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Guest columnists Robert Weiner and Jenny Zhao:
The world needs another nuclear freeze movement

By Robert Weiner and Jenny Zhao



The Domsday Clock of the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, set at 89 seconds to midnight, is displayed during a news conference at the United States Institute of Peace, Tuesday, Jan. 28, 2025, in Washington. (AP Photo/Mark Schiefelbein)

With all the nuclear scare bravado from Russia and U.S. President Donald Trump, and with the threats from Iran, India, Pakistan, Israel, China and elsewhere, the world needs nuclear freeze rallies like we had nationally in the 1980s.

Those rallies included the leadership of Springfield congressman Ed Boland, who chaired and emceed the Oct. 5, 1982, University of Massachusetts rally. Boland was co-chair of the House Intelligence Committee, whose report credited the rallies around the world for the nuclear arms treaties passed at the time.

Despite repeatedly warning against “World War III” and asserting this past March that “the greatest threat” is “big monster ... nuclear weapons,” Trump’s recent deployment of nuclear submarines in response to threats from former Russian president Medvedev, now deputy chairman of the [Security Council of Russia](#), is the latest and clearest evidence that nuclear tensions are spiraling toward catastrophe. In response to Trump’s warnings about his ultimatum, Medvedev threatened to invoke the Cold War-era Soviet nuclear system known as “[The Dead Hand](#),” which triggers automatic detection if Moscow were struck.

What’s needed is a global reprise of the 1980s Nuclear Weapons Freeze Campaign that mobilized more than a million Americans and forced superpowers to negotiate.

On June 12, 1982, more than a million protesters gathered in New York City in support of this freeze campaign, which called for a bilateral halt between the U.S. and Soviet Union to stop the [testing](#), production and deployment of nuclear weapons. At UMass Amherst less than four months later, there was a similar demonstration of student support for the movement with more than 30,000 people. As then-Sen. Ted Kennedy put it in a letter to a rally organizer, the rally “addressed the most vital issue of [the] time.”

The House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, chaired by Boland, reported that “the [1982] November elections saw [freeze resolutions on 28 state and local ballots](#), and they passed in 25.” By November 1983, the campaign had been endorsed by more than “[370 city councils](#), 71 county councils, and by one or both houses of 23 state legislatures.”

The threat is even more powerful today. Russia, the U.S. and China possess [5,459, 5,177, and 600](#) nuclear weapons respectively. The top 10 countries show the extent of this threat. Iran carted off 16 trucks of unidentified materials hours before the recent U.S. strike, and the [Stockholm International Peace Research Institute](#) warned this June that a new nuclear arms race is currently emerging.

Ward Wilson, author of “It is Possible: A Future Without Nuclear Weapons,” contends that nuclear deterrence remains unproven and depends on what he calls “[pure luck](#)” to prevent disaster. This fragility of deterrence makes Wilson’s approach more urgent: rather than continuing to rely on “pure luck,” a global freeze would create breathing room for systematic disarmament.

There are already encouraging voices for change that leaders can look to to pilot a new freeze movement. Veterans For Peace, through its [Nuclear Abolition Working Group](#), advocates taking U.S. nuclear weapons off “hair-trigger alert” and scrapping the trillion-dollar plans to replace the entire U.S. arsenal. The Coalition for Peace Action, which [chartered the successful](#) 1982 “Peace Train” that brought 1 million people to New York City, continues pushing for nuclear disarmament.

The 1980s freeze movement succeeded because it offered a simple, verifiable solution: stop building new weapons and negotiate reductions. Major treaties were ratified: the [Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces \(INF\) Treaty \(1987\)](#), the [Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty \(START\) I \(1991\) and II \(1993\)](#). By the early 1990s, both the U.S. and Soviet Union had [reduced their arsenals](#). Boland asserted, “Even hostile administrations could not dismiss authentic grassroots pressure.”

The 1980s freeze movement offers three concrete lessons for today. First, the power of one clear demand: Instead of complex arms control terminology, activists asked for one thing any citizen could understand (“freeze”) that politicians could support without appearing weak on defense.

Second, build unstoppable coalitions: When [religious groups, scientists and veterans](#) all demanded the same freeze, then-President Reagan couldn’t dismiss it as partisan politics.

Third, make it verifiable: The freeze used existing satellite monitoring that both superpowers already trusted, so politicians didn’t have to defend complex new inspection regimes to skeptical voters. Today, the International Atomic Energy Agency already [monitors nuclear facilities worldwide](#) — all except Iran.

What’s also needed now is a U.N.-sponsored summit bringing together all nuclear powers — Russia, the United States, China, France, the United Kingdom, Pakistan, India, Israel and North Korea — to explore a comprehensive nuclear freeze treaty. Iran will likely want to join the table to maintain the image of a responsible, responsive state.

Today’s nuclear landscape is both more dangerous and more promising than the 1980s. It’s more dangerous because 10 nations now possess weapons and new technologies compress decision-making. Iran’s recent material dispersal shows how quickly crises escalate. It’s more promising because 122 nations have already endorsed nuclear prohibition, social media can mobilize globally and climate activism has proven young people will organize around existential threats. The freeze model bridges this gap — offering immediate action that both nuclear and non-nuclear states can support.

As President Reagan and [Soviet General Secretary Gorbachev said in 1985](#), “A nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought.” The lesson is even more serious today as weapons technology has expanded. It’s time for the next nuclear freeze movement to begin.

Robert Weiner is a former spokesman in the Clinton and Bush White Houses and congressional staffer. On behalf of Sen. Ted Kennedy, he organized the 1982 Nuclear Freeze Rally on the UMass campus and called Ed Boland to emcee it. Jenny Zhao is a policy analyst at Robert Weiner Associates and the Solutions for Change Foundation, and a student at Wellesley College.