# Richard Tanter, ‘Nuclear weapons: the Trump reality’, [*Arena Magazine*](http://arena.org.au/category/arena-magazine/), 145, November-December 2016, pp. 19-21

Strategically and morally there are only two acceptable positions on nuclear weapons: a commitment to deep arms control and disarmament, or work for the prohibition of nuclear weapons as a prerequisite for their abolition. Trump will oppose both, and in doing so he will increase global support for each.

Absent knowledge of key appointments, Trump’s personal character and campaign statements are salient and deeply troubling. We can be reasonably sure Trump will have severe conflict with Congress and the US permanent political class, both on matters of policy and on violations of law. These will cause disruptions in the administration’s capacity to conduct ‘normal’ international relations, including the domestic preconditions required for the ‘legitimate’ use of nuclear weapons. These factors will also increase risk, particularly in combination with Trump’s chaotic cognitive style on the one hand and on the other the number, range and intensity of regions and domains of conflict or systemic stress on American hegemony.

Five key trends concerning nuclear weapons will be exacerbated or encouraged by the Trump ascendancy.

All nine nuclear-weapon states are modernising their nuclear arsenals. Action-reaction strategic technology cycles drive most of this. Russia is concerned to counter US conventional high-tech superiority. China’s drive to build a submarine-based survivable nuclear second-strike capability (itself a key motivation for the South China Sea island-building campaign)— seeks to preserve its relatively small ‘minimal means of retaliation’ land-based nuclear deterrent force which would likely be vitiated by US missile defence and highly accurate conventional and nuclear missiles.

It is entirely possible that Trump will ditch the Obama administration’s deal with Iran. A cascade of Saudi Arabian, Turkish and Egyptian nuclear wannabes would be almost inescapable. Trump’s encouragement of Japanese and South Korean nuclear breakout fits all too well with the ambitions of the Abe cabinet in Japan, and the majority of South Koreans who support a Korean nuclear force. We will also see renewed support for Australian nuclear weapons in the name of self-reliance.

Shifts in technology and doctrine are encouraging belief among strategists that nuclear weapons are ‘usable’—that single detonations or small numbers can be used in war without leading to ‘uncontrollable escalation’. Russian strategists now point to US and NATO conventional superiority as a justification for considering a nuclear first strike; Pakistan has reportedly deployed nuclear weapons close to the Indian border as a tripwire in the event of Indian conventional attack.

In a remarkable initiative by non-nuclear states led by Austria and Mexico, the UN General Assembly is about to formally mandate a recommendation by the First Committee to commence negotiations in 2017 for a ‘legally binding instrument to prohibit nuclear weapons, leading towards their total elimination’. This unprecedented movement of the non-nuclear-weapons-possessing states of the world aims to render the possession of nuclear weapons a matter of deep stigma and disgrace, as a critical and practical step towards their total elimination.

In an extraordinary remark that tells us a great deal about the inner psychic dynamics of adherence to a nuclear alliance, the Australian foreign minister, Julie Bishop, reprimanded supporters of the ban treaty, saying they should ‘engage, not enrage’. The only logical implication of Bishop’s all-too-Freudian slip was that the world runs a risk of explosive rage by demanding that the nuclear-weapons states adhere to their long-ignored obligations under the nuclear non-proliferation treaty. With Trump she may well be right. Some ally.

And then there is climate change under Trump: without serious progress on nuclear abolition, global climate politics will be conducted in a very uneasy nuclear-armed crowd. Climate disruption is not yet socially visible to majorities in the rich and carbon-polluting countries of the world, but an existential threat will be widely felt within a decade. The contours of global politics in a severely carbon-constrained world are not yet clear, but the combination of existential climate threat, uneven and displaced projection of responsibility, and at least one Trump administration mean that the Cold War is probably the most appropriate, and fateful, model.