

The Third Nuclear Age: Trump, the Order, and the Bomb

by Gideon Rose



Pakistani army soldiers guard nuclear-capable missiles at the International Defence Exhibition in Karachi on November 27, 2008. RIZWAN/GETTY IMAGES

In his second term as president, Donald Trump has attempted a revolution in American policy. Believing that previous patterns and norms of domestic and international politics shackled the rightful powers of the American leader, he has moved to concentrate authority and national resources in his own hands and deploy them at will.

In foreign policy, this has meant rejecting the reigning intellectual paradigm of liberal hegemony, in which the U.S. aspired to run the world as leader of a team of allies and partners. “The postwar global order is not just obsolete, it is now a weapon being used against us,” Secretary of State-designate Marco Rubio said in his confirmation hearings in January. In its place, the second Trump administration seeks a return to a more traditional world of competitive states acting according to their individual national interests, with America always first and foremost. In keeping with

this vision, the administration has increased tariffs, cut back spending on foreign aid and international public goods, and distanced itself from American allies and partners. All this has come as a shock to the last group in particular, who are now regarded less as friends than as leeches and marks—burdens to be shed or opportunities to be exploited.

What the Trump administration does not seem to have given much thought to is what will happen as other international actors update their assessments of U.S. policy and adjust their own behavior accordingly. One of the most significant downstream effects of the assault on the liberal

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American physicist Dr. Robert Oppenheimer (left) points to a photo of the Nagasaki atomic bomb explosion as Dr. Henry D. Smyth, Major General Kenneth D. Nichols, and Dr. Glenn Seaborg observe on February 1946. RIZWAN TABASSUM/GETTY IMAGES

international order could be a new round of nuclear proliferation.

Turning back the clock a century on American foreign policy won't erase the existential threat of widespread nuclear expertise and relatively cheap, easy nuclear technology. The nonproliferation regime that keeps mass acquisition of nuclear weapons at bay is a voluntary act of concerted national self-restriction, one that countries adhere to because they feel safer with the regime than they would without it. But they feel safe in large part because the regime is nestled within a broader international system policed by generally benign American power. And it is this system that the Trump administration is currently shredding.

Everybody should understand that if the liberal international order falls, the nonproliferation regime will fall with it. And the powers rushing for nukes then would not be terrorists or rogues, but newly orphaned friends of the U.S. who are no longer convinced they can

rely on American security guarantees and might even have reason to fear American coercion.

The political scientist Kenneth Waltz famously argued that when it came to the spread of nuclear weapons, "more may be better"—because all international rivalries would be durably stabilized by the prospect of mutually assured destruction. The world may be about to test his hypothesis. And since the most dangerous phase of the proliferation process is always when countries are about to cross the nuclear threshold, unless the Trump administration changes course, the years ahead are likely to be turbulent. The American and Israeli attack on Iranian nuclear facilities this past June, in other words, may not signal the end of an era but the beginning of one—the first of a series of nuclear crises as the world shifts into its third nuclear age.

The First Nuclear Age

American policymakers began building the liberal international order during the 1940s, after three decades of devastating war and economic crisis. The lesson they drew from the first half of the 20th century was simple: when countries acted purely on crude short-term

self-interest, they were led to embrace beggar-thy-neighbor economic policies and buck-passing security policies. These, in turn, produced economic and social turmoil, the rise of aggressive autocracies, and, ultimately, global carnage. Hoping to avoid a repeat of this pattern, Washington decided to try acting on enlightened long-term interest instead, playing international politics as a team sport. This meant working with like-minded allies to build a stable, secure framework within which members of the team could grow together without fear.

From the beginning, the order has rested on extraordinary American power, deployed on behalf of the team at large rather than the U.S. alone. This reflected not sappy altruism nor cynical neoimperialism but an understanding that in the modern world, economics and security need to be handled at something beyond the national level. American policymakers recognized that capitalism is a positive-sum game in which the players can grow together rather than simply at one another's expense. And they recognized that among friends, security can be a nonrivalrous good. So, at the end of World War II, instead of using its incredible strength to exploit other countries—as every other previous dominant power in history had done—Washington chose to jump-start its allies' economies and support their defense, creating an ever-growing zone of peaceful cooperation within the larger, more conflictual international system.

By coincidence, nuclear weapons appeared on the scene at precisely this time. As the ultimate tools of war, they posed a unique challenge for the new order to handle. It seemed likely that countries that acquired them would gain strategic autonomy and coercive power, whereas nations that didn't go nuclear would become prey. Unsurprisingly, lots of countries thought about getting them, as always happens when a successful new military technology appears. But it remained a mystery how nuclear dynamics would affect the stability and workings of an order based to some degree on the equality of nations under law.

Before you read, download the companion **Glossary** that includes definitions, a guide to acronyms and abbreviations used in the article, and other material. Go to www.fpa.org/great_decisions and select a topic in the Topic Resources section.

From the late 1940s through the mid-1960s, a slow process of nuclear proliferation played out. Two decades after Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the situation was summed up succinctly by the satirist Tom Lehrer in his song “Who’s Next?”

First we got the bomb and that was good, ‘Cause we love peace and motherhood.

Then Russia got the bomb, but that’s O.K.,

‘Cause the balance of power’s maintained that way! Who’s next?

France got the bomb, but don’t you grieve, ‘Cause they’re on our side (I believe).

China got the bomb, but have no fears.

They can’t wipe us out for at least five years! Who’s next?

Then Indonesia claimed that they Were gonna get one any day.

South Africa wants two, that’s right: One for the black and one for the white! Who’s next?

Egypt’s gonna get one, too, Just to use on you know who. So Israel’s getting tense, Wants one in self-defense.

“The Lord’s our shepherd,” says the psalm, But just in case, we better get a bomb!

Who’s next?

Luxembourg is next to go

And, who knows, maybe Monaco.

We’ll try to stay serene and calm

When Alabama gets the bomb!

Who’s next, who’s next, who’s next?

Who’s next?

As Lehrer recognized, nuclear proliferation was not a unitary or random phenomenon. Countries fell into distinct categories based on their relation to the U.S. Some, such as Russia and China, were nuclear-armed enemies. Others, such as Britain and France, were nuclear-armed friends. Still others, such as Israel, were orphans, countries without a nuclear patron threatened by stronger regional foes. And some, such as Egypt under Gamal Abdel Nasser, were rogues, countries that sought nuclear weapons for coer-

cion. In the background were lots of bystanders, with subnational groups waiting in the wings.

Against all expectations, however, mass proliferation was avoided when a rough solution to the problem emerged. The U.S. would counter its nuclear-armed enemies through deterrence while using its own arsenal to protect its friends as well as itself, obviating the need for them to have independent nuclear programs. This arrangement was codified in the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), which came into force in 1970. The Americans, Soviets, British, French, and Chinese got to keep their arsenals, enabling great power deterrence to continue to work, while other signatories gave up the right to go nuclear, keeping the problem from spreading. The bargain made sense and has largely held up, with only a few orphans and rogues (Israel, India, Pakistan, and North Korea) joining the nuclear club in the half-century since.

During the first nuclear age, stability was achieved and the order bolstered by incorporating nuclear weapons into the bipolar hierarchy of the Cold War. Nuclear deterrence kept the superpower rivalry in bounds, with “safety

[being] the sturdy child of terror, and survival the twin brother of annihilation,” as British statesman Winston Churchill put it. The two superpowers, in turn, policed their respective spheres of influence, taking responsibility for their allies’ security and collaborating to ensure nuclear technology and material didn’t spread further to other states or subnational groups. Thanks in part to these arrangements, and contrary to practically everyone’s fears, the postwar era didn’t explode into another global conflagration but rather turned into the long peace, the most extensive stretch without great power war since the dawn of the modern state system in the 17th century.

The Second Nuclear Age

Nobody expected the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 or the collapse of the Soviet Union two years later. It was the sudden realization of the vision of the Cold War’s end that the diplomat George Kennan, author of the doctrine of containment, had put forth decades earlier. The U.S. had held the line, waited, and eventually watched its opponent cede the field. What should come next for American foreign



On September 1, 1945, U.S. Navy lieutenant Thomas M. Brown (right) confers with Dr. Shigeru Kawada (center), head of Saga General Hospital, about a Japanese refugee with flash burns from the bombing of Nagasaki, Japan. U.S. MARINE CORPS/GETTY IMAGES

policy? At the time, this seemed like an open question, and much ink was spilled in the “Kennan sweepstakes” as people proposed various replacements for containment as a U.S. grand strategy. But the question was not really open, because there was an obvious answer: stay the course.

The George H. W. Bush administration knew that containment was not itself the essence of postwar policy but a means of protecting the real essence, which was the liberal international order that American policymakers had begun building well before relations with the Soviet Union turned sour. The Cold War is best understood as a Soviet rejection of and challenge to that order, which resulted in its development not being on a universal basis, as the Franklin D. Roosevelt administration had hoped, but in the West alone, as the Harry S. Truman administration ultimately settled for. When the Soviet challenger gave up, therefore, the order was free to expand and flourish everywhere, as originally planned.

As Brent Scowcroft, George H. W. Bush’s national security adviser, told the president in a memo in 1989, Washington’s mission wasn’t to write a new story. It was to write another chapter in the old one:

In his memoirs, *Present at the Creation*, Dean Acheson remarked that, in 1945, their task “began to appear as just a bit less formidable than that described in the first chapter of Genesis. That was to create a world out of chaos; ours, to create half a world, a free half, out of the same material without blowing the whole to pieces in the process.” When those creators of the 1940s and 1950s rested, they had done much. We now have unprecedented opportunities to do more, to pick up the task where they left off, while doing what must be done to protect a handsome inheritance.

Bush’s comment: “Brent—I read this with interest!”

During the 1990s, accordingly, the George H. W. Bush and Bill Clinton administrations devoted themselves to refounding the order for the post-Cold War era. They took on outsized responsibility for global affairs and worked with other countries to try to create benign, stable arrangements in key regions—arrangements that would benefit the U.S. along with every other country prepared to play by the rules.

Just as the first nuclear age coincided with the bipolar Cold War, so

the second nuclear age coincided with the unipolar post-Cold War era. The chance of a superpower confrontation now seemed remote, and the most urgent nuclear threats seemed to come from proliferation to rogues and the uncontrolled dispersion of former Soviet nuclear materials and expertise. So the problems of the day included trying to block the weapons of mass destruction aspirations of countries such as Iraq, Iran, and North Korea, and corral “loose nukes” through efforts such as the 1991 Nunn-Lugar Cooperative Threat Reduction Act.

A particularly thorny issue was raised by the remnants of the Soviet nuclear arsenal stationed in the now independent country of Ukraine—1,800 strategic warheads, strategic bombers, and intercontinental missiles. Scared about the possibility of further proliferation, other countries pressured Kyiv to give everything back to Moscow, promising that it would not suffer from doing so. Without much ability to resist, Kyiv agreed, and the move was codified in the 1994 Budapest Memorandum, with Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Ukraine joining the NPT in return for assurances of protection by the U.S., the United Kingdom, and Russia.

During this second nuclear age, stability was achieved and the order bolstered by incorporating nuclear weapons into a unipolar liberal hegemony. Rivalries among the legal nuclear powers were no longer a burning issue, with the U.S. dominant, Russia and China quiescent, and the U.K. and France an afterthought. Managing the problems of orphans, rogues, and terrorists was a challenge and attracted lots of attention and controversial activity. But once again, contrary to widespread fears, the world didn’t explode into general war, and the long peace just got longer.

Toward the Third Nuclear Age

In the first years of the new millennium, American hegemony seemed secure, along with the liberal international order that rested on it. Great power relations were calm and seemed set to remain so



Physicist Norris Bradbury sits beside the Gadget, the first nuclear test device, atop the Trinity Site test tower in New Mexico in 1945. HISTORICAL/GETTY IMAGES

as economic and political liberalization spread around the world.

Some skeptics argued that the old demons were likely to return. Writing in *Foreign Affairs* in 1993, for example, the political scientist John Mearsheimer opposed the thinking enshrined in the Budapest Memorandum, noting that Ukraine would eventually need to counter Russian revanchism and that maintaining a nuclear capability was the least problematic way of doing that. “Ukraine cannot defend itself against a nuclear-armed Russia with conventional weapons, and no state, including the U.S., is going to extend to it a meaningful security guarantee,” he wrote. “Ukrainian nuclear weapons are the only reliable deterrent to Russian aggression.” But at the time, fears of nuclear proliferation outweighed fears of future wars, so post-Soviet Ukraine ended up with a purely conventional military.

The British and French nuclear arsenals, meanwhile, faded almost entirely from view. The United Kingdom had started the world’s first serious nuclear weapons program in 1941, merging it with the Manhattan Project two years later. When Washington stopped cooperating after the war, London decided to continue on its own and successfully tested its first bomb in 1952. France began a secret military nuclear program in 1954, brought it public in 1958, and successfully tested its first weapon in 1960.

France had gotten the bomb even when it was already covered by the American nuclear umbrella because French president Charles de Gaulle simply didn’t trust Washington to live up to its security guarantees. Extended deterrence was a sham, he felt, and for Paris to be truly secure, it had no choice but to acquire a nuclear capability of its own. As he put it in 1963, “American nuclear weapons remain the essential guarantee of world peace. . . . But it remains that American nuclear power does not necessarily respond immediately to all the eventualities concerning Europe and France. Thus . . . [we have decided] to equip ourselves with an atomic force that is unique to us.” The



Far-right activists clash with riot police outside the Ukrainian Parliament in Kyiv on October 14, 2014. GENYA SAVILOV/GETTY IMAGES

French called this the *force de frappe*—the “strike force.” Everybody else rolled their eyes, considering it a reflection less of sober strategic logic than of excessive Gallic pride or paranoia.

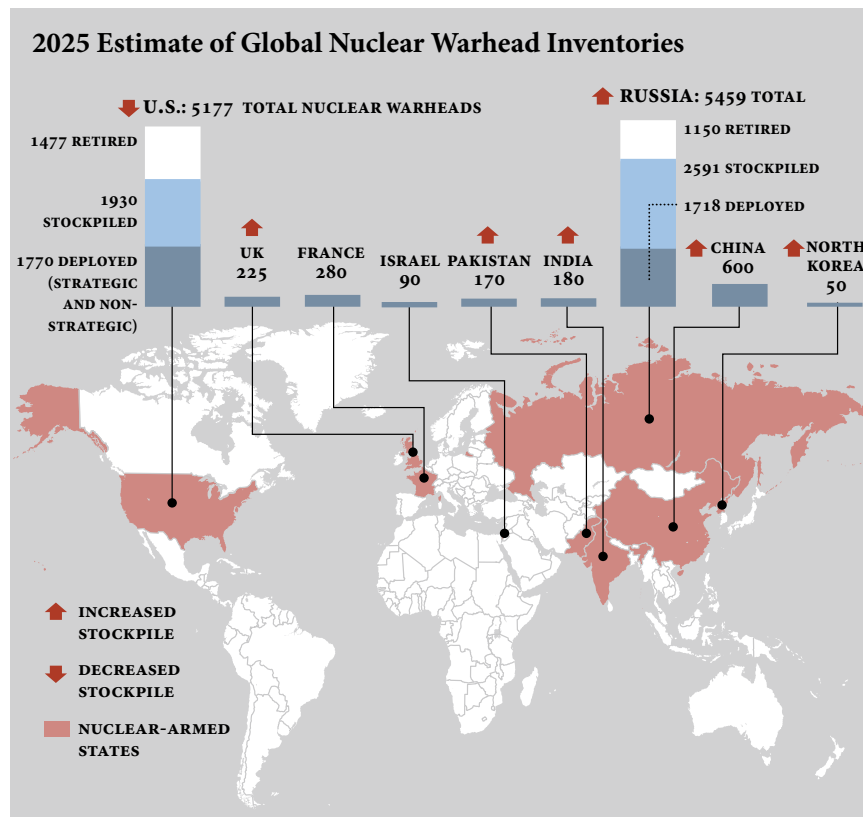
Then, in 2014, outraged by Ukraine’s increasing turn to the West, Russian president Vladimir Putin decided to teach Kyiv a lesson. He fomented separatist movements in southern and southeastern Ukrainian provinces with Russian-speaking populations and then sent Russian forces in to “assist” them, quickly seizing Crimea and parts of the Donbas. Low-level conflict and inconclusive negotiations dragged on for years afterward, until in 2022 Putin launched a full-scale invasion designed to conquer the rest of the country with the intention of either reabsorbing it into Russia proper or reducing it to a colony with a puppet government taking orders from Moscow.

Given the disparity in size and strength between the belligerents, few expected Ukraine to be able to resist the Russian onslaught. But it did, and once it was clear Kyiv wouldn’t fall quickly, the U.S. and Europe moved to support it with increasing amounts of military and economic aid. As the months and years ground on, a war of movement turned into a war of position and attrition. The Biden administration and its

European allies remained committed to keeping Kyiv in the fight, but Putin’s willingness to throw all his country’s massive resources into the balance increasingly gave him a slight advantage.

Then came Trump’s return to the White House. In running for another term, he had declared his intention to end the war in a day, without saying much about how. After he took office, the details started to be filled in, and they seem to involve forcing Ukraine to accept most of Russia’s demands: ceded territory, military weakness, and reorientation back to the east. It is hard to know just how far the administration’s pro-Moscow tilt will ultimately go, because of both the idiosyncratic volatility of Trump’s decision-making and the confusion surrounding what would be an epochal shift in U.S. foreign policy. But over the first year of Trump’s second term, enough has changed to make clear that previous American promises of support, to Ukraine and others, can no longer be fully trusted.

With the U.S. beginning to walk away from its role as guarantor of European security and supporter of the liberal order at large, the world may be on the verge of entering a third nuclear age, the hallmarks of which would be multipolarity and instability. De Gaulle



SOURCE: KRISTENSEN, NORRIS FAS 2025. LUCIDITY INFORMATION DESIGN, L.L.C.

and Mearsheimer were right (at least on this issue). Extended deterrence was a sham, and the people who relied on it were suckers. Which, for many countries under threat, raises an obvious question: why not follow the French route rather than the Ukrainian route and gain security by developing their own forces de frappe?

Regression to the Mean

From the dawn of time, humans have lived in groups of groups. Whether bands, tribes, chiefdoms, cities, states, or empires, all human polities everywhere have existed alongside other polities, been wary of competitors, and fought one another for survival. In modern history, as political scientist Robert Gilpin noted, this has resulted in a constantly repeating story of rising and falling great powers. The most dominant players in each era have set out rules for how the game is played, which structure international life for a time. Eventually, however, differences in countries' growth rates create imbalances between the material base of a system and its institutional

superstructure. Challengers rise and ultimately the system gets rebalanced through a major war—at which point the cycle begins again.

From 1945 on, however, that pattern hasn't held because two new developments changed the incentives that powerful states faced. Nuclear weapons dramatically raised the costs of war, such that a full-scale conflict among nuclear powers would destroy all the players involved (along with much else). The emergence of the liberal international order, meanwhile, dramatically raised the benefits of peace, giving member states the option of achieving independence and prosperity safely through cooperation. Together, the bomb and the liberal order reversed the calculus that had driven all previous international politics. With war possibly suicidal and peace potentially lucrative, another path for humanity opened up, even without a fundamental change in human nature or a transition to world government (the traditional utopian remedies commonly offered).

The founders of the order took the logic of social contract theory from the

domestic to the international level. If autonomous individuals in the state of nature could find ways to cooperate for mutual benefit, why couldn't autonomous countries? They didn't have to love one another or act saintly; they just needed to have some common interests and understand the concept of a positive-sum game. The more countries played such games, the more opportunities they would have to benefit by cooperation as well as conflict. And gradually, interactions could turn into relationships and then communities—first functional, eventually institutional, and maybe one day even heartfelt.

As the U.S. and its allies fought to victory in history's most devastating war, American policymakers seized on the notion of the order as a chance to head off yet another global cataclysm. This approach promised to resolve the tension between American interests and American ideals by achieving them simultaneously, on the installment plan. The U.S. would protect its interests by amassing power and using it as necessary, and it would serve its ideals by nurturing an ever-growing community of independent countries that played nicely with one another. Cooperation would lead to integration and prosperity, which would lead to liberalization. Slowly but steadily, Locke's world would emerge from Hobbes's world.

And indeed, over two distinct periods, the bipolar Cold War and the unipolar post-Cold War era, the liberal order grew and spread, accompanied by arrangements that turned the extraordinary power of nuclear weapons into a force for unprecedented stability. Recently, however, the order has begun to erode. Thanks to differential growth rates, U.S. dominance has diminished and challengers have arisen. This raises the uncomfortable question of whether another great power war is in the offing, as the system rebalances itself once again. With the chances of continued peaceful growth dropping (since they rested in part on collective security and an open global economy), will the threat of nuclear destruction be enough to stop the historical pattern of great power conflict from reemerging?

The truly scary thing is that no one knows. The international system right now is a strange theoretical hybrid. Its base is a classic realist group of sovereign nations with different capabilities and interests, all jockeying for position and survival. Layered on that is the postwar liberal order, a grand web of advanced industrial democracies and their partners, voluntarily cooperating for mutual long-term benefit, overseen and protected by a U.S. that is still, for the most part, looking out for the team at large. And now at the top of the system is Trump, constituting another realist layer—a team captain happy to play for himself alone.

For the moment, this structure is constraining everybody in the Western alliance. U.S. allies are suddenly realizing that the world is more realist than they had assumed and that contracting out security to Washington has left them vulnerable and marginalized. Trump is finding that deeply rooted institutions and procedures of international cooperation are harder to discard or bypass than he thought and that going it alone can involve costs as well as benefits. It remains unclear how sustainable this situation is, or whether it will eventual-

ly move decisively one way or another. And how nuclear weapons fit into this picture is anybody's guess.

Nuclear Normalization

All nuclear strategy has been based on the notion that, unlike every other weapon before them, the new weapons' destructive power put them outside or beyond politics. Soon after being developed, they were separated from the rest of military affairs. They got their own budgets, commands, and war plans. They got their own field of thought, with an abstract autonomous logic distinct from traditional theorizing about foreign policy and war. But all of that took place, it can now be seen, because of the special characteristics of the first and second nuclear ages. Nuclear weapons could have their own existence on the sidelines of everything else only so long as international politics was clearly structured through bipolar rivalry or unipolar hegemony.

If the world is indeed returning to traditional, self-interested sovereign multipolarity, as the Trump administration seems to favor, nuclear strategy will increasingly lose its distinctiveness and come to be seen as one branch of mil-

itary affairs among others. The bomb will be treated as a tool—one with its own grammar, in Clausewitz's phrase, but not its own logic. In such a world, countries would end up making decisions about nuclear issues with their own short-term individual interests first, not as part of a coordinated group trying to serve larger collective interests over the long term. And what that would look like in practice can be shown by looking separately at each of the groups Lehrer sung about 60 years ago.

Some things would not change much, especially at the top and bottom of the system. The major nuclear powers have never really been constrained much by the nonproliferation regime, acquiring pretty much whatever weapons they wanted, and that behavior would continue. U.S.-China tensions are currently driving another major acquisition cycle, and tripolar deterrence and arms control are complicated, but those challenges predate Trump, are largely independent of him, and will outlast him.

Prohibitions against proliferation to subnational groups and non-state actors, meanwhile, will probably remain robust, since all states would



A mushroom cloud rises after the detonation of a French atomic bomb over Mururoa Atoll (Aopuni) in 1971. GALERIE BILDERWELT/GETTY IMAGES

continue to have strong incentives to retain tight control over nuclear technology and materials. And bystanders in relatively peaceful nuclear-free regions are likely to continue their local self-restraint pacts (at least until one of them comes to feel gravely threatened by a stronger neighbor).

The calculations of orphans and rogues would change somewhat. These are countries whose security rivalries play out primarily at the regional level and are driven more by regional rivalries than superpower affairs. Israel, India, Pakistan, North Korea, and Iran operate in the gray areas at the margins of the current global nuclear regime and will continue to do so. If the regime erodes significantly, it would become even more brazen and less subject to external constraints.

The countries most affected by the shift to the third nuclear age would be American allies and partners, who would increasingly find themselves feeling like orphans. If the U.S. becomes truly unreliable, one path countries seeking protection could take would be to resource extended deterrence from a different provider. German prime minister Friedrich Merz, for example, said this spring that he would “talk to the British and French about

whether their nuclear protection could also be extended to us”; other members of NATO are doing the same. British prime minister Keir Starmer and French president Emmanuel Macron are open to the idea and are now working together. As they put it in a statement in July, “France and the United Kingdom agree that there is no extreme threat to Europe that would not prompt a response by our two nations. France and the United Kingdom have therefore decided to deepen their nuclear cooperation and coordination.”

In the coming years, therefore, a truly European deterrent might emerge. That would be a useful development, helping stabilize European security in a post-American world. But loss of faith in Washington’s guarantees wouldn’t stop with Washington; it would raise doubts about all future extended deterrence arrangements. If London got the bomb because it didn’t trust Washington to defend it, and Paris didn’t trust either Washington or London, why should other countries trust London and Paris? After all: fool me twice, shame on me.

A few countries might therefore decide to pursue their own bombs, just to be sure. With all the restrictions now in place to prevent such an outcome, it would not be an easy course

to follow, even for advanced industrial nations that could do it without outside help. Potential proliferators would have to navigate a comprehensive regime designed to block them, including constraints imposed not just by the NPT but also by the Atomic Energy Agency, the Nuclear Suppliers Group, the Missile Technology Control Regime, and the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty. Proliferators would have to assemble serious nuclear expertise, large amounts of fissile material, and the ability to manufacture high-end weapons. It would take several years of sustained effort and cost tens of billions of dollars. But it is certainly possible.

Israel started its nuclear weapons program in the 1950s, receiving lots of help from the French. The Israelis are thought to have developed their first bomb by the end of the 1960s, adding a couple of hundred more in later decades. Meanwhile, after watching its archenemy India go nuclear, Pakistan started its covert nuclear program in the 1970s. After getting lots of help from China and North Korea, Islamabad tested a weapon successfully in 1998.

Japan has followed a different route, developing a latent nuclear capability rather than a full-blown one—a “bomb in the basement” that could be assem-



A photojournalist captures a damaged residential building hit by an Israeli strike in Tehran on June 25, 2025. ATTA KENARE/GETTY IMAGES

bled into a weapon quickly if necessary. Since the 1960s, Tokyo has pledged not to possess nuclear weapons, not to produce them, and not to allow them on Japanese soil. But it has also acquired an advanced civilian nuclear energy program, large stockpiles of separated plutonium, and an impressive local defense industry. Any Japanese government could take the final steps to nuclear armament within months, if willing to accept the controversy that would follow at home and abroad.

So Who's Next Now?

The most obvious candidates for going nuclear next would be Ukraine and Taiwan, nations clearly threatened by powerful nuclear-armed neighbors. (Taiwan has already tried twice, in the 1970s and 1980s, but was caught and stopped by the U.S. each time.) But once such efforts were underway, those threatening neighbors might very well attack before the programs could come to fruition: the attempt to gain security could easily lead to preventive war and national destruction. This is precisely what happened to Iran a few months ago, as Tehran's approach to the final thresholds of nuclear capability triggered an American-Israeli attack before Iran could be sure of its deterrent. So neither Ukraine nor Taiwan is likely to risk it.

If the order continues to erode, therefore, the first new nuclear power of this wave of proliferation would probably be South Korea. It joined the NPT in 1975, but it could withdraw at will and might conclude that it needs an independent nuclear capability to hold off the threat from North Korea. More than 70% of South Koreans already favor going nuclear. The country's officials have already begun talking about the possibility, and such discussions would surely intensify if the U.S. made any moves toward disengagement. If Seoul went nuclear, Tokyo would probably follow. And eventually Australia might join them, restarting the nuclear weapons program it gave



The South Korean submarine Lee Beom-seok takes part in a naval fleet review off the coast of Busan, South Korea, on September 26, 2025. NURPHOTO/GETTY IMAGES

up in the 1970s.

In Europe, many are growing concerned. Polish generals have openly mulled going beyond relying on France and the United Kingdom and acquiring their own nuclear force. In a March 7 speech to the Polish parliament, Prime Minister Donald Tusk seemed to back the idea. Poland “must reach for the most modern possibilities, also related to nuclear weapons and modern unconventional weapons,” he said. “It is not enough to purchase conventional weapons, the most traditional ones.” Officials in Nordic and Baltic countries have been having conversations about nuclearization in private. (Sweden had an independent nuclear program into the 1970s.) And Turkish strategists are paying close attention to the situation.

As Czech foreign minister Jan Lipavsky said in June, “The international order, which we knew for 80 years after World War II, has fallen apart. That international order created a certain predictable environment, including nonproliferation treaties on so many types of weapons. . . . Clearly, we now see a discussion on nuclear weapons—and Vladimir Putin is to blame for that because he opened this Pandora’s box. He’s challenging borders and so, logically, others are

asking: how can we now protect our borders?” Lithuanian defense minister Dovile Sakaliene noted, about the unpunished violation of the Budapest Memorandum, “The message that this sends to other countries is: if you have weapons, don’t abandon them, if you have the ability to produce weapons, produce them. Weapons of all kinds. . . . Countries that do have a nuclear weapon, somehow they do not get attacked fiercely.”

The third nuclear age remains largely hypothetical for now, a “Ghost of Christmas Future” scenario showing what might happen if the Trump administration continues on its current course, turning American alliances into situationships. But if the Trump administration does actually go so far as to abandon the order its predecessors built up over generations, it would hardly be surprising if former allies reconsidered some of the choices they made on the assumption of sustained American protection. It is far too soon to predict how things will play out, and there are substantial obstacles in the way of countries trying to hedge their bets by embracing full-scale nuclear self-help. But the psychological barriers that have long kept proliferation at bay may already have fallen away.

Discussion Questions

1. What changes could the U.S. make in its policy toward the Russia-Ukraine conflict that might help rebuild allied confidence in America's extended nuclear deterrence commitments?
2. Through what mechanisms can the global community ensure that countries act in the collective interest of the world rather than solely in their own self-interest?
3. Do you think President Trump's rejection of the liberal international order will have a lasting influence on global nuclear proliferation patterns, or will nations' current self-interested behaviors fade once his administration ends?
4. If current anxieties about the U.S. commitment to the liberal international order are temporary, what steps could the U.S. or its allies take now to mitigate or reverse proliferation trends driven by that uncertainty?
5. If the liberal international order were to collapse, does nuclear deterrence alone have the power to prevent another great-power war, or does deterrence depend on this cooperative framework?
6. If the next U.S. administration demonstrates renewed commitment to the international order, how can current decisions that tend toward proliferation be counterbalanced?
7. What are the secondary effects of global nuclear proliferation on citizens? How can Americans work together as a community to mitigate both proliferation and its effects?
8. Which factor do you think will play a more substantial role in driving potential nuclear proliferation: the weakening U.S. commitment to the international order, or growing challenges to U.S. global dominance?

Suggested Readings

Galchen, Rivka. "Why Don't We Take Nuclear Weapons Seriously." *New Yorker*, 2025. Argues that despite rising nuclear risks, policymakers and the public treat the issue with alarming complacency, ignoring both the moral and existential dimensions of nuclear war.

Hawkins, Amy. "China Stockpiling Nuclear Warheads at Fastest Rate Globally, New Research Shows." *Guardian*, 2025. Reports that China is expanding its nuclear arsenal faster than any other country, reversing decades of global reduction trends and raising concerns about a new arms race.

Hennigan, W. J. "The Brink." *New York Times*, 2025. A data-driven and visual exploration of what nuclear war would look like, combining graphics, imagery, and analysis to help readers grasp the human and geopolitical consequences of nuclear escalation.

Jacobson, Annie. *Nuclear War: A Scenario*. Dutton and Transworld, 2024. A hypothetical yet research-based narrative that depicts how a sudden nuclear exchange might unfold and escalate globally in the so-called Third Nuclear Age, highlighting the fragility of deterrence and the catastrophic risks of nuclear miscalculation.

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