Opinion

MESSENGER-INQUIRER
EDITORIAL BOARD

Mike Weafer Publisher
Don Wilkins Executive Editor

To Make Your Opinion Known

- Readers Write, P.O. Box 1480, Owensboro, KY 42302;
- Email us at ReadersWrite@messenger-inquirer.com;
- Send your letter by fax at 686-7868.

Include your name, address and a telephone number where you can be reached during the day. Letters should be no more than 250 words and will be edited for clarity.

Trump should emulate Schmidt with Xi and Putin



ANDREAS **KLUTH**

For reasons that could range from good to atrocious, President Donald Trump wants a three-way summit with his Russian and Chinese counterparts when the three men are in Shenzhen next month for an economic forum.

In the worst scenario, Trump and Xi Jinping would conspire to doom Ukraine to Vladimir Putin's subjugation. In the best, however, they would open a long and necessary process toward an eventual nuclear detente among the U.S., Russia and China. Trump claims he wants this trilateral meeting "not so much for Ukraine" but "to talk about nuclear weapons and denuclearization." Let's take him at his word.

What would such talks look like? And what lesson could Trump take from a West German chancellor in the 1970s?

even aside from new dangers such as artificial intelligence entering the nuclear command chains — make trilateral nuclear talks urgent.

First, since the expiration this year of the last arms-control treaty between the U.S. and Russia, no formal limits constrain the nine nuclear powers at all.

Second, whereas arms control used to be a (relatively) simple matter between the two atomic superpowers — Russia and the U.S. still account for 86% of all nukes — it is now a much more complicated "three-body problem" because China is fast catching up. And the U.S. must assume that Moscow and Beijing could one day gang up against Washington.

And third, today's arms race isn't only about the number of nukes but also about the types of warheads, delivery vehicles and war plans that are emerging.

China and Russia are increasingly investing in "tactical" weapons. Those are designed not to destroy the homeland of the main adversary (the U.S., in their case) but to win, with allegedly "limited" strikes, a conventional war in a local theater, such as the Taiwan Strait or Eastern Europe.

Tactical nukes are considered especially dangerous precisely because they appear more usable but could still cause uncontrolled escalation to Armageddon. That's why the U.S. after the Cold War mothballed almost all its tactical warheads (except for about 100 that are stationed at allied bases in Europe).

Moscow retired fewer of its tactical nukes, and it now outnumbers the U.S. about 10-to-1 in that category. Worse, Putin has repeatedly threatened to use such weapons in Ukraine.

And China has been adding tactical nukes to signal to the U.S. that it cannot be blackmailed or defeated in a regional conflict over Taiwan. In response, the Trump administration is considering redeploying its own tactical nukes to Asia.

So a new arms race is on, and even though Trump keeps inviting Xi and Putin to talk about it, Xi refuses. It's "neither fair, reasonable nor realistic to ask China to join the so-called trilateral nuclear disarmament negotiations at this stage," China's foreign ministry said this month.

That impasse is prompting some policy veterans in Washington to think outside the box. One of them is Joel Wit, a veteran of the State Department who has, since the 1990s, been negotiating with, and often in, North Korea to stop its nuclear program. (Unsuccessfully, obviously.)

"It seems to me, it's inevitable that we are going to redeploy tactical nuclear weapons aimed at China," Wit told me. In isolation, such a move could invite disaster, he agrees, because "these things are dangerous." The plan could work, however, if "we link it to an arms-control proposal."

The model, Wit said, would be the hugely controversial, but ultimately successful, dual-track decision taken by NATO in 1979. Its main brain father was the West German chancellor at the time, Helmut Schmidt. Even though the political backlash cost him dearly in his own party, country and continent, Schmidt considered it one of his biggest contributions to peace, as he told me not long before his death in 2015, when he was in his 90s.

Just as China is deploying more tactical nukes in Asia today, the Soviet Union in the 1970s was stationing more medium-range missiles in Europe to threaten America's European allies but not the U.S. itself. This caused a crisis of credibility and deterrence: Nobody believed that Washington would retaliate for a tactical strike by Moscow against Europe with U.S. strikes against the Soviet Union itself.

So Schmidt urged the U.S., and by extension NATO, to do two things at once: First, Washington was to send more of its own tactical nukes, mounted on medium-range and cruise missiles, to Western Europe. Simultaneously, it offered the Kremlin arms-control negotiations to get rid of this class of weapons altogether.

The decision provoked not only Moscow but also millions of Germans and other Europeans who chose to hear the first part but not the second and took to the streets in protest. By the early 1980s, moreover, the plan seemed to be failing when the U.S. began stationing the threatened missiles but Moscow wasn't budging.

But then a new Soviet leader, Mikhail Gorbachev, agreed to talks with his U.S. counterpart, Ronald Reagan. And in 1987 (five years after Schmidt left the chancellery), the two signed a treaty to eliminate all ground-based missiles with intermediate ranges. Schmidt told me that the dual-track decision eight years earlier had made it possible.

Today's situation is more complicated, not least because any dual signal by Washington would have to bring both Beijing and Moscow to the table, and ideally Pyongyang and others as well. But the logic remains the same: Trump would offer a stick in one hand and a carrot in the other while highlighting the insanity of the current arms race if it continues.

Nothing so far suggests that Trump, who seems increasingly and bizarrely deferential to Putin and conciliatory toward Xi, has the nerve to take this risky but promising step. And yet nothing should in theory be Trumpier: For a president who has branded his foreign policy as "peace through strength," a dual track would add the strength to get the peace.



"I'VE SPENT MORE BUYING ELECTIONS TRYING TO AVOID TAXES THAN IT WOULD COST TO JUST PAY THE TAXES. SOMETIMES IT'S THE PRINCIPLE."

Dems' midterm chances trending much like Tea Party tide in 2010



RONALD **BROWNSTEIN**

When Democrats rallied for House candidate Cait Conley in Chappaqua, New York, on Oct. 24, the crowd cheered as speakers counted down the minutes until early voting in New York state began at 10 a.m.

That fervor is a challenge for Representative Mike Lawler and other Republicans defending House districts like this one — affluent and well-educated, where voters overwhelmingly disapprove of President Donald Trump.

In the Trump era, the GOP has lost significant support among White, college-educated voters.

Today, Republicans hold only 50 of the 212 House districts where the share of White residents with a four-year degree exceeds the national norm; as recently as 2015, Republicans held 70 of 194 such districts.

Despite those losses, House Republicans have generally benefited from the electorate's educational realignment.

Under Trump, they have solidified their hold on the slight majority of districts (223) where the share of Whites with a college degree lags below the national average.

But this year, Republicans face a two-front threat. The cracks in the president's support among non-college voters are allowing Democrats to contest blue-collar seats across the industrial heartland. And Trump's deep unpopularity with college-educated voters is endangering the remaining House Republicans in affluent suburbs.

The GOP appears especially vulnerable in seats like Lawler's, which I call "educated enclaves." These are districts where the share of White residents and the share of those residents with at least a bachelor's degree both exceed the national average. Democrats now hold 54 of the seats in that basket, and Republicans only 37, and as many as one-third of those Republicans face tough races.

Lawler is a prime example.

which stretches from Westchester commuter towns outside New York City into the picturesque Hudson Valley — exemplifies the affluent suburban terrain that has moved toward Democrats in recent decades. The median income in the district exceeds $123,000 and over 56% of its White residents hold at least a four-year college degree.

Lawler was narrowly first elected in 2022 amid disappointment in President Joe Biden's first two years and then comfortably won reelection in 2024, even though Kamala Harris slightly bested Trump in the district.

Both sides agree Lawler faces greater risk today. He spent his entire career as a Republican political operative before stepping onstage to become a candidate. Especially at a time when politicians face widespread distrust, Conley, an Army veteran and former counterterrorism and cybersecurity official for Biden, presents a much sharper contrast with that background than Lawler's previous two Democratic opponents, who were both elected officials.

"Over the last 20 years while I was out defending our democracy," Conley declares in one ad, "Mike Lawler found every way possible to profit from it." The sharp edge on that message is typical of this race.

Lawler always highlights the relatively few issues on which he has broken with Trump (such as his opposition to ending enhanced healthcare subsidies and to withdrawing Temporary Protected Status from the district's large Haitian population). But when I asked him if his district was better off because of Trump's second-term policies, he immediately answered, "Yeah."

He defends Trump's tariffs as necessary to reverse decades of manufacturing job loss. He's called the Iran War "a righteous decision."

And he champions the 2025 Trump tax bill. "Don't let the Democrats tell you this was tax cuts for billionaires," Lawler roared at a raucous rally late last week where he was endorsed by the International Brotherhood of Teamsters and about two dozen other unions.

In a bruising debate with Conley earlier this month, Lawler repeatedly sought to shift voter discontent away from Trump and toward Democrats. He blamed Biden's foreign policy for international turmoil. He pointed toward New York Governor Kathy Hochul for high utility, housing and energy costs. He linked Conley, who's run as a centrist, to far-left Democrats such as New York City Mayor Zohran Mamdani.

But this redirection may not allow Lawler to escape the undertow of the district's deepening alienation from the president. Like Democratic candidates everywhere, Conley slams Lawler for voting repeatedly to support Trump's tariffs, the Iran war and the healthcare cuts in the One Big Beautiful Bill Act.

"Every time it has mattered … where was Mike Lawler? Standing side by side with Donald Trump," she insisted during their bruising debate. In an interview, Conley briskly said she would vote to overturn Trump's tariffs and healthcare cuts and to stop the war — while Lawler, when I spoke with him, notably avoided any firm pledges.

"I've been able to deliver real results for my district, precisely because I can work with anybody," Lawler told reporters after his Teamsters rally. It's an argument voters have heard this year from Maine Senator Susan Collins and other Republicans in swing areas.

But conversations with residents at the Chappaqua farmer's market after Conley's rally made clear many want a representative who confronts Trump instead of haggling with him. "You can say whatever you want about how independent you are, but we know how you voted," Tomas, who works in advertising marketing, and asked not to provide his last name, told me. Jennifer, an events planner, likewise said that Lawler and other Republicans who present themselves as independent "can't or won't" stand up to Trump when it matters most. "There needs to be a check on the administration," Alex, a physician, simply said, to explain why he wanted a Democratic Congress.

The remaining House Republicans who have survived in these blue-trending, well-educated seats are almost all skillful politicians. They remind me of the Democrats who held on for years in the working-class seats the GOP now dominates.

Eventually, though, in the 2010 tea party election, many of those Democrats were swept away in a towering partisan tide. The same 100-year flood could be approaching for the remaining Republicans in educated enclaves.