



United  
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# THE UN'S ROLE IN REDUCING NUCLEAR WEAPONS PROLIFERATION

“ Nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation are not utopian ideals. They are critical to global peace and security. We have a legal and moral obligation to rid our world of nuclear tests and nuclear weapons... A world free of nuclear weapons will be safer and more prosperous.”

— UN SECRETARY-GENERAL BAN KI-MOON

## > WHAT HAS BEEN THE UNITED NATION'S HISTORICAL ROLE IN THIS MATTER?

The elimination of nuclear weapons has been at the forefront of the United Nations' agenda since its inception. The organisation began immediately to address the nuclear problem, creating a commission to deal with problems relating to atomic energy in its first resolution adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1946. Today, the United Nations focuses on fostering multilateral agreements aimed at halting nuclear proliferation and testing whilst continuing to promote complete nuclear disarmament.

Despite the fact that nuclear weapons have only ever been used twice in warfare history — Hiroshima and Nagasaki — there are around 22,000 nuclear weapons that remain globally and it would take only one of these to cause irreversible and catastrophic damage, potentially leading to existential risk. The United Nations asserts that nuclear disarmament is the best protection for its global citizens but recognises that it has been extremely difficult to achieve.

Given that over half of the world's population currently live in nuclear countries or ones that form part of a nuclear alliance, the United Nations continues to place nuclear non-proliferation at the top of its agenda. Both multilateral and bilateral treaties have been implemented in an effort to prevent nuclear proliferation and testing including the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, Partial Test Ban Treaty, Nuclear Suppliers Group and the Missile Technology Control Program as well as distinct bilateral agreements between individual nations.

## > WHAT IS THE NON-PROLIFERATION TREATY?

The Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) is an international agreement aimed at preventing the creation and spread of nuclear weapons and associated technology whilst aiming to promote the peaceful use of nuclear energy. The NPT focuses on both of these goals to further its overall goal of general and complete nuclear disarmament.

Opened for signature in 1968, the NPT entered into force in 1970 and was then extended indefinitely in May 1995. Today, 191 parties have joined the NPT including the five nuclear-weapon states which the Treaty also openly recognises — The United States, France, Russia, United Kingdom and China who also make up the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council.

As part of the Treaty, a safeguards system has been established under the responsibility of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) as a means to ensure compliance with the Treaty by undertaking inspections. These inspections impede the ability for nations to divert fissile material for weapons use whilst the Treaty advocates for cooperation and equal access to technology of all State parties.

## > WHO DEALS WITH NUCLEAR NON-PROLIFERATION?

The United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs (UNODA) is the key department within the United Nations to help promote and strengthen the nuclear non-proliferation norm by working with the General Assembly and other bodies. UNODA helps to create dialogue and transparency in regard to military matters whilst also providing impartial and up-to-date information surrounding multilateral disarmament issues to Member States. UNODA works with a variety of organisations and bodies including civil society, research and educational institutes and non-governmental organisations to help encourage and promote nuclear non-proliferation and complete disarmament as well as arms disarmament more generally.

UN Photo/Paulo Filgueiras



## > NUCLEAR-WEAPON-FREE ZONES

Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zones (NWFZ) are distinct areas or zones around the world which have been agreed upon under a treaty or convention by states themselves to be in “total absence of nuclear weapons” as defined by the UN General Assembly. These zones are an important part of nuclear non-proliferation and the wider aim at complete disarmament as they act as a regional effort to solidify these norms.

The UN Disarmament Commission has outlined a set of recommended principles and guidelines for states to follow in the establishment of NWFZ: emphasising the need for states to arrive at these arrangements themselves; nuclear-weapon states should be consulted on agreements in order to facilitate their signature and ratification as not to threaten or use nuclear weapons against nations that are party to the Treaty; and finally NWFZ should not prevent the use of nuclear science and technology for peaceful purposes.

## > WHERE ARE WE NOW?

Despite the ongoing effort by the United Nations for a nuclear weapon-free world through its treaties and forums, there remains significant challenges to nuclear non-proliferation.

The 2015 Review Conference on the Treaty of Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons saw the failure of nations to come to an agreement in regard to the draft Final Document. This failure to reach consensus is highly concerning as we see heightening tensions in the global arena surrounding nuclear weapons use.

The United Nations is continually adopting resolutions which call for negotiations on a nuclear weapons convention (NWC) which would provide a global treaty prohibiting the threat or use of nuclear weapons as well as the establishment of a phased programme for complete disarmament. Over 130 countries have supported these resolutions but unfortunately negotiations have not been able to begin due to a lack of support from nuclear-armed states and those under extended nuclear deterrence as well as a lack of momentum for the Conference on Disarmament to undertake any significant work.

UN Photo/Eskinder Debebe



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