

Third wave of nuclear powers

Gwynne Dyer Our World Today

The 'third wave' of nuclear weapons countries is beginning, and it will be at least as dangerous as the previous waves. Maybe more so, because it will be happening in a world where the old, predatory style of international politics is coming back after a long absence.

The first wave of countries to get nuclear weapons were the five great powers on the winning side in the Second World War. The United States came first, in 1945, and immediately dropped two 'atomic bombs' on Japan. The second was Russia (then calling itself the Soviet Union) in 1949, then the United Kingdom in 1952, France in 1960, and finally China in 1964.

Then the 'proliferation' came to an abrupt end: no other country went nuclear for almost twenty years. Why? Because the Cold War created stable alliances in Europe and Asia in which the other 'western' members felt no need to develop their own nuclear weapons, relying instead on the American promise of 'extended deterrence'.

The Russians and the Chinese were on their own, mainly because their rival Communist ideologies meant they had no potential great-power allies anyway. The Russians solved their problem by building around 10,000 nuclear weapons. The Chinese settled for 'minimum deterrence' and built only about 300 to retaliate against an attack by either the United States or the Soviet Union. So far so good.

Mention should also be made of Israel, which built its first nuclear weapons in 1966 (with a lot of French help), but it is often not even included in the list of nuclear powers because it never admits to having them. Estimates run from 90 to 400 warheads, deliverable by planes, submarines and land-based missiles.

People have grown relatively comfortable with these arsenals simply because they have not been used for six, seven or even eight decades. That does not mean they would never be used, but at least their operators have long experience of them.

The second wave of nuclear weapons was mostly in what was then called the 'Third World': successful weapons tests in 1991 in India and Pakistan and in North Korea in 2006, and secret nuclear weapons programs cancelled in South Africa, Argentina and Brazil in the late 1980s. (South Africa already had six bombs but dismantled them).

There was relatively little concern about this in the richer parts of the world, because possible nuclear wars in South Asia, South Africa or South America seemed far enough away from the wealthy North not to pose a major threat to the latter.

In fact, another India-Pakistan war is entirely plausible (there have been three already), and it could easily go nuclear. India currently has only two ballistic missile-firing nuclear submarines, not enough for a permanent at-sea capability. Pakistan has no SLBMs at all and its ballistic missiles could be destroyed on the ground by a surprise attack, so it is in de facto 'launch on warning' mode all the time.

India and Pakistan have around 350 nuclear weapons between them. If all buttons were pressed, that could cause firestorms in so many cities that it would create a mild version of a 'nuclear winter': enough smoke and dust in the upper atmosphere to block much of the Sun's light for years, causing a collapse in food production and widespread famine throughout the northern hemisphere.

And here comes the third wave of nuclear weapons powers, all seeking to replace the lost American guarantee of nuclear deterrence with some homegrown equivalent: Germany, Poland and possibly even Sweden in Europe; Japan and South Korea in Asia. And if Iran goes nuclear, Turkey and Saudi Arabia will surely follow.

The potential aggressors are mostly the same old lot: Russia for the European countries, and China or North Korea for the Asian

ones. Even Canada might now be considering nukes to deter an American invasion if Ottawa were not aware that a Canadian nuclear weapons program would mean instant US military occupation.

This is definitely a First World wave, which means that the actual weapons could be available in just a couple of years if the various aspirants are willing to burn through a lot of money. It is also a quite unnecessary expense, which will still leave us less safe than we were under the old arrangement.

Nobody designed the remarkably stable system of mutual deterrence that gave us eighty years without a nuclear war. It just evolved out of a thousand smaller decisions that tended always to avoid or postpone or at least lessen the scale of some imminent international confrontation.

Nobody set out to destroy the deterrence system, either. Least of all Donald Trump, who was just seeking some short-term advantages in his usual way. Indeed, his understanding of nuclear deterrence is probably on a par with his understanding of tariffs.

But we'll miss it badly when it's gone.