Research Report

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Developing effective actions towards the total elimination of nuclear weapons

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Introduction

Nuclear weapons are by many seen as the most destructive weapons ever created. These weapons release massive amounts of energy in a very short time with the use of nuclear reactions, this doesn't only cause an explosion and a lot of destruction but also extreme heat and radiation. Therefore the effect of these weapons continue to last long after the initial explosion and can also spread beyond the country it was used against.

Developing effective actions towards the total elimination of nuclear weapons, means removing all existing nuclear arsenal as well as preventing countries from developing new ones. Even though the goal of nuclear disarmament has been an international goal for decades, more than thousand nuclear weapons still exist to this day. Many countries disagree about whether nuclear weapons make the world safer or more dangerous. The biggest challenge therefore will be to find realistic steps towards disarmament while keeping the security concerns of countries that currently depend on nuclear weapons low.

General Overview

The current nuclear situation

A nuclear weapon was first used in 1945, when the United States dropped an atomic bomb on Nagasaki and Hiroshima. The destruction that this caused showed the world how nuclear weapons were very different from conventional weapons. Along with the explosion and fires, radiation caused deaths and illnesses long after the attack.

Today, a total of 9 states are known or believed to possess nuclear weapons: the United States, China, Russia, the United Kingdom, France, Pakistan, India, North Korea and Israel. At the beginning of 2026 there was estimated to be 12,187 nuclear warheads worldwide, with a majority being possessed by the United States and Russia.

Although the amount of nuclear warheads around the globe has significantly decreased since the Cold War, this does not necessarily mean that the problem is disappearing. This is mainly because states are modernising their weapons, missiles, submarines and other systems. Therefore the focus is gradually shifting from reducing stockpiles of nuclear weapons originating from the Cold War to reducing further development of more advanced nuclear weapons.

Nuclear deterrence

Likely the biggest obstacle to achieve total nuclear disarmament will be the idea of nuclear deterrence. Deterrence means that a country keeps nuclear weapons as a tool to discourage other countries from attacking it. The idea is that other countries are aware that their attack could lead to a devastating nuclear response.

Many supporters claim that deterrence has helped prevent wars between major nuclear powers. However critics argue that the value of deterrence is quickly lost when a country doesn't act rationally or when a serious accident, misunderstanding or technical failure is made. A single miscalculation could have devastating consequences that cannot be reversed.

Existing international agreements

One of the most important international agreements for nuclear weapons is the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT). It was introduced in 1970 and currently has 191 states parties entered. The main goals of this treaty are: preventing the spread of nuclear weapons, supporting peaceful nuclear energy and working towards nuclear disarmament.

Article 6 of this treaty expects states to pursue negotiations towards nuclear disarmament. However, till now its progress has been slow. In 2026 the NPT Review Conference ended without every country reaching consensus on the final outcome document which shows the continuing disagreement about the possession of nuclear weapons.

Another important agreement about nuclear disarmament is the treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW). This agreement entered into force in 2021 and completely prohibits its members from possessing and developing any form of nuclear weapon. Since 2026 75 countries have joined this treaty. However, none of the 9 nuclear-armed states have joined.

Another important treaty is the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test_Ban treaty (CTBT). Even though almost all countries have signed it, the CTBT still has not been formally entered into force because several states have not ratified it.

Humanitarian consequences

Probably the biggest argument for nuclear disarmament are the major humanitarian effects. Not only will the powerful blast of a nuclear explosion immediately kill large numbers of people but the heat, fires and radiation would cause deaths and illnesses afterwards.

Next to that hospitals, infrastructure and emergency services could also be destroyed making it extremely difficult to help the remaining survivors. The radioactive fallout could also cross national borders creating treaties to neighboring countries and maybe even an entire continent. A large nuclear conflict could therefore affect the climate, global food production and many ecosystems. This has led to organizations such the International Committee of the Red Cross to argue that there would be limited to no adequate humanitarian responses to the use of these devastating weapons.

Major Parties Involved:

1. United States

Having one of the largest nuclear arsenals in the world, the United States is a major party in discussion about nuclear disarmament. The US was also the first ever country to develop nuclear weapons and actually use it in a war. Next to that the United States argues that their nuclear weapons are still necessary for deterrence and for protecting itself and their allies. At the same time they also take part in several arms-control agreements with Russia that aim for a reduction in nuclear weapons, major progress towards worldwide nuclear disarmament becomes difficult without the participation of the United States.

2. Russia

Russia is also in possession of a huge nuclear arsenal and inherited a lot of the Soviet Union's weapons after the Cold War. Nuclear weapons remain an important part of Russia's military and security strategy. Russia has previously worked with the United States through treaties such as START (Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty) to limit strategic nuclear weapons. START is a treaty where control agreements were made between the USA and Russia to reduce the number of strategic nuclear weapons. However the relationship between western countries and Russia have strongly deteriorated, making cooperation more difficult. The expiration of New Start makes Russia especially important in trying to achieve the total elimination of

nuclear disarmament and preventing a renewed nuclear arms race.

3. People's Republic of China

While having less nuclear weapons than the United States and Russia, China has been rapidly expanding and modernising its arsenal. China has traditionally argued that it maintains only the necessary amount of nuclear weapons needed for its national defence and it supports the idea of creating a further world without nuclear weapons. However China also argues that Russia and the US should begin with reducing their nuclear arsenal before expecting China to make major reductions. At the same time the United States increasingly wants China to participate in future arms-control agreements. Therefore China is becoming increasingly important in negotiations about eliminating nuclear weapons.

Possible Solution

Complete nuclear disarmament is not a realistic goal through one agreement. Therefore, multiple smaller steps would be a more realistic strategy. **Firstly,** Russia and the USA could find a replacement for New START. A new treaty could introduce verifiable limits on their nuclear weapons and later include other states that possess nuclear weapons, such as China. **Secondly,** countries could strengthen verification systems. States are more likely to reduce their nuclear weapon arsenals when others do the same. The IAEA (International Atomic Energy Agency) and other organizations could receive more resources to inspect nuclear facilities.