

Introduction

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The nuclear age has persisted for more than 77 years. That means for nearly eight decades, we have lived with “doomsday machines” programmed for unwinnable wars and global conflagration; astonishing waste of human and financial resources; bullish, masculinised conflicts among states that deploy violence globally; 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. During the COVID-19 crisis, governments have not been able to provide basic protective equipment and medical supplies and services. At the most recent UN climate conference in November 2021, so-called world leaders failed to commit to the actions necessary to sustain life on Earth, proving again their irrational prioritisation of profit over people and planet.

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, converging crises in our world: we can divest, and we can disarm.

Seventy-five years of apocalyptic potential

For seventy-seven 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-seven 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-seven 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-seven 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.

How much longer can we survive all this wasted money and ingenuity; tensions between human beings armed to the death with the capacity to destroy entire cities, countries, the world, in moments; 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, mass hysteria!”³

Preparing for major apocalypse in the midst of a “minor” one

Right now, we are still in the midst of a global pandemic for which no governments were sufficiently prepared. Millions of people have lost their lives or their jobs. Vaccine apartheid and profiteering has meant that pharmaceutical companies are raking in profits while people in many countries still can't access a vaccine. Two years on, we still are unable to meet in person without masks and social distancing; many cannot travel; and those that can and do meet are putting their lives and the lives of others at risk.

But don't worry: the nuclear-armed states can still launch their nuclear weapons! US Strategic Command said that the coronavirus had “no impact” on the ability of the United States to launch its nuclear weapons.⁴ Meanwhile, there are still approximately 13,150 nuclear weapons in the world.⁵ 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.”⁶ Some proponents of nuclear weapon modernisation argue that these investments are necessary to keep nuclear arsenals “safe” and “reliable”. But 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.

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.⁷ 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.”⁸

The imperatives of divestment and disarmament

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.

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.⁹ Towards health care, housing, education, food, decarceration, 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 there was a nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) meeting.¹⁰ While the 2020 NPT Review Conference, scheduled for April–May 2020, was postponed due to COVID-19, we published a 2020 edition of the report to show the

investments being made in nuclear weapons at a time of a global health crisis. Now that the Review Conference has been rescheduled for January 2022, we are issuing an updated edition. We also encourage readers to view our 2022 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 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.
- 2 For examples please see "The Environmental Legacy of Nuclear Weapons Production: Five Case Studies," International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons, April 2020.
- 3 A line from the film *Ghostbusters*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JmzuRXLzqKk>.
- 4 Lucas Tomlinson, "Coronavirus has 'no impact' on ability to launch nuclear weapons: Top US nuke commander," Fox News, 17 March 2020; Tom Banden Brook, "Top priority for nuclear forces amid coronavirus pandemic: Stay healthy," USA Today, 20 April 2020.
- 5 Hans M. Kristensen and Matt Korda, "Status of World Nuclear Forces," Federation of American Scientists, 2021.
- 6 Joint civil society statement on the 2020 Non-Proliferation Treaty Review Conference, 11 May 2020, available at <http://www.reachingcriticalwill.org>.
- 7 See https://www.icanw.org/healthcare_costs.
- 8 Lilly Adams, "Nuclear Weapons, Frontline Communities, and the COVID Stimulus. What You Need to Know." Union of Concerned Scientists, 4 May 2020.
- 9 See Nick Estes, "A Red Deal," *Jacobin*, August 2019.
- 10 All editions can be found at <http://www.reachingcriticalwill.org/resources/publications-and-research/publications>.

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