Introduction

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It’s May 2020. Almost seventy-five years since a US president sitting in Washington, DC decided to drop two atomic bombs on the people of Japan—one on the city of Hiroshima, the other on Nagasaki. Thus began the nuclear age, marked with the construction of multiple “doomsday machines” programmed for unwinnable wars and global conflagration; astonishing wastes of human and financial resources; bullish, masculinised conflicts among states that deploy violence here and there while dancing around their potential for planet-ending acts; and the relentless peddling of all this as completely, totally, and undeniably rational.

But it is not rational. And the continued investment by certain governments in not just the maintenance but also the “modernisation”—the upgrading, updating, and life-extending—of nuclear weapons is absurd, dangerous, and immoral. Fortunately, during the COVID-19 crisis, people are starting to take notice of where all of the money—in many cases, taxpayers’ money—has gone; of why their governments cannot provide basic protective equipment and medical supplies and services during a global pandemic. And even more fortunately, there is something we can do to get rid of the threat of nuclear weapons and release trillions of dollars to deal with real, rather than imagined, crises of security, safety, and stability: we can divest, and we can disarm.

Seventy-five years of apocalyptic potential

For seventy-five years, the world has lived under the threat of radioactive blast and firestorm, the effects of which are immediately devastating and punishingly intergenerational.¹ For seventy five years, from production to testing and use to storage of radioactive waste, nuclear weapon activities have contaminated land and water—and will continue to do so for thousands of years more.² For seventy-five years, a very few governments—nine, at current count—have decided to invest trillions of dollars into these instruments of death and destruction. For seventy-five years, corporations like Lockheed Martin, Boeing, and Bechtel have reaped incredible profits from government contracts for bombs and bombers. Certain academics, politicians, and bureaucrats have risen through the ranks of think tanks or government administrations in positions bankrolled by the nuclear profiteers, spinning theories of “nuclear deterrence” and “strategic stability” to justify this massive, unconscionable investment in technologies of massive violence.

It’s been seventy-five years. Will we reach one hundred if we continue on like this? Can we survive a century with nuclear weapons? Can we survive a century of wasted money and ingenuity; a century of tensions between human beings armed to the death with the capacity to destroy entire cities, countries, the world, in moments; a century of living with this existential threat while another, that of climate change, promises even more damage and uncertainty ahead?

The question of can we, though, is not as relevant as should we. Should we just keep going, the way the nuclear war mongers want? They say we’ll be fine. Better than if we were to disarm, they argue. Eliminating nuclear weapons will “destabilise” international relations, they assert. It will mean another global conflict, invasions and occupations, “dogs and cats living together.”³
**Preparing for major apocalypse in the midst of a “minor” one**

Right now, we are in the midst of a global pandemic for which no governments were sufficiently prepared. We do not have enough basic equipment like ventilators and protection for health care workers. Capitalist economies are tanking as the majority of workers have been ordered to stay at home to prevent the virus from spreading even more rampantly than it has already. Millions of people have lost or will lose their jobs. Hundreds of thousands have and will lose their lives.

But don’t worry: the nuclear-armed states can still launch their nuclear weapons! US Strategic Command has said that the coronavirus has had “no impact” on the ability of the United States to launch its nuclear weapons.⁴ “Right now across the command, we are working to make sure that our ICBMs remain on alert and our critical command and control capabilities stay viable,” say those in charge of the US doomsday machine.⁵

While nuclear weapon forces in all nuclear-armed states are likely to be affected by the pandemic and may have to delay or reduce active deployments or other activities they deem necessary for the effectiveness of their “deterrence” doctrines,⁶ the fact is that there are still approximately 13,410 nuclear weapons in the world.⁷ While this is significantly less than the 70,000+ kicking around in the 1980s, it is still more than enough to destroy our planet many, many times over.

While we can celebrate the 80 per cent decrease in stockpiles, we also have to recognise that reductions of nuclear weapons tapered off in the 1990s, only to be replaced, as a recent joint activist statement has noted, “by a lavishly-funded new race to develop novel and diversified abilities to unleash nuclear violence.”⁸ Some proponents of nuclear weapon modernisation argue that these investments are necessary to keep nuclear arsenals “safe” and “reliable”. But existing warheads in the US are already certified annually to be safe and reliable;⁹ furthermore, the plans outlined for most nuclear-armed states—as explored in this study—make it clear that they are pursuing new nuclear weapons and capabilities, not simply “securing” existing weapons.

The US government has been quick to reassure that the coronavirus pandemic will not affect its nuclear weapon investments.¹⁰ The current US president’s latest budget proposal, released earlier this year, called for an increase of nearly 20 per cent in spending on nuclear weapons while cutting funds for the Center for Disease Control, World Health Organisation, and other public health agencies.¹¹ BAE Systems, Boeing, General Dynamics, Lockheed Martin, Northrop Grumman, Raytheon, and all other major weapons producers have all indicated they are “open for business”. While many have instituted work-from-home policies for certain employees, they have all assured the Pentagon that they will continue to operate throughout the crisis.

In the United Kingdom, the government has so far indicated it is also full-steam-ahead with its nuclear weapon modernisation programme. Estimated to cost about £205 billion, the efforts to replace the UK’s Trident nuclear weapon system has already suffered from cost overruns.¹² Furthermore, as the chapter on the United Kingdom in this publication notes, when it comes to accounting for other potential costs, “Environmental considerations and risks become externalities that are neither considered nor identified, with no analysis of remediation requirements or responses to climate change impact, accidents, or the protection of civilian populations.”

Even without the detonation of a nuclear bomb, accidentally or on purpose, these weapons are costing lives. The International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN) has calculated annual nuclear weapon spending in three countries and compared it to the costs of meeting immediate health care needs during the coronavirus pandemic.¹³ In France, for example, which spends approximately €4.5 billion a year right now on its nuclear weapon programme, the government could redirect those funds to pay for 100,000 hospital beds for intensive care units, 10,000 ventilators, and the salaries of French nurses and 10,000 doctors. In each of the nuclear-armed states, the money spent on nuclear weapons has directly impacted the resources available to deal with the pandemic.

Past nuclear weapon activities also have direct impact on populations now facing the pandemic. Survivors of exposure to radiation from nuclear weapon use, testing, production, and waste are at greater risk from COVID-19. Exposed populations “are disproportionately from Indigenous communities, communities of color, low-income, or rural communities, and often face significant barriers to receiving adequate health care even in the best of times.”¹⁴

**The imperatives of divestment and disarmament**

Thus since the beginning of the pandemic, activists have been demanding an end to nuclear weapon modernisation and a redirection of resources.¹⁵ Former Navy Commanders, members of parliament, academics, and activists have urged the UK government to redirect the billions of pounds spent on the operation and
modernisation of the Trident nuclear weapon system towards responding to the pandemic instead,\textsuperscript{16} while US advocates have called for the government to reduce its “bloated nuclear arsenal and invest in more urgent security priorities” such as “preventing or mitigating any future mass outbreak of disease.”\textsuperscript{17} US activists have also demanded that stimulus packages include equitable health care access for communities harmed by nuclear weapon activities.\textsuperscript{18}

But it is not just during the COVID-19 pandemic that we need to be concerned with nuclear weapon maintenance, modernisation, or use. This is a pandemic we live with every day, to the point where it has become completely normal for the vast majority of people in the world. Out of sight, out of mind. Missile tests don’t even make the news. Nuclear weapon tests, such as those most recently by the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK), grab the headlines for a moment—but the fact that those most vocally condemning the DPRK’s actions possess far larger nuclear arsenals themselves is virtually never discussed outside of antinuclear activist circles.

We cannot wait until a nuclear weapon is used again before we pay attention and act to end the threat of nuclear war. We don’t have to.

In 2017, the majority of the world’s countries negotiated and adopted the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons. It outlaws the possession, use, threat of use, and development of nuclear weapons. It closes existing legal gaps in international law, provides for nuclear disarmament, and categorically rejects the idea nuclear weapons provide security or stability.

Among other things, this treaty precludes nuclear weapon modernisation, and bans any assistance—material or otherwise—with such programmes. This follows the letter and spirit of the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), which obligates nuclear-armed states both to nuclear disarmament and to ceasing the nuclear arms race. None of the nuclear-armed governments are in compliance with either treaty. It is here, on the basis of international law and all of the commitments and actions to which these governments have voluntarily subscribed over the past fifty years, that we can demand an end to nuclear weapons.

It is also on the basis of public health, environmental protection, and of morality and human rights, that we can demand nuclear weapon divestment and disarmament. It is past time to unleash the funds and the forces of human ingenuity to more productive, positive, progressive ends: towards a Green New Deal and a Red Deal.\textsuperscript{19} Towards health care, housing, education, food, decarceration and prison abolition, migration, and more. Towards international relations and transnational cooperation based on peace, equity, justice, and solidarity, instead of weapons and war.

About this publication

This report is an update of a study that Reaching Critical Will initiated in 2012, funded by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Austria. Updates have been made each year since there was a nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) meeting.\textsuperscript{20} While the 2020 NPT Review Conference, scheduled for April–May 2020, has been postponed due to COVID-19, we are publishing a 2020 edition of the report to show the investments being made in nuclear weapons at a time of a global health crisis. Depending on when the Review Conference is convened, we may issue an updated edition if necessary. We also encourage readers to view our 2020 NPT briefing book, which sets out information about the history and status of the NPT while also highlighting and explaining some of the main issues to be addressed by states parties at the Review Conference.

Each chapter has been prepared by experts on national nuclear weapon programmes. Each goes through the current status of nuclear weapon forces; modernisation programmes and plans; the costs of these programmes; the countries’ positions on international nuclear weapon law and policy; and public discourse related to nuclear weapons.

This study is for activists, researchers, and governments. It is meant to provide a strong and up-to-date evidence base to improve public understanding about nuclear weapons modernisation activities and their costs. We hope it is useful in preparing for the next NPT Review Conference, but also more broadly for challenging the rhetoric of the nuclear-armed states by exposing the reality of their nuclear weapon programmes and plans. This report demonstrates that concrete action is needed now, in the immediate term, in order to ensure that the global nuclear weapon enterprise is not extended into the indefinite future. It also demonstrates the need for activists to focus on challenging key structures and processes of our political and economic institutions in order to truly effect change that will impact the nuclear weapon policies of our governments.
References

1. For more information see Unspeakable suffering: the humanitarian impacts of nuclear weapons, Reaching Critical Will of the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom, February 2013.
3. A line from the film Ghostbusters: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JmzuRXLzqKk
13. See https://www.icanw.org/healthcare_costs.
20. All editions can be found at www.reachingcriticalwill.org/resources/publications-and-research/publications.