In the middle of the 2010 nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) Review Conference, the Obama administration submitted a “Section 1251” report to the US Senate, attached to its request for the Senate’s consent to ratify the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) the US had signed with the Russian government. Included in this report was a commitment to spend 180 billion USD on the modernization of the US nuclear weapons complex: its warheads, its delivery systems, and its production infrastructure. The report outlined a comprehensive plan to (1) maintain nuclear weapon delivery systems; (2) sustain a “safe, secure, and reliable” US nuclear weapons stockpile; and (3) modernize the nuclear weapons complex.3

Inside the United Nations, where state parties to the NPT were gathered to develop a comprehensive plan for implementing the Treaty—including the disarmament obligations contained in article VI—not a word was said about this report. The day before the report was released, the South African and Irish delegations had pointed out that arsenal reductions, such as the modest ones contained in New START, do not automatically translate to a commitment to nuclear disarmament. They and many others, notably the Non-Aligned Movement, have over the years argued that modernization of nuclear weapons is contrary to obligations to disarm. Yet on 13 May 2010, when the first US president with a “vision” of a world free of nuclear weapons committed his administration to providing billions upon billions of dollars to extending the life of the US nuclear weapon enterprise for the indefinite future, there was no outrage in the conference rooms.

In the meantime, throughout the Review Conference the nuclear weapon states had been insisting that fulfillment of article VI of the NPT is everyone else’s responsibility. In their joint statement, they continued to put disarmament off into the distant future, arguing that other states need to first “create the conditions” that they deem necessary to fulfill their own obligations under article VI. They argued, “All other States must contribute to fulfilling these disarmament goals by creating the necessary security environment, resolving regional tensions, promoting collective security, and making progress in all the areas of disarmament.”4

However, as the Brazilian ambassador pointed out, the vast majority of non-nuclear weapon states “have never put their non-proliferation duties on hold, conditioning their fulfillment to indefinite, more favourable international conditions.”5 The international community cannot leave it up to the nuclear weapon states to decide when they are ready to disarm. Allowing these states to retain their nuclear weapon capabilities, accepting their reliance on nuclear weapons as a form of security and defence, and remaining silent when they develop new weapons and facilities might be the greatest challenge to international peace and stability that the world is facing.6

As of March 2012, the nuclear weapon possessors—China, Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, France, India, Israel, Pakistan, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States—are estimated to possess approximately 19,500 nuclear weapons.7 Furthermore, the United States is not the only one to have plans to modernize its nuclear complex—all of the nuclear weapon possessors are engaged in modernization activities.

This study explores these nuclear weapon modernization programmes in depth. Non-governmental researchers and analysts, leading and knowledgeable experts about nuclear weapons programmes and policies, provide information on the plans of China (Hui Zhang), France (Hans Kristensen), India (M.V. Ramana), Israel (Merav Datan), Pakistan (Zia Mian), Russia (Pavel Podvig), the United Kingdom (John Ainslie), and the United States (Andrew Lichterman).8 They also analyze the costs of nuclear weapons in the context of the economic crisis, austerity measures, and rising challenges in meeting human and environmental needs. Combined, the nuclear weapon possessors have spent approximately one hundred billion USD on their nuclear programmes. At this rate, they will collectively spend at least one trillion USD on nuclear weapons over the next decade.9

At the same time as they commit billions of dollars to their nuclear weapon arsenals, most of these states are simultaneously making significant cuts in their social welfare systems, such as health care, education, and childcare. This arguably constitutes a violation of human rights. Adequate resources are critical to the realization of human rights and several instruments of international law mandate the prioritization of human rights over militarism.

For example, article 2.1 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) instructs all state parties “to take steps, individually and
through international assistance and co-operation, especially economic and technical, to the maximum of its available resources, with a view to achieving progressively the full realization of the rights recognized in the present Covenant by all appropriate means, including particularly the adoption of legislative measures.” The Maastricht Guidelines on violations of economic, social, and cultural rights clarifies that a state is in violation of the Covenant if it fails to allocate the maximum of its available resources to realizing human rights.10 Article 26 of the UN Charter itself calls for the “establishment and maintenance of international peace and security with the least diversion for armaments of the world’s human and economic resources.”

Continued investment in nuclear arsenals will continue to drain the world’s resources, which will have particularly harsh impacts on the world’s poor. Over 1.2 billion people live in what is known as “extreme poverty”, i.e. less than 1.25 USD per day. The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) state that poverty in the world is to be halved by 2015, but not enough effort or money is expended to achieve this goal. The World Bank estimates that it would take between 35 to 76 billion USD per year until 2015 for the world community to be able to live up to the MDGs. This is but a fraction of the one trillion USD that will likely be spent on nuclear weapons over the next decade.11

The money spent on nuclear weapons not only detracts from the resources available to tackle the converging ecological, economic, and energy crises, but also reinforces the institutions that benefit from weapons and war. As one of the chapters in this report explores, “nuclear establishments and military-industrial complexes exist today in the context of (and, to a degree still inadequately understood, in the service of) an aggressive corporate capitalism that now encompasses virtually the entire planet.”12 Author Andrew Lichterman argues, “It is in this broader global context that we need to view nuclear weapons.”

This chapter, on political will, is one of three thematic chapters in this study that look at some of the key challenges and opportunities to prevent nuclear weapon modernization and achieve disarmament. A second examines the application of international law to modernization. The third analyzes the feasibility of divestment campaigns as a way to challenge the financing of nuclear weapon companies. Tim Wright, one of the authors of the recently released report Don’t Bank on the Bomb: The Global Financing of Nuclear Weapons Producers, explains that divestment can help “establish, or reinforce, the illegitimacy of the nuclear weapons industry by building understanding and acceptance of the illegality of these weapons and drawing attention to the catastrophic humanitarian and environmental harm they cause.”13

Divestment is indeed a valuable tool for governments and civil society to take direct action against the profit of nuclear weapons. However, divestment alone, and calls for “disarmament for development,” do not solve the entrenched structural challenges of nuclear weapons and the systems that sustain them. As Lichterman argues in his chapter, we need to develop “a deeper critique of the current conjuncture, a vision of an alternative path forward that reduces the demand for weapons and military services, and a strategy for advancing along that path.”14 He argues that it is the “fundamental institutional arrangements of our economy and their relationship to the technologies, built world, and development path that they entail” that must also be challenged. Rejecting the argument that before the elimination of nuclear arsenals can be negotiated, the world must be free of war and international tensions, Lichterman writes:

We do not have to wait until we have removed the causes of war to advocate for disarmament, or to develop the movements and social change strategies that make disarmament possible. Removing the causes of war and working for nuclear disarmament are part of the same larger project. Making the world more economically equitable lessens the danger of war. Giving all people a voice in the decisions that affect every sphere of their lives lessens the danger of war—and almost certainly increases the chances that economic life will become more fair as well. Moving towards a way of life that is consistent with the rhythms and limits of the ecosystems that sustain us likely reduces the dangers of war over the long term. Nuclear weapons and nuclear power are both leading instances of the irrationalities that result from a social world that has been constructed to concentrate power in the hands of tiny minorities, and to make it possible for them to maintain and defend their power.15

Currently, there are no near-term prospects for nuclear disarmament. Russia and the United States have engaged in bilateral negotiations; however, Hans Kristensen of the Federation of American Scientists has explained that while New START “reduces the legal limit for deployed strategic warheads, it doesn’t actually reduce the number of warheads. Indeed, the treaty does not require destruction of a single nuclear warhead and actually permits the United States and Russia to deploy almost the same number of strategic warheads that were permitted by the 2002 Moscow Treaty.”16 Furthermore, as Shannon Kile, Senior Researcher at the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) has argued, “It’s a stretch to say that the New START cuts agreed by the USA and Russia are a genuine step towards nuclear disarmament when their planning for nuclear forces is done on a time scale that encompasses decades and when nuclear modernization is a major priority of their defence policies.”17 While both Russia and the United States are considering cuts to their arsenals that go further than those required by New START
(see their respective chapters in this study), their simultaneous plans for and investment in modernization undermines the idea that either country is actively pursuing disarmament.

“Consider this brash analogy,” says Darwin Bond-Graham of the Los Alamos Study Group, a watchdog of the US nuclear weapons laboratory in New Mexico:

If the two states that hunt the vast majority of the world’s whales (out of the ten states that still allow this practice) agreed to a bilateral international treaty concerning whaling which stated that all parties ‘seek a world free of whaling,’ and if whaling states party to this treaty agreed to reduce their harvests by 10%, and yet the convention concretely allowed for the use of new hunting techniques, the killing of new species, hunting in new waters and the design and construction of advanced new whaling ships and harpoons, would it be hailed as an anti-whaling treaty? Indeed, if part of the domestic political deal made within whaling states in order to secure ratification in their legislatures included large investments in a ‘national whaling complex’ that would be able to build these ships and harpoons a century into the future, would anti-whaling activists publicly support it? Would they call it a good first step toward an end to whaling?218

Meanwhile, none of the other nuclear weapon possessors have expressed willingness to engage in reductions, or even negotiations for reductions, until the US and Russian arsenals have come down to “strategic parity” with their own. The Conference on Disarmament, the UN-affiliated body in Geneva in which multilateral disarmament agreements are to be negotiated, has been unable to even adopt a programme of work in 15 years, let alone engage in negotiations on any topic. France, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States have made it clear that they object to the negotiation of a nuclear weapons convention that would ban the possession and use of nuclear weapons. They have all, in one way or another, reiterated President Obama’s remarks that until nuclear weapons are eliminated, they will retain them—a catch-22 of epic proportions.

In article VI, the NPT contains a legally-binding obligation for five of the eight nuclear weapon possessors to achieve an agreement on the elimination of nuclear weapons. None of the five are in compliance with this obligation. At each meeting of NPT state parties, these countries profess their continued commitment to disarmament and report on the “measures” they have undertaken to fulfill this commitment. Through action 1 of the 2010 NPT Review Conference final document, all state parties are further committed “to pursue policies that are fully compatible with the Treaty and the objective of achieving a world without nuclear weapons.” Yet in reality, each of the nuclear weapon states are pursuing programmes for the modernization, refurbishment, and lifetime extensions of their nuclear weapons. Those programmes are contrary to the article VI obligation of cessation of the nuclear arms race at an early date pending nuclear disarmament, as explained in John Burroughs’ thematic chapter on international law. The three non-NPT state parties—India, Israel, and Pakistan—have also indicated their intention to maintain and/or modernize their arsenals rather than disarm, despite some rhetoric to the contrary. And as the international law chapter sets forth, these latter three states do indeed have obligations to disarm, despite their refusal to join the NPT.

This study is for both civil society and governments. We hope it is useful in preparing for the next review cycle of the NPT and for challenging the rhetoric of the nuclear weapon possessors. Exposing the reality of their modernization plans demonstrates that stronger and more concrete commitments must be extracted now, in the immediate term, in order to ensure that the global nuclear weapon enterprise is not extended into the indefinite future. It also demonstrates the need for civil society to focus on challenging key structures and processes of our political and economic institutions in order to truly effect change that will impact the nuclear weapon policies of our governments.

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Notes

6. Fihn and Acheson, op. cit.

8. The Democratic People’s Republic of Korea is not included in this study due to lack of publicly available information on its programme.


11. Ibid.


15. Ibid.


19. Remarks by President Barack Obama, Hradcany Square, Prague, Czech Republic, 5 April 2009.