



BY WILLIAM F. FELICE
Guest Columnist

Russia's dangerous nuclear posturing threatens us all

Pressure on Russia to uphold the international laws governing nuclear weapons is perhaps the most pressing foreign policy priority for the U.S. and the world.



Vladimir Putin's cavalier attitude toward the dangers of a nuclear catastrophe has been vividly on display since Russia's takeover of Europe's largest nuclear power plant at Zaporizhzhia shown here with the Dnipro river on the other side of Nikopol, Ukraine, last month. [EVGENIY MALOLETKA | AP]

Last last month Russia inexcusably sabotaged UN efforts to reaffirm and bolster the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons. The treaty aims to reduce nuclear risks and prevent the enlargement of nuclear arsenals around the world. Since Vladimir Putin launched his aggressive war against Ukraine over six

months ago, the danger of a nuclear calamity has grown exponentially. Russia refused to accept the final joint declaration accepted by all other states at the U.N. Conference on Nuclear Disarmament. Putin's belligerence imperils our future.

How important is the nuclear non-proliferation treaty (NPT)? After both the U.S. and Russia successfully developed nuclear weapons in the middle of the 20th century, there was virtually unanimous agreement among foreign policy experts and political leaders that nuclear weapons would rapidly spread to dozens of countries. President John F. Kennedy in 1963 argued that there would be as many as 20 nuclear-armed states by 1975. The experts and JFK were wrong. Today there are only nine states with nuclear weapons. How did the international community prevent the widely predicted rapid proliferation of these weapons of mass destruction?

Arguably the biggest "hidden secret" in international relations is the remarkable success of the NPT, which came into force in 1970. The treaty has been ratified by 191 nations, including the five major powers that first had nuclear weapons. The goal of the treaty is to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons and weapons technology through the promotion of cooperation in the peaceful uses of nuclear energy. Countries renounce their rights to nuclear weapons and, in return, receive the fruits of civilian nuclear technology. Furthermore, nuclear weapons states pledge to work to eliminate their nuclear arsenals.

This system was not just built on trust. The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) was set up with the ability to conduct rigorous inspections and verify compliance. The agency provides safeguards to prevent the improper diversion of fissile material from civilian to weapons use. The agency even has the right to send inspectors to investigate suspicious activities at sites not officially declared nuclear facilities by the country's leaders. All of this creates powerful incentives for nations to follow the rules and abide by their nonproliferation obligations.

The agency's work significantly contributed to a dramatic decline in the proliferation of nuclear weapons after the 1970 nuclear non-proliferation treaty went into effect. Indeed 75% of the countries that had the capability to become nuclear weapons states declined to do so and remained non-nuclear. Some banded together to create "nuclear weapons free zones," which now encompasses all of

Africa, South and Central America, Southeast Asia, Antarctica, as well as Australia, New Zealand and the islands of the Pacific.

Russia's challenge to the international norms governing nuclear weapons has created great uncertainty and danger in global affairs. In addition to undermining the U.N. NPT conference, Putin threatened to use nuclear weapons in his invasion of Ukraine. In response, U.N. Secretary General Antonio Guterres warned "humanity is just one misunderstanding, one miscalculation away from nuclear annihilation."

Putin's cavalier attitude toward the dangers of a nuclear catastrophe has been vividly on display since Russia's takeover of Europe's largest nuclear power plant at Zaporizhzhia. Ukraine has alleged that Russia is storing heavy weaponry inside the complex and using it as a cover to launch attacks. The Ukraine military obviously can't respond without the risk of hitting one of the plant's reactors. The International Atomic Energy Agency is currently struggling to investigate the status of the Zaporizhzhia plant.

The existential risks of nuclear war are well-known. In August Rutgers University scholars released a current worst-case scenario of the impact of a full-scale nuclear war between the U.S. and Russia. Beyond the millions of direct deaths from the atomic bomb blasts themselves, the Rutgers report estimates that the indirect death toll caused by soot from burning cities and forests entering the atmosphere would lead to more than 5 billion people dying of starvation. This death toll reflects how much global crop yields would suffer as drifting clouds blocked out the sunlight that sustains plants and life itself.

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