

Can Nuclear War Really Happen?



VOICES FOR PEACE SERIES

There are over 12,000 nuclear weapons on the planet—most much more lethal and destructive than the atomic bombs the United States dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945.

Throughout the nuclear weapons era, the world has had countless nuclear close-calls and near-misses—as a result of human error, hubris and miscalculation, escalating wars and armed conflicts, and technology failures. Yet since the end of the Cold War, the world has largely ignored the danger of nuclear war.

What is driving the danger of nuclear war?

RISING TENSIONS:

- Between the two largest nuclear powers, the US and Russia, especially since the 2023 Russian invasion of Ukraine unleashing a flood of explicit threats from Russian leaders to use nuclear weapons.
 - In South Asia between India and Pakistan, each possessing over 170 nuclear warheads, who regularly engage in armed cross border conflict over Kashmir, as recently as May 2025.
 - Between the US and China with possible flash points over Taiwan or shipping lanes in South China Sea which could at any moment turn into a major war.
 - On the Korean peninsula where North Korea has, since the failed Trump/Kim summits in 2018, rapidly developed nuclear weapons and missile delivery systems, and in South Korea, shaken by the US abandonment of Ukraine, is openly debating building its own nuclear weapons.
 - In the Middle East between nuclear armed Israel and Iran which now has ability to rapidly build nuclear weapons if it decides to (and Israel has made clear it will use military force to prevent) and where the war in Gaza continues unabated.
- Meanwhile, the climate crisis increases global risk of armed conflict as nations compete over scarce resources of food and water and massive climate migration adds to the danger of nuclear conflict.

*“We stand today,
I believe, in greater danger of a
nuclear catastrophe than we
faced during the Cold War.”*

*William Perry, Former
U.S. Secretary of Defense 2017*

What is driving the danger of nuclear war? (con't)

HUBRIS & DANGEROUS RHETORIC

Throughout the nuclear weapons era, the U.S. public has been told that the threat of nuclear weapons use—i.e. nuclear deterrence—works and therefore no country is likely to use them ever again. In fact nuclear armed states have repeatedly threatened to use them and the threats are growing more frequent.

Since the invasion of Ukraine, Russian leaders have on numerous occasions publicly said they will, if necessary, use nuclear weapons.

In 2017, Donald Trump famously said that North Korea would be “met with fire, fury and frankly power the likes of which this world has never seen before.”

Since the October 2023 terrorist attack in Gaza, several Israeli officials have bluntly advocated for the use of nuclear weapons to “crush and flatten all of Gaza.”

TECHNOLOGICAL ADVANCES

Rapid advances in cyber technology and artificial intelligence have made the world a much more dangerous place. Nuclear command and control systems are vulnerable to cyber attack by terrorists or state actors who might be able to launch a nation’s nuclear weapons directly, or trigger a false alert that tricks a nation into launching its weapons. Terrorists have access to advanced technology and most nations actively engage in cyber warfare. **B**

References for this work can be found at bit.ly/bftb-references

“It was luck that prevented nuclear war. We came that close to nuclear war at the end.”

*Robert McNamara, Former
U.S. Secretary of Defense*



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Back from the Brink is a national grassroots campaign of committed individuals, organizations, and elected officials advocating for common-sense policies to prevent nuclear war and abolish nuclear weapons from the planet.