

## *The new contagion of nuclear escalation*

The nuclear arms control consensus is devolving into competitive flexes—a return to the radioactive theater of the 1950s



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Russian Defense Ministry footage said to show a Burevestnik nuclear-powered cruise missile being built. Image: Youtube Screengrab

Russia's latest claim of having [tested a nuclear-powered cruise missile](#), which one Western analyst dubbed the “flying Chernobyl”, marks another chilling turn in the race toward unconstrained lethality among the great powers.

The news, first reported by [The Guardian on October 27, 2025](#), described Moscow's announcement that its Burevestnik missile had flown 14,000 kilometers and stayed aloft for 15 hours.

Whether or not every technical detail is verifiable, the message is unmistakable: Russia is signalling that its ability to threaten global stability has entered a new, more dangerous phase.

Not to be outdone, US President Donald Trump declared that America [would resume nuclear tests](#), which have been banned since 1992. US Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth [said at the ASEAN Defense Minister Plus Summit](#) in Kuala Lumpur that friends and allies of the US would be given prior notification before future tests.

## **A return to the unthinkable**

To be sure, the idea of a nuclear-powered missile is not new. Both the US and the previous Soviet Union [flirted with developing the weapon during the previous Cold War](#), only to abandon it due to the immense radiological risks and engineering difficulties.

To revive that concept in 2025 is to cross a psychological threshold long considered taboo. Russian engineers claim that the [Burevestnik can remain in flight indefinitely](#), powered by a small nuclear reactor that heats its engine and provides almost limitless range.

Western experts warn that such a system would [leave a trail of radioactive exhaust](#) in its wake—hence the ominous nuclear disaster-linked nickname.

In other words, Russia has not only reminded the world of its nuclear arsenal; it has reintroduced the nightmare of a weapon that could poison the very atmosphere through which it flies.

This is no mere technical boast. It is strategic theater—an attempt to restore deterrence through fear.

## **Strategic coercion dressed as innovation**

By publicizing the Burevestnik, the Kremlin is testing how far it can stretch the limits of escalation. The announcement came just as [Ukraine stepped up drone attacks](#) on Russian territory, including Moscow's airports.

It also followed new rounds of Western sanctions targeting [Russian oil revenue](#). A show of nuclear-powered strength serves multiple purposes: to warn Western capitals against deepening their involvement in Ukraine; to impress domestic audiences weary of a protracted war; and to remind the Global South that Russia still commands technological daring in defiance of Western-led isolation.

Yet this self-assertion betrays a certain desperation. [Russia's conventional military machine has been ground down in Ukraine](#). Sanctions constrain its industrial base and its economy is increasingly reliant on discounted oil exports to China and India.

When conventional power falters, symbolic power becomes paramount. The flying Chernobyl is thus less a weapon of war than a weapon of messaging.

## **A world of shattered boundaries**

What makes this tit-for-tat episode so potentially destabilizing is not the Russian weapon itself but what it represents: the erosion of boundaries that once kept nuclear competition in check.

Since the 1990s, most arms control regimes have decayed—the [INF Treaty](#), [the Open Skies Treaty](#) and the confidence-building measures that bound Russia to Europe under the OSCE.

The testing of a nuclear-powered missile drives another nail into that coffin. It tells the world that the line between conventional and nuclear escalation has blurred beyond recognition.

If Russia's claim proves true, it sets a precedent other powers may emulate. [China is already investing in hypersonic glide vehicles](#); the US is exploring new nuclear- and sea-launched systems.

Once Moscow demonstrates that taboo weapons can be flaunted without meaningful consequence, restraint elsewhere may evaporate. Arms control was never about moral purity—it was about predictability. Today, even that thin layer of predictability is gone.

## **Lethality as performance**

The surge of Russia's lethality is therefore as performative as it is practical. It speaks to a leadership obsessed with demonstrating that Moscow cannot be ignored or contained.

In a world of fragmented alliances and [declining Western unity](#), such performance carries weight. Every announcement of a “miracle weapon” buys Moscow time, leverage and headlines. It shifts the narrative from retreat to resurgence, even when battlefield reality tells a different story.

For small and medium states—especially those in Southeast Asia—this theater has sobering implications. The precedent that great powers can toy with radioactive propulsion or hypersonic delivery systems without consequence deepens insecurity across regions already struggling to maintain strategic autonomy.

If Europe is again living with the fear of fallout, Asia must brace for its own version of brinkmanship.

## **Nuclear flexes, far and wide**

Russia's “flying Chernobyl” test is part of a broader pattern: the contagion of escalation. When one great power flexes, others feel compelled to respond. The US [will be pressured to invest more in missile defence](#) and retaliate with new nuclear tests.

China will likely accelerate its [nuclear modernization program](#). India, Pakistan and even North Korea will draw their own conclusions about the utility of nuclear signaling. Each step that raises the bar of destructive potential lowers the threshold for catastrophe.

The human and environmental stakes are staggering. A nuclear-powered missile that crashes [would scatter radioactive debris across whatever land or sea](#) it fell upon.

During the Soviet Union's earlier tests, several [prototypes failed catastrophically, leaving contamination zones that persist to this day](#). To repeat such folly in 2025, under the shadow of a war already scarring Europe, is to treat the planet as collateral.

Trump's nuclear rhetoric adds another accelerant. The contagion is no longer theoretical; it is trans-Atlantic. What was once an arms-control consensus now risks devolving into competitive testing—a return to the radioactive theater of the 1950s.

## Economic decay meets military bravado

The Guardian's report also noted the tightening noose of Western sanctions, particularly on Russia's energy sector. In that sense, the missile test may be a diversion from economic distress.

As revenues shrink and war costs mount, the Kremlin seeks victory in symbolism. Each demonstration of ["limitless range" or "invincible weaponry"](#) distracts from the domestic austerity and loss of life. The Soviet Union once followed this path—prioritizing prestige projects over prosperity. History remembers how that ended.

The surge of Russia's lethality is not only about missiles; it is about mindset. It reflects the belief that coercion still works, that fear still wins. But the long arc of international relations shows that societies built on fear exhaust themselves.

Power sustained by paranoia eventually implodes. The actual test of statesmanship, therefore, is not how loudly one can threaten, but how wisely one can restrain.

The world cannot afford a return to the radioactive experiments of the past. Every kilometer that the Burevestnik supposedly travelled is a mile stolen from humanity's sense of safety. Every threat of new nuclear testing echoes an era the world should have by now left behind.

If the 21<sup>st</sup> century is to avoid repeating the nightmares of the 20th, the lesson is clear: technological power without moral restraint leads not to deterrence but to decay and eventually unthinkable disaster.

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