

World ‘one miscalculation away from nuclear annihilation’, UN chief says

Citing Ukraine, the Korean peninsula and Middle East, António

Guterres says: ‘We have been extraordinarily lucky so far. But luck is not a strategy’



World one misstep from ‘nuclear annihilation’, says UN chief

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The United Nations’ secretary general, António Guterres, has warned that a misunderstanding could spark nuclear destruction, as the United States, Britain and France urged Russia to stop “its dangerous nuclear rhetoric and behaviour”.

At the opening of a key nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) conference in New York, Guterres warned that the world faced “a nuclear danger not seen since the height of the cold war”.

Citing Russia's war with Ukraine and tensions on the Korean peninsula and in the Middle East, Guterres said he feared that crises "with nuclear undertones" could escalate.

"Today, humanity is just one misunderstanding, one miscalculation away from nuclear annihilation," Guterres told the 10th review conference of the NPT, an international treaty that came into force in 1970 to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons.

"We have been extraordinarily lucky so far. But luck is not a strategy. Nor is it a shield from geopolitical tensions boiling over into nuclear conflict," he added, calling on nations to "put humanity on a new path towards a world free of nuclear weapons".

The meeting, held at the UN's headquarters in New York, has been postponed several times since 2020 due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Guterres said the conference was "a chance to strengthen" the treaty and "make it fit for the worrying world around us".

"Eliminating nuclear weapons is the only guarantee they will never be used," the secretary general said, adding that he would visit Hiroshima for the anniversary of the US atomic bombing of the Japanese city on 6 August 1945.

"Almost 13,000 nuclear weapons are now being held in arsenals around the world. All this at a time when the risks of proliferation are growing and guardrails to prevent escalation are weakening," Guterres added.

In January, the five permanent members of the UN security council – the US, China, Russia, Britain and France – had pledged to prevent the further dissemination of nuclear weapons.

On Monday, the US, Britain and France reaffirmed their commitment in a joint statement, saying a "nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought".

The three also took aim at Russia – which announced it had placed its nuclear forces on alert shortly after its invasion of Ukraine on 24 February – and urged Moscow to respect its international commitments under the NPT.

“Following Russia’s unprovoked and unlawful war of aggression against Ukraine, we call on Russia to cease its irresponsible and dangerous nuclear rhetoric and behaviour,” they said.

President Vladimir Putin insisted that Russia remained faithful to the treaty’s “letter and spirit” and that there could be “no winners” in a nuclear war, according to the Kremlin.

While many speeches focused on Russia, the US secretary of state, Antony Blinken, also denounced North Korea, which “continues to expand its unlawful nuclear programme”, and Iran, which “remains on a path of nuclear escalation ... And so we come together at a critical moment,” he said.

Earlier, in a statement, Joe Biden called on Russia and China to enter nuclear arms control talks.

The US president reiterated that his administration was ready to “expeditiously negotiate” a replacement to New Start, the **treaty capping intercontinental nuclear forces** in the United States and Russia, which is set to expire in 2026.

The NPT, which the 191 signatories review every five years, aims to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons, promote complete disarmament and promote cooperation in the peaceful use of nuclear energy.

At the last review conference in 2015, the parties were unable to reach agreement on substantive issues.

“Since then, the division within the international community has become only greater,” lamented the Japanese prime minister, Fumio Kishida. “A path to a world without nuclear weapons has become even harder. Nevertheless giving up is not an option.”

Nuclear annihilation just one miscalculation away, UN chief warns

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The world is one misstep from devastating nuclear war and in peril not seen since the Cold War, the UN Secretary General has warned.

"We have been extraordinarily lucky so far," Antonio Guterres said.

Amid rising global tensions, "humanity is just one misunderstanding, one miscalculation away from nuclear annihilation", he added.

His remarks came at the opening of a conference for countries signed up to the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.

The 1968 deal was introduced after the Cuban missile crisis, an event often portrayed as the closest the world ever came to nuclear war. The treaty was designed to stop the spread of nuclear weapons to more countries, and to pursue the ultimate goal of complete nuclear disarmament.

Almost every nation on Earth is signed up to the NPT, including the five biggest nuclear powers. But among the handful of states never to sign are four known or suspected to have nuclear weapons: India, Israel, North Korea and Pakistan.

Secretary General Guterres said the "luck" the world had enjoyed so far in avoiding a nuclear catastrophe may not last - and urged the world to renew a push towards eliminating all such weapons.

"Luck is not a strategy. Nor is it a shield from geopolitical tensions boiling over into nuclear conflict," he said.

And he warned that those international tensions were "recaching new highs" - pointing specifically to the invasion of Ukraine, tensions on the Korean peninsula and in the Middle East as examples.

Russia was widely accused of escalating tensions when days after his invasion of Ukraine in February, President Vladimir Putin put Russia's substantial nuclear forces on high alert.

He also threatened anyone standing in Russia's way with consequences "you have never seen in your history". Russia's nuclear strategy includes the use of nuclear weapons if the state's existence is under threat.

On Monday, Mr Putin wrote to the same non-proliferation conference Mr Guterres opened, declaring that "there can be no winners in a nuclear war and it should never be unleashed".

But Russia still found itself criticised at the NPT conference. US Secretary of State Antony Blinken condemned what he called Russia's sabre-rattling - and pointed out that Ukraine had handed over its Soviet-era nuclear weapons in 1994, after receiving assurances of its future security from Russia and others.

"What message does this send to any country around the world that may think that it needs to have nuclear weapons - to protect, to defend, to deter aggression against its sovereignty and independence?" he asked. "The worst possible message". Today, some 13,000 nuclear weapons are thought to remain in service in the arsenals of the nine nuclear-armed states - far lower than the estimated 60,000 stockpiled during the peak of the mid-1980s.

Opinion: One miscalculation away from nuclear holocaust

Opinion by [David A. Andelman](#)

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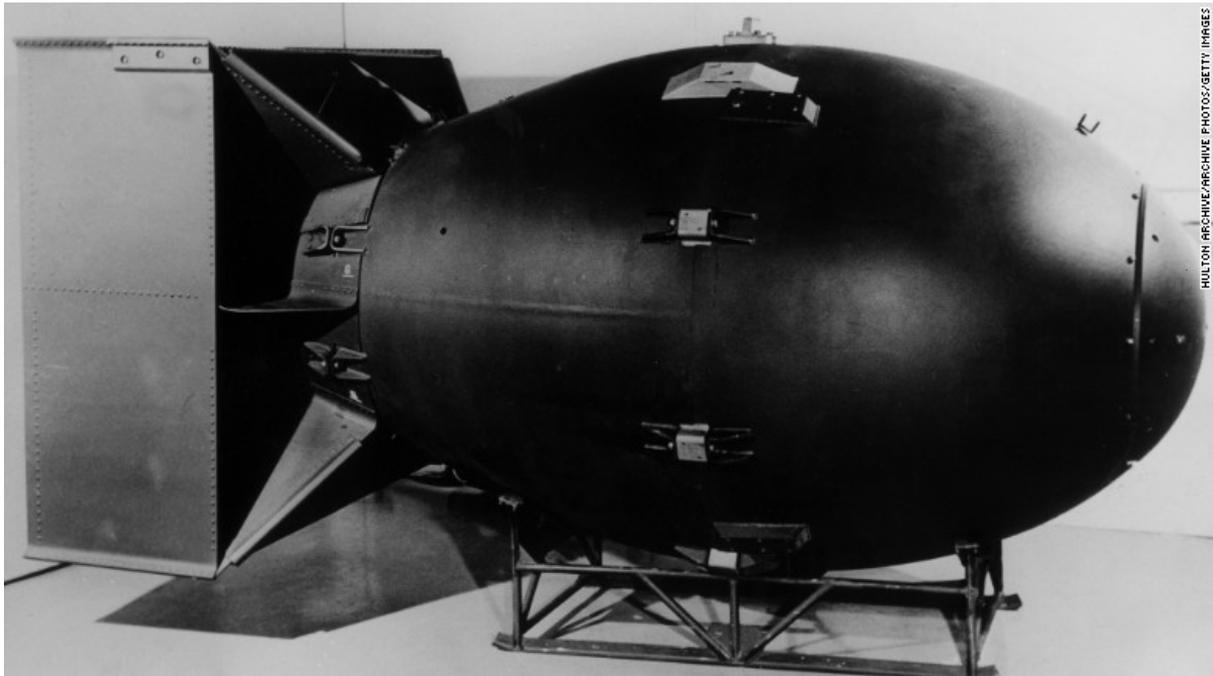
(CNN)United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres is hardly a global figure given to panic, or hyperbole for that matter. But rarely has he seemed quite so afraid.

David Andelman

"Humanity is just one misunderstanding, one miscalculation away from nuclear annihilation," Guterres said this week. The way he and a growing number of those who think deeply about nuclear issues and their consequences see it, the world is plunging headlong towards potential Armageddon, with little regard to the consequences of their actions, or inaction.

- House Speaker Nancy Pelosi seems to have paid little heed to such fears as she moved blithely ahead with her visit to Taiwan in the face of dire warnings from the leadership of mainland China, whose arsenal of [350 nuclear weapons](#) lies just across a narrow strait. And this in the context of bellicose words and actions from Russian President Vladimir Putin on Ukraine and Kim Jong Un's ongoing nuclear rhetoric and actions in nearby North Korea.

- Guterres's fears, of course, were broader and deeper than this single Asian flashpoint. He was [addressing a world conference](#) of the nations that have signed the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons -- a gathering delayed by two years due to the Covid-19 pandemic.



Side view of the 'Fat Man' atomic bomb, the kind that the US dropped on Nagasaki, Japan, on August 9, 1945, killing thousands of people during the Second World War.

Signed on July 1, 1968, by 93 nations, and in force two years later, [the treaty](#) now has 191 adherents. Yet never has it seemed more vulnerable, if not more relevant, than today.

The context, as Guterres observed, was that this year's conference -- the 10th since its signing -- "occurs at a [time of nuclear danger](#) not seen since the height of the Cold War."

- Indeed, the very foundations of global security that have effectively guaranteed the peace since the explosion of the "[Fat Man](#)" [plutonium device](#) -- the last ever detonated in battle over Nagasaki on August 9, 1945 -- have been deeply eroded.

The United States was, and remains, the only nation ever to have detonated a nuclear weapon in a war. The Soviet Union tested [its first device](#) four years later.

In July 1959, then-French President Charles de Gaulle sent the Count Alexandre de Marenches, the co-author of our book, "[The Fourth World War](#)" to Washington, to ask US President Dwight Eisenhower to give France the secrets that would allow the French to join the nuclear club. Ike politely but firmly declined.

Still, in less than a year, France had exploded [its first nuclear device](#), eight years after [the British](#).

Russia was already en route to equalizing this balance. By the early 1960s, the Kremlin had deployed the first of what would be an arsenal of more than 3,000 nuclear weapons to Ukraine, where some of the first steps toward a Soviet bomb had been taken in Ukrainian institutes located in the now deeply contested cities of Kharkiv and Donetsk. More Soviet weapons then found their way [to Belarus and Kazakhstan](#).



Opinion: How to assess the risk of nuclear war without freaking out

By the mid-1960s, on the western side of the Iron Curtain there were three nuclear powers (the US, Britain and France), on the eastern side, four ostensibly nuclear-armed states, though utterly controlled by the Kremlin. Effectively, there were just two nuclear blocs.

There are many who look back on that era as the good old days of nuclear confrontation -- and with good reason. Each side, for decades, possessed enough nuclear weapons -- as many as [41,000 for the USSR](#) and [31,000 for the US](#) at their respective peaks -- to have utterly obliterated the other side, not to mention all life on earth. This led to the concept of [Mutually Assured Destruction](#) (MAD).

Since then, arms control agreements have reduced the size of these arsenals dramatically -- to levels still able to incinerate the earth, but without reducing much of the tension. While arsenals have shrunk since the Cold War, [the number of countries](#) with nuclear weapons has proliferated.

How is it at all possible to have MAD when you have [nuclear weapons in the hands of nine powers](#)? (The countries in question are the US, Britain, France, Israel, Pakistan, India, Russia, China, and North Korea.) Within this group of nations, there are pockets of mutually assured destruction. Some 93% of all the world's 13,900 nuclear weapons are [still controlled by Washington and Moscow](#).

To a degree, MAD prevails there, and indeed the prospect of mutually assured destruction comprises a good part of what has [deterred Pakistan and India](#) from launching their arsenals at each other during any of three Indo-Pakistani wars or other regular confrontations across their contested borders.



The original cover of the UK government's 1980 guide to surviving a nuclear attack.

A broader threat, though, has only expanded. How likely is it that given some existential challenge, Russia or even China, which [arrived in the nuclear club in 1964](#), might not deploy a weapon of their own? Certainly, Russia has issued such a threat in Ukraine. Just weeks before its invasion of Ukraine, Russia conducted maneuvers with nuclear units, while Putin announced that his nuclear deterrent forces were being placed on a "[special regime of alert](#)."

And then there are the peripheral nuclear powers. While most of the world has been preoccupied with Ukraine, Taiwan, and terrorist leaders in Afghanistan, [North Korea](#) has continued to launch missiles and threaten new rounds of nuclear tests. On Victory Day last month, Kim Jong Un warned he was "ready to mobilize" his nuclear deterrent. Finally, we are potentially within weeks of a new round of escalations, this time involving Iran. Though Secretary of State Antony Blinken has embraced a return to the conference table to restore the nuclear accord

that was restraining Iran's headlong dash toward a nuclear weapon, there is little real evidence Iran is prepared to agree.

How is it at all possible to have MAD when you have nuclear weapons in the hands of nine powers?

David Andelman

Indeed, on Monday the Biden administration unveiled [a new round of sanctions](#) targeting "illicit" support of the Iranian oil industry, which is already under crushing sanctions. And there are indications that the "breakout time" -- the time needed for Iran to produce enough fissile material for a nuclear weapon -- has [shrunk to near-zero](#).

Should Iran test or even exhibit the capacity to test a nuclear weapon, its arch enemy [Saudi Arabia has already indicated](#) it will do all within its power to deploy its own. Indeed, it has fostered [close relations with the nuclear programs of Pakistan and with China](#), whose appetite for foreign sources of oil knows few bounds.

It is hardly surprising that the UN Secretary-General has waxed so pessimistic. The speeches that followed his opening of the non-proliferation conference seemed scarcely calculated to return the genie to its nuclear bottle.

Blinken [charged in his speech](#) at the same conference that Russia is "engaged in reckless, dangerous nuclear saber-rattling" in Ukraine, while North Korea "is preparing to conduct its 7th nuclear test." And as for Iran, it "remains on a path of nuclear escalation."

"To escape the logic of fear," Blinken concluded, should be the most immediate mission of all nations who've agreed to restrain the proliferation of nuclear arms.

Somehow, though, an even more worthwhile objective might just be for the world to find a way to turn back the clock from 2022 to 1962 or even 1982. These were terrifying years when, innocently, we practiced weekly duck-and-cover exercises under our little wooden desks in kindergarten, dug home fallout shelters in our backyards against an imminent nuclear attack.

- But those very real and immediate threats led the nightly news, consumed the global dialogue, motivated every action by every world leader who understood that nuclear arms were, and should be, at the very top of priorities. They no longer are.

It is this fear that is at the heart of the Secretary-General's pessimism -- and should be at the heart of all of us.