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I. Introduction

In August 1945, two atomic bombs devastated the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, killing over 200,000 civilians. For the first time people saw what humanity was capable of and what it must never allow again. This horror led to the foundation of international efforts towards universal nuclear disarmament. More than fifty years later, the global landscape has changed, but the threat has definitely not disappeared. Instead of becoming irrelevant, nuclear weapons have become an important security aspect as well as a symbol of power for most states.

New challenges, including current geopolitical tensions, technological developments, and the growing divide between nuclear and non-nuclear states, demand urgent reassessment. Treaties and agreements do not only need to be examined, but also completely reimagined.

The number of nuclear weapons has declined since the Cold War but modernization programs and renewed rivalries between major powers have drastically slowed this progress and hardened positions. At the same time, states outside existing frameworks continue to expand their capabilities, undermining decades of non-proliferation efforts. Emerging technologies such as AI further complicate the situation. Traditional treaties often lack the tools to respond to these 21st-century threats.

To rethink universal nuclear disarmament means to confront the reality that time has changed and problems complexified. These problems can not be solved by only revisiting past agreements, but by recognizing the need for innovative and future-oriented approaches. In doing so, the international community faces a choice between escalation and transformation, between a life-ending catastrophe or finding a new path towards lasting security, peace and diplomacy. Because as Albert Einstein once said: “Peace can not be kept by force; it can only be achieved by understanding”

II. Definition of Key Terms

A. Nuclear Disarmament

Nuclear disarmament is the process of reducing and completely eliminating nuclear weapons. The United Nations wants to eliminate nuclear weapons ever since its establishment after the end of World War 2 where nuclear weapons have been used twice in warfare. Disarmament can be unilateral (one country giving up its weapons, bilateral (two countries agreeing to reduction) or multilateral (involving many countries through treaties or agreements). Achieving the Ultimate Goal "of a world without nuclear weapons" [1] has been an ongoing and complex challenge.[2]

B. Nuclear Weapons

Nuclear weapons are devices that produce large amounts of explosive energies through either nuclear fission or fusion. These weapons consist of explosives combined with radioactive materia. Nuclear weapons are considered as the biggest threat to our world today. Not only can they eradicate millions of people in minutes but they can also harm the environment for thousands of years due to nuclear fallout. Nuclear weapons are *weapons of mass destruction (WMDs)*[3]*.* Nuclear weapons have been used twice in warfare, both times by the United States against Japan at the end of the Second World War. Despite the threat of these weapons to humanity approximately 12,100 still exist. [4]

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[1] "IPNDV: Understanding Nuclear Disarmament" https://www.ipndv.org/learn/understanding-nuclear-disarmament/#:~:text=The%20IPNDV%20defines%20verification%20as,assess%20compliance%20with%20a%20treaty Accessed 14 April 2025.
[2] "United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs: Nuclear Weapons" https://disarmament.unoda.org/wmd/nuclear Accessed 14 April 2025.

[3] "United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs: Weapons of Mass Destruction" *https://www.unrcpd.org/wmd/* Accessed 14 April 2025.
[4] "Arms control Association: Factsheet- Nuclear Weapons- Who Has What at a Glance" https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/nuclear-weapons-who-has-what-glance Accessed 14 April 2025.

C. Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zones

A Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone (NWFZs) is a treaty or convention a group of states has freely established that bans the development, manufacturing, testing, stationing or transporting of nuclear weapons. These zones are recognized as such by the General Assembly of the United Nations and have mechanisms of control to enforce their obligations.[5]

The first of the 5 currently existing NWFZs was created in 1967 with the Treaty of Tlatelolco, prohibiting the use of Nuclear Weapons in Latin America and the Caribbean.[6]

D. Deterrence Theory

Nuclear deterrence refers to a principle in international relations where the retaliatory potential and destructive force of nuclear weapons prevents nations from launching a nuclear attack. [7]

This implies that a nuclear attack on a power with nuclear weapons would devastate both parties. Having the ability to counterattack a nuclear attack with powerful nuclear retaliation against the attacker is considered vital in nuclear deterrence. The topic gained increased prominence as a military strategy during the Cold War.

E. Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT)

According to the United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs (UNODA) the NPT is an "international treaty whose objective is to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons and weapons technology [...] and to further the goal of achieving nuclear disarmament and general and complete disarmament. " [8] Created in 1968, it has

[5] "United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs: Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zones" https://disarmament.unoda.org/wmd/nuclear/nwfz/ Accessed 15 April 2025.

[6] "United Nations: Overview of Nuclear-Weapon-Free-Zones" https://www.un.org/nwfz/content/overview-nuclear-weapon-free-zones Accessed 15 April 2025.

[7] "Carnegie Council for Ethics in International Affairs: Definition, Nuclear Deterrence" https://www.carnegiecouncil.org/explore-engage/key-terms/nuclear-deterrence Accessed 15 April 2025.

[8] "United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs: Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT)" https://disarmament.unoda.org/wmd/nuclear/npt/ Accessed 15 April 2025.

since been signed by 191 states. Only India, Israel, Pakistan and South Sudan have still refused to agree. In 2003, North Korea declared its withdrawal from the contract and has since been sanctioned by the UN.[9]

III. General Overview

A. Existing treaties

The international community has long relied on multilateral treaties to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons and encourage disarmament. Very prominent and important examples are the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) and the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW). In 2022 the 10th Review Conference of the NPT took place with concern.

1. Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons

The Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW), adopted in 2017 and entered into force in 2021, aims to ban all nuclear weapons entirely. Under the TPNW, signatory states are prohibited from developing, testing, producing, stockpiling, using or threatening to use nuclear weapons. [10]

While praised by disarmament activists and supported by many Global South countries, the TPNW has been criticized by nuclear-armed states for ignoring the security dilemmas that drive deterrence-based policies. As of today, none of the nine nuclear-armed states have signed it [11]

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[9] “Center For Arms Control And Non-Proliferation: Fact Sheet: Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) https://armscontrolcenter.org/fact-sheet-nuclear-non-proliferation-treaty-npt/ Accessed 15 April 2025.

[10]“United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs: Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons” https://disarmament.unoda.org/wmd/nuclear/tpnw/ Accessed 16 April 2025.

[11] “United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs: Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons” https://disarmament.unoda.org/wmd/nuclear/tpnw/ Accessed 16 April 2025.

2. The X Review Conference in 2022

The Tenth Review Conference of the NPT exposed deep divisions between nuclear-weapon states (NWS) and non-nuclear-weapon states (NNWS). A central point of contention was the continued failure of NWS to implement past disarmament commitments. Since the previous conference, many NWS have deepened their reliance on nuclear deterrence, citing global instability as justification. As a result, the downward trend in global nuclear stockpiles has stopped and in some cases even reversed. Tensions were heightened by the Russia-Ukraine war. Although Russia attended the conference, it remained largely inactive in negotiations. In the end, Moscow blocked consensus on the final outcome document, objecting to references regarding humanitarian risks and the situation in Ukraine.[12]

B. Rising international tensions

In recent years, rising global tensions have made nuclear disarmament more difficult. The most alarming case has been Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, which was accompanied by threats to use nuclear weapons. In 2023, Russia also suspended its participation in the New START treaty, the last remaining nuclear arms control agreement between the United States and Russia.[13]

Moreover, Iran's nuclear program continues to raise international concern. Despite remaining a party to the NPT, Iran's nuclear ambitions have strained regional stability and raised fears of a new arms race in the Middle East. [14] These developments illustrate

[12] "Arms Control Association: 10th NPT Review Conference: Why It Was Doomed and How it Almost Succeeded https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2022-10/features/10th-npt-review-conference-why-it-was-doomed-and-how-it-almost-succeeded Accessed 16 April 2025.

[13] " Arms Control Association: Russia Suspends New START" https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2023-03/news/russia-suspends-new-start Accessed 16 April 2025.

[14] "Iran Watch: Iran's Nuclear Timetable: The Weapon Potential" https://www.iranwatch.org/our-publications/articles-reports/irans-nuclear-timetable-weapon-potential Accessed 16 April 2025.

that the political will for cooperation has weakened significantly. Trust among major states is fading more and more.

C. The danger of new technologies

In addition, new technologies are making the nuclear landscape more dangerous. Developments in artificial intelligence (AI), cyberwarfare, and autonomous weapons systems are raising concerns about the future. [15]

AI systems could potentially shorten decision-making time in a crisis or introduce vulnerabilities through hacking or false signals. [16]

All of this makes it increasingly difficult to monitor and verify nuclear behavior, highlighting the need for updated frameworks that reflect today's new situation.

D. Nuclear Proliferation

In recent years the global stockpile of nuclear weapons has increased after a long decline following the Cold War. Many nations are investing in and modernizing their nuclear technology and arsenals despite the NPT. The chart below shows a comparison between national stockpiles and inventory of nuclear forces from 2023 to 2024. The table shows that in total, despite a decrease in the global inventory of nuclear weapons from 2023 to 2024, 9 more missiles, intended for use by armed forces, were added to the global stockpile. Notably, China is now believed to have placed some warheads on alert for the first time. All nine nuclear-armed states, including India, Pakistan, and North Korea, are developing or deploying new delivery

[15] "SIPRI: Responsible innovation in AI for peace and security" https://www.sipri.org/research/armament-and-disarmament/emerging-military-and-security-technologies/responsible-innovation-ai-peace-and-security Accessed 16 April 2025.
[16] "SIPRI: Emerging military and security technologies" https://www.sipri.org/research/armament-and-disarmament/emerging-military-and-security-technologies Accessed 16 April 2025.

systems. Despite the dismantling of older weapons, the overall reliance on nuclear deterrence is increasing, and transparency continues to decline.[17]

World nuclear forces, January 2024

	Deployed warheads[a]	Stored warheads[b]	Military[c] stockpile		Retired[d] warheads		Total inventory[e]	
Country	2024	2024	2023	2024	2023	2024	2023	2024
United States	1 770	1 938	3 708	**3 708**	1 536	1 336	5 244	**5 044**
Russia	1 710	2 670	4 489[f]	**4 380**	1 400	1 200	5 889[f]	**5 580**
United Kingdom	120	105	225	**225**[g]	–	–	225	**225**[g]
France	280	10	290	**290**	–	–	290	**290**
China	24[h]	476	410	**500**	–	–	410	**500**
India	–	172	164	**172**	–	–	164	**172**
Pakistan	–	170	170	**170**	–	–	170	**170**
North Korea	–	50	30	**50**[i]	–	–	30	**50**[i]
Israel	–	90	90	**90**	–	–	90	**90**
Total	3 904	5 681	9 576[f]	**9 585**	2 936	2 536	12 512[f]	**12 121**

IV. Major Parties Involved

A. The P5 Nations

The P5 Nations are recognized under the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) as nuclear-weapon states (NWS). They are legally committed to pursuing disarmament under Article VI of the treaty and are expected

[17] "SIPRI: Role of nuclear weapons grows as geopolictical relations deteriorate - new SIPRI Yearbook out now" https://www.sipri.org/media/press-release/2024/role-nuclear-weapons-grows-geopolitical-relations-deteriorate-new-sipri-yearbook-out-now Accessed 16 April 2025.

to lead by example. However, all five are actively modernizing their arsenals. [18] Many fear that the continued reliance on nuclear weapons by the P5 could encourage other states to pursue similar capabilities. [19]

B. Non-Nuclear-Weapon States (NNWS)

The Non-Nuclear-Weapon States have agreed under the NPT not to develop or acquire nuclear weapons. While most comply, some do not prevent non-state actors from accessing nuclear materials which is an issue in today's global security environment. NNWS have also voiced concerns about the slow pace of disarmament by the NWS. [20]

C. International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN)

ICAN is a global coalition of many organizations promoting the complete elimination of nuclear weapons. ICAN focuses on the humanitarian consequences of nuclear war and argues that a universal legal ban is the only realistic path towards global disarmament. The group works primarily with non-nuclear-weapon states and civil society, advocating for transparency, accountability, and a moral shift away from nuclear deterrence policies. [21]

E. Conference on Disarmament (CD)

The Conference on Disarmament (CD) is the UN's primary forum for negotiating global disarmament treaties. It played a key role in drafting the NPT.

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[18] "SIPRI: Role of nuclear weapons grows as geopolitical relations deteriorate- New SIPRI Yearbook out now" https://www.sipri.org/media/press-release/2024/role-nuclear-weapons-grows-geopolitical-relations-deteriorate-new-sipri-yearbook-out-now

[19] "United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs: Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT)" https://www.un.org/disarmament/wmd/nuclear/npt/ Accessed 16 April 2025.

[20] "British American Security Information Council: Keeping the "Non" in the Non-Nuclear Weapon States" https://basicint.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Keeping_the_Non_in_the_Non_Nuclear_Weapons_States_0.pdf Accessed 16 April 2025.

[21] "Britannica: International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons" https://www.britannica.com/topic/International-Campaign-to-Abolish-Nuclear-Weapons Accessed 16 April 2025.

However, progress has stalled in recent years due to political disagreements and the requirement for full consensus, limiting the effectiveness.

V. Timeline of Events

Date	Event
December 4, 1961	UN GA passes Resolution → preventing nuclear proliferation of further states (the basis for the NPT)
March 5, 1970	NPT enters into force with 46 signatories
August 3, 1992	France signs the NPT as the last of the P5 nations
May 11, 1995	NPT is extended indefinitely - Criticism by non-nuclear-weapon-states
January 10, 2003	North Korea announces withdrawal from the NPT
May 6, 2014	Protocol for the Central Asian Nuclear-Weapons-Free-Zone (CANWFZ) treaty signed by all 5 NWS
January 2021	The Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) takes effect
February 2023	Russia invades Ukraine → Due to Western sanctions, no mutual controls are allowed and Russia withdraws from a New START agreement

VI. Previous & Possible Solutions

Despite being one of the most widely supported treaties in existence, the NPT was never changed since it entered into force. While the treaty has helped prevent the widespread development of nuclear weapons, it has also faced repeated criticism, especially from non-nuclear-weapon states. A major attempt to push progress came during the 2000 NPT Review Conference, where a final document outlined 13 practical steps toward disarmament. While the document was ambitious, many of the goals still remain unmet. In recent years, instead of disarmament, increased modernization efforts from all five nuclear powers were seen.

The New START treaty, signed between the United States and Russia in 2010, aimed to limit deployed strategic warheads and increase transparency. For a time, it seemed like a step in the right direction. However, in 2023, Russia announced a suspension of its participation, citing tensions with the West and the war in Ukraine. This has shown how easy bilateral agreements can be undermined by geopolitical shifts.

Therefore, this brings up a deep issue. The effectiveness of any treaty depends on the willingness of states to comply. New geopolitical tensions and the prioritization of state sovereignty have made cooperation even harder. Countries argue that disarmament efforts infringe on their right to defend themselves, which further delays any meaningful action.

Looking forward, one long-term solution would be the universal adoption of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW). While none of the nuclear-weapon states have signed it, full participation would represent a true global commitment to disarmament.

Additionally, the rapid development of technologies such as artificial intelligence, autonomous weapons systems, and cyber warfare introduces new dimensions to nuclear security. On one side AI could enhance early warning systems but on the other side AI could also increase the risk of miscalculation or

accidental launches. Cyberattacks on nuclear command and control systems pose serious risks that the NPT was never designed to address. Future solutions must include updated verification mechanisms and safety protocols that suit our new time. The international community must begin a serious dialogue on how to regulate the advanced technologies in nuclear strategy, before it is too late.

VII. Conclusion

The process of universal nuclear disarmament began around 65 years ago. While the NPT has helped to prevent a widespread proliferation, frustration continues to grow among non-nuclear states over the slow pace of disarmament and the resulting imbalance of power. The last 65 years are considered the era of new technologies which also leads to new challenges affecting nuclear disarmament. In an age shaped by new wars, shifting alliances, and rapidly evolving technologies, global nuclear disarmament can no longer rely on outdated frameworks alone. Rising instability demands a stronger commitment to dialogue, cooperation, and most importantly future-proof solutions. International unity and shared responsibility are no longer optional, they are essential. Looking ahead, member states must ask themselves, is there any time to wait?

VIII. Questions to Consider

- How can the NPT be made more effective in ensuring actual disarmament by the nuclear-weapon states (NWS)?
- Which measures could encourage non-signatory nuclear-weapon possessor states (NWPS) to participate in disarmament talks?
- In what ways can the UN and IAEA address the lack of transparency in nuclear arsenals?
- How can international frameworks adapt to the rising risks coming from new technologies such as AI?

- What role should civil society and NGOs like ICAN play in future negotiations on disarmament?
- Can regional security guarantees be used as an alternative to nuclear deterrence in areas with rising tensions?

IX. Sources for further research

A. UN Documents

Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) [2017]
(https://treaties.un.org/doc/Treaties/2017/07/20170707%2003-42%20PM/Ch_XXVI_9.pdf)
Bans the use, development, and possession of nuclear weapons. Supported by many NNWS but opposed by nuclear-armed states.

Comprehensive Nuclear Test-Ban Treaty (1996)
(https://www.ctbto.org/sites/default/files/2022-09/CTBT-MSS-RES-1-e.pdf)
The Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty condemns and forbids any form of nuclear explosive tests. Sadly, the CTBT has yet to enter into force, seeing as many member states have not signed it yet. It is another great solution to tackle the problem of the spread of nuclear weapons/materials

B. Other Sources

New START Treaty
(https://www.state.gov/new-start-treaty)
A bilateral arms reduction treaty between Russia and the USA. The agreement was long considered a model project for overcoming tensions between East and West but is now suspended by Russia in 2023 due to the Ukraine war, raising fears of further escalation

Emerging technologies and nuclear Stability
(https://europeanleadershipnetwork.org/commentary/emerging-technologies-and-nuclear-stability/)
Emerging technologies, like artificial intelligence, cyber capabilities, and hypersonic missiles, are changing the landscape of nuclear stability. These technologies could undermine nuclear deterrence. Arms control measures and international dialogue are crucial to address the risks these technologies pose to nuclear decision-making and crisis management.

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