



## **How Global Instability Fuels the Nuclear Arms Race**

**By**

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The world is in an uncertain place today and is perhaps experiencing the most uncertainty since World War II. Since the beginning of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the world has faced an active threat of nuclear escalation. Fortunately, Russian President Vladimir Putin has not crossed the nuclear threshold. Still, the threat cannot be discounted.

Since the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the world followed the course laid out by the United States. The crumbling foundations of arms control and disarmament regimes, Russian invasion of Ukraine, the aggressive economic and diplomatic rise of China, and new multilateral arrangements by emerging states are all contributing factors to an ongoing reshaping of the global power dynamic that is challenging American leadership.

The uncertainty created by global institutions that are not effectively coping with Russian aggression, Chinese expansionism, and American retreat is exacerbating the threat of nuclear weapons use. This uncertainty is also causing some states to wonder if they need to pursue their own safety—in the form of nuclear proliferation. After all, the open threat of nuclear weapons use is occurring for the first time in the lives of many national leaders.

In the bipolar world that existed at the time, rivals were kept from attacking each other by competing in small technological battles over nuclear delivery vehicles, not the destructive power of their weapons. But, with the withdrawal of the Cold War era's arms control arrangements, the threat of arms racing increased as the United States took a clear lead in conventional warfighting technology.

The ever-increasing distrust among rivals, coupled with the weakening of international institutions, is a central cause for the erosion of trust in the current world order. The perception of declining American power and interest in maintaining global order fuels a sense of self-reliance in the security realm, particularly for emerging powers. Careful not to criticize the United States publicly, Japan and South Korea, for example, wonder how reliable American extended nuclear deterrence remains in the wake of Chinese and Russian aggression that seems unchecked.

Closer to home, North Korea is already an established nuclear power and a looming threat that requires a robust defensive mechanism. A fear of extinction is ever present because reliance on a third party for security is always a risky endeavor.

On the other hand, active conflicts in the Middle East cannot be ignored. This is particularly true when a known nuclear state and an aspiring nuclear state are rivals and engaged in a shooting war.

Iran is known to have enriched uranium to at least 60 percent, and may soon, or perhaps already has, enriched uranium to weapons grade. Fortunately, Israel seems willing to rely on its conventional capabilities to win against Iran. This is a positive outcome in the midst of active conflict.

Repeated attempts to halt the Iranian nuclear program by the United States and Israel are proving insufficient. Wisely, Iran is abstaining from fielding a nuclear weapon, but this decision could change in the near future.

Efforts to prevent Iran from building nuclear weapons with the “Iran Nuclear Deal” (commonly known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA)) were never supported by the left or right in the United States. Thus, President Trump ended the deal during his first term. American withdrawal from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces



(INF) Treaty in 2019, due to Russian cheating; cessation of talks on New START since 2021; American withdrawal from the Open Skies Treaty (OST) in 2020, due to Russian cheating; and the unresolved deadlock on the proposed Fissile Material Cut-off Treaty (FMCT) leave advocates of arms control unhappy.

The sense of mistrust that pervades also prevents confidence-building measures from playing any role. Emerging powers are also questioning the concept of a nuclear umbrella in the wake of President Trump's clear desire to force Europe to bare a much greater share of their own security. Ukraine, the victim of Russian aggression, once inherited Soviet nuclear weapons, which they gave back in 1994 in return for [security assurances](#)—only to see Russia violate those guarantees at little expense.

At this current juncture, stability is hard to maintain. Erosion of trust in the United States is evident. Weakening and non-existent nonproliferation regimes are of great concern. States that once rested easy in American security guarantees are now thinking differently when it comes to their own survivability, security, and territorial integrity.

Ineffective international institutions have also become a driving factor in undermining the global narrative surrounding the validity international policing in crises. In such circumstances, states with potential capabilities are now looking to themselves more than ever before. Whether the world is headed for a period of anarchy or a new hegemon is uncertain. What is certain is that everyone will feel the results.

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