

Beware of 2nd Nuclear Age

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North Korea's launch of a long-range missile in mid-December was followed by a flurry of global condemnation that was almost comical in its predictability and impotence. But the launch underscored a larger reality that can no longer be ignored: The world has entered a second nuclear age. The atomic bomb has returned for a second act, a post-Cold War encore. This larger pattern needs to be understood if it is to be managed.

The contours of the second nuclear age are still taking shape. But the next few years will be especially perilous because newness itself creates dangers as rules and red lines are redefined. This took at least 10 years in the first nuclear age, and this time may be no different.

In the Middle East, South Asia and East Asia, old rivalries now unfold in a nuclear context. This has already changed military postures across the Middle East. Part of the Israeli nuclear arsenal is being shifted to sea, with more atomic warheads being placed on submarines to prevent their being targeted in a surprise attack. Israel is also launching a new generation of satellites to provide early warning of other countries' preparations for missile strikes. If Iran's mobile missiles disperse, Israel wants to know about it immediately.

Thus, the old problem of Arab-Israeli peace is now seen in the new context of an Iranian nuclear threat. The two problems are linked. How would Israel respond to rocket attacks from Gaza, Lebanon or Egypt if it simultaneously faced the threat of nuclear attack by Iran? What would the U.S. and Israel do if Iran carried its threat to the point of evacuating its cities or placing missiles in its own cities to ensure that any attack on them would cause massive collateral damage?

Pakistan has doubled the size of its nuclear arsenal in the last five years. Its armed forces are set to field new short-range tactical nuclear weapons. India became the latest country after the U.S., Russia and China to become a nuclear-triad power — that is, to deploy nuclear weapons on bombers, missiles and submarines. Moreover, India tested an intercontinental ballistic missile last year, giving it the ability to hit Beijing and Shanghai. Finally, India almost certainly has a multiple-nuclear-warhead weapon in development and has also launched satellites to aid its targeting of Pakistan's forces.

In East Asia, North Korea has gone nuclear and is set to add a whole new class of uranium bombs to its arsenal. It has rehearsed quick missile salvos, showing that it could launch attacks on South Korea and Japan before any counterstrike could be initiated.

China, too, is shifting its nuclear forces to mobile missiles and submarines. These weapons can be put on alert in a way that would be highly visible to U.S. satellites and the global media. Thus, the Chinese can easily "nuclearize" a crisis with the U.S. or anyone else. They do not have to detonate a nuclear weapon but only alert adversaries to the dramatic increase in the political stakes and dangers of a showdown.

Russia, not wanting to be left out of the act, recently staged the largest nuclear exercises in decades to remind everyone that it remains a serious nuclear player, too.

These individual developments are troubling. But they cannot be understood in isolation from the larger multipolar system of major powers that is forming. To a great extent, this is a nuclear multipolar system. Possessing nuclear weapons contributes to a country's global status as a major power.

To better understand this principle, consider the following question: When was the last time the U.S. or anyone else seriously proposed that India sign the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, which would force India to give up the bomb. Given the United States' economic problems and looming defense cuts as well as growing Chinese power, there is no longer even a remote possibility that this demand will be made. India has become an accepted, legitimate member of the nuclear club. It is even less likely that China or Russia would disarm for the sake of a nuclear-free world.

But the most urgent problem stems from the breakdown of major countries' onetime nuclear monopoly and the empowerment of smaller countries like North Korea, Pakistan, Israel and possibly Iran. A new set of rules for diplomacy, military strategy and arms control is needed to stabilize this emerging nuclear order. Pretending that it does not exist is not a strategy.

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