



LET'S BE REALISTS

Eleven answers to common questions
and comments about nuclear weapons



ICAN 2017
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Cover photo: An unarmed Trident II D5 missile launches from the Ohio-class ballistic missile submarine USS Nebraska (SSBN 739) off the coast of California. U.S. Navy photo by Mass Communication Specialist 1st Class Ronald Gutridge, released into public domain.

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#1

“Nuclear weapons deter war, they keep us safe.”

It is often claimed that nuclear weapons deter war, preserve “strategic stability” or “keep us safe.”¹ But there is no evidence for this beyond the mere correlation of the existence of nuclear weapons with the fact that a third world war has not (yet) occurred. Countries have conducted acts of aggression against countries with nuclear weapons.

Argentina invaded the British overseas territory, the Falkland Islands in 1982, as one example. An arsenal of thousands of nuclear weapons did not protect the United States against the tragic 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks or deter terrorists from the attack in the first place. It is naïve and unrealistic to expect nuclear weapons to deter or defend against all aggression.

What’s more, if nuclear weapons really did reliably deter war or keep people safe, why wouldn’t nuclear-armed states encourage more countries to acquire them?

On the contrary, most governments know that nuclear weapons are dangerous, destabilising, indiscriminate, and potentially catastrophic.

A hundred and ninety-one countries have joined the [1968 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty](#) (NPT) which prohibits the acquisition of nuclear weapons.² The United States, Russia, China, France, and the United Kingdom have willingly accepted a legal obligation to negotiate disarmament (Article VI of the NPT) in exchange for nearly all other countries accepting a legal obligation never to acquire nuclear weapons.

Nuclear weapons do not keep anyone safe; they threaten [massive, indiscriminate](#) harm to millions of people.³

“No country will ever actually use nuclear weapons – they are just for deterrence.”

The theory of nuclear deterrence requires that the threat of use of nuclear weapons be credible. For this reason, over one thousand nuclear weapons were deployed on high alert in 2017.⁴

We know about a [disturbing number of accidents](#), close calls and near catastrophes since 1945; presumably many more remain secret.⁵ [History shows](#) that conflicts can escalate rapidly and unpredictably, national leaders do not always act rationally or prudently, communications can break down, and high tensions tend to amplify misunderstandings.⁶ Deterrence is often given the credit for the long record of non-use of nuclear weapons, but much of it is [due solely to good luck](#) – which cannot be expected to last forever.⁷

The risk of nuclear weapons being used, whether deliberately, by accident, or miscalculation, is real. It literally could happen at any moment. Worse, many [experts assess](#) that the risk of use of nuclear weapons is increasing, [due in part](#) to the increased speed of warfare triggered by the expanded use of artificial intelligence by the military.^{8,9} Unless nuclear weapons are eliminated, sooner or later they will be used – and the consequences will be catastrophic.

#3

“The genie is out of the bottle. You can’t eliminate nuclear weapons if the technological know-how to create nuclear weapons still exists.”

If the genie is out of the bottle and the technological know-how to create nuclear weapons exists, why do only nine countries have nuclear weapons? Many countries could make nuclear weapons but have undertaken not to do so – and the non-diversion of nuclear materials used for nuclear energy to weapons is verified by a highly effective [international system of safeguards](#) run by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).¹⁰ This system could be adapted and extended to all countries once those with nuclear weapons have made the choice to disarm.

More generally, dangerous technology can be and has been successfully controlled. Chemical and biological weapons have been outlawed, as have anti-personnel landmines, cluster bombs and blinding laser weapons. Useful and economically important industrial chemicals that proved to be health hazards or dangerous environmental pollutants have been banned and their use stopped worldwide. It is entirely possible and nuclear weapons are no different. There is nothing magic about them.

“No country will give up its nuclear weapons if other countries still have them.”

Each country with nuclear weapons should give them up because of the catastrophic humanitarian consequences of their use; from this perspective the question of whether or not other countries have nuclear weapons is irrelevant. Just as a government would not say, “why should we give up torture and slavery if they still exist in other countries?” governments should not insist on retaining an ability to inflict massive civilian casualties and environmental damage just because a handful of other countries still do so.

Only nine countries have nuclear weapons, and around 30 other countries claim to depend on them through military alliances. This means that over 150 countries have decided that they can provide for their national security without nuclear weapons, even if other countries have them.¹¹

Kazakhstan, South Africa, and Ukraine once possessed nuclear weapons but chose to give them up. Brazil, Sweden, and Switzerland, among others, started developing nuclear weapons but decided not to proceed. There is nothing special or unique about the threats that nuclear-armed countries and their allies face that can only be dealt with by reliance on nuclear weapons.

#5

“Giving up nuclear weapons would only work in democracies. Authoritarian regimes will never join a treaty banning nuclear weapons.”

As previously explained, it is a myth that nuclear weapons provide security for any country – whether it is a democracy or an authoritarian regime. Regardless of the governance structure of a country, nuclear weapons simultaneously pose a security threat and do nothing to protect that country from real modern-day security challenges, like cyberattacks or climate change. All countries have little to lose (and much to gain in terms of freeing up resources) by giving up their nuclear weapons.

While there are good reasons for giving up nuclear weapons regardless of what other countries do, countries may decide to disarm together. Five nuclear-armed states have already accepted a legal obligation to pursue disarmament negotiations under the NPT. It is possible, for example, for two or more nuclear-armed countries to join the UN Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW, see page 23) together, and jointly negotiate the disarmament plan required by Article 4. While challenging, there is nothing unique or particularly special about such a task; it is a matter of aligning interests and incentives – the bread and butter of multilateral diplomacy.

All nuclear-armed states – whether democratic or authoritarian – will disarm when they calculate that it is in their national interest to do so. The aim of ICAN (and the TPNW) is to influence this calculation; public pressure is one way of doing this, multilateral diplomacy and building new global norms are others. All tools, channels and actors have a role to play.

#6

“Giving up nuclear weapons will mean getting more conventional weapons and increasing military expenditure.”

All nine nuclear-armed states already have large, formidable and expensive conventional military forces so it is not evident that their possession of nuclear weapons spares them from having to invest in conventional military capacity. There is no magic role that nuclear weapons play “in defence” of these countries. If they chose, these countries could assure their security the same way that other countries do.

There is no evidence that this would cost more; given the [vast amounts](#) that the nuclear-armed states spend on their arsenals, there is good reason to believe it would cost considerably less.¹² There is also no need for some other weapon to take the place of nuclear weapons. Nuclear weapons have catastrophic humanitarian consequences and all nuclear-armed states would be better off getting rid of them.

#7

“You will never know if a country has actually eliminated nuclear weapons, some countries will hide some weapons to use later.”

How would we know if, say, France or Pakistan had actually eliminated their nuclear weapons and did not still secretly possess any? The same way we know that Iran, Brazil, South Africa, Japan, Sweden and over 180 other countries do not possess any nuclear weapons: regular inspections and thorough accounting for all fissile material through the IAEA safeguards system. This system has successfully kept nuclear weapons out of the hands of most countries for over 50 years. There is no reason to think it would not work for the remaining nine countries once they decide to eliminate their nuclear weapons.

And the process of verifiably eliminating nuclear weapons is not as difficult as it may seem. Independent, scientific [experts have mapped out](#) credible and accurate techniques for how nuclear-armed countries could verifiably and reliably disarm.¹³

#8

“A treaty banning nuclear weapons does not matter if none of the countries with nuclear weapons have joined. It is useless to push for disarmament in a forum where there are no nuclear-armed states.”

Ironically, the best answer about the impact of a ban on nuclear weapons on nuclear-armed states comes from the nuclear-armed states themselves. They have bitterly opposed the TPNW from the outset; today they are still lobbying countries around the world not to join the treaty and [even badgering the Pope](#) against speaking out against nuclear weapons.¹⁴

Why? Why would they care about a treaty that, [in the words](#) of a U.S. ambassador, “will not reduce nuclear weapon stockpiles by even one single weapon”?¹⁵ The answer is that despite their public claims that the TPNW will be ineffective, they understood the profound potential impact of the treaty right from the beginning. They realised that the TPNW would delegitimise and stigmatise nuclear weapons, including by increasing domestic and international pressure for their elimination, restricting financial investment in their production and maintenance, and – perhaps worst of all – making nuclear disarmament a global humanitarian responsibility shared by all countries, rather than the

exclusive strategic concern of a small club of nuclear weapon possessors.

Thus, we have the bizarre spectacle of nuclear-armed states trying to convince others that the TPNW will simultaneously have no effect and be highly dangerous and destabilising. The United States [told the United Nations](#) that a ban on nuclear weapons would “risk creating a very unstable security environment, where misperceptions or miscalculations could escalate crises with unintended and unforeseen consequences, not excluding the possible use of a nuclear weapon.”¹⁶ [Russia argued](#) that the TPNW would risk “plunging the world into chaos and dangerous unpredictability.”¹⁷

However, in October 2016 the United States [sent a memo](#) to its NATO partners explaining what it really thought about the TPNW: among other things, the treaty “could impact non-parties as well as parties, and could even have an impact prior to its entry into force”, “could make it impossible to undertake nuclear planning or training ... or nuclear-related transit through territorial airspace or seas” and “could – and [is] designed by ban advocates to – destroy the basis for US nuclear extended deterrence”.¹⁸ And there you have it: why the TPNW matters, concisely explained by a nuclear-armed state.

#9

“The military-industrial complex and the arms industry will prevent any serious progress on nuclear disarmament. It is unrealistic to expect to be able to overcome such powerful economic interests.”

There are indeed economic and commercial factors working against nuclear disarmament. Nuclear weapons are big business! It is only natural that people who stand to lose money if nuclear weapon stockpiles are reduced or eliminated will oppose any moves in that direction. The same challenge is found in many social and environmental causes. But elite economic interests can be overcome.

Prohibiting nuclear weapons under international law is a key step in persuading banks, financial institutions, and other investors to divest from corporations involved in producing or maintaining nuclear weapons. [Annual research](#) shows that a number of financial institutions are already choosing to divest from nuclear weapons.¹⁹

The TPNW's foundation in humanitarian principles and international humanitarian law, and its focus on the catastrophic effects of any use of nuclear weapons also helps to counter economic arguments for nuclear weapons.

Preserving jobs and boosting economic prosperity is something all politicians like to do (or at least to talk about doing), but defending the manufacture of instruments of mass murder and indiscriminate destruction as a job creation scheme or regional economic stimulus starts to look like a grotesque perversion of responsible government. Many corporations, too, will find that the stigmatising effect of the TPNW becomes an increasingly unwelcome burden on their public image, and eventually will move to distance themselves from any business connected with nuclear weapons. Public awareness-raising and consumer boycott campaigns can accelerate this process.

#10

“The Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) are the central treaties for pursuing nuclear disarmament. We should focus our efforts on those, as the TPNW risks weakening both.”

It is important to understand that the TPNW is not an alternative to or substitute for the NPT, CTBT or other treaties and approaches. It is an addition. It is intended to “fill the legal gap” and take its place among the range of instruments and processes required for nuclear disarmament.

The TPNW [reaffirms in its preamble](#) “that the full and effective implementation of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, which serves as the cornerstone of the nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation regime, has a vital role to play in promoting international peace and security” and recognises “the vital importance of the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty and its verification regime as a core element of the nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation regime”.²⁰

Contrary to the unsubstantiated claim by TPNW opponents, the TPNW does not “undermine” the NPT,

on safeguards or anything else.²¹ TPNW states parties see joining the TPNW as a means of implementing their NPT Article VI obligations. The TPNW's safeguards provisions are at least as strong as those of the NPT, and in some respects stronger.²²

Joining the TPNW does not stop countries from working with others to implement the NPT and to bring the CTBT into force. Nor does it stop countries from pursuing a fissile material treaty, nuclear risk reduction measures, verification exercises, a more stable international environment, or any other steps that may contribute to progress on nuclear disarmament. In fact, leading negotiators of the TPNW are actively engaged in pursuing these complementary disarmament steps.

Note that it is the nuclear-armed states and not the TPNW supporters that are blocking entry into force of the CTBT, obstructing the start of fissile material treaty negotiations in the Conference on Disarmament, refusing to discuss de-alerting measures, or withdrawing from nuclear arms control treaties.

#11

**“What about terrorists?
Your approach has nothing to say
about terrorist groups getting
nuclear weapons.”**

It is very difficult to build a nuclear weapon from scratch.²³ One way for a terrorist group to obtain a nuclear weapon would be to get key components or a complete warhead from a nuclear-armed state. The fewer nuclear-armed states that exist and the fewer nuclear weapons they possess, the harder it becomes for terrorist groups to acquire a nuclear weapon. When nuclear weapons are totally prohibited and abolished, and all countries are subject to IAEA safeguards, it will be almost impossible for a terrorist group to get a nuclear weapon. Accepting the continued retention of nuclear weapons by some states means accepting a higher risk of nuclear terrorism.

Endnotes

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About ICAN and the Author

The International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN) is a global campaign working to mobilise people in all countries to inspire, persuade and pressure their governments to sign and ratify the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons. ICAN is comprised of more than 500 partner organisations in over 100 countries. More information about ICAN can be found at www.icanw.org.

The lead author, Richard Lennane has long experience in multilateral disarmament and arms control, as an Australian diplomat, a United Nations official, and an NGO activist. Richard worked in the United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs from 2001–2013, and was head of the Biological Weapons Convention Implementation Support Unit from its creation in 2007. From 2014–2016, he headed the provocative and controversial nuclear disarmament NGO ‘Wildfire’, and from 2016–2020, he was Executive Director of the Geneva Disarmament Platform.

About the UN Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW)

On 7 July 2017 – following a decade of advocacy by ICAN and its partners – an overwhelming majority of the world’s nations adopted a landmark global agreement to ban nuclear weapons, known officially as the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW).

The TPNW prohibits nations from developing, testing, producing, manufacturing, transferring, possessing, stockpiling, using or threatening to use nuclear weapons, or allowing nuclear weapons to be stationed on their territory. It also prohibits them from assisting, encouraging or inducing anyone to engage in any of these activities.

A nation that possesses nuclear weapons may join the treaty, so long as it agrees to destroy them in accordance with a legally binding, time-bound plan. Similarly, a nation that hosts another nation’s nuclear weapons on its territory may join, so long as it agrees to remove them by a specified deadline.

Nations are obliged to provide assistance to all victims of the use and testing of nuclear weapons and to take measures for the remediation of contaminated environments. The preamble acknowledges the harm suffered as a result of nuclear weapons, including the disproportionate impact on women and girls, and on indigenous peoples around the world.

The TPNW will enter into force once 50 countries ratify or accede to it.

