In December 2013, the UN General Assembly (UNGA) passed Resolution 68/32, declaring September 26 the International Day for the Total Elimination of Nuclear Weapons. [1] This day falls on the anniversary of the 1983 Soviet nuclear false alarm incident, when nuclear war almost broke out due to a malfunction in the Soviet early warning system that falsely detected a U.S. ballistic missile attack. [2] To raise public awareness of the threat nuclear weapons pose to humanity and to promote disarmament, the UNGA commemorates this day by convening an annual meeting to engage the public and their leaders on the long-standing ambition of eliminating these weapons.

Background on Nuclear Diplomacy

Global nuclear disarmament remains one of the UN's oldest goals. It was in the UNGA's very first resolution, passed on January 24, 1946, that the UN Security Council (UNSC) resolved to establish a Commission to “deal with the problems raised by the discovery of atomic energy.” [3] Resolution 1(I) charged this Commission with “the elimination from national armaments of atomic weapons” and weapons adaptable to mass destruction, and to control atomic energy “to ensure its use only for peaceful purposes.” [4]

These ideals were codified in 1970, when the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) entered into force. The NPT, a landmark international treaty that remains the cornerstone of non-proliferation efforts today, has been joined by 191 states.

It is the only binding commitment with the goal of nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament endorsed by the nuclear-weapon armed states: United States, Russia (formerly the Soviet Union), the United Kingdom, France, and China. [5]

In 1978, the first Special Session of the UN General Assembly Devoted to Disarmament (SSOD) recognized that, within the field of global disarmament, nuclear disarmament should be prioritized. [7] The final document of the 1978 SSOD included a Declaration of Principles that singled out the nuclear-weapon states as primarily responsible for nuclear disarmament. [8]

Slowed progress on nuclear disarmament by the five nuclear-armed states in recent years has inspired additional multilateral engagement on the nuclear weapons issue. In 2021, led by non-nuclear-weapon states through the Humanitarian Initiative under the NPT, the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) entered into force after five years of negotiations. The TPNW is another landmark endeavor in nuclear diplomacy, as it is the first legally-binding treaty to comprehensively and explicitly prohibit nuclear weapons. [9] Today, there are 66 state parties and 23 signatories to the Treaty. [10]

Due to concern over Iran’s enrichment of uranium being in violation of the NPT, Germany and the European Union joined Iran and the P5 in signing the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2015, where Iran agreed to dismantle its nuclear stockpile in exchange for sanctions relief. Despite Iran’s compliance with the Treaty, the United States withdrew from the JCPOA in 2017. Current negotiations to reinstate the JCPOA are ongoing. Read more [here](https://www.sipri.org/yearbook/2018/07).

[10] https://banmonitor.org/tpnw-status#:~:text=By%20the%20end%20of%202021%2C%20a%20total%20of%2012%20states,Niue%2C%20Tuvalu%2C%20and%20Zambia
The TPNW treaty, a key milestone in the ongoing movement to eliminate nuclear weapons, is opposed by the world’s most powerful nuclear-armed states and their military allies. The United States, Russia, the United Kingdom, France, and China - the permanent members of the UN Security Council, known as the P5 - have actively discouraged states from supporting the TPNW.

In October 2020, the United States sent a letter to signatories of the Treaty on behalf of the P5 and NATO allies, stating to “stand unified in our opposition to the potential repercussions” of the Treaty, and that “we believe that you have made a strategic error and should withdraw your instrument of ratification or accession.” [11] These claims stem from the belief that the TPNW undermines the NPT, even though Article VI of the TPNW stipulates that all state parties are to undertake negotiations in good faith to achieve complete global nuclear disarmament. [12] Despite obstruction by the P5, the TPNW has revived discourse about alternative avenues to nuclear deterrence and presented the international community with a critical opportunity to reevaluate a key element of global security.

U.S. Nuclear Posture

The United States is in possession of 5,428 nuclear warheads, almost half of the world's total inventory of approximately 12,705 warheads.[13] At the beginning of every new presidential administration, the Department of Defense (DoD) typically issues a Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) to articulate the administration’s nuclear “declaratory policy.” [14] The NPR is an official statement explaining the United States' approach to nuclear weapons, outlining the U.S.’ strategy of nuclear deterrence given the current geopolitical context, and informing both domestic and international audiences of U.S. policy. [15]

Contrary to usual timelines, the Biden Administration's NPR has not yet been released. The DoD has so far only distributed a brief, one-page summary of this year's review on March 28, and has not published an unclassified version publicly. [16] The delay is due in part to the war in Ukraine. It may also be a consequence of the Administration's overdue National Security Strategy, as well as lawmakers’ disputes over the cancellation of the development of a proposed nuclear-armed submarine-launched cruise missile (SLCM-N). [17]

[13] Includes deployed strategic, nonstrategic, reserve, and military stockpile warheads.
Historically, the United States has maintained a nuclear weapons policy of “strategic” or “calculated ambiguity” and has not ruled out a “no first use” policy - currently only adopted by China and India [18] - claiming that a policy prohibiting the use of a nuclear weapon first in a conflict “could undermine the U.S. ability to deter Russian, Chinese, and North Korean aggression.” [19] During his candidacy, President Biden pledged to adopt a declaratory policy of “sole purpose,” [20] specifying “the sole purpose of our nuclear arsenal is to deter - and, if necessary, retaliate for - a nuclear attack against the United States and its allies.” [21] However, the DoD’s most recent NPR summary did not include “sole purpose” language, and instead maintained that the “United States would only consider the use of nuclear weapons in extreme circumstances to defend the vital interests of the United States or its allies and partners.” [22]

The United States government will spend $634 billion over the next 10 years to sustain and modernize its nuclear warheads.

The United States’ position of calculated ambiguity and emphasis on strategic deterrence requires the continuous modernization of its nuclear arsenal at a high cost. In 2021, the Congressional Budget Office gave an official estimate that the United States will spend $634 billion over the next 10 years to sustain and modernize its nuclear warheads, delivery systems, and production facilities, a figure 28 percent higher than the estimate in the 10-year plan released in 2019.[23] In addition to upgrading capabilities, the United States, along with all other nuclear-armed states, have been strengthening nuclear rhetoric and more thoroughly integrating nuclear weapons in their military strategies.

The Global Nuclear Arms Race

Substantial progress has been made on global disarmament since the height of the Cold War through bilateral and multilateral agreements. The decline in global inventories is largely due to the United States and Russia’s dismantlement of retired nuclear warheads. Russia and the United States, who own approximately 90 percent of the world’s nuclear arsenal, are still dismantling their previously retired warheads in accordance with bilateral strategic stability agreements. [24] However, the rate of reduction has significantly slowed in the past decade. [25]

[21] https://fas.org/pub-reports/sole-purpose/
[23] https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/USNuclearModernization
On January 3, 2022, the P5 nuclear states released a joint statement reiterating their obligations to promote disarmament and prevent the spread of nuclear weapons as stipulated by the 1970 NPT. Still, nuclear deterrence doctrine remains a central element of all nuclear-armed states’ military strategies, and despite promises to disarm, each of the P5 countries are currently in the process of modernizing and expanding their nuclear capabilities. In fact, modernization efforts are resulting in a projected increase of global nuclear arsenals over the next decade. Non-proliferation efforts were further harmed by Russia’s blocking of the final consensus document at the recent 2022 NPT Review Conference, producing an inconclusive outcome to an overall fragile conference process. The deterioration of U.S.-Russia relations over the past two decades, ongoing modernization, and the escalation of Russia’s war in Ukraine all increase the risk of nuclear conflict. These events signal a dangerous trend away from nuclear diplomacy and arms control.

The International Day for the Total Elimination of Nuclear Weapons was created to energize interest in nuclear non-proliferation efforts. However, since the Day’s inception in 2013, the non-proliferation advocacy community has yet to see marked improvements. Today’s heightened nuclear risk underscores the imperative of nuclear-armed states to act to prevent a potential global catastrophe. To that end, it is critical that nuclear weapons discourse remains focused on the imminent devastating human and ecological costs of nuclear war, rather than how nuclear weapons may improve militaristic capacities. On this International Day for the Total Elimination of Nuclear Weapons, the world is once again reminded of the immense risk posed by the proliferation of nuclear weapons, as well as the potential for diplomatic agreements to reduce and eliminate this universal threat.