essential because that dimension is vital to their strategy. Due to consideration of space, this essay focuses on Russia's nuclear challenges to international order.

The bipartisan Strategic Posture Commission's report suggests that Russia and China's large-scale nuclear programs pose "qualitatively new threats of opportunistic aggression" and raise the risk of future "cooperative two-theater aggression." In their [report and testimony](#), commission members clarify that written Russian strategy and doctrine envision limited first use of theater nuclear weapons to deter the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), coerce war termination on favorable terms, and suggest larger-scale employment of theater nuclear weapons to defeat NATO in war, if a loss is likely.

And yet Russian emphasis on new nuclear weapons hardly ends here. [Russia's walkout from the Comprehensive Test-Ban Treaty \(CTBT\)](#) reopens possibilities for it to test nuclear weapons. Indeed [Putin warned](#) that he is prepared to resume nuclear testing.

[Stationing nuclear weapons in Belarus](#) likewise adds to the threat of nuclear war in Europe. Russia also seeks to build [nuclear power plants in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan](#). These could become a basis for nuclear material exports back to Russia or other countries.

Chinese imports of nuclear materials from Russia hit a record high in 2022, stimulating widespread fears that Moscow is making it easier for China to produce weapons-grade uranium for its missiles. Moscow has also backtracked on its 2013 insistence that China must take part in any future arms control negotiations because China still refuses to do so. As Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Rybakov said in 2013, "We cannot endlessly negotiate with the United States the reduction and limitation of nuclear arms while some other countries are strengthening their nuclear and missile capabilities.... Making nuclear disarmament a multilateral process is becoming a necessity."

However, Russia evidently cannot now insist on Chinese participation despite the Chinese nuclear threat to Russia. Thus, Rybakov now reiterates the official view that Chinese nuclear weapons do not threaten Russia even though several independent analysts argue to the contrary. Similarly, Russia's newfound amity with North Korea is stimulating anxiety that Pyongyang's natural demand for a *quid pro quo* for the one million artillery shells it gave Russia will lead [Putin to support North Korea's missile, nuclear, and space](#) programs. It is already known that [Moscow promised to help Pyongyang build satellites](#) and [followed through on that pledge recently](#)—regarding its most recent launch. Other observers maintain that it would not be excessively difficult for [Russia to provide North Korea with nuclear assistance](#).

Here again, there is a parallel precedent. Recently, Putin, in conversation with General Zhang Youxia, vice chairman of China's Central Military Commission, stated that building on existing plans, Putin advocated closer cooperation in space with China, "including high-orbit assets, and new prospective types of weapons that will ensure strategic stability (i.e. likely nuclear weapons) of both Russia and the People's Republic of China."

Beyond these actions undermining nonproliferation, in general, and the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), in particular, [Russo-Iranian military cooperation](#) is reportedly unprecedented, growing in scope, and comprises ballistic missile cooperation. There is also little doubt that [Iran is coming closer to actually possessing a nuclear weapon](#).

Indeed, [Russia told the United Nations \(UN\)](#) that it no longer needs to obey UN restrictions on giving Iran missile technology since Resolution 2231 (2015) recently expired. And, at the same time, [Iran is actively soliciting Russian help](#) with its nuclear program. Providing such help would, like all of the aforementioned activities, either break the spirit or even the letter of the NPT. In invading Ukraine, Moscow actually violated [the NPT](#), which openly commits signatories not to invade non-nuclear states.

All of these Russian moves undermine nonproliferation and the NPT. And this list does not include the almost nightly wild nuclear threats to be heard daily on Russian TV and [even among supposed experts](#). Certainly, experience repeatedly shows that [the UN is unlikely](#) to do more than inform and provide reports on the process.

Moscow and her friends are dismantling the structures of nuclear security. China, Iran, and North Korea are apparently intent on destroying the “guardrails” of international security, in general, and against nuclear use, in particular—all to obtain a free hand in realizing their imperial and aggressive dreams. This trend not only puts smaller states at increased risk, but it obligates the US and its nuclear allies to invest more in new and improved nuclear weapons. This is needed to restore deterrence that only justifies these aggressors’ paranoia, which drives them to nuclear weapons in the first place.

As the [Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States](#) recommended, the US needs to update and renovate its nuclear arsenal to make it more fit for service in regard to today’s and tomorrow’s threats. This means technological renovation, more precision, greater flexibility, and very likely additional nuclear weapons. Yet at the same time America and her allies, in both Europe, Asia, and the Middle East need a conventional buildup as well to preserve deterrence at lower levels in both Europe and Asia so neither Russia nor China can start a conventional war in the expectation that it can use nuclear blackmail, as in the Ukraine, to deter NATO from defending vital interests.

Likewise, the United States and her allies abroad must also update and modernize conventional forces to deter either by punishment or deny lower-level threats that could also escalate—the Houthi threat to Red Sea shipping—in the belief that the organizers of these threats could control escalation and that the US is afraid to widen existing conflicts. Thus, as noted above, in the nuclear sphere too many states lost their reason and are tempting fate. Consequently, judgment in nuclear and other security areas is left to states who, as the record shows, are all too willing to behave as brutish beasts. Therefore, they must be stopped sooner than later.

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