GREAT DECISIONS
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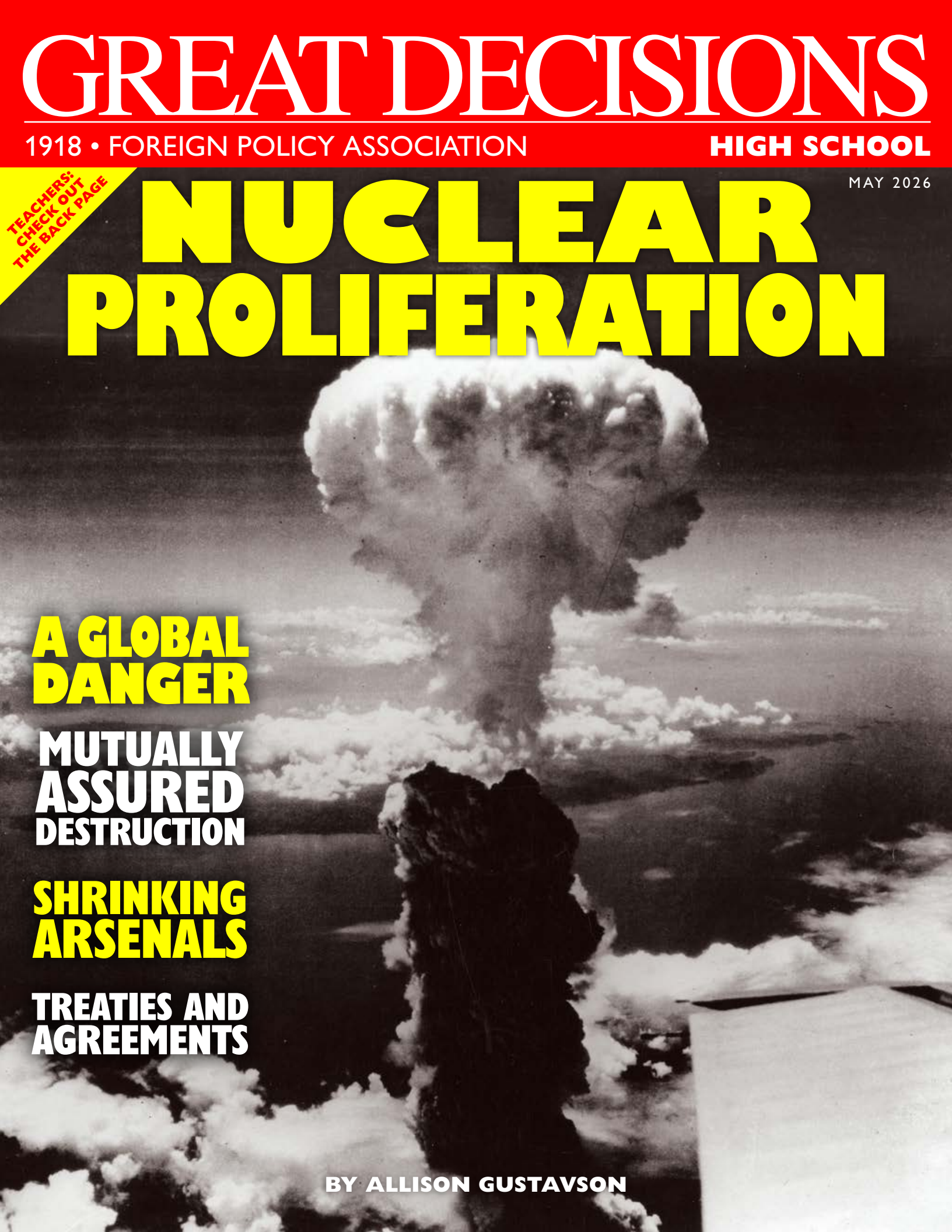
HIGH SCHOOL

TEACHERS: CHECK OUT THE BACK PAGE

MAY 2026

NUCLEAR PROLIFERATION



A GLOBAL DANGER

MUTUALLY ASSURED DESTRUCTION

SHRINKING ARSENALS

TREATIES AND AGREEMENTS

BY ALLISON GUSTAVSON

COULD IT HAPPEN AGAIN?

Lee Frey/Authenticated News International/Getty Images

Demonstrators march toward New York City's Central Park in June 1982 as part of the Freeze campaign to demand a halt on the creation of nuclear weapons.

On a short list of the most overwhelming and potentially destructive global issues, the **proliferation** of nuclear weapons is definitely near the top. When confronted with the topic and asked why they aren't more concerned about the prospect of a nuclear catastrophe, most people typically respond with a shrug and a stammer, thinking they can't do much about the situation.

Actually, we can do a lot. In 1979, one young researcher launched an international movement that ultimately led to an 80% reduction in nuclear weapons. The Freeze campaign, as the movement was known, started at the local level as people became increasingly alarmed about the threat of nuclear weapons and disappointed in their leaders' disproportionately weak responses to it.

In communities across the country, people distributed information, circulated petitions, and brought resolutions to their organizations and public officials. By 1982, the largest protest ever—nearly one million participants in New York City's Central Park—demonstrated to the world that nuclear danger could not be ignored.

Through bottom-up pressure from ordinary people, the Freeze eventually forced the Reagan Administration to reverse its position on nuclear buildup. Reagan reached out to Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, declaring that "a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought." Together they set in motion a succession of arms control agreements

National Archives

Then-US president Ronald Reagan makes an agreement with Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev in 1988.

that lasted through the Obama Administration.

HOW DID WE GET HERE?

In August 1939, with the German invasion of Poland—the beginning of World War II—less than a month away, renowned physicist Leo Szilard enlisted Albert Einstein to write a letter to President Franklin Roosevelt. Citing recent scientific breakthroughs that could be used to build "extremely powerful bombs" they feared were being actively pursued by the Nazis, the two urged the US government to beat Germany to creating this new type of weapon.

Research began in 1940 but accelerated significantly after the attack on Pearl Harbor the following year, when US Army General Leslie Groves was put in charge of a top-secret program known as the **Manhattan Project**—famously depicted in the 2023 blockbuster *Oppenheimer*—which brought together hundreds of thousands of people in undisclosed locations to build a nuclear bomb.

A few years later, in a one-shot desert rehearsal, the first atomic bomb was detonated. The test, codenamed Trinity, ushered in the **Atomic Age**—and with it, a trail of radioactive fallout that to this day has left downwind communities in New Mexico seeking federal compensation for excess cancers linked to the blast.

Just one day after Trinity, Szilard wrote a petition to President Harry S. Truman, co-signed by seventy other Manhattan Project scientists, urging the US not to use the bomb. Szilard called on Truman to first give its enemy, Japan, a chance to agree to terms of surrender. Otherwise, Szilard wrote, the US "may have to bear the responsibility of opening the door to an era of devastation on an unimaginable scale."

Nobody knows what happened to that letter, but Truman did not take its advice. In August of 1945, the world changed forever. Over the course of three days, the US dropped a uranium bomb on the Japanese city of Hiroshima and a plutonium bomb on Nagasaki, killing over 200,000 people—including nearly 40,000 children. Those who survived faced radiation poisoning, skyrocketing cancer rates across generations, and birth defects that persist to this day. During the explosion, temperatures rose to more than 7,000 degrees Fahrenheit as radioactive rain poured from the sky.

For his part, Szilard spent the rest of his life fighting against

THE DEBATE

SHOULD THE US PRESIDENT HAVE SOLE AUTHORITY TO LAUNCH A NUCLEAR FIRST STRIKE?

YES

- ✓ In the event of a nuclear attack, there's not enough time for group debate.
- ✓ Deterrence requires adversaries to believe in immediate retaliation.
- ✓ The US doesn't want to project indecision.

NO

- ✗ The Founders explicitly gave war powers to Congress.
- ✗ One individual should not decide the fate of humanity.
- ✗ Shared authority doesn't slow retaliation—it only slows striking first.

President Harry S. Truman

National Archives

nuclear weapons, founding the Council for a Livable World to bring "'the sweet voice of reason' about nuclear weapons to Congress, the White House, and the American public."

IF WE DON'T, THEY WILL

The world has been grappling with the consequences ever since the US unleashed the first nuclear attack.

The Soviet Union tested its own bomb in 1949, igniting an arms race that nearly ended in catastrophe during the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis, when the Soviets placed nuclear warheads within striking distance of the US, on the island of Cuba. The resulting standoff took thirteen days of negotiation and diplomacy to resolve.

President Kennedy's televised address to a terrified country put the nuclear **doctrine** of **deterrence** on full display: "It shall be the policy of this nation to regard any nuclear missile launched from Cuba against any nation in the Western Hemisphere as an attack by the Soviet Union on the United States, requiring a full retaliatory response upon the Soviet Union."

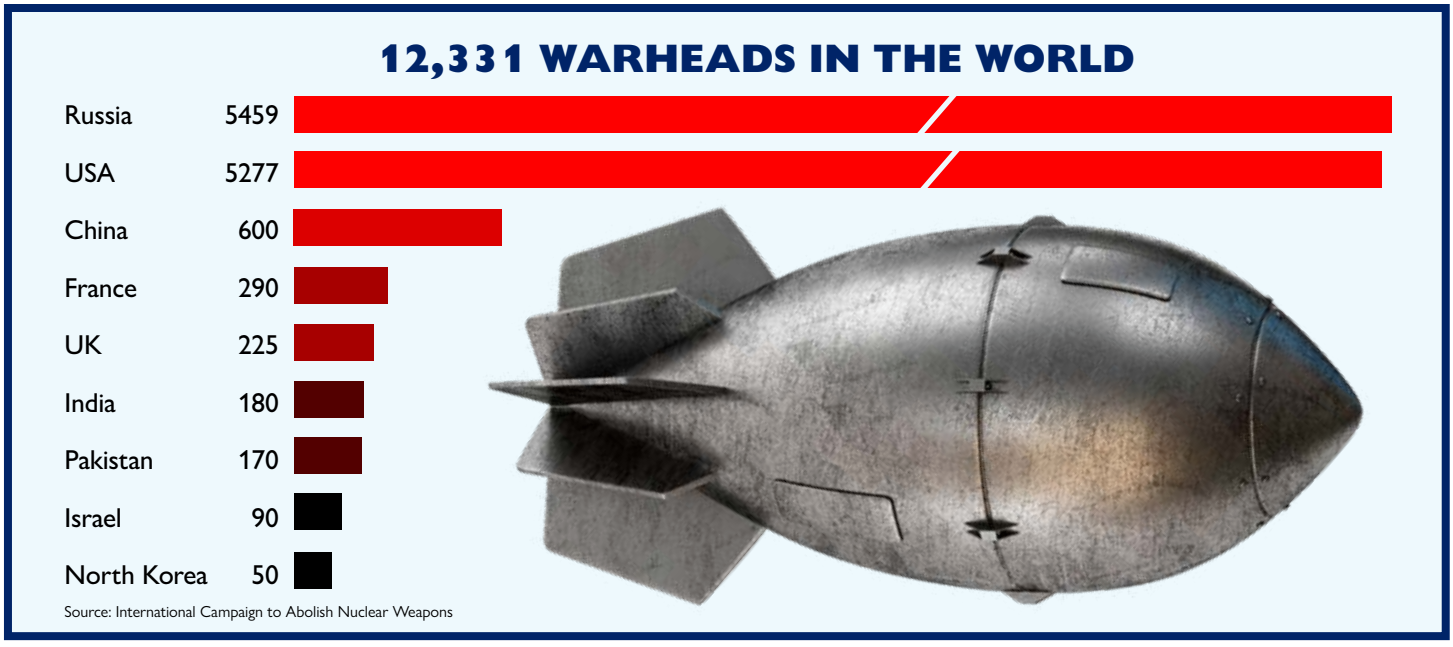
In other words: by striking us, you guarantee your own demise. Scientists now estimate that even a limited exchange of nuclear weapons could trigger a "nuclear winter"—blocking sunlight, collapsing global food systems, and threatening billions with famine far beyond the blast zones. This is a concept known as **Mutually Assured Destruction** (MAD), a threat that has to be understood as credible and total to be effective—and in that one sentence, Kennedy removed all ambiguity. It worked, and the Soviets removed the nuclear weapons from Cuba.

After that close call, the landmark **Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty** (NPT) was "opened for signature" in 1968, took effect in 1970, and was extended indefinitely in 1995. The NPT is an agreement by which countries without nuclear weapons agree never to acquire them, and the countries that already have nuclear weapons agree to take "good-faith measures" to disarm.

The NPT has been, by most measures, a resounding success: current nuclear arsenals are big, but only about one-fifth the size of what they were a half-century ago. But the international cooperation that made the NPT work is now unraveling, and despite the treaty, the number of countries in the "nuclear club" did grow. Nine countries currently possess nuclear weapons, every one of them driven by the same calculation: *if we don't, they will*.

WHERE WE ARE TODAY

The combined force of the NPT framework and the grassroots pressure of the Freeze movement produced dramatic results. Still, "reduced" is not "eliminated," and the nine nuclear countries now have a roughly 12,331 vastly more powerful nuclear



Nikolayn/Dreamstime.com

Nine countries are known to have nuclear weapons today. The US and Russia have the most nuclear weapons, by far.

warheads between them—a number that's expected to grow over the coming decade.

At the same time, in February 2026, the last nuclear agreement between the US and Russia expired. Its expiration leaves room for much speculation and little certainty. While China rapidly expands its arsenal and refuses to join talks, the three big nuclear powers (the US, Russia, and China) are left guessing about the others' intentions.

This matters because a nuclear incident unfolds incredibly fast—a launched missile can land in as little as 28 minutes. By the time it's detected by radar, 7 to 8 minutes are already gone, leaving roughly 17 minutes to decide upon a response. Fire back? Gamble that it's a false alarm? With treaties, shared understandings help reduce the chance of misjudgment. Without them, those ambiguous signals force immediate responses in an incredibly high-stakes, low-information environment.

Case in point: The Iran crisis. In 2015, a landmark deal limited Iran's nuclear program in exchange for sanctions relief, and international inspectors confirmed Iran was in compliance. The Trump administration withdrew from the deal in 2018, and Iran responded by expanding its program. In 2025 and again in 2026, the US and Israel struck key Iranian facilities and leadership. The situation is ongoing as this article goes to press.

THE DEBATE

IS THERE ANY SITUATION WHERE IT WOULD BE OK FOR THE US TO LAUNCH A NUCLEAR ATTACK?

YES

- ✓ It might be necessary if another country attacked first.
- ✓ It might be needed if a country posed some other threat.
- ✓ It could be used to end a war quickly.

NO

- ✗ There's no way to launch a nuclear attack without harming civilians.
- ✗ It would result in other countries attacking the US with nuclear weapons.
- ✗ It goes against basic morals and values.

Fotoaccount/Dreamstime.com

Morteza Nikoubazl/NurPhoto/AP Images

In April 2026, first responders survey damage at a residential building near Tehran, Iran, that was destroyed by a US-Israeli attack. The conflict began in part because of Iran's attempts to acquire its own nuclear weapons.

Martial Trezzini/Keystone/AP Images

Activist Beatrice Fihn's leadership of the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons helped result in the organization being recognized with a Nobel Peace Prize in 2017.

THE DEBATE

SHOULD NATIONS AGREE TO KEEP ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE OUT OF NUCLEAR WEAPONS DECISION-MAKING?

YES

- ✓ The stakes are too high for error-prone AI.
- ✓ AI systems can be hacked or fed bad data.
- ✓ These situations are intensely human and fragile.

NO

- ✗ We need a way to process threats faster and more accurately.
- ✗ If adversaries use it, then we're at a disadvantage.
- ✗ AI can assist human decision-makers without replacing them.

Chakis Thuranikorn/Dreamstime.com

REDUCING RISK

Sometimes an issue is too important to leave to the people in charge. That was the lesson of the Freeze movement, and again in 2017, when 122 nations—tired of waiting for the nuclear powers to honor their promise to disarm—adopted the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW), making nuclear weapons illegal under international law for the first time.

Under the leadership of Beatrice Fihn, a Swedish lawyer, the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN) won a Nobel Prize for its groundbreaking efforts to achieve a treaty-based prohibition of nuclear weapons. To date, 74 states have **ratified** (are legally bound by) the Treaty, while an additional 25 have signaled an intention to do so. Notably absent are all nine nuclear-armed states.

Until elimination is achieved, then, the focus must be on reducing risk. We know how to do this. The first step is to stop proliferation by discouraging any more countries from developing their own nuclear weapons. It is also important to maintain communication, which will allow countries' leaders to better understand each other's thinking. Countries could also enter into agreements to inform each other exactly how many and what kinds of nuclear weapons they possess.

Countries also need to adopt clear, actionable policy positions, with citizens demanding that leaders stick to their words. Such positions include a "no first use" policy—committing to never launch

first while making it clear that any attack will be met with a devastating response. Shared authority can also reduce the risks of nuclear weapons being put to use by ensuring that no one person can make the decision to launch an attack without the approval of others.

Activists like Szilard and Fihn didn't wait for permission, proof, or guaranteed results to act on behalf of their deepest values—they knew the stakes, and they acted. Peace, then, isn't a state of being; it's something we do. And it ripples: when one person decides to act, others are likely to be inspired to join in.

WHAT *YOU* CAN DO

- **Ask** every congressional candidate their position on nuclear weapons and why the US won't commit to *never starting* a nuclear war. You can find your local elected officials here.
- **Join** "Youth 4 Disarmament," the UNODA's initiative to mobilize the largest generation of young people in history to "promote the meaningful, inclusive and effective participation of young people in discussions in the field of disarmament and non-proliferation."
- **Submit** a pitch for "Next Up in Arms Control"—no prior experience necessary!
- **Learn** about the Japanese perspective: participate in the annual "Cranes for Our Future" campaign (August 6-9), visit the Children's Peace Memorial, and watch *Barefoot Gen*, a devastating animated film created by a Hiroshima survivor.
- **Vote**, when you are old enough! With few exceptions, you can't vote until you're 18, but you can help register others to vote. In many states you can register yourself at 16 or 17, and you'll be ready to vote when you are old enough!

TEEN TRAILBLAZERS

Behrooz Kiany

Iranian teen Behrooz Kiany was among the 100 youth leaders from 62 countries who completed the Youth Leader Fund training in 2025. Fifty of the participants will visit Hiroshima and Nagasaki and meet with survivors. "I believe that someday in the future, we can tell our grandchildren that we were the ones who made nuclear disarmament the truth," says Kiany.

Courtesy of Behrooz Kiany

Shizuka Kuramitsu

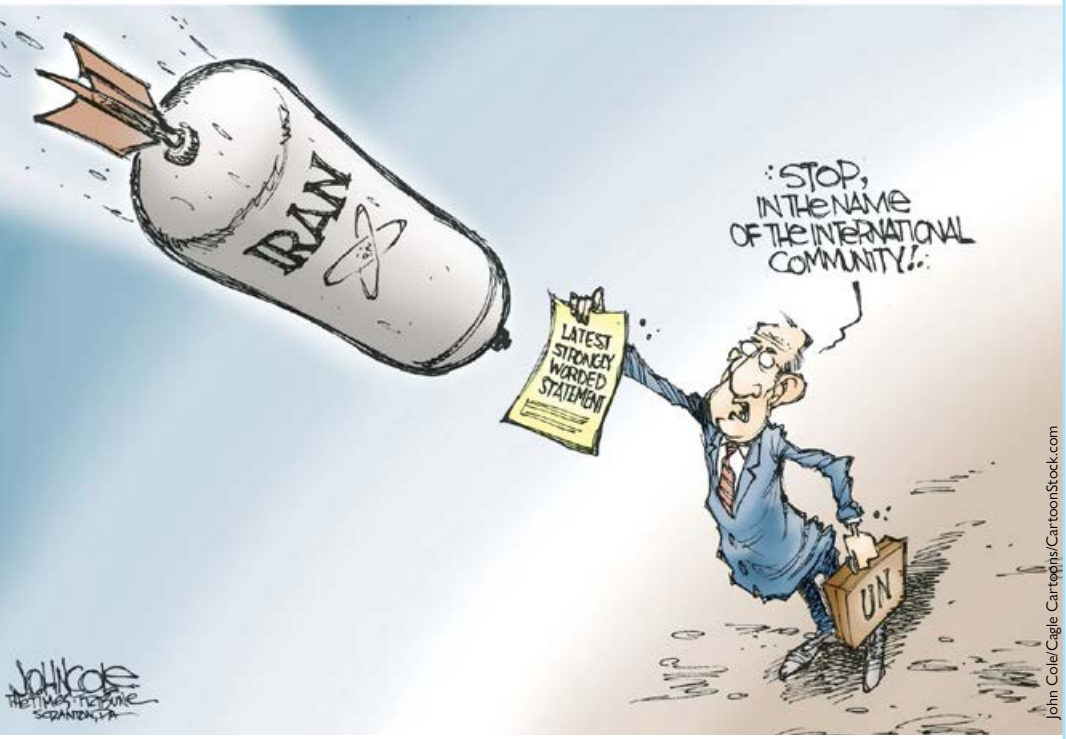
Youth leader Shizuka Kuramitsu was born in Hiroshima and grew up listening to survivors' stories. As a teen, she became a research assistant for the Arms Control Association. In this capacity, she addressed the United Nations about nuclear proliferation.

Rishi Gurudevan

Rishi Gurudevan, a high school junior, founded Students for Nuclear Disarmament and was profiled in the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists: "I, a 16-year-old kid who's scared out of his mind about nuclear war, call upon all the nuclear experts who want to save the world," he said. "Reject cynicism and embrace this opportunity. Only through intergenerational collaboration will humanity be spared."

2026 Greater Boston Physicians for Social Responsibility

THE BACK PAGE



FIGHTING BACK

1. What do you think this cartoon is trying to say? Why do or don't you disagree?
2. If the "strongly worded statement" in the cartoon can't stop Iran from having nuclear weapons, what can?
3. Should countries that have nuclear weapons of there own be able to stop others from doing the same? Why or why not?

NOW IT'S YOUR TURN TO MAKE GREAT DECISIONS

1. How would you change US nuclear policy if you were in charge?
2. What effect do you think the current conflict in Iran will have on people's opinions about nuclear proliferation?
3. **YOUR STORY:** Have you ever felt afraid of a nuclear war? What made you feel that way?

KEY WORDS & TERMS	
Atomic Age	Mutually Assured Destruction
deterrence	Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty
doctrine	proliferation
Manhattan Project	ratified

FOREIGN POLICY ASSOCIATION 1918

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