



West's response to Russia could augur a more nuclear world

April 9, 2022 **Lawrence J. Haas** *The Hill*

Related Categories: Arms Control and Proliferation; Warfare; Iran; North Korea; Russia; Ukraine

North Korea tested a powerful new intercontinental ballistic missile late last month, ending its five-year moratorium on long-range testing.

Earlier this month, meanwhile, a majority of members in Iran's parliament wrote to hardline conservative President Ibrahim Raisi, urging the regime to secure "stronger guarantees" from the United States as part of the ongoing negotiations in Vienna over how to revive the 2015 global nuclear deal with Iran.

These nuclear-related developments in Pyongyang and Tehran may seem unconnected, but they're both closely linked to Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the U.S.-led efforts to force Russian strongman Vladimir Putin to reverse course. And they point up another reason why the United States and its allies must ensure that Putin fails to conquer Ukraine or to slice off a piece of it as part of a negotiated settlement.

If Putin prevails — especially if it's because the West hesitated to take the requisite economic and arms-related steps due to fears that an increasingly cornered Putin will use nuclear weapons in Ukraine or beyond — it will incentivize other nuclear and would-be nuclear states to expand their nuclear pursuits.

At the moment, the West is trying to walk a fine line in response to Putin's invasion and human rights horror: to impose as much economic and military pain on Russia as possible without prompting a last-resort nuclear response.

Complicating matters further, Ukraine itself once had nuclear weapons — but gave them up in exchange for a series of security guarantees throughout the 1990s from Washington, Moscow, and Great Britain.

When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, the newly independent Ukraine found itself with about 5,000 nuclear arms of different kinds that the Soviets had stationed there. At that point, Ukraine had the world's third largest nuclear arsenal, behind the United States and Russia.

Today, in Pyongyang, Tehran, and elsewhere, governments must be asking themselves two questions: Would Putin have felt free to invade a nuclear-armed Ukraine? And what lesson should we draw from the world's response to it?

North Korea, which in late March tested the Hwasong-17, an ICBM that reportedly flew nearly 700 miles, has 40 to 50 nuclear warheads and enough fissile material for perhaps seven bombs.

While the Biden administration denounced the test, North Korean dictator Kim Jong Un said he will continue to strengthen the North's "nuclear war deterrence" and expects a "longstanding confrontation" with the United States.

In Iran, the regime's nuclear progress continues apace as Washington tries to resurrect the 2015 nuclear deal, officially the "Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action," from which President Trump withdrew the United States in 2018.

Since 2019, Iran has made significant progress on uranium enrichment and other activities. It's now enriching uranium to 60 percent purity, which is just a small step to weapons-grade material, and enriching far more uranium at lower levels of purity — all of which significantly violates the limits of the 2015 deal.

Now, the regime reportedly would need just weeks to produce a nuclear bomb, if it made the decision to do so — an assessment U.S. senators called "sobering" and "shocking" when they were briefed about it in February.

As North Korea and Iran watch the West hesitate before imposing tighter sanctions on Russia and providing greater arms to Ukraine, other states that abandoned their nuclear weapons programs years ago may rethink that move.

Take South Korea. It gave up its covert nuclear pursuit in the 1970s, but its people are growing increasingly alarmed about the North's expanding nuclear arsenal. Some 71 percent of South Koreans want their country to develop nuclear weapons, according to a survey released in February.

That number will likely grow after recent threats from the North. After South Korean Defense Minister Suh Wook vowed that the South could launch precision strikes if it thought the North was readying a strike, Kim's influential sister, Kim Yo Jong, threatened to use nuclear weapons if Seoul attacks.

To reassure the South that it doesn't need nuclear weapons, U.S. officials may have to accede to President-elect Yoon Suk Yeol's request for the United States to redeploy nuclear bombers and submarines to the Korean peninsula and his hope that the two nations "normalize" joint military drills.

So, for the United States and its allies, the task is an awesome one: They must force a Russian retreat through the economic and arms-related steps at their disposal. Their failure to do so risks a more nuclearized world.