



# PeaceMeal - Food for Thought

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Website: WCPeace.org e-mail: info@WCPeace.org

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Chairman & Editor, Jim Stoffels: (509) 946-8087

## 2023 Doomsday Clock Statement

This year, the Science and Security Board of the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists moves the hands of the Doomsday Clock forward, largely (though not exclusively) because of the mounting dangers of the war in Ukraine. The Clock now stands at 90 seconds to midnight — the closest to global catastrophe it has ever been.

The war in Ukraine may enter a second horrifying year, with both sides convinced they can win. Ukraine's sovereignty and broader European security arrangements that have largely held since the end of World War II are at stake. Also, Russia's war on Ukraine has raised profound questions about how states interact, eroding norms of international conduct that underpin successful responses to a variety of global risks.

And worst of all, Russia's thinly veiled threats to use nuclear weapons remind the world that escalation of the conflict — by accident, intention, or miscalculation — is a terrible risk. The possibility that the conflict could spin out of anyone's control remains high.

Russia's recent actions contravene decades of commitments by Moscow. In 1994, Russia joined the United States and United Kingdom in Budapest, Hungary, to solemnly declare that it would "respect the independence and sovereignty and the existing borders of Ukraine" and "refrain from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of Ukraine..." These assurances were made explicitly on the understanding that Ukraine would relinquish nuclear weapons on its soil and sign the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty — both of which Ukraine did.

Russia has also brought its war to the Chernobyl and Zaporizhzhia nuclear reactor sites, violating international protocols and risking widespread release of radioactive materials. Efforts by the International Atomic Energy Agency to secure these plants so far have been rebuffed.

As Russia's war on Ukraine continues, the last remaining nuclear weapons treaty between Russia and the United States, New START, stands in jeopardy. Unless the two parties resume negotiations and find a basis for further reductions, the treaty will expire in February 2026. This would eliminate mutual inspections, deepen mistrust, spur a nuclear arms race, and heighten the possibility of a nuclear exchange.

As UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres warned in August, the world has entered "a time of nuclear danger not seen since the height of the Cold War."

The war's effects are not limited to an increase in nuclear danger; they also undermine global efforts to combat climate change. Countries dependent on Russian oil and gas have sought to diversify their supplies and suppliers, leading to expanded investment in natural gas exactly when such investment should have been shrinking.

In the context of a hot war and against the backdrop of nuclear threats, Russia's false accusations that Ukraine planned to use radiological dispersal devices, chemical weapons, and biological weapons take on new meaning as well. The continuing stream of disinformation about bioweapons laboratories in Ukraine raises concerns that Russia itself may be thinking of deploying such weapons, which many experts believe it continues to develop.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has increased the risk of nuclear weapons use, raised the specter of biological and chemical weapons use, hamstrung the world's response to climate change, and hampered international efforts to deal with other global concerns. The invasion and annexation of Ukrainian territory have also violated international norms in ways that may embolden others to take actions that challenge previous understandings and threaten stability.

There is no clear pathway for forging a just peace that discourages future aggression under the shadow of nuclear weapons. But at a minimum, the United States must keep the door open to principled engagement with Moscow that reduces the dangerous increase in nuclear risk the war has fostered. One element of risk reduction could involve sustained, high-level US military-to-military contacts with Russia to reduce the likelihood of miscalculation. The US government, its NATO allies, and Ukraine have a multitude of channels for dialogue; they all should be explored. Finding a path to serious peace negotiations could go a long way toward reducing the risk of escalation. In this time of unprecedented global danger, concerted action is required, and every second counts.

— *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, January 24, 2023*



"AT LAST, A TREATY COMPLETELY BANNING NUCLEAR WEAPONS..."

# The US has a new nuclear proliferation problem: South Korea

In January, Seoul officially put its nuclear option on the table, for the first time since 1991. South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol declared the country would consider building its own arsenal of nuclear weapons if the threat it faces from nuclear-armed North Korea continues to grow, which it will.

North Korea launched over 90 missiles in 2022. Those tests accompanied a major revision in North Korea's nuclear strategy, which now allows the preemptive use of nuclear weapons in the early stages of a crisis. Experts expect North Korea's ramped-up nuclear aggression will continue into the new year. Many even expect Pyongyang to conduct a new nuclear test, which would be the country's first since 2017 and a watershed event against a backdrop of global turmoil.

South Korea faces strong strategic reasons to continue developing its own nuclear arsenal. While the United States has tried to keep a lid on South Korea's nuclear ambitions, few traditional nonproliferation or counterproliferation policies are well-poised to reverse the current nuclearization of the North. It's time for a new approach.

South Korea faces an increasingly capable nuclear adversary in its northern neighbor. North Korea's nuclear arsenal, first tested in 2006, has grown rapidly. The country now hosts dozens of nuclear weapons and continues to diversify its arsenal, building more sophisticated delivery capabilities, which include intercontinental missiles capable of reaching the United States. North Korea makes dozens of threats (usually against the United States) every month, many of them nuclear in nature. North Korea has been exceptionally belligerent lately, testing more nuclear-capable missiles in the past year than it did in the previous five years combined.

South Korea has a complicated relationship with its western neighbor, too. South Korea relies heavily on China for trade, but Seoul's strong military alliance with the United States contributes to Chinese views of encirclement. So far, South Korea has walked a tightrope between its biggest military partner and biggest trade partner. But that won't last. Most South Koreans consider that China will be their country's biggest threat in the next 10 years.

South Korea has a troubled security environment, and the US security guarantee to South Korea is intended to make sure those threats don't materialize. The guarantee offers reassurance that Seoul will be protected against any adversary. The guarantee is one of the United States' strongest. The two countries boast significant military cooperation. The US military currently stations approximately 28,500 servicemembers in South Korea, regularly participates in large-scale military exercises with South Korean forces, and, under current policy, would fight under joint command with South Korean forces if a war were to break out.

But even with all this, the security guarantee doesn't seem to be enough to keep down the bubble of proliferation advocates. Policymakers in South Korea have long called for a return of US tactical nuclear weapons, and a handful of more conservative politicians have occasionally suggested that the state would be better off with its own nuclear arsenal. Increasingly, this conversation has gone mainstream. The debate was even a key talking point and part of the conservative party platform in the last South Korean presidential election.

For years now, most South Koreans have supported the idea of the country building its own nuclear weapons. By 2022, such

support had grown to over 70 percent. Russia's continued use of nuclear threats in the Ukraine war may bring that number even higher as nuclear anxiety grows. South Koreans are keenly aware that the United States and its allies have been effectively deterred by Russia's nuclear arsenal, and they worry that a similar situation could repeat itself in Asia. Public support for South Korea building its own nuclear weapons has no doubt contributed to the policy's rise out of the fringe and into the spotlight.

If South Korea is so concerned about nuclear threats from North Korea, a solution is to get reassurance that the United States will come to its aid in a fight against Pyongyang — or so the logic goes. But it isn't that simple.

The United States and South Korea already have a tight-knit relationship, and faith in the US security guarantee is already high. At least 6 in 10 South Koreans are confident that the United States will fight with them against North Korea, if need be.

US politicians have regularly emphasized the criticality of the US-South Korean relationship, and the recent Biden administration's Nuclear Posture Review made some usually heavy-handed promises in South Korea's defense, even stating that "any nuclear attack by North Korea against the United States or its Allies and partners is unacceptable and will result in the end of that regime. There is no scenario in which the Kim regime could employ nuclear weapons and survive."

But perhaps, a very credible security guarantee is just not enough — or perhaps it is even part of the problem. Even when South Koreans have faith in the US alliance, many still don't see it as a reliable solution to their perceived nuclear risks. In surveys, the more South Koreans believe the United States would use its nuclear weapons to defend them, the more they shy away from the US alliance and prefer that their own government build independent nuclear weapon capabilities.

Although counterintuitive at first sight, the rationale is simple: Why would South Koreans trust the United States to be adequately cautious with its nuclear weapons — refraining from using them unless absolutely necessary? After all, the previous US president promised to rain down "fire and fury" on the Peninsula.

South Koreans have significantly higher levels of trust in their own government's ability to make responsible nuclear choices than they do in an ally. Moreover, most South Koreans believe that their continued alliance with the United States will end up dragging Seoul into a nuclear war it otherwise could have avoided. And understandably, South Koreans don't want a nuclear war.

Any nuclear use on the Korean Peninsula — even if only North Korea were targeted — would likely have devastating environmental and health effects throughout the Peninsula. And Seoul is less than 124 miles from Pyongyang. Even in the event that North Korea invaded South Korea, most South Koreans still say in polls that they would prefer not to use nuclear weapons unless North Korea had already used them first.

Logically, South Koreans can't take it for granted that this preference will be reflected in US policy. The US nuclear doctrine makes it clear that the United States carves out the right to "nuclear first use," a tactic that involves launching nuclear weapons at an opponent before they have the chance to launch their own. Given that North Korea's missiles can now reach the US homeland, any war fighting strategy for the United States is likely to prioritize destroying these assets — and a first strike

would be the easiest way to accomplish that goal. For this reason, a credible US nuclear security guarantee alone won't alleviate South Korea's nuclear anxieties.

President Yoon was quick to note that, even now, South Korea has options other than building its own nuclear arsenal. One of these is to request that the United States re-deploy some of its tactical nuclear weapons in South Korea. The United States withdrew its South Korea-based arsenal of approximately 100 nuclear weapons in 1991 to move past the Cold War. No US nuclear weapons have been stationed in the country since.

The redeployment of these weapons, however, would do little to resolve the core issues of the current crisis — and maybe quite the opposite. Deployed US nuclear weapons in South Korea would heighten North Korea's fears that the United States is preparing for the decapitation strategy it so boldly announced in its recent National Defense Strategy. There is also a moral hazard. Having nearby US nuclear weapons may embolden some in South Korea to push back harder against North Korea's threats, making tensions even worse.

Moreover, unless these weapons were operated under South Korean command — a contingency that is extremely unlikely — issues around transparency, cooperation and trust in US nuclear planning would still remain.

Redeploying nuclear weapons would certainly be a signal of US interest in defending South Korea, but what's needed now is a combination of commitment and caution. Fortright communication about when and why nuclear weapons would be used, combined with clear indicators about how nuclear use will be avoided is more important for the United States than simply showing it has the muscles. Those have been on display for decades already.

Redeployment of US tactical nuclear weapons would also leave South Korea vulnerable to many of the same risks as they would incur by building their own arsenal. In this sense, even opting for US redeployment over nuclear proliferation — although it may put less strain on the alliance in the short term — remains dangerous.

The redeployment of tactical nuclear weapons would not resolve the domestic political pressures at play in South Korea. Polling from the Chicago Council on Global Affairs finds that two-thirds of South Koreans would prefer that their government build its own nuclear weapons than accept the redeployment of US tactical nuclear weapons, while below 10 percent prefer US weapons over South Korean ones. Outright opposition to US tactical nuclear weapons is also strong — at 40 percent, compared to just 26 percent opposed to South Korea building its own nuclear weapons. These figures suggest that a different strategy is called for, one that recognizes the need for more South Korean agency in the nuclear planning process.

If neither cementing the guarantee nor redeploying tactical nuclear weapons is the answer, what can the United States do instead? One option can be to fight back against South Korea's urge to build nuclear weapons with tried-and-tested nonproliferation policies. Nonproliferation leverages both carrots — security guarantees intended to protect a vulnerable country from nuclear threats — and sticks — sanctions and other punishments intended to dissuade this country from building nuclear weapons. Understandably, the US approach with its allies generally prioritizes carrots, but that may not continue to work with South Korea.

Could, therefore, counterproliferation strategies succeed?

Well, they did in the 1970s. When former South Korean President Park Chung-Hee embarked on a covert nuclear weapons acquisition program, the United States responded by threatening to scale back its support for South Korea and to reduce its military presence there. The pressure from Washington was a key component of Park's decision to end the program — although domestic politics and concerns about the country's international reputation also contributed to that decision.

But what worked in the past may not work today. In the 1970s, South Korea didn't face nuclear threats as obvious as those it faces today. The withdrawal now of US forces would be much more likely to convince Seoul that the only way to stop North Korea is to deter Pyongyang on its own.

Other counterproliferation policies have had mixed results. Experts argue that the threat of sanctions can often dissuade countries not to pursue nuclear weapons. However, once sanctions are imposed, they do little to reverse existing programs. South Korea may already be past the point at which sanctions would be useful. Multiple studies have found that South Koreans who support nuclear proliferation are not deterred by the threat of sanctions. Instead, South Koreans already anticipate that proliferation would result in significant sanctions — yet they would support the policy anyway.

A South Korean nuclear weapons program would almost certainly violate the obligations to nuclear nonproliferation and the peaceful, civilian use of transferred nuclear technologies that Seoul agreed to when it signed a nuclear cooperation agreement with the United States. This agreement, which remains in force until 2040, currently bans uranium enrichment in South Korea, at least without prior approval, as well as some types of plutonium reprocessing. Those capabilities would be needed for a robust nuclear weapons program. Violating its nuclear cooperation agreement with the United States could therefore trigger sanctions against Seoul. It would even legally enable the United States to demand that technology transferred under the agreement be returned. This is unlikely to be sufficient to stop a South Korean nuclear program if Seoul committed to one, but it does emphasize that the United States could levy very heavy costs.

The United States can also advance nonproliferation through leading by example. Making it clear to South Korea that the global nonproliferation regime is critical — and that a South Korean withdrawal from the Non-Proliferation Treaty would be unacceptable — could help dissuade Seoul. After all, the country is highly concerned with its hard-earned international reputation, and unilaterally leaving a major international treaty would be no small step.

The United States can also commit itself to policies that prioritize restraint and arms control. Demonstrating its ability to embrace a more cautious attitude towards the use of nuclear weapons may diminish some of the concerns about Washington's willingness to escalate to nuclear use, and it would model valuable norms in the nuclear space — norms that could perhaps even help balance against the behavior of other nuclear countries.

— *edited from Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, January 19, 2023*

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# Why US policy on North Korea should prioritize nonproliferation, not denuclearization

While total denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula remains a security objective of the United States, the idea of North Korea relinquishing its nuclear weapons looks increasingly unrealistic. North Korea's refusal to cooperate diplomatically, increased missile launches near US-allied territory, aggressive rhetoric, and expected seventh nuclear test signify blatant hostility toward disarmament discussions, especially those that demand its complete denuclearization. Given this reality, the United States' strategic emphasis must shift away from denuclearization.

Without regard for the humanitarian consequences of developing these weapons, North Korea has emerged in recent years as a prominent threat to the global nonproliferation regime. Despite widespread counterproliferation and disarmament efforts, North Korea has relentlessly pursued nuclearization to facilitate regime survival, legitimacy, and coercive diplomacy. Years of negotiation with the United States and regional parties proved futile when North Korea conducted its first nuclear test in 2006.

This landmark development shifted international attention toward preventing further development of strategic, high-yield thermonuclear weapons and accompanying delivery vehicles. Despite these efforts, North Korean leader Kim Jong-un has since overseen the accelerated production of nuclear warheads, leading to the nation's sixth and largest nuclear test in 2017, with estimates placing the yield over 100 kilotons.

North Korea has dedicated significant resources to developing intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) to effectively deliver these high-yield weapons globally. Some of these missiles, such as the recently tested Hwasong-17, will likely be capable of housing multiple independently targetable reentry vehicles (MIRVs), which dramatically increases the destructive power of a North Korean nuclear attack and reduces the effectiveness of current missile defense systems.

In January 2021, Kim Jong-un declared his intent to develop tactical nuclear weapons. If North Korea can successfully develop, test and deploy a smaller nuclear warhead, this would present greater challenges to nuclear security, stability and non-proliferation than strategic weapons. Nuclear warheads designed for potential use in artillery or other short-range delivery vehicles significantly lower the threshold for escalation to nuclear first use.

To ensure the effective delivery of these weapons, Kim could delegate launch authority to battlefield commanders positioned to respond to rapidly evolving threat scenarios. While this delegation would be a significant departure from the traditionally centralized North Korean command and control structure, it would be an effective way for Kim to reinforce a credible deterrent and ensure the survival of North Korea's nuclear system in case of decapitation or if communications were compromised during an attack.

Possible evidence of this strategy can be drawn from the presence of unit commanders at the April 16, 2022 testing of a short-range ballistic missile and the subsequent Korean Central News Agency statement that the missile boosts the country's frontline long-range artillery units and increases "the operation of tactical nukes and diversification of their firepower missions." Additionally, on September 8, 2022, Pyongyang codified a new nuclear doctrine and noted for the first time that "in case the command and control system over the state nuclear forces is placed in danger owing to an attack by hostile forces, a nuclear

strike shall be launched automatically and immediately" in accordance with an "operation plan decided in advance."

These operational and policy changes could indicate movement toward a first-use nuclear strategy and potentially the implementation of a delegation framework that could be executed in wartime or crisis. If launch authority were delegated, the number of individuals who could decide to deploy a nuclear weapon would multiply, leaving substantial room for miscalculation, misperception or misuse. This becomes of particular concern given North Korea's lack of sophisticated intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance capabilities and subsequent lack of strategic situational awareness.

Kim may also believe that comparatively less-damaging tactical nuclear weapons could be deployed without fear of guaranteed retaliation by the United States, whose nuclear deterrent is extended to South Korea. Because North Korea possesses the theoretical capability to strike the continental United States with a strategic nuclear weapon, the risk would be far greater for the United States to intervene militarily after North Korean tactical nuclear use. If no major US population centers, troops or military facilities are targeted, the United States could be reluctant to enter a foreign conflict that puts its mainland at risk of a nuclear attack. Escalation from conventional conflict to nuclear first use through a preemptive or retaliatory strike on South Korean ports, missile launch facilities, command and control systems, or groups of naval vessels could be a viable strategic option for North Korea to gain an advantage in a limited conflict, especially considering South Korea's and the United States' vastly superior conventional capabilities.

While the main threat of tactical nuclear weapons revolves around their potential use in a conflict, they also bear significant proliferation risks. North Korea is a known proliferator of chemical, biological, missile and conventional weaponry to finance its own nuclear program. North Korea's development of tactical nuclear capabilities would provide additional opportunities to export nuclear technology and information to nefarious actors, thereby generating increased revenue to expand its nuclear arsenal further. Designs and technologies for potentially more portable nuclear weapons with a smaller yield could entice malicious buyers as North Korea grapples with perpetual economic turmoil and a dearth of hard currency. Furthermore, in a major blow to North Korea's foremost rival, tactical nuclear proliferation would directly threaten American promotion of non-proliferation, complicating key US national security objectives.

The more capabilities that North Korea develops, the higher the potential for these weapons to find their way to other dangerous actors around the world that engage in illicit arms trade with North Korea. North Korea's nuclear program is a significant threat to regional and global security, but for reasons that are continuously evolving and often neglected by security experts and policymakers.

Considering North Korea's latest developments, policymakers have an opportunity to relinquish an archaic and unrealistic focus on total denuclearization — at least for the time being. The United States should reinvigorate the focus on collaborating with regional allies to emphasize cooperative threat reduction measures include strengthening the relationship with South Korea's newly elected government to prevent further miscommunication on ↩

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~ a reader in Kennewick

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## U.N. chief urges end to nuclear weapons for 'future generations'

United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres urged all nations to abolish nuclear weapons, which "offer no security, just carnage and chaos," as Russian President Vladimir Putin amps up threats in his war against Ukraine. Guterres made his remarks on September 26 to a special U.N. General Assembly session on the International Day for the Total Elimination of Nuclear Weapons, which has been marked every year since 2013, as he offered his New Agenda for Peace.

"The Cold War brought humanity within minutes of annihilation. Now, decades after the fall of the Berlin Wall, we can hear once again the rattling of nuclear sabers," Guterres told the General Assembly. "The era of nuclear blackmail must end. The idea that any country could fight and win a nuclear war is deranged."

"Nuclear disarmament is not a utopian dream," Guterres tweeted after his speech. "I urge all countries to ease tensions, reduce risk and forge a new consensus around defusing the nuclear threat for good. Eliminating these devices of death is possible and

necessary."

The previous week, Russian President Vladimir Putin threatened to use nuclear weapons in Russia's war in Ukraine, warning "it's not a bluff." Putin also said he was partially mobilizing hundreds of thousands of reservists in Russia to bolster the military in Ukraine in what is believed to be the first mobilization in Russia since World War II.

The United States called the military aggression "outrageous" and urged the United Nations to push back against Moscow's military campaign and support Ukraine.

Guterres said United Nations members are frustrated with the "slow pace of disarmament" and are concerned about "the catastrophic humanitarian consequences of the use of even a single nuclear weapon, let alone a regional or global nuclear war."

In August, the parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons fell short of reaching an agreement.

"We are disappointed — but we will not give up," Guterres said. "I urge all States to use every avenue of dialogue, diplomacy and negotiation to ease tensions, reduce risk, and eliminate the nuclear threat."

"My proposed New Agenda for Peace calls for meaningful disarmament and developing a common understanding for the multiple threats before us," Guterres added. "I pledge to work closely with all Member States to forge a new consensus around how we can collectively defuse these threats and achieve our shared goal of peace."

"Any use of a nuclear weapon would incite a humanitarian Armageddon," Guterres warned. "We need to step back."

"Nuclear weapons are the most destructive power ever created," he said. "Their elimination would be the greatest gift we could bestow on future generations."

## US Policy on North Korea – continued

policy objectives and present a more unified approach to the evolving situation.

North Korea's threat perception is valid; the United States and South Korea must attenuate Kim's incentive to use a nuclear weapon in the first place. If the United States can set aside the goal of denuclearization, at least for the immediate term, it could help foster stability on the Korean Peninsula as the risk continues to grow with North Korea's expanding arsenal. To convince North Korea to constructively re-engage with the United States, denuclearization cannot be the basis or objective of the conversation.

– edited from *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, Jan. 13, 2023

– *United Press International*, Sept. 26, 2022

# How the Kremlin has co-opted its critics and militarized the home front

Andrei Soldatov and Irina Borogan

In late September, following devastating Russian setbacks in Ukraine and Russian President Vladimir Putin's controversial "partial mobilization" of the Russian population, the Kremlin faced an explosion of popular discontent on social media. Notably, some of the most vocal criticism came from the government's core supporters: ultranationalists and military hard-liners who felt that Russia was not fighting as well as it should. By the beginning of October, the recriminations were coming close to Putin's own circle, with Ramzan Kadyrov, the notoriously brutal head of Chechnya, issuing a long diatribe on Telegram, the messaging app. According to Kadyrov, a Russian general who had lost a crucial town in Donetsk was "being shielded from above by the leadership in the General Staff." Other leading figures close to Putin, including Yevgeny Prigozhin who runs Wagner Group, the military contractor with close ties to the Kremlin, echoed similar complaints.

But just as the situation appeared to be getting out of control, the criticisms died down. By November, most of the hard-liners had been brought in line and were no longer assailing Russia's war strategy. Meanwhile, the military itself has quietly been handed control over many parts of the Russian economy, giving the government and the Ministry of Defense broad new powers, even in the private sector. Taken together, these developments highlight the growing influence of the military and those close to it, in the way that Putin wields power at home. Rather than making the regime more vulnerable, as some Western observers have suggested, the setbacks in the war in Ukraine over the past few months have offered Putin an opportunity to expand his hold over Russian society, and even over his military critics.

Almost since the invasion began last February, Russian hard-liners have been criticizing the Kremlin's war strategy. Many hawks were dismayed by the chaotic invasion and Russia's serial failures during the first months of the war, and they were not buying the Ministry of Defense's narrative that it was acceptable to lose so many Russian troops to a supposedly inferior enemy. Nor were they happy when Ukraine began to regain ground, first around Kyiv and then farther east. What was more striking, however, was how this pushback was made public.

By the time of the invasion, any debates about the army in the Russian media and the Duma had long been suppressed, and after February 24, the Kremlin also introduced more sweeping censorship of any discussion about the war. But the Internet was still available, and Telegram quickly became the go-to alternative for military commentators. Owned by a Russian company and used primarily as a messaging app, Telegram has long had an unusually significant role in Russia, particularly through its network of channels on which prominent users can broadcast to large numbers of subscribers. It was also one of the very few social media platforms that was not immediately blocked by the government when the war started.

As a result, when it became clear that the invasion wasn't going according to plan, interest in Telegram skyrocketed. Ultranationalists and other hard-liners, always distrustful of the media, flocked to military commentators on the platform to learn what was really happening. On these channels, they could find a relatively honest and open debate about the problems the army was facing in Ukraine, as well as grassroots efforts to help Russian

troops. These channels brought together a large constituency that supported the war but was dismayed at how it was being fought. One of the most prominent channels was run by Igor Girkin (known as Igor Strelkov), a hardcore nationalist and Federal Security Service veteran who became defense minister of the self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic in 2014. (In November, Strelkov was convicted in absentia by a Dutch court for his role in shooting down Malaysia Airlines flight MH17.) Strelkov had long been pushing for an all-out war with Ukraine, and when the invasion faltered, he launched a vicious attack on Russia's generals. And although he has long been considered an outcast by the military establishment, Strelkov was able to maintain close knowledge about the situation on the ground because military rank and file respected and trusted him. Drawing on his own sources, he posted regular battlefield updates and openly reported Russian military failures, mistakes and retreats that sharply contradicted the Kremlin's heroic narrative about the "special operation."

Even more radical was Strelkov's associate Vladimir Kvachkov, a 74-year-old former colonel in the Soviet special forces with a long record of right-wing violence, who joined Strelkov in blasting Russia's military command. Soon, Strelkov and Kvachkov could be found on YouTube and Telegram presenting their analysis of Russia's disastrous war and challenging the official accounts of the Russian retreat. Still, for much of the spring and summer, Moscow didn't take them seriously. That changed in September, after Ukraine launched its dramatic counteroffensive in the Kharkiv region. Strelkov's Telegram channel grew to more than 600,000 subscribers, and he was now joined by a growing chorus of other critical voices.

First were the so-called voenkors, Russian journalists who were embedded with the army. Traditionally, voenkors have been fiercely loyal to the Kremlin, but in this war they developed an even stronger rapport with soldiers on the frontlines. Most of them have their own Telegram channels, where their unalloyed reports have gained huge followings. A channel maintained by Alexander Kots, a correspondent for the tabloid *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, now boasts 680,000 subscribers; another, called *WarGonzo*, run by veteran war journalist Semen Pegov, now has 1.3 million subscribers. For many Russians, channels like these are the true voice of the army, which has made their discussion of Russia's military setbacks all the more potent.

By fall, the voenkors were joined by an even more influential strain of criticism from people close to the Kremlin itself. Take Kadyrov, who has long enjoyed close ties to Putin. In a series of posts on his Telegram channel, the Chechen leader issued blistering assessments of the war, although he refrained from criticizing Putin personally. It was in this vein that he issued his October 1 tirade. When Lyman, a crucial railway hub in the Donetsk region, was taken back by the Ukrainians, Kadyrov singled out the Russian commander who had been responsible for the town's defense. "I cannot stay silent about what happened in Lyman," he wrote, placing the blame squarely on the military's top leadership.

Coming from a longtime Putin ally, these comments posed an unusual challenge to the official military narrative. And other insiders supported him. Most notable was Prigozhin, Putin's chief, a former Soviet-era convict, and for the past decade the leader of

the notorious Wagner Group, whose fighters have also played an important role in Ukraine. By this point, Kadyrov's comments were being amplified by voenkors and other ultranationalists, who added stark new reports from the frontline. Meanwhile, as Putin's mobilization got underway, Russian social media was filled with videos from around the country showing angry and crying people who had no interest in joining a deadly war. Caught between the Telegram critics, who wanted Russia to fight harder, and many ordinary Russians, who were increasingly concerned about a war that was a debacle, the Kremlin looked as if it might be losing its grip on Russian opinion.

On October 8, Putin finally acted. In a major shift, he reorganized Russia's chain of command, appointing Sergei Surovikin as the overall head of Russian forces in Ukraine. On paper, Surovikin is an unlikely choice: his thuggish record includes seven months in prison for his involvement in the failed coup d'état of 1991 and criminal charges for weapons smuggling, as well as accusations that he beat up a colleague. But Surovikin has one thing in his favor: the Telegram warriors approve of him. As soon as the announcement was made, veterans and military correspondents praised his appointment; Kadyrov and Prigozhin also supported him. Only Strelkov kept his critical stance, reminding his subscribers of Surovikin's checkered career. Such was the change of tone on Telegram that when Ukrainian forces humiliated Russia by bombing the bridge to Crimea, a vital Russian supply route, the voenkors were largely silent and Strelkov accused them of turning into Kremlin propagandists.

Even as the voenkors pulled back on their criticism, however, the Kremlin took further steps to end dissent. On October 14, it became known on Telegram that Russia's General Staff had asked prosecutors to investigate nine military critics, including Pegov and Strelkov, for violating a new law against spreading "knowingly false information" about the army. (This is a law that the Kremlin has used frequently to silence critics since the start of the invasion. In the spring of 2022, one of the authors of this article was put on Russia's wanted list on similar charges.) The investigation was meant to send a warning to others on Telegram, and it did. Correspondents immediately gave up criticism of the military leadership, reporting instead on generally positive news about the mobilization and "improvements" in logistics, training, and other matters.

The Kremlin has also begun to reward voices that toe the party line. On November 17, having given up his criticism of the war, Kots was appointed to Russia's Human Rights Council, a body that enjoys some access to the Kremlin and which Putin has recently filled with loyalists. A week later, the Kremlin awarded Pegov, who has also curbed his harsh reporting, the Order of Courage. And the regime has even managed to tamp down on Strelkov. After reports surfaced of the investigation against Strelkov and others, Strelkov seems to have reached some kind of accommodation with the Kremlin. The Kremlin allowed him to leave Moscow to help form his own "volunteer battalion" and join the fighting. In return, he stopped commenting on the war. By November, his Telegram channel had gone silent.

The Kremlin has not stopped bringing its military critics into line. In an effort to give the military more clout in Russian society, it has also taken significant steps to militarize the economy. On October 19, Putin established the Coordination Council for Material Support of the Russian Federation Armed Forces, a body charged with organizing federal and local authorities' activities, as

well as the "healthcare system, industry, construction, transport, and other sectors," in support of the war in Ukraine. Behind its bureaucratic-sounding name lies a clear purpose: all federal ministries and regional governments must now prioritize providing the army with supplies, military equipment, and other resources. Denis Manturov, Russia's industry and trade minister, has been put in charge of arms and military equipment deliveries for the council according to the "specific orders of the Ministry of Defense."

In fact, Russian officials have talked about militarizing the economy since the early stages of the war. In June, First Deputy Prime Minister Andrey Belousov, a hard-liner who was trained as an economist, explained what this "mobilization economy" would look like: Russian society would be focused on "specific targets" and the private sector would be required to meet those goals. Most important, he said, an elite body would be assembled to restructure the economy for this purpose. According to Belousov, in a militarization economy, the most critical Russian industries would be assisted and supplied by many others.

But it was not until July that the Kremlin began to put these ideas into practice. Under a law adopted by the Russian parliament, the government acquired expansive controls over the wartime economy, including the power to implement "special economic measures" to appropriate the production of private companies as needed. As a result, private companies can now be required to fulfill military contracts on demand, and their employees must work overtime to meet production targets. The effect of these measures seems likely only to grow in the coming months. In late November, Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu said that the government plans to increase defense purchasing by 50 percent in 2023.

Unsurprisingly, the business sector has not entirely welcomed the law. In theory, it could help businesses by giving them lucrative military contracts. In reality, however, it has added to the Defense Ministry's growing influence over civilian life. Already, the call-up of hundreds of thousands of men and the new laws giving the military control of domestic industries have had far-reaching effects. The generals now have a decisive say in the economy. They can also mobilize any number of employees in any corporation, which makes them more powerful than ever. Along with the silencing of military critics and regaining control of the narrative, these steps have given the Kremlin an effective way to close ranks.

And here may be a stark reality that the West needs to acknowledge. Just because Putin is losing on the battlefield in Ukraine doesn't mean that he is losing control at home. If anything, the most recent stages of the conflict have allowed the Kremlin to extend its reach over public opinion and the civilian economy. The chances that domestic pressure could force Putin to seek to end the war are slimmer than the military situation suggests.

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"Such a weapon [the hydrogen bomb] goes far beyond any military objective and enters the range of natural catastrophes. By its very nature, it cannot be confined to a military objective but becomes a weapon which, in practical effect, is almost one of genocide. ... It is necessarily an evil thing considered in any light."

~ Enrico Fermi and I. I. Rabi, *Manhattan Project physicists*

# China's H-20 Stealth Bomber: A Threat to the U.S. Military?

Following the debut of the American B-21 strike stealth bomber in December, the U.S. military demonstrated to the world that all three legs of its nuclear triad are undergoing strategic modernization efforts. However, China has emulated the push to expand its nuclear weapons capabilities as it seeks to supersede the U.S. in military might.

The People's Liberation Army Air Force's (PLAAF's) "B-2 copycat" — the H-20 bomber — is expected to enter service within this decade. Once commissioned, China's first-ever nuclear-capable strategic bomber could reach targets within the United States.

This capability, in addition to the H-20's weapons capacity and other unknowns, is deeply troubling. While the U.S. B-2 Spirit remains the only operational stealth bomber in the world today, a PLA near-copy may soon enter the picture.

Although China's stealth bomber program was not officially recognized until 2016, the PLAAF likely began working on initial bomber designs in the early 2000s. A top Northrop Grumman design engineer was charged with violating the Arms Export Control Act in 2005 after being caught selling B-2 bomber information to Beijing. By 2013, Chinese aviation expert Andreas Ruppercht released renderings of models that emulated the development of a pending Chinese stealth bomber.

One year later, a state-run Chinese media outlet reported that the PLAAF was working on an "intercontinental strategic bomber capable of penetrating an enemy's air defenses." The Aviation Industry Corporation of China released a video in 2018 depicting a bomber underneath a drop cloth that is believed to be the H-20.

While so much remains unknown regarding the airframe, the Peoples Republic of China (PRC) is undoubtedly working to achieve full air superiority in an effort to surpass its adversaries. Analysts believe that the H-20 bomber could have a range of 5,300 miles, raising concerns that the airframe could reach beyond the first Island Chain off the coast of China and into Japan, the Philippines, or even the U.S. territory of Guam.

A 2018 Pentagon assessment also detailed how the development of a refuelable bomber would pose even more risks for the United States. The PLAAF could "expand long-range offensive bomber capability beyond the second island chain" if a refuelable bomber were developed.

Design-wise, the H-20 appears to be an American B-2 Spirit copycat. Based on imagery and videos released in China, analysts believe the H-20 will sport a flying wing design, which provides vital stealth advantages. Since the airframe has no fuselage or tail, the H-20 could fly with low drag and high structural efficiency. Additionally, this type of design generates more lift compared to other fixed-wing airframes and is effective at limiting detection from high and low-frequency radar bands.

Regardless of the extent of abilities China's upcoming H-20 stealth bomber will possess, one thing remains abundantly clear. Beijing is working tirelessly to develop a military arsenal that will at least match the prowess of the United States. Consequentially, the PRC's efforts to achieve a "world-class military" by 2049 are well underway.

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**WORLD CITIZENS FOR PEACE**  
**POST OFFICE BOX 594**  
**RICHLAND WA 99352**