Arms racing and the NPT: modernisation of nuclear weapon systems

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All of the nuclear-armed states—including those that are states parties to the NPT—are investing in the expansion, development, or so-called modernisation of their nuclear arsenals. These programmes are not just about “increasing the safety and security” of nuclear weapon systems, which is what the nuclear-armed states claim. The “upgrades” in many cases provide new capabilities to the weapon systems. They also extend the lives of these weapon systems beyond the middle of this century, ensuring that the arms race will continue indefinitely.

China is transitioning from liquid-fueled slow-launching missiles to solid-fuel, quicker-launching road-mobile missiles, to make the force more “useable”. Recently China has also sped up the modernisation of its sea-based strategic force, replacing its first generation ballistic nuclear missile-carrying submarines.¹

France has replaced its sea-launched ballistic missiles for its current class of submarines,² and is also planning to develop new missiles for a new class of submarines.³ It has carried out studies for a next-generation air-launched cruise missile.⁴ Half of its nuclear bomber force has been upgraded so far.

Russia is modernising its main silo- and road-mobile ICBM.⁵ It is also developing a new silo-based ICBM,⁶ and is upgrading its ballistic missile submarine force.⁷ It’s also working on its nuclear attack submarines and nuclear-capable cruise missiles,⁸ as well as its bombers.⁹

The UK parliament voted in favour in July 2016 of renewing its Trident nuclear weapon system. This means that the UK’s Vanguard-class submarines will be replaced with the “Dreadnought”-class of submarines.¹⁰ In 2019, the UK will also make a decision about the design of a new warhead.¹¹

The United States is developing a new class of ballistic missile submarines, a new long-range bomber with nuclear capability, a new air-launched cruise missile, a next-generation land-based ICBM, and a new nuclear-capable tactical fighter aircraft. It will also include work on warheads and nuclear command and control facilities.¹²

More examples, including from non-NPT states parties, can be found in WILPF’s updated study Assuring destruction forever.¹³

The only way to prevent states from modernising their nuclear weapons is to prohibit and eliminate these weapons. In the meantime, NPT states parties are already legally obligated to end the nuclear arms race and achieve nuclear disarmament.

This NPT outcome should reflect the serious concern expressed by many states parties about modernisation and development of nuclear weapon systems, and call for the cessation of such programmes, which violate article VI of the NPT and entrench double standards.

⁵ “Tir d’essai réussi pour le missile nucléaire M51,” L’UsineNouvelle, 1 July 2016;
⁶ “Successful M51 Ballistic Missile Test by French Defense Procurement Agency DGA,” Kiosque, 1 July 2016;
⁹ “Tir d’essai réussi pour le missile nucléaire M51,” L’UsineNouvelle, 1 July 2016;

Hans M. Kristensen and Robert S. Norris, op. cit., p. 120.

Hans M. Kristensen and Robert S. Norris, op. cit., p. 121.

Hans M. Kristensen and Robert S. Norris, op. cit., p. 123.

Hans M. Kristensen and Robert S. Norris, op. cit., p. 122.


Kristensen and Norris, op. cit., p. 49.