The Nuclear Danger 65 Years After the Hiroshima and Nagasaki Bombings

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The first nuclear bomb detonation in July 1945 and the surprise attacks on the people of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August of that year ignited a global debate about the role, the morality, and the control of nuclear weapons that continues to this day.

Then as now, some judged that the catastrophic dangers inherent in nuclear weapons outweigh any justification for their existence or at least for large numbers of such weapons, leading them to seek meaningful nuclear restraints. Others considered nuclear weapons to be legitimate military and political instruments and argued for an ever increasing array of nuclear capabilities. Still others, including much of the American public, have embraced some elements of both perspectives.

Since the bombings in Japan, nuclear weapons have not been used in a military attack. Yet they have left a trail of devastation, including: cancer victims from the fallout from atmospheric nuclear test explosions, contaminated workers and radioactive and toxic pollution from nuclear weapons production plants.

Although the U.S.-Soviet superpower competition that gave rise to the development, testing, and deployment of tens of thousands of nuclear weapons and thousands of strategic and tactical nuclear delivery systems ended some twenty years ago, many of the weapons and the policies developed to justify their possession and potential use persist.

Today, Russia and the United States still possess nearly 20,000 nuclear bombs--more than 95 percent of the world total. In addition to the United States and Russia, there are now seven more nuclear-armed nations: the U.K., France, China, Israel, India, Pakistan, and North Korea.

As the new film Countdown to Zero explains very well, the overall number of nuclear weapons has declined and their use is viewed as increasingly unacceptable, but the nuclear weapons danger remains too high.

- many U.S. and Russian weapons remain primed for quick launch;
- nuclear weapons material stocks remain insecure;
- some states continue to produce nuclear bomb material;
- a few states still refuse to ratify the global treaty banning nuclear testing, which would help block the development new and more sophisticated bombs;
- some states retain the option to use nuclear weapons in conflicts that begin with conventional weapons;
- there is a risk that additional countries may utilize "peaceful" nuclear technologies to produce fissile material for bombs.

The nuclear status quo cannot hold. We must act by moving quickly to reduce and eliminate nuclear weapons. Countries with nuclear weapons must reduce the role and number of their nuclear weapons and all countries must support strengthened barriers to prevent proliferation.

U.S. leadership is essential to prevent the spread and use of nuclear weapons, beginning with
bipartisan support for common sense steps, including ratification of the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty, which the Senate will vote on in September, and the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, which should be reconsidered next year.

However one feels about nuclear weapons and their role, it is essential for all of us to understand the horrific effects of nuclear weapons and work together to prevent their use ever again.

This week, as the world marks the 65th anniversary of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Arms Control Today reprises the following annotated photo essay (PDF) to help recall the human consequences of nuclear war in ways that words cannot describe. - DARYL G. KIMBALL

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