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Nuclear Jungle closes in: Trump's intention to end the Intermediate Nuclear Forces Treaty is alarming, but it's not the only sign of a global arms race

Erika Simpson

University of Western Ontario (Western University), simpson@uwo.ca

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1. Trump's intention to end the Intermediate Nuclear Forces Treaty is alarming, but it's not the only sign of a global arms race

ERIKA SIMPSON, SPECIAL TO POSTMEDIA NEWS

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U.S. President Donald Trump announced last month he will withdraw the United States from the Intermediate Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty — prompting Mikhail Gorbachev, former president of the U.S.S.R., to write that we are entering a new Cold War.

It's not a one-off for Trump, who has also ripped up the nuclear control agreement with Iran.

The U.S. and Russia share 15,500 nuclear weapons between them, 95 per cent of the world's arsenal. The U.S. intends to spend US\$430 billion on modernizing its nuclear weapons over the next few years. Russia is doing the same, although it is not open about its spending.

Other countries have arsenals of nuclear weapons — such as India and Pakistan with approximately 100 each, Israel with a secret stockpile estimated at 100 and North Korea, which may have between 13 and 60 nuclear weapons, according to U.S. estimates.

We are entering a nuclear jungle with fewer institutional agreements.

The INF Treaty was signed in 1987 between Gorbachev and U.S. President Ronald Reagan to cover Russian SS-20 nuclear missiles and the United States' Pershing missiles, to be deployed in Europe, along with ground-launched cruise missiles.

Now the Americans say the Russians are violating the treaty by developing a newer cruise missile that possibly could be deployed under water. Republicans also note the agreement, as a bilateral treaty, does not cover China's development of intermediate-range nuclear missiles.

The world still has the 1968 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), signed by 160 countries. The United Nations holds a review conference of the NPT every five years, but diplomats walked away with no agreement in 2015. Now worries are that in 2020, there will be yet more disagreement and possibly the collapse of the nuclear arms control regime.

The UN suggested a high-level summit on nuclear disarmament for April 2018, but it was cancelled at the last minute.

The UN promised in 2010 to hold a conference on weapons of mass destruction in the Middle East, but it never happened.

Taken together with the failed Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty and the weakened Chemical Weapons Convention and Biological and Toxic Weapons Convention, new arms races could begin.

At any rate, everybody agrees we are entering a very dangerous situation because of global nuclear proliferation.

There is a risk that countries will look at the success of North Korea in retaining its nuclear arsenal and decide to acquire or build their own. Japan and South Korea could follow suit. Saudi Arabia and Syria may develop their own in response to Israel's arsenal. We also have to worry about the possibility of terrorists obtaining nuclear materials, like plutonium or uranium, on the world market and making dirty bombs that could be blown up in large cities, causing thousands of people in other cities to flee to the countryside for fear their city would be next.

There is not much that can be done until the U.S. and Russia agree to come to the bargaining table.

In the interim, the states without nuclear weapons have held three global conferences that resulted in the 2017 Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons. It's the first new disarmament treaty in 20 years.

But all the nuclear-armed states and all NATO allies have refused to sign it. The NATO allies want to abide by NATO's Strategic Concept, which promises that "as long as nuclear weapons exist, NATO will remain a nuclear alliance."

The risk is that as more countries acquire nuclear weapons, the world becomes more dangerous than during the Cold War. Back then, it was a bilateral world order; now it is a

multipolar world, with many more nuclear powers that don't have the safeguards, command and control, and hot lines we had during previous crises, like the Cuban missile crisis.

A global movement pressing for disarmament, as there was during the 1980s, is unlikely, although people continue to participate in vigils, marches and letter writing campaigns organized by the Nobel Peace Prize-winning International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons. It may take a limited nuclear exchange to see another global movement. And the risk of accidental or limited nuclear war is getting higher. Even if 100 nuclear weapons were exchanged, a tiny percentage of the world's arsenal, the planet would enter a nuclear winter with plummeting temperatures, the collapse of the global economy, and a worldwide food crisis due to failed agricultural crops.

The U.S. and Russia are modernizing their nuclear weapons, using the argument that nuclear warheads need to be safer, more credible and usable. The new U.S. Nuclear Posture Review increases that country's reliance on usable nuclear weapons.

The prospect of renewed arms control talks is very unlikely — although with Trump's penchant for putting his stamp on deals, perhaps he would try. But he has made no mention of the possibility when he announced his intention to pull out of the INF Treaty.

The jungle is closing in on us.

Erika Simpson is an associate professor of international relations at Western University and the author of NATO and the Bomb.