# Nuclear winter emerges as an overlooked climate crisis demanding urgent joint activism



Thirty-five years after the inception of the nuclear age, the U.S. government's narrative surrounding nuclear testing remains disconcertingly familiar. An official once articulated, “Nuclear weapons are like automobiles,” highlighting the rigorous testing process akin to that of a new car. Despite the euphoric proclamations surrounding the success of underground nuclear tests at the Nevada Test Site, a sober undercurrent persists regarding the ramifications of these actions. In 1980, as underground detonations outpaced surface tests, the untold dangers of radiation exposure still resonated with local populations, echoing fears that a world kept in the dark about the true nature of nuclear tests might ultimately face annihilation from its own creations.

Yet, it was not until later that voices like Al Gore began to illuminate the dire implications of climate change, a threat that was gradually emerging alongside the nuclear spectre. Fast forward to 2024, when human-induced warming surpasses the critical threshold of 1.5 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels—a milestone marked by a plethora of scientific datasets. According to Inside Climate News, this alarming trend not only endangers ecosystems but also raises existential questions about our capacity as a society to confront dual threats: climate change and nuclear annihilation.

Recent analyses have drawn ominous connections between these two catastrophic prospects. A study suggests that a limited nuclear exchange—such as a conflict between India and Pakistan—could lead to severe climatic disruptions termed "nuclear winter." Research led by Alan Robock and Lili Xia indicates that smoke from burning cities would ascend to the stratosphere, blocking sunlight and precipitating catastrophic declines in global agricultural output for several years. While nuclear winter is often relegated to theoretical discourse, the potential aftermath raises profound concerns over food security on a global scale.

Despite the clear intersections of nuclear conflict and climate disruption, collaborative efforts between environmental and disarmament activists remain scant. In a disheartening revelation, Robock acknowledged a lack of synergies between the two movements, despite the immediate and long-term implications of nuclear warfare on climatic conditions. Ted Glick, a longtime climate activist, remarked that, "nuclear winter could be seen as the ultimate climate issue." Still, he noted that the absence of nuclear war since Hiroshima and Nagasaki has tempered urgency surrounding nuclear threats compared to the palpable impacts of climate change already being felt.

Opinions diverge on whether the nuclear winter phenomenon should be classified strictly as a climate issue. John J. Berger posited that while both nuclear war and climate change affect environmental conditions, blending the two could dilute the unique challenges each presents. However, advocacy groups like the Council for a Livable World are framing the relationship between climate change and nuclear threats as interdependent, advocating for an integrated response.

This complexity extends into community activism, where local efforts highlight the intersections of nuclear disarmament with environmental justice. Many frontline communities affected by nuclear activities are simultaneously facing the ravages of climate change, leading to a holistic understanding that encompasses both systemic issues. Leaders like Basav Sen have stressed that environmental racism intersects with both nuclear and climate issues, pointing out that marginalized communities suffer disproportionately from the consequences of both nuclear activities and climate disruption.

Nonetheless, substantial barriers remain for these movements to unite effectively. Jackie Cabasso, from the Western States Legal Foundation, chronicled disappointing engagements with mainstream climate activists regarding nuclear disarmament issues. Additionally, Robert M. Gould highlighted a generational divide, noting a diminished presence of younger activists in the anti-nuclear movement, which may impede the cross-pollination of ideas crucial for comprehensive solutions.

The military-industrial complex is recognised as a significant contributor to greenhouse gas emissions, further complicating the landscape. With Washington's foreign policy often caught in the dual cycle of fossil fuel extraction and nuclear brinkmanship, environmental advocates are challenged to address these intricate ties. The potential for nuclear winter thus sits ominously on the horizon, a reminder that the solutions to our climate crises may also reside within our ability to mitigate the risks of nuclear proliferation.

Both climate advocacy and anti-nuclear movements share common adversaries, and their potential partnership in confronting these existential threats remains largely untapped. As we grapple with these overwhelming realities, a collaborative commitment could serve as a lifeline in the face of unimaginable disasters that lie ahead.

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* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.counterpunch.org/2025/06/09/is-nuclear-winter-a-climate-issue/), [[6]](https://militarydispatches.com/nuclear-weapons-and-climate-change/)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.counterpunch.org/2025/06/09/is-nuclear-winter-a-climate-issue/), [[2]](https://www.rutgers.edu/news/climate-change-nuclear-wars-smoke-could-threaten-global-food-supplies-human-health), [[4]](https://www.icanw.org/climate_disruption_and_famine)
* Paragraph 3 – [[2]](https://www.rutgers.edu/news/climate-change-nuclear-wars-smoke-could-threaten-global-food-supplies-human-health), [[3]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nuclear_winter), [[5]](https://news.mongabay.com/2006/12/nuclear-war-could-cause-global-cooling-i-e-block-global-warming/)
* Paragraph 4 – [[4]](https://www.icanw.org/climate_disruption_and_famine), [[6]](https://militarydispatches.com/nuclear-weapons-and-climate-change/)
* Paragraph 5 – [[1]](https://www.counterpunch.org/2025/06/09/is-nuclear-winter-a-climate-issue/), [[7]](https://www.nationalgeographic.com/culture/article/110223-nuclear-war-winter-global-warming-environment-science-climate-change)
* Paragraph 6 – [[2]](https://www.rutgers.edu/news/climate-change-nuclear-wars-smoke-could-threaten-global-food-supplies-human-health), [[4]](https://www.icanw.org/climate_disruption_and_famine)
* Paragraph 7 – [[6]](https://militarydispatches.com/nuclear-weapons-and-climate-change/), [[3]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nuclear_winter)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.counterpunch.org/2025/06/09/is-nuclear-winter-a-climate-issue/> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.rutgers.edu/news/climate-change-nuclear-wars-smoke-could-threaten-global-food-supplies-human-health> - A study by Rutgers University and the National Center for Atmospheric Research indicates that smoke from nuclear war fires could cause climate change lasting up to 15 years, threatening global food production and human health. The research, published in the Journal of Geophysical Research – Atmospheres, used a modern climate model to simulate the effects of smoke from regional and global nuclear wars on ozone chemistry and surface ultraviolet light, leading to a loss of the protective ozone layer and increased ultraviolet radiation reaching Earth's surface.
3. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nuclear_winter> - Nuclear winter is a hypothesized severe and prolonged global climatic cooling effect following widespread firestorms from a large-scale nuclear war. The concept suggests that such fires inject soot into the stratosphere, blocking sunlight and leading to significant temperature drops, which could disrupt agriculture and cause widespread famine. The term 'nuclear winter' was coined in 1983, and studies have shown that even a small-scale nuclear conflict could have catastrophic climatic consequences.
4. <https://www.icanw.org/climate_disruption_and_famine> - The International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN) highlights the interconnectedness of climate change and nuclear weapons as 'twin existential threats.' The organization emphasizes that nuclear war could lead to global famine due to climate disruption, and that environmental stresses from climate change are increasing the risk of nuclear conflict. ICAN also points out the environmental damage caused by nuclear weapons, including contamination from uranium mining and nuclear waste, which is exacerbated by climate change effects.
5. <https://news.mongabay.com/2006/12/nuclear-war-could-cause-global-cooling-i-e-block-global-warming/> - Research presented at the American Geophysical Union meeting in 2006 suggests that even a small-scale regional nuclear war could produce millions of tons of soot particles, leading to global cooling. The study, led by Alan Robock of Rutgers University, indicates that such a conflict could cool the planet by several degrees over large areas, including most grain-growing regions, potentially causing widespread crop failures and famines.
6. <https://militarydispatches.com/nuclear-weapons-and-climate-change/> - An article discussing the concept of nuclear winter, which refers to the severe global cooling that could occur following widespread nuclear warfare. The piece explains that massive amounts of soot and smoke released into the atmosphere from burning cities and forests would block sunlight, drastically lowering temperatures and disrupting agricultural production. It also highlights that even a limited nuclear exchange could produce enough smoke to trigger severe climate changes, with dire implications for food security and biodiversity.
7. <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/culture/article/110223-nuclear-war-winter-global-warming-environment-science-climate-change> - An article from National Geographic discussing how even a regional nuclear war could trigger unprecedented global cooling and reduce rainfall for years. U.S. government computer models suggest that such a conflict could lead to significant decreases in global temperatures and precipitation, resulting in widespread famine and disease. The piece also draws parallels to historical events like the 1815 eruption of Mount Tambora, which caused the 'year without a summer' and widespread crop failures.