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# Nuclear Disarmament: Historical Context, Contemporary Needs and Strategies for Success in the 21st Century

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## ABSTRACT

*Nuclear disarmament has emerged as a critical global initiative aimed at ensuring peace and stability among nations, particularly in the aftermath of the catastrophic events of World War II. The atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki serve as stark reminders of the devastating power of nuclear weapons, prompting world leaders to reconsider their arsenals and seek cooperative frameworks for arms reduction. The urgency of peacebuilding became clear as countries recognized that unchecked nuclear proliferation posed an existential threat not only to individual nations but to humanity as a whole.*

*In this context, the commitment to nuclear disarmament has garnered significant support from a variety of stakeholders, including international organizations, governmental entities, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and grassroots movements. The United Nations, especially through initiatives like the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of nuclear weapons (NPT), has played a leading role in advocating for disarmament. The NPT, established in 1970 and renewed every five years during review conferences, seeks to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons, promote peaceful uses of nuclear energy, and advance global disarmament efforts.*

*Moreover, contemporary discussions around nuclear disarmament increasingly address the intersectionality of disarmament with issues such as climate change, social justice, and human rights. As the global community strives for a safer world, it is essential to keep evolving strategies, ensuring that nuclear disarmament remains a priority on the international agenda. This paper thus explores the multifaceted nature of nuclear disarmament, focusing on its historical context, underlying motivations, tangible outcomes, and the contemporary strategies required to further advance this crucial endeavour.*

**Keywords:** Nuclear disarmament, World War, Peace, United Nations.

## I. INTRODUCTION

The world's nuclear arsenal has significantly diminished, now less than half the size it was during the height of the Cold War. Remarkably, the United States and Russia alone account for

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a staggering 95 percentage of the entire global stockpile, underscoring their dominant roles in the nuclear domain.<sup>2</sup> This dramatic reduction reflects decades of disarmament efforts, yet the concentration of power in these two nations remains a pivotal aspect of global security dynamics. The commitment to nuclear disarmament was clearly outlined in Article VI of the 1968 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). This commitment was reaffirmed during the 1995 NPT Review Conference, where the decision on "Principles and Objectives for Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament" further emphasized this goal. Additionally, the 2000 NPT Review Conference reinforced this commitment through the adoption of the "Thirteen Practical Steps" detailed in the conference's final documents, underscoring the ongoing international efforts toward achieving disarmament. Official data on the status of nuclear stockpiles is scarce, and no authoritative international mechanism exists to accurately measure or verify the number of active, reserve, or pending dismantlement warheads. Furthermore, for meaningful progress in nuclear disarmament, nations with potential nuclear capabilities must work together on verification, enforcement, and maintaining stability within the nuclear landscape.

## **II. A 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY RETROSPECTIVE: THE HISTORY OF NUCLEAR DISARMAMENT**

In the late 1930s, unprecedented technological advancements paved the way for the creation of nuclear weapons, marking a significant milestone in human history. During World War II, in 1942, the United States and its allies launched the Manhattan Project, a secret research initiative aimed at developing nuclear weapons. This effort was driven by the fear that their adversaries might produce such weapons first and gain a decisive advantage in the war.<sup>3</sup> The advent of nuclear weapons marked the onset of the nuclear age, fundamentally altering the course of world history. Throughout the Cold War, the intensifying rivalry between the USSR and the USA significantly increased the likelihood of a nuclear confrontation, which could have led to unprecedented destruction and profound tragedy. On July 29, 1957, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) was established to promote the regulated use of nuclear technology and ensure its safe application.

On October 15, 1962, a U.S. military reconnaissance aircraft identified Soviet nuclear missiles being installed in Cuba, just a few hundred miles from the coast of Florida. This discovery led to a tense standoff as the U.S. Navy blockaded Cuba headed by Fidel Castro, demanding the removal of the missiles. After several days of high-stakes negotiations, Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev agreed to dismantle the missiles in exchange for a formal pledge from the United

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<sup>2</sup> François Carrel-Billiard & Christine Wing, Nuclear Disarmament, in Nuclear Energy, Non-Proliferation, and Disarmament: Briefing Notes for the 2010 NPT Review Conference (Int'l Peace Inst. 2010).

<sup>3</sup> The History of Nuclear Proliferation' (World 101) 2010

States not to invade Cuba. In a secret side agreement, the U.S. also agreed to withdraw some of its own missiles from Turkey, though this part of the deal was not made public at the time. This episode, known as the **Cuban Missile Crisis**, brought the world to the brink of nuclear war and highlighted the delicate balance of power during the Cold War.<sup>4</sup>

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, global opposition to nuclear weapons grew significantly. During this period, the major nuclear powers, the Soviet Union and the United States, began to scale back their stockpiles of nuclear weapons. Meanwhile, some developing countries, such as India, pursued nuclear capabilities for strategic defense purposes. On February 14, 1967, Latin America achieved a significant milestone by becoming the first region to establish a nuclear weapon-free zone with the opening of the Tlatelolco Treaty for signature.<sup>5</sup> In May 1974, India carried out its inaugural nuclear test, codenamed Smiling Buddha. This event marked India as the first nation to conduct a nuclear test outside of the five recognized nuclear powers under NPT. In 1998, Pakistan conducted its first successful nuclear test, establishing itself as a nuclear-armed nation. After the fall of the Soviet Union, Ukraine, Belarus, and Kazakhstan retained the nuclear weapons on their territories. Only three former Soviet republics, along with South Africa, voluntarily relinquished their nuclear stockpiles. They also joined the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and declared themselves as non-nuclear weapon states.<sup>6</sup> In 2003, North Korea withdrew from the NPT and, four years later, announced that it had successfully conducted its first nuclear test.

The Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT) emerged after a two-year negotiation process and was subsequently opened for signature at the United Nations. This treaty prohibits any nuclear activity intended to test new weapons, making such projects illegal. However, the binding nature of CTBT remains uncertain, as key nuclear-armed states, including India, China, the United States, and Pakistan, have yet to sign or ratify the treaty. In 2015, after years of negotiations, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) was finalized, with the United States, Russia, Germany, China, France, the United Kingdom, and the European Union reaching an agreement. After Iran consented to limit its nuclear program and subject its nuclear assets to significantly stricter monitoring than the basic safeguards set by the International Atomic Energy Agency, the United States and other nations eased financial penalties imposed on Iran. The United Nations ratified the Treaty on the Prohibition of nuclear weapons on July 17, 2017,

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<sup>4</sup> Michael Hankins, 'The Cuban Missile Crisis' 2023

<sup>5</sup> Ibid

<sup>6</sup> Isha Anand, The Legality of the Use of Nuclear Weapons in Light of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) or Nuke Ban Treaty, [2023] JCLJ.

marking the first legally binding agreement aimed at nuclear disarmament.<sup>7</sup> The history of nuclear disarmament is complex and extensive, yet every initiative has been driven by the pursuit of global peace and stability. Collaborative efforts continue to be made to deter nations from incorporating dangerous nuclear weapons into their strategic plans.

### **III. ETHICAL AND DIPLOMATIC IMPERATIVES OF NUCLEAR DISARMAMENT**

In the modern era, efforts to advance nuclear disarmament are largely driven by humanitarian imperatives to mitigate the harmful effects of nuclear weapons and prevent similar accidents.<sup>8</sup> The term "humanitarian imperatives" is frequently employed by contemporary anti-nuclear movements that seek to create a more peaceful environment for future generations and protect them from the devastating and long-lasting effects of nuclear weapons, which have the potential to harm countless generations.<sup>9</sup> Nuclear-armed states often hesitate to relinquish their nuclear arsenals due to concerns that their absence might lead to a loss of strategic power, a possibility they cannot entirely dismiss. Examining the ethical, diplomatic, and humanitarian aspects of the issue can provide further clarity.

In 2024 August 6 on the eve of 69<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Hiroshima Atomic Bombing Incident, the IFRC and ICRC jointly declared a statement which reiterates the humanitarian imperative to stop spreading nuclear atrocities.<sup>10</sup>

Numerous international figures have echoed this statement, including Archbishop Desmond Tutu, who was the holder of Esteemed Nobel Prize for peace has also lent his voice to this sentiment. Many scholars and intellectuals have noted that the past seven decades have witnessed an unprecedented era of relative peace and stability in modern history. This prolonged period of calm coincides with the era of nuclear deterrence, leading some to suggest that the threat of mutually assured destruction has, in fact, contributed to the maintenance of international stability, making it more than just a mere coincidence.<sup>11</sup> Achieving nuclear disarmament requires a prolonged and incremental process of trust-building measures between nuclear-armed states and non-nuclear states, fostering a gradual and reciprocal reduction in

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<sup>7</sup> Isha Anand, *The Legality of the Use of Nuclear Weapons in Light of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) or Nuke Ban Treaty*, [2023] JCLJ.

<sup>8</sup> Arielle Denis, *Banning Nuclear Weapons: An African Perspective*, Int'l Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (2014).

<sup>9</sup> Henry Shue, *Liberalism: The Impossibility of Justifying Weapons of Mass Destruction*, in *Ethics and Weapons of Mass Destruction: Religious and Secular Perspectives* 136 (Sohail H. Hashmi & Steven P. Lee eds., Cambridge Univ. Press 2004).

<sup>10</sup> Tadateru Konoe and Peter Maurer, 'Remembering Hiroshima: Nuclear Disarmament is a Humanitarian Imperative', [2014] statement, ICRC

<sup>11</sup> Thomas E. Doyle II, *Moral and Political Necessities for Nuclear Disarmament: An Applied Ethical Analysis*, [2015] JSTOR.

nuclear arsenals. These steps are vital in bridging the trust deficit among nuclear-armed states, thereby transforming their verbal commitments to disarmament into tangible actions and practical progress.<sup>12</sup> The concept of nuclear disarmament is compelling due to its clear and strong moral and humanitarian foundation. It is rooted in the belief that the existence of nuclear weapons poses an unacceptable risk to all of humanity, threatening not only immediate and catastrophic loss of life but also long-term environmental devastation and global instability.

#### **IV. ADVANCING NUCLEAR DISARMAMENT: THE NEXT CRUCIAL STEPS**

History has witnessed numerous milestones in nuclear development, including tests, exercises, and reductions. However, the continued existence and potential use of nuclear weapons indicate that significant progress is still needed to achieve a world free of nuclear threats. Treaties and international organizations have made substantial contributions to reducing the number of nuclear weapons, but there remains room for further action. Determining the additional steps necessary to protect our international community from nuclear threats is an urgent and ongoing concern. As we delve deeper into the path toward achieving the larger goal, the following steps warrant careful consideration.

**Adopting a no-first-use policy;** The core purpose of nuclear weapons is to serve as a deterrent against potential nuclear attacks from other nations. This policy helps mitigate the risk of miscalculations during emergencies and prevents minor issues from escalating into major nuclear conflicts. Policies like this help to make the world safer by setting clear rules for the use of nuclear weapons. It makes a country's approach to nuclear threats more predictable and reduce the fear of immediate nuclear attacks. Moreover, by focusing on non-nuclear deterrents and defense strategies, countries can put more resources into strengthening their conventional military forces and approaches. This helps improve overall security without depending on nuclear threats. Such a policy can also enhance diplomatic relations by lowering the perceived threat of nuclear conflict, which encourages a more cooperative and friendly international atmosphere.<sup>13</sup> India and China are the only countries with an exclusive no first use nuclear policy. However, India's NFU policy includes exceptions in the event of a chemical or biological attack.<sup>14</sup> On the other hand, the fundamental principle of India's nuclear policy has always been its commitment towards international peace and stability.

**Centralization of authority in a single individual;** Taking the United States as a case in point,

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<sup>12</sup> Review Conference of the Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons Final Document (2000) Geneva, Switzerland: United Nations.

<sup>13</sup> No-First-Use Policy Explained: What is a "No-First-Use" Nuclear Policy? (2020) Union of Concerned Scientists.

<sup>14</sup> 'A world without nuclear weapons' [2023] Global Zero

the decision to use nuclear weapons rests solely with the President. Once the President decides, no one has the power to overrule or prevent that decision, highlighting the immense responsibility and authority carried by the office.<sup>15</sup> The core advantage of this concentration of power is its clear and undeniable accountability. When accountability is present, the tendency to use nuclear weapons, even in times of grave crisis, would be considerably reduced. Moreover, sole authority in decision-making will lead to a more consistent nuclear policy, avoiding potential conflicts that can arise from differing opinions in a more distributed decision-making process. This approach will contribute to the success of a clearer and more consistent nuclear strategy.

**De Alerting<sup>16</sup> nuclear weapons;** De-alerting involves making temporary adjustments to nuclear weapons and their systems to make them less readily deployable in combat. The aim is to extend the time required to launch these weapons, thereby reducing the risk of a hasty or accidental strike. De-alerting can offer a crucial buffer between rapid decision-making and the development of diplomatic solutions during a crisis. This delay can be a vital safeguard, helping to prevent the situation from escalating into a dangerous nuclear conflict.

**Agreements of International Nature;** Currently, a total of nine countries possess nuclear weapons. To reduce the risk of nuclear attacks, it is crucial to implement significant changes in the domestic policies of these nations. Additionally, fostering mutual cooperation and developing policies that minimize the likelihood of nuclear weapon use during crises are essential. Entering into binding international agreements could potentially lower the immediate risk of nuclear attacks. Additionally, such agreements can build trust and cooperation among countries, which will ultimately contribute to international peace and stability.

**Efficient allocation of Resources;** The development of nuclear energy and weapons is costly. Instead of allocating more resources to this area, directing investment towards economic and other developmental sectors could lead to greater progress for nations.<sup>17</sup> Prioritizing investments in sectors such as social welfare, community development, education, healthcare, and infrastructure can significantly enhance living standards and overall quality of life. These areas should be given precedence over the development of nuclear weapons, which are primarily intended for deterrence due to their highly destructive nature.

These are only primary steps toward reducing the risk of nuclear weapons. Achieving this goal

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<sup>15</sup> 'Whose Finger Is on the Button? Nuclear Launch Authority in the United States and Other Nations' [2017] Union of concerned scientists.

<sup>16</sup> 'Nuclear Weapons Solutions' [2020] Union of concerned scientists

<sup>17</sup> Rethinking Land-Based Nuclear Missiles Sensible Risk-Reduction Practices for US ICBMs [2020] Union of concerned scientists.

is a lengthy process that requires mutual coordination and a genuine commitment to global peace and security. Preventive measures to avoid the use of nuclear weapons by nuclear-armed states must be carefully monitored and managed. A single lapse in decision-making could have devastating consequences for the entire world. To address the evolving needs of international security, strategies must adapt accordingly. International treaties play a crucial role in facilitating peaceful dialogue and communication between nations. Strengthening these treaties can help mitigate the risk of unforeseen nuclear attacks. Greater transparency in nuclear policies will foster disarmament by providing nations with insight into each other's nuclear strategies. Worldwide arms control initiatives are in place, and actively supporting these efforts signifies a strong commitment to disarmament.

In this era of Transformation and unpredictability nations must show more commitment towards global peace and security. It is imperative to accelerate the movement towards the complete disarmament of nuclear weapons for the sake of international peace and global stability.

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