

We must get rid of all nuclear weapons before it's too late - opinion

The record of close calls over the decades shows just how near the world was to a nuclear catastrophe. The time to eliminate the man-made threat of nuclear weapons is now.

By KAIRAT UMAROV, *The first deputy minister of foreign affairs of Kazakhstan*

The recently released film *Oppenheimer* has drawn public attention to the real and present danger of nuclear weapons. This is long overdue, as the nuclear threat has often been overshadowed in public discourse, despite these weapons presenting as much of an existential risk as the climate crisis.

The Doomsday Clock, a symbolic measure of humanity's vulnerability to global catastrophes, was recently re-adjusted from 100 seconds to midnight, to 90 seconds to midnight. The Doomsday Clock is set annually by the Bulletin's Science and Security Board in consultation with its Board of Sponsors, (which includes 10 Nobel Prize laureates). There are multiple reasons for this.

Over the past 25 years, the global nuclear security architecture has come under strain and its resilience has been severely tested, reminding us that the nuclear fears depicted in *Oppenheimer* remain pertinent. It is imperative for the world to take the threat of nuclear weapons seriously – and map a pathway towards nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament.

Kazakhstan knows all too well the disastrous consequences of nuclear weapons. For almost half a century, our land endured atmospheric, ground, and underground tests. This impacted the health of roughly 1.5 million Kazakhs living near the Semipalatinsk test site, where the Soviet Union conducted nuclear tests between 1949-1989. The aftereffects of radiation persist even three decades after Kazakhstan decommissioned the Semipalatinsk test site in 1991.

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres was right when he said last year that it is vital to eliminate the threat of nuclear weapons before they eliminate our world. What can be done to achieve this?

How can we eliminate the threat of nuclear weapons?

First, the international community must resist any attempt to normalize nuclear threats, challenging those who assert that even a limited nuclear strike can be justified.

Secondly, negotiations on arms control and further reductions of nuclear arsenals must be resumed. In particular, it is critical for the US and Russia to negotiate a new arms control framework to supersede New START, the last remaining major nuclear arms control agreement between the United States and Russia that is still in force. Unless updated, New START will expire in 2026.

The international community must underscore the need to restore global nuclear diplomacy and reaffirm worldwide commitment to nuclear disarmament – the ultimate goal of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation Weapons and the more recent Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW).

Next month's G20 summit in New Delhi, which will bring together global powers' senior representatives, presents an ideal opportunity for political leaders to reaffirm their commitment to nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament.

Since the 10th Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) Review Conference concluded a year ago without agreement, ahead of the next Review Conference in 2026, states parties to the NPT should leverage preparatory meetings to redress this and to advance an agenda to reduce nuclear risks and strengthen the treaty that has long been the cornerstone of the global nonproliferation regime.

Kazakhstan has been entrusted by NPT signatories to chair the second session of the NPT Preparatory Committee. It is my country's hope that a balanced approach can reinforce the Treaty's review process. To support the global push for nuclear disarmament, Kazakhstan was among the first states to join the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) in 2019.

Given our painful history with nuclear testing, we have partnered with Kiribati – a Pacific nation that has similarly experienced the devastating fallout from nuclear tests – to co-chair a working group focused on victim assistance, environmental remediation, and international cooperation under the framework of the TPNW. A key goal is to establish an International Trust Fund. We are optimistic that this initiative can be realized during Kazakhstan's presidency at the third meeting of States Parties to the TPNW in 2025.

Even amid global geopolitical unease, progress in nuclear disarmament is possible. The number of nuclear weapons has decreased from around 65,000 in the mid-1980s to about 12,500 today. Kazakhstan can act as a blueprint for nuclear powers as a country that voluntarily relinquished its nuclear weapons after independence from the Soviet Union, and closed the world's largest nuclear test site.

Together with its neighbors in the region, Kazakhstan established a Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone in Central Asia. This process can be applied to other regions of the world too.

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