

The Politics of Nuclear Weapons

In a joint statement on 3rd January 2022, five of the world's nuclear powers agreed that "a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought" in a rare joint pledge to reduce the risk of such a conflict ever starting. The pledge was signed by the P5 – USA, Russia, China, the UK and France; the main five nuclear weapons states. The release of the statement was timed to coincide with the five-yearly review conference of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), where back in 1968 the nations with nuclear capabilities bargained with nations without nuclear weapons that they would disarm so long as the rest of the world did not acquire nuclear weapons.

Nuclear weapons are a unique category of weapons as they can kill a large number of people and cause great damage to infrastructure. The nations who have acquired nuclear weapons have spent a lot of money on a weapon they may never use. They acquired nuclear weapons in order to deter aggression.

Nine countries today have nuclear weapons with a variety of delivery systems. There is a distinction between deployed and non-deployed weapon systems. Deployed weapons are already integrated with a delivery system and ready to use. Warheads in non-deployed or reserve status still require this final step before they can be delivered.

The most advanced delivery systems are the nuclear triad system. These are land-based missiles, submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBM) and weapons carried by aircraft. Land-based ballistic missiles—especially intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBM) – provide long-range strike capability. SLBMs have retaliation capabilities in the event that a country's land-based systems are destroyed in a first strike, whilst warheads on an aircraft provide cover, but they are slower to reach their target than missiles. Each nuclear nation has a different mix of delivery capabilities; only the US, Russia and China are considered to definitely possess a full triad.

Nearly 90% of global nuclear weapons are held by the US and Russia. The US has around 5,550 warheads, and Russia has 6,257. These include both strategic warheads (which can strike sites located far from any battlefield) and non-strategic, or tactical, warheads (which are intended to be used near a battlefield, and are usually less powerful). The current size of these arsenals pales in comparison to each country's peak inventory during the Cold War. The USA had 31,255 in 1967 and the Soviet Union had 40,159 in 1986.

Since then India, Pakistan and North Korea acquired nuclear weapons and the Zionist entity is considered to possess them and several countries had nuclear weapons programmes that were later abandoned. This was due to changes in political circumstances that reduced the need for nuclear weapons. In some cases, it was due to pressure from a major power that provided a guarantee under its own nuclear umbrella. Belarus, Kazakhstan and Ukraine all inherited nuclear weapons when the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991. All three countries returned the weapons to Russia by the mid-1990s to be dismantled. South Africa independently developed its nuclear weapons and subsequently forfeited them. Argentina and Brazil also abandoned their nuclear programmes before developing a nuclear device. They both secretly pursued nuclear weapons in the 1960s. By the early 1990s, both countries

gave up their weapons programmes and signed the NPT. South Korea and Taiwan also had secret nuclear programmes in the 1970s. Both programmes were subsequently disbanded.

In the Middle East, Iraq, Syria and Libya all had active nuclear weapons programmes. Iraq's nuclear programme was forcibly dismantled after the Gulf War, and Libya gave up its nuclear programme in 2003. Syria's nuclear ambitions never progressed far, but it is believed to have possessed enriched uranium and built a research reactor with the aid of North Korea. In 2007, the Zionist entity took out Syria's reactor with airstrikes.

Despite all the talk of reducing nuclear stockpiles and disarmament, the nuclear arms race never really finished and remains in full swing. Beatrice Fihn, executive director of the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN), said the words of the five countries do not match their actions. *"They write this 'nice' statement but doing exactly the opposite in reality. They're in a nuclear arms race, expanding nuclear arsenals, spending billions on modernising and constantly prepared to start a nuclear war."* [CNN]

In the US' last nuclear posture review in 2018, it emphasised the modernisation of the entire nuclear arsenal including the increase in the types and role of US nuclear weapons. This also includes the pursuit of a nuclear-armed submarine launched cruise missile to provide a nonstrategic presence.

Russia has been replacing its ageing Soviet-era ICBMs, SLBMs and ballistic missile submarines. Alongside this, Russia is developing several kinds of nuclear delivery vehicles.

The US has recently made a big issue of China's expanding nuclear weapons. Much of this is misplaced as China historically had a small and mostly land-based nuclear arsenal. With its growing power and the need to be taken seriously globally, China is building more road-mobile ICBMs and strategic nuclear submarines as well as introducing air-based nuclear capabilities.

The UK in 2021 outlined the government's review of security and defence policy, Global Britain in a Competitive Age: The Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy and announced that it was increasing the cap on its nuclear stockpile from 225 to 260 warheads.

Despite the talk of reducing and eliminating nuclear weapons, the reality is all the global powers are expanding their nuclear programmes in order to maintain an image of strength and deter others. This has remained the case since the 1968 NPT treaty and will continue into the future as global competition has always driven the acquisition of nuclear weapons. Despite nuclear weapons being a special class of weapon, the reality is all weapons of war are nothing without a strategy and there is no strategy without politics. This is why nuclear weapons – a weapon of war, is politics through other means.

**Written for the Central Media Office of Hizb ut Tahrir by
Adnan Khan**