

The Continuing Threat of Global Destruction

As the Cold War faded in the final years of the 20th century, the threat of global nuclear war seemed to recede. This was an opportunity to dismantle the structures and the logic of nuclear deterrence—and the world passed it by.

After the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the idea of nuclear deterrence took hold again, largely because of a lack of clear alternatives. Today, progress toward nuclear disarmament has stalled and new threats of nuclear proliferation are emerging.

Despite treaty obligations dating back to the 1968 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, the traditional nuclear weapon states have failed to take meaningful moves to disarm.

India, Israel, Pakistan and possibly North Korea have developed nuclear weapons outside the NPT framework. Such acts—and failures to act—have undermined the world's most important legal protection against the uncontrolled spread of nuclear weapons.

Almost everyone in today's world feels insecure, but not everyone feels insecure about the same thing. Different threats seem more urgent to people in different parts of the world.... We need common global strategies to deal with all of them—and indeed, governments are coming together to work out and implement such strategies, in the UN and elsewhere. The one area where there is a total lack of any common strategy is the one that may well present the greatest danger of all: the area of nuclear weapons.

—Kofi Annan



What are the types of nuclear weapons?

Nuclear weapons are classified as either "strategic weapons"—which are used to strike targets deep inside enemy territory—or "tactical weapons"—short-range weapons designed to destroy specific military, communications or infrastructure targets on the battlefield.

Atomic, or fission, bombs were the first developed. Then, in the 1950s, the United States and the Soviet Union developed vastly more powerful thermonuclear, or hydrogen, bombs.

Once the materials for an atomic weapon are acquired, assembling them is frighteningly simple. The threat that terrorist groups or rogue states could acquire the materials needed to construct a fission weapon is very real.

In recent years, proposals have been made to develop a new generation of low-yield nuclear weapons, including "bunker busters," to destroy secure underground targets. Such weapons would lower the threshold to the use of nuclear weapons, making it more "acceptable" and thus more likely.

How many nuclear weapons are there?

The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) reports in its 2006 yearbook that there are about 27,000 nuclear warheads. This is enough to destroy all life on Earth many times over.

The United States and Russia have the most nuclear weapons. The United States has 10,000, Russia 16,000.

It is estimated that the United Kingdom probably has 185, France 350, China 130, India 50, Pakistan 60 and Israel between 100 and 200. In October 2006, North Korea appears to have conducted a nuclear test explosion.