

The new campaign to ban the bomb

Nearly 70 years after the invention of the atom bomb, an international summit meets this week in London in pursuit of a nuclear-weapon-free world. Could this dream ever become reality?



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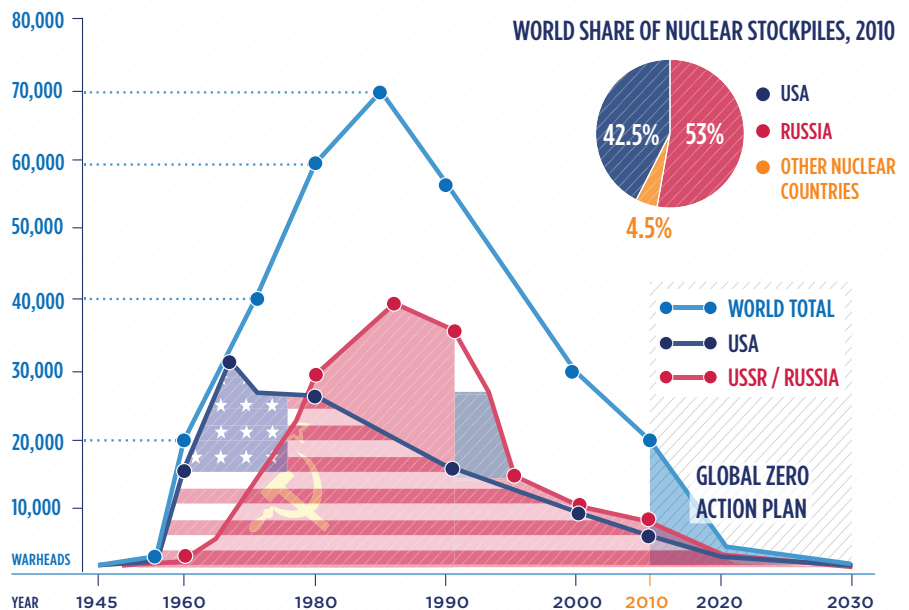
It has been decades since the world faced the immediate threat of nuclear war. The superpower conflicts of the 20th Century have given way to much smaller-scale battles in the 21st. Today, combatants are more likely to be lightly armed militants than nuclear-armed states.

But according to new figures released by the anti-nuclear campaign group Global Zero, an estimated \$1 trillion will be spent on upgrading nuclear stockpiles in the next decade.

Campaigners say this is wrong, and must be stopped. The existence of nuclear weapons, they argue, remains a deadly threat to world peace and security, and spending money only increases that threat. We might think that nuclear war is a thing of past, but if we're not careful, it could spell the end of our future.

Why? Partly because nuclear technology is more accessible than ever before. The first bombs were built in the 1940s. With

CLIMBING DOWN THE WORLD NUCLEAR MOUNTAIN



modern science, it has become easier than ever to build a nuclear weapon – even relatively poor countries can manufacture the necessary parts for a missile and warhead.

Also, the nuclear threat has fragmented. Once, nuclear weapons were controlled only by a few powerful nations. Now, potential nuclear actors include rogue states like North Korea and even terrorist groups, who are known to have been seeking nuclear weapons for some time. A recent attack on a naval base in nuclear-armed Pakistan has shown how easily that country's weapons could fall into the wrong hands.

Thirdly, there is the old danger of a nuclear accident. Several times in the past, misunderstandings and miscommunications have had alarmed generals hovering over their nuclear launch buttons. As the number of nuclear powers grows, the chance of a nuclear attack set off by accident, or by rogue

factions within a country's military, continues to increase.

Global Zero supporters, who include scientists, politicians and former world leaders, propose a radical solution. They say nuclear arsenals must first be cut. Then strict supervision programmes must be implemented. Finally, continued reductions must take place until there is not a single nuclear weapon left in the world.

HOPE AND FEAR

Critics accuse Global Zero of over-optimism. Even if big countries like the US and Russia agree to reduce stockpiles, rogue states may not. And no country wants to get rid of its nuclear deterrent unless it can be certain that other countries are doing the same.

But supporters say the danger of nuclear war demands an ambitious response. If the people of the world can get behind their initiative, perhaps a nuclear-free day will eventually dawn at last.

Q & A

Q Are nuclear weapons really all that scary?

A Yes. Even the first nukes (dropped on Japan in 1945) were horrifyingly destructive. Thousands were vaporised in an instant by the power of a single bomb, with more dying later of radiation. By the 1980s, there were enough nuclear weapons in existence to destroy every human on the planet.

Q How are they that powerful?

A Basic nuclear bombs work by splitting heavy atoms like uranium or plutonium. When atomic bonds break, a huge quantity of energy is released. The scary thing is that the science of atom bombs is now very well understood – in principle, they aren't that hard to build.

Q So why doesn't everyone have one?

A Because it's hard to get hold of the raw

materials. But if enough weapons-grade uranium fell into the wrong hands, you could build a simple bomb that would fit inside a suitcase.

SOME PEOPLE SAY...

'The only real guarantee of peace is to be more heavily armed than everyone else.'

WHAT DO YOU THINK?