

# **An Introduction: It's Time to Protest Nuclear War Again**

**Kathleen Kingsbury, Opinion Editor**

The threat of nuclear war has dangled over humankind for much too long. We have survived so far through luck and brinkmanship. But the old, limited safeguards that kept the Cold War cold are long gone. Nuclear powers are getting more numerous and less cautious. We've condemned another generation to live on a planet that is one grave act of hubris or human error away from destruction without demanding any action from our leaders. That must change.

In New York Times Opinion's latest series, *At the Brink*, we're looking at the reality of nuclear weapons today. It's the culmination of nearly a year of reporting and research. We plan to explore where the present dangers lie in the next arms race and what can be done to make the world safer again.

W.J. Hennigan, the project's lead writer, begins that discussion today by laying out what's at stake if a single nuclear weapon were used, as well as revealing for the first time details about how close U.S. officials thought the world came to breaking the decades-long nuclear taboo.

Russia's president, Vladimir Putin, threatened in his 2024 annual speech that more direct Western intervention in Ukraine could lead to nuclear conflict. Yet an American intelligence assessment suggests the world may have wandered far closer to the brink of a nuclear launch more than a year earlier, during the first year of Mr. Putin's invasion.

This is the first telling of the Biden administration's efforts to avoid that fate, and had they failed, how they hoped to contain the catastrophic aftermath. Mr. Hennigan explores what happened during that tense time, what officials were thinking, what they did and how they're approaching a volatile future.

**IN THE FIRST ESSAY OF THE SERIES, W.J. HENNIGAN LAYS OUT THE RISKS OF THE NEW NUCLEAR ERA AND HOW WE GOT HERE. YOU CAN LISTEN TO AN ADAPTATION OF THE PIECE [HERE](#).**

Within two years, the last major remaining arms treaty between the United States and Russia is to expire. Yet amid mounting global instability and shifting geopolitics, world leaders aren't turning to diplomacy. Instead, they have responded by building more technologically advanced weapons. The recent intelligence on Russia's development of a space-based nuclear weapon is the latest reminder of the enormous power these weapons continue to wield over our lives.

There is no precedent for the complexity of today's nuclear era. The bipolarity of the Cold War has given way to a great-power competition with far more emerging players. With the possibility of Donald Trump returning as president, Iran advancing its nuclear development and China on track to stock its arsenal with 1,000 warheads by 2030, German and South Korean officials have wondered aloud if they should have their own nuclear weapons, as have important voices in Poland, Japan and Saudi Arabia.

The latest generation of nuclear technology can still inflict unspeakable devastation. Artificial intelligence could someday automate war without human intervention. No one can confidently predict how and if deterrence will work under these dynamics or even what strategic stability will look like. A new commitment to what could be years of diplomatic talks will be needed to establish new terms of engagement.

Over the past several months, I've been asked, including by colleagues, why I want to raise awareness on nuclear arms control when the world faces so many other challenges — climate change, rising authoritarianism and economic inequality, as well as the ongoing wars in Ukraine and the Middle East.

Part of the answer is that both of those active conflicts would be far more catastrophic if nuclear weapons were introduced into them. Consider Mr. Putin's threat at the end of February: "We also have

weapons that can strike targets on their territory,” the Russian leader said during his annual address. “Do they not understand this?”

The other answer lies in our recent history. When people around the world in the 1960s, '70s, '80s and early '90s began to understand the nuclear peril of that era, a vocal constituency demanded — and achieved — change.

Fear of mutual annihilation last century spurred governments to work together to create a set of global agreements to lower the risk. Their efforts helped to end atmospheric testing of nuclear weapons, which, in certain cases, had poisoned people and the environment. Adversarial nations started talking to each other and, by doing so, helped avoid accidental use. Stockpiles were reduced. A vast majority of nations agreed to never build these weapons in the first place if the nations that had them worked in good faith toward their abolishment. That promise was not kept.

In 1982 as many as a million people descended on Central Park calling for the elimination of nuclear arms in the world. More recently, some isolated voices have tried to raise the alarm — Jamie Dimon, the chief executive of JPMorgan Chase, said last year that “the most serious thing facing mankind is nuclear proliferation” — but mostly such activism is inconceivable now. The once again growing threat of nuclear weapons is simply not part of the public conversation. And the world is less secure.

Today the nuclear safety net is threadbare. The good news is that it can be restitched. American leadership requires that Washington marshal international support for this mission — but it also requires leading by example. There are several actions that the U.S. president could take without buy-in from a Congress unlikely to cooperate.

As a first step, the United States could push to reinvigorate and establish with Russia and China, respectively, joint information and crisis control centers to ensure that misunderstandings and escalation don't spiral. Such hotlines have all but gone dormant. The United States could also renounce the strategy of launching its nuclear weapons based only on a warning of an adversary's launch, reducing the chance America could begin a nuclear war because of an accident, a human or mechanical failure or a simple misunderstanding. The United States could insist on robust controls for artificial intelligence in the launch processes of nuclear weapons.

Democracy rarely prevents war, but it can eventually serve as a check on it. Nuclear use has always been the exception: No scenario offers enough time for voters to weigh in on whether to deploy a nuclear weapon. Citizens, therefore, need to exert their influence well before the country finds itself in such a situation.

We should not allow the next generation to inherit a world more dangerous than the one we were given.

## **Nuclear War Is Called Unimaginable. In Fact, It's Not Imagined Enough.**

W.J. Hennigan