

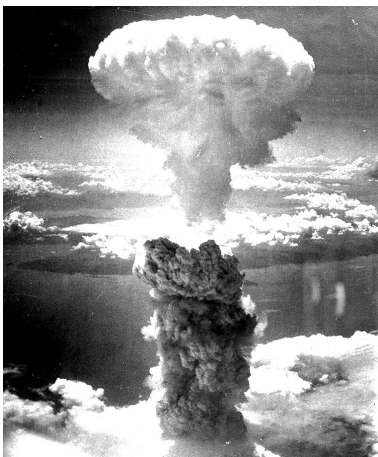
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Nuclear weapons

The Growing Risk of Nuclear War

- Features -



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“We live in an age of conflicts, an age of biological weapons, chemical warfare, atomic fallout and nuclear bombs . . . Every man, woman, and child lives, not knowing if they shall see tomorrow’s sunrise.” [\[1\]](#)

— Martin Luther King, Address at the Thirty-sixth Annual Dinner of the War Resisters League, 1959. [\[2\]](#)

MLK’s WARNING FROM nearly 60 years ago continues to be true. As psychologist Robert Lifton once wrote, vulnerability is the “central existential fact of the nuclear age” because everyone, everywhere, is “susceptible to instant destruction.” [\[3\]](#)

That potential for instant destruction has become more imminent, with the most militarily powerful countries adding fuel to an already overheated arms race and engaging in wars with each other, indirectly if not directly. Making the situation more perilous is the introduction of Artificial Intelligence-powered tools into warfare. [\[4\]](#)

For 60 years, one modicum of moderation came from arms control arrangements that constrained competition between the two largest nuclear weapons powers. But the last such treaty, the New START Treaty, which imposed limits on how many strategic nuclear weapons the United States and Russia could deploy, expired in February of this year. [\[5\]](#)

Proliferation for “Defense”

Although Trump has talked about a new treaty, no replacement is being negotiated. Trump has also told U.S. military leaders to resume nuclear weapon testing. [\[6\]](#)

Nuclear weapon testing would allow the United States, and other countries like China and Russia that will likely follow suit, to develop more destructive or usable weapons. Exploding nuclear weapons will also produce fallout — adding to the radioactive burden experienced by communities in those regions of the world where nuclear weapons were tested in the past. [\[7\]](#)

None of this should be happening had powerful countries respected international law. According to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) that was negotiated in 1968, the five countries that had tested nuclear weapons already — the United States, the Soviet Union (now Russia), China, France, and the United Kingdom — were to disarm their weapons.

Although all these countries are signatories to the NPT, they have so far refused to honor their commitments under Article 6 of the treaty, claiming they need these weapons for their security. Thanks in part to their refusal, the NPT is fraying, with the last three review conferences ending in failure, including the most recent one in 2026. [\[8\]](#)

When countries possessing immense military power claim that they also need nuclear weapons to protect themselves, it should not be surprising that leaders in other countries, with less military capacity, start mirroring this notion.

In June 2026, three years after joining NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization), the parliament of Finland voted to allow the country to “receive, transport and otherwise facilitate the movement of nuclear weapons on its territory.” [9]

Officials in Poland, too, have been expressing an interest in hosting nuclear weapons,[[AP News, April 22, 2024, “Finland Tears up Nuclear Weapons Ban in NATO Shift.”](#)] with Prime Minister Donald Tusk saying that the country seeks “as much autonomy as possible” and will “eventually” seek its own weapons. [10]

A Nuclear Energy Connection

Then there are countries like Saudi Arabia that seek nuclear weapons, but through a seemingly more benign route: developing a nuclear power program. Such countries often claim they want nuclear reactors because of interest in developing sustainable energy or solving climate change. [11]

In September 2025, for example, the Saudi Minister of Energy declared that “the Kingdom is moving towards utilizing nuclear energy and its radiation applications for peaceful purposes... including the construction of the first nuclear power plant in the Kingdom to achieve multiple objectives” including “advancing sustainable development.” [12]

Although hardly known for its interest in sustainability, the Trump administration has promised “a decades-long, multi-billion-dollar nuclear energy partnership” between the two countries, with the assurance “that all cooperation will be conducted in a manner consistent with strong nonproliferation standards.” [13]

But reading the nuclear cooperation agreement signed in July 2026 by U.S. Energy Secretary Chris Wright and Saudi Minister of Energy Abdulaziz bin Salman, it turns out that the agreement might allow Saudi Arabia to develop the capability to enrich uranium.

The hypocrisy is striking: Iran has developed exactly the same capacity for itself, yet the United States sanctioned and bombed that country. Trump later flipped and his Truth Social post announced that there “will be no enrichment of material.” [14]

Saudi Arabia’s purported interest in sustainability makes little sense: solar energy has become the cheapest source of electricity, especially in sun-drenched Saudi Arabia. [15]

To understand what else might be motivating the interest in nuclear, one can turn to a March 2018 interview on CBS, when Saudi Prince Mohammed bin Salman pointed to the possibility that Iran might develop a nuclear bomb, and declared Saudi Arabia “will follow suit as soon as possible.” [16]

Developing a nuclear bomb “as soon as possible” is very likely the real driver for Saudi interest in nuclear energy. This is a well-trodden path; other countries have produced the wherewithal for a nuclear weapon by first developing the capacity to generate nuclear energy.

India, for example, set up its Atomic Energy Commission in 1948 for “peaceful” purposes but tested its first nuclear weapon in 1974, and then a range of weapons in 1998. [17]

So, too, Saudi Arabia might get closer to possessing the capacity to make nuclear weapons if it were to set up a nuclear program, regardless of where Trump lands on over allowing uranium enrichment.

Iran has become the poster child for this blurry line between nuclear power and nuclear weapons. The United States and Israel have used a potentially specious claim that Iran is developing nuclear weapons under the guise of a civilian nuclear program to justify their pitiless bombardment of that country and its population.

In fact, the White House listed 74 incidents when Donald Trump stated that Iran could not have nuclear weapons. [\[18\]](#) Benjamin Netanyahu can doubtlessly put up an even longer list, with his repeated announcements that Iran was weeks or months away from possessing a bomb, for three decades now. [\[19\]](#)

These atrocities were both ironically and hypocritically carried out by two countries that themselves possess large numbers of nuclear weapons.

Investing in Forever Arsenals

The United States and Israel not only possess nuclear weapons, they are investing immense amounts of resources — financial, material, and intellectual — to maintain or expand their arsenals. So too are the others belonging to the vile group of countries that possess this most destructive of weapons.

Between them, the nine nuclear-armed states spent close to \$119 billion in 2025 on their nuclear arsenals, with the United States leading this perverse list by a wide margin. Its \$69.2 billion was over five times China's expenditure of \$13.5 billion; the United Kingdom came close behind China at \$12.6 billion. [\[20\]](#)

These activities come at the cost of essential social programs aimed at goals like access to affordable health care, which are being gutted in many of these countries.

Profiting from these activities are various corporate entities. A 2025 report by the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN) lists 24 companies around the world with large contracts to contribute to the production of nuclear weapons, led by Northrop Grumman and General Dynamics “with outstanding contracts with a potential value of at least \$31 billion and \$24 billion respectively.”

Other companies include Airbus, BAE Systems, Bharat Dynamics, Boeing, China Aerospace Science and Technology, Fluor, Honeywell, Jacobs Solutions, L3 Harris, Leonardo, Lockheed Martin, Rolls-Royce, RTX (formerly Raytheon), and Safran. [\[21\]](#)

There is a strong overlap between the companies listed above and the arms manufacturing companies that have “provided Israel with weapons and other military equipment used in its attacks on Gaza, the West Bank, Lebanon, and Syria since October 2023.” [\[22\]](#)

The other overlap is between this list of companies involved in nuclear weapons production and companies involved in the nuclear energy industry; entities like Fluor, Jacobs, and Rolls-Royce are in the business of selling nuclear reactor technology and producing nuclear weapons. [\[23\]](#)

In January 2025, for example, Rolls-Royce received a £9 billion contract to support the United Kingdom's nuclear submarines while also being selected by the U.K. government to build small modular nuclear reactors. [\[24\]](#)

Today, however, explicit threats to use nuclear weapons to achieve political goals have become commonplace.

Russian officials, including Dmitry Medvedev, have threatened nuclear strikes in Ukraine, and Israeli officials, such as Amihai Eliyahu, have suggested using nuclear weapons in Gaza. [\[25\]](#)

Trump has frequently threatened countries like North Korea and Iran. These leaders have already shown a willingness to inflict mass civilian casualties through conventional means. So, it is not inconceivable that one of these days, they might indeed use a nuclear weapon.

One reaction to blatant U.S. aggression has been to explain away, if not advocate for, other countries acquiring nuclear weapons — even among some sections of the left. [\[26\]](#) The argument often rests on the differential treatment meted out to North Korea or China or Russia, by the United States, which is then attributed to these countries possessing nuclear weapons. [\[27\]](#)

After the invasion of Iraq, too, some claimed that had Iraq possessed nuclear weapons, then the United States would not have attacked the country. But are such claims valid?

Except for those who swallow U.S. government propaganda uncritically, it should be clear that the real motivations for invading Iraq or attacking Iran have nothing to do with their nuclear capabilities, but much to do with their location in West Asia and their fossil fuel reserves.

In contrast, North Korea does not possess oil and is in a much quieter part of the globe. So, the ruling elites in the United States have much less motivation to invade North Korea.

It is also impossible to verify the claim that the United States would not have invaded a nuclear-armed Iraq. Political scientist Barry Posen argued after the first Gulf War (1991) that the United States should have prosecuted that war even if Iraq had some limited nuclear capability, it should do so after explicitly warning Iraq of a certain and overwhelming nuclear response to any Iraqi nuclear use. [\[28\]](#)

His reasoning was that the stakes of inaction were too great for the United States. U.S. leaders do listen to people like Posen and may well have attacked a nuclear-armed Iraq if the stakes, as these leaders perceive them, were seen as worth the resulting carnage. [\[29\]](#)

MAD World

There is another historical parallel that some might point to: the absence of war between the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War, which nuclear weapons advocates attribute to these countries possessing immense nuclear arsenals. (To be sure, the United States and the Soviet Union fought numerous proxy wars — Vietnam and Afghanistan, for example — that killed enormous numbers of people in those countries.)

The presence of these weapons, the argument goes, creates the fear of “mutually assured destruction” and deters these countries from going to war with each other.

This hope has been termed nuclear deterrence. Although nuclear weapons states loudly proclaim their faith in deterrence, by making plans to use these weapons under various contingencies they implicitly admit the possibility that deterrence could fail.

Thus, for example, the United States under Biden explicitly announced its plans to use nuclear weapons under some specific contingencies. [\[30\]](#) One cannot predict when one of these contingencies will come to pass, and when these plans made for using nuclear weapons will indeed be implemented.

As historian E. P. Thompson pointed out more than four decades ago,

“The danger of [nuclear] war arises, not from conscious planning on the part of the elites... War is possible as the outcome of policies initiated by these irresponsible minorities, as the final unforeseen link in a casual chain forged at each stage by the previous choice of some ruling class.” [\[31\]](#)

The underlying contradiction was laid out clearly by General Lee Butler, who served as Commander-in-Chief of the United States Strategic Command, who observed: “The goal — the wish, really — might be to prevent nuclear war, but the operational plan had to be to wage war.” [\[32\]](#)

These operational plans also allow for countries to threaten another country with nuclear weapons to compel the other to do something the latter might not desire. The most notorious example is the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis, widely regarded as the time the world came closest to nuclear war.

Military crises occur with great regularity, even between nuclear weapons states. India and Pakistan have also gone to full-fledged war. One can only credit luck with the world having escaped a nuclear war so far. Or, to the “grace of God”, as Lee Butler put it. [\[33\]](#)

When this “grace” runs out, as is bound to happen sooner or later, the destruction would be widespread and unimaginable. The levels of casualties from a possible nuclear war means that challenging the power of nuclear weapon states through military means, namely by other countries acquiring nuclear weapons, can lead to mass death.

For Nuclear Disarmament

What the current state of affairs demands is a collective and peaceful refusal by the peoples of the world to the continued ability of a few countries to wield the threat of nuclear annihilation. That threat will disappear only if nuclear weapons are abolished — a goal that people on the left should be committed to.

Globally, a majority of people are in favor of eliminating nuclear weapons. One poll conducted in 2024, for example, found that in five key countries — United States, South Africa, Brazil, India, and Indonesia — 69 percent of those polled supported “total nuclear disarmament,” and 58 percent viewed nuclear weapons as “a source of insecurity.” [\[34\]](#)

There is also a long history of diplomatic efforts aimed at disarmament, starting with the very first resolution of the United Nations in 1946, which called for proposals for “the elimination from national armaments of atomic weapons and of all other major weapons adaptable to mass destruction.”

One key step toward that goal occurred in July 2017, when 122 countries adopted the United Nations Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons. [\[35\]](#)

The treaty prohibits its signatories to, inter alia, develop, produce, test, possess, use, threaten to use, or transfer nuclear weapons. In July 2025, Tonga became the 100th country to accede to the Treaty. [36] The vast majority of the countries around the world have demonstrated their desire to ban nuclear weapons.

But when powerful countries like the United States and Russia have no respect for international law or norms, treaties alone will not achieve the sought-after goal.

The only countervailing power can come from social movements, which have to be intersectional and international. [37] Most important of these is the antiwar movement, and it has to realize that fighting for the abolition of nuclear weapons is essential to peace.

Source: Against the Current September-October 2026, ATC 244.

PS:

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[1] Photo: Charles Levy. Mushroom cloud rising over Nagasaki, Japan on August 9, 1945. The U.S. authorized aerial bombings over Hiroshima and Nagasaki killed between 110,000 and 210,000 people, mostly civilians. The nuclear weapons developed since then are far more destructive.

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Risk of War, and Reactions

Nuclear weapons are not just ways for private companies to profit; their existence automatically gives rise to the possibility that they could be used. During earlier periods of concern about nuclear weapons, use was seen to be more likely a result of accidents or miscalculation. [[Pavel Podvig, *Science & Global Security* 14, nos. 2–3 (2006): 75–115, "[Reducing the Risk of an Accidental Launch.](#)"; Bruce Blair, *The Logic of Accidental Nuclear War* (Brookings Institution Press, 1993); M. V. Ramana and Zia Mian, *Scientific American*, April 8, 2022, "[India's Inadvertent Missile Launch Underscores the Risk of Accidental Nuclear Warfare.](#)".

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