New 'cold war' grows ever warmer as the prospect of a nuclear arms race hots up

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Champagne corks popped on December 3, 1989 as Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev and US president George H.W. Bush met on the cruise ship, Maxim Gorky, off the coast of Malta to declare the end of the cold war.

Gorbachev and Bush's predecessor in the White House, Ronald Reagan, had—at two summits over the past five years—thrashed out agreements that would limit and reduce both sides' nuclear arsenals. With the cold war over, Gorbachev liberalized the Soviet Union, presiding over its dismantling, which formally occurred on December 26, 1991.

To those adversaries who accused him of capitulation and the tame surrender of the Soviet bloc countries, his reply was simple: "To whom did we surrender them? To their own people."

Reagan and Gorbachev agreed that a nuclear war couldn't be won, so must never be fought. Yet this month, the UN's high representative for disarmament affairs, Izumi Nakamitsu, warned that "the risk of a nuclear weapon being used is higher now than any time since the height of the cold war and the architecture designed to prevent its use is ever more precarious."

So how did we get here? Russia's aggression under the leadership of Vladimir Putin has plunged the world into a new era of nuclear uncertainty by reasserting Soviet isolationist strategies. By embracing the notion of a nebulous western threat, he has preserved his totalitarian leadership, while justifying political isolation, party control within Russia, and revanchist adventurism abroad—the latest of which has been the unlawful invasion of Ukraine.

Nuclear saber-rattling and posturing are unsettling features of Putin's military strategy. He has now explicitly threatened to resort to use of

nuclear weapons three times since launching his invasion in 2022. And he recently ordered that tactical weapons be stationed in Belarus.

His strategists clearly see the threat of a nuclear confrontation as a realistic deterrent to Nato intervention in Ukraine. Nuclear blackmail is being used to guarantee Russian sovereignty, to coerce and force adversaries to adhere to Russian terms, and to dissuade global actors from meaningful intervention or resolution in Ukraine.

Putin's behavior is emblematic of a global shift in attitude towards the nuclear taboo. Other leaders, among them the former US president Donald Trump and North Korea's Kim Jong-un have carelessly returned nuclear warfare to the table as a viable strategy instead of a deterrence.

'Nuclear neolateralism'

This is an age of nuclear neolateralism. Nation states have unstable and mercurial political, economic and cultural relations involving new networks, conflicts and complexities. Since the turn of this century, the world has seen the resurgence of populism and religious nationalism, the near ubiquity of digital technology, and an increasing velocity of nuclear proliferation and brinkmanship.

These factors make our current situation more complex than the cold war. A new Silk Road nexus has emerged across China, Russia, Iran, Israel and North Korea since the wars in Ukraine and Gaza. This web of relationships is shaped by regional dynamics, strategic interests and global power shifts that influence security and global weapons proliferation.

China and Russia have recently developed stronger strategic ties. But tensions remain along shared borders—and freshly leaked classified papers reveal Russia's fear of Chinese nuclear attack. China has 500

active nuclear warheads, and is expanding its nuclear arsenal. Beijing is also learning lessons from Russia and Israel about how a future Taiwanese conflict may unfold.

An unexpected alliance has arisen between North Korea and Russia. Historically, Russia advocated for diplomatic solutions to North Korean nuclear proliferation. Pyongyang has supplied weapons to Russia since 2023 in violation of UN security council sanctions, and seeks to leverage this support to gain acceptance as a nuclear state.

In 2019, North Korean leader Kim Jong-un warned his people to prepare for war with the US by 2024. A leaked military document confirmed this, saying: "the Dear Supreme Commander will dominate the world with the nuclear weapons." On April 22, Pyongyang claimed it had tested a new command-and-control system in a simulated nuclear counter-strike exercise.

South Korea has responded by developing its own submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs) in 2022 and is the only nation state to possess SLBMs without nuclear warheads. In February 2023, the leader of the People Power Party, Chung Jin-suk, argued that South Korea needs nuclear weapons. But this strategy could also make South Korea more vulnerable to attack from hostile North Korea.

Iran and Russia are cooperating in the nuclear sphere. Iran's nuclear weapons program was limited under the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action. But Trump pulled the US out of the treaty in 2018 and there is strong evidence (denied by Iran) that it has reinvigorated its weapons program. In 2023, UN inspectors reported that Iran had enriched trace amounts of uranium to almost weapons grade.

Israel has targeted Iran with assassinations, cyberwarfare, drone attacks and commando raids to destroy its burgeoning nuclear program, adding

to Middle East tensions. Saudi Arabia does not have nuclear weapons, but officials have said that they will acquire them if their regional rival, Iran, becomes nuclear.

A new arms race

The UN has said that a quantitative arms race seems imminent. The latest US nuclear posture review revealed a plan worth US$1.5 trillion (£1.21 trillion) to modernize US nuclear capability and create a "nuclear sponge" of 450 nuclear silos to absorb a future Russian attack.

Now the UK has announced it will increase its defense budget to 2.5% of GDP to put it on a "war footing." The government has reaffirmed its commitment to its nuclear arsenal, despite Britain's UN ambassador, James Kariuki, stating: "Nuclear war cannot be won and must not be fought" at a recent security council meeting.

Professor Ramesh Thakur, the director of the Center for Nuclear Nonproliferation and Disarmament at the Australian National University, expressed the same thought more hauntingly when he wrote: "If you want the peace of the dead, prepare for nuclear war." We must hope that this new cold war doesn't become hot.

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