Introduction
Ray Acheson

As the chapters in this volume show, all of the nuclear-armed states are modernizing their nuclear arsenals, and some are continuing to expand them.\(^1\) China, the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, France, India, Israel, Pakistan, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States collectively possess approximately 17,300 nuclear weapons.\(^2\) They are preparing to spend an estimated one trillion USD on nuclear weapons over the next decade.\(^3\)

At the same time, social security programmes like food stamps (in the US), Independent Living Fund (in the UK), and other social welfare programmes are significantly or even entirely cut. Despite states’ legal obligations to use resources to ensure the economic, social, and cultural rights of their population, social programmes are the first to be cut in national budgets all over the world, while military expenditure and nuclear weapons spending increases.

While the nuclear-armed states pour grossly inflated sums into nuclear weapons, the fulfillment of disarmament commitments lies fallow. France and the UK have “capped” their arsenals and Russia and the US have somewhat reduced their deployed weapons under the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty. However, their modernization planning and spending undermines the idea that these governments are committed in any way to achieving disarmament. Instead, they have each normalized into their political and economic architectures “smaller but still potentially world-destroying nuclear arsenals,” despite post-Cold War social and political changes that were expected to make nuclear disarmament possible.\(^4\)

The programmes and policies of the nuclear-armed states are designed to perpetuate their possession of these weapons into the indefinite future. Internationally, these governments have backed the interests that sustain these programmes by adopting inflexible political positions against pursuing initiatives to ban and eliminate nuclear weapons, or even to discuss the humanitarian impact of nuclear weapons. They have argued that any activities not explicitly found within the 2010 NPT Action Plan will distract and detract from “progress” on the actions articulated in that plan—which are based on steps that have been on the international agenda since the 1950s.\(^5\) However, most of the incremental steps that have been agreed to have not been implemented. And actions such as modernization have actually resulted in steps backwards.

As laid out in article VI of the NPT, it is the responsibility of all states to pursue effective measures for nuclear disarmament. Failure by the nuclear-armed states to do so must be met with resolve for concrete action by non-nuclear weapon states so as to avoid further entrenchment of the indefinite possession of nuclear weapons.\(^6\) All governments have the responsibility to prevent a humanitarian tragedy.

Above all else, banning and eliminating nuclear weapons is a humanitarian imperative.

The reasons are clear:

- **The immediate effects of even a single nuclear weapon detonation are horrifying and overwhelming.** One detonation will cause tens of thousands of casualties and inflict immediate and irreversible damage to infrastructure, industry, livelihoods, and human lives. The effects will persist over time, devastating human health, the environment, and our economies for years to come. These impacts will wreak havoc with food production and displace entire populations.\(^7\)

- **The existence of nuclear weapons generates great risk.** There have been many instances of near-misses and potential accidental nuclear detonations.\(^8\) There have also been a number of recent reports of the declining operational atmosphere and disturbing behaviour of those in supposed “command and control” of these arsenals.\(^9\) Furthermore, the policies of “nuclear deterrence” and military doctrines of nuclear-armed states and their allies require preparations for the use of nuclear weapons. The potential use of nuclear weapons in a conflict between their possessors or in pre-emptive or retaliatory strikes against others is not a threat of the past.

- **Nuclear weapons waste money.** The money spent on nuclear weapons not only detracts from the resources available to tackle ecological, social, economic, and energy crises, but also reinforces the institutions that benefit from weapons and war. The maintenance and modernization of nuclear weapons undermine development and the achievement of global economic and social equality.

The overwhelming majority of states have rejected nuclear weapons. They do not see them as instruments of security but rather of destruction. Yet unlike the other weapons of mass destruction, nuclear weapons have not been categorically banned. Now is the time to address this anomaly, which has been allowed to persist for far too long.

In 2012, Reaching Critical Will published the first report on global nuclear weapon modernization. This briefing paper provides an update of the summaries of each of the countries covered by that report. A full account of each country’s nuclear weapon programmes can still be found in the 2012 report at www.reachingcriticalwill.org.