

Opinion Nuclear proliferation**The nuclear arms race is back**

War in Ukraine and China's military build-up have put the world's deadliest weapons back at the centre of global politics

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After the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the fear of nuclear war hung over the world for decades. When I went to university in the 1980s, students were marching against the deployment of nuclear weapons at Greenham Common air base in southern England. My children grew up in a different atmosphere. The threat of nuclear war receded after the end of the cold war. Russia and the US embraced arms control and the global stockpile of nuclear weapons was [reduced](#) by about 80 per cent.

But now the nuclear threat is back with a vengeance. Over tea and cakes with military veterans, Vladimir Putin recently boasted of the successful test of an underwater drone, capable of carrying a nuclear missile and “unique in the world”. Shortly afterwards Donald Trump [announced](#) that he had decided to renew US testing of nuclear weapons — potentially ending a moratorium that has lasted more than 30 years.

It was Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 that returned the nuclear threat to the centre of world politics. From the start, Putin used nuclear sabre-rattling to warn off the west. His threats were taken very seriously. At one point in late 2022, US intelligence agencies estimated that there was a 50 per cent chance that Russia would use battlefield nuclear weapons.

But while Putin is central to the new nuclear story, there are other threatening subplots. Since 2020, China has more than doubled its stockpile of nuclear weapons to around 600 — and its arsenal looks set to double again over the next decade. Beijing’s is the most striking build-up. But all the nine nuclear-armed states — from Britain to North Korea — are currently [modernising](#) and often expanding their nuclear arsenals. Meanwhile, nuclear-arms control treaties are [lapsing](#) one by one.

Believers in the “balance of terror” could argue that this new nuclear era is not necessarily a bad thing. The cold war between the Soviet Union and the western alliance never went hot — in large part because of the fear of mutual assured destruction.

So perhaps the spread of nuclear weapons is, counter-intuitively, a force for peace? Unfortunately, that is a dangerously partial truth. The world has come hair-raisingly close to nuclear war on several occasions. During the 1962 Cuban missile crisis, a Soviet submarine commander took the decision to go nuclear and had to be countermanded by a fellow officer. In 1983, the Soviet Union’s warning systems went on red alert signalling wrongly that the country was under nuclear attack. The officer in charge decided not to pass the message up the chain of command — preventing a decision to fire back. The US has also [experienced](#) false alarms that put the country dangerously close to pressing the button.

Insiders with knowledge of these near-misses often became evangelists for arms control. In 2007, Henry Kissinger and George Shultz — former US secretaries of state and nobody's idea of naive peaceniks — jointly [called](#) for a “world free of nuclear weapons”.

Today's nuclear build-ups are potentially even more dangerous than those of the cold war for two main reasons. First, there is a growing threat of nuclear proliferation. The attack by nuclear-armed Russia on non-nuclear Ukraine — combined with the Trump administration's ambiguous attitude to its allies — has put the possible acquisition of nuclear weapons on to the agenda of states that fear the removal of the American security umbrella.

The potential new nuclear states include Saudi Arabia, South Korea, Japan, Poland and even Germany. Iran, still reeling from the Israeli-US attack on its nuclear facilities, may also try to covertly rebuild its programme.

The development of AI increases the [risks](#) — making it easier for countries, or even non-state actors, to build the world's deadliest weapons. There is also growing discussion of the risk that nuclear-weapons command and control systems could be hacked or disabled by cyber attacks.

A lot could depend on the outcome of the Ukraine war. Over the course of the last three years, Putin's nuclear blackmail has become less effective. The US and its European allies — which hesitated to supply Ukraine with even defensive weapons at the beginning of the war — have become increasingly bold. Ukraine is now [encouraged](#) to strike targets deep inside Russia using western intelligence and missiles, which was an absolute taboo in 2022. This change in policy reflects a growing conviction that the threshold for Russian use of nuclear weapons is much higher than Putin would like the outside world to believe.

If Russia is eventually defeated in Ukraine — or fought to a standstill — the watching world might conclude that nuclear weapons are not as useful as many believed. The Kremlin will have invested vast sums in a nuclear capability that it ultimately could not use.

But if Russia ultimately defeats Ukraine while the west stands back, the common conclusion might be that the mere possession of nuclear weapons allows a country to wage a conventional war on a non-nuclear neighbour — without the risk of decisive outside intervention to defeat the aggressor. Other nuclear states, such as North Korea and China, might well take note. So might their non-nuclear neighbours.

There is a lot more at stake in the Ukraine war than who rules over the Donbas.

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