The Elders

Nuclear Weapons

Policy Position Paper

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The Elders

In January 2023, The Elders launched a new five-year strategy to address three of the existential threats facing humanity – the climate and nature crisis, pandemics, nuclear weapons – as well as the persistent global challenge of conflict. Drawing on Nelson Mandela's mandate, our approach also incorporates four cross-cutting commitments: to multilateralism, human rights, gender equality and women in leadership, and intergenerational dialogue.

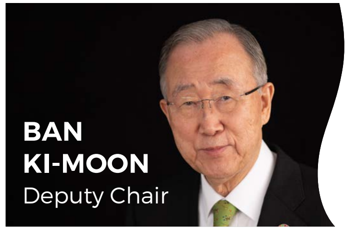
The impact of these threats is already being seen on lives and livelihoods: a rapid rise in extreme weather events, a pandemic that killed millions and cost trillions, a war in which the use of nuclear weapons has been openly raised. But there could be worse to come – maybe much worse. Some of these threats jeopardise the very existence of human life on our planet. We have the power to destroy ourselves as well as the world we live in. Nations lack the ability or will to manage these risks.

The urgency of the interconnected existential threats we face requires a crisis mindset from world leaders – one that puts shared humanity centre stage, leaves no one behind, and recognises the rights of future generations. When nations work together, these threats can all be addressed for the good of the whole world. There is still hope.

As Elders, we use our experience and influence to work for peace, justice, human rights and a sustainable planet. We engage with global leaders and civil society through private diplomacy and public advocacy to address existential threats, promote global solutions, and encourage ethical leadership that supports the dignity of all human beings.

The Elders

Founded by Nelson Mandela in 2007, The Elders are a group of independent global leaders working together for peace, justice, human rights and a sustainable planet.



Lakhdar Brahimi, Fernando Henrique Cardoso, Ricardo Lagos and **Muhammad Yunus** are Elders Emeritus.

Kofi Annan (1938-2018) was a founding member of The Elders and served as Chair from 2013-2018. **Desmond Tutu** (1931-2021) was a founding member of The Elders and served as Chair from 2007-2013. **Ela Bhatt** (1933-2022) was a founding member of The Elders. **Martti Ahtisaari** (1937-2023) was a member of The Elders from 2009. **Jimmy Carter** (1924-2024) was also a founding member of The Elders.

Photo: UN / Eskinder Debebe

> "We must ask the question, which might sound naïve to those who have elaborated sophisticated arguments to justify their refusal to eliminate these terrible and terrifying weapons of mass destruction – why do they need them anyway?
>
> In reality, no rational answer can be advanced to explain what, in the end, is the consequence of Cold War inertia and an attachment to the use of the threat of brute force.

NELSON MANDELA

from his 1998 speech to the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) on the 60th anniversary of the UN Declaration of Human Rights

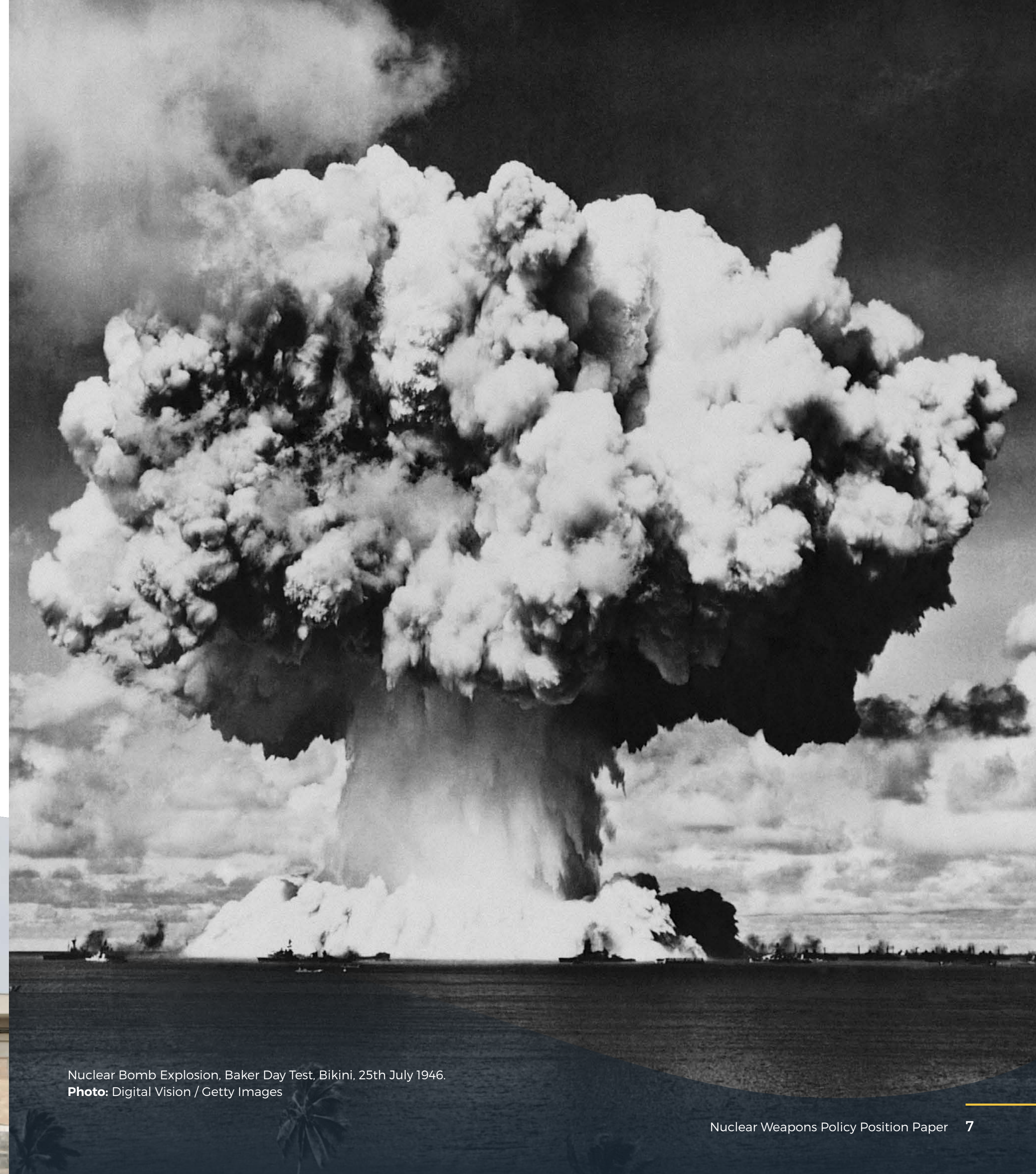
The Elders and nuclear weapons

The existential threat to humanity posed by nuclear weapons has always been present in the minds of the Elders, as individual global leaders who previously held high office with governments and international organisations around the world, and as a group. All have thought long and hard about the implications for human security of the possession and proliferation of these “doomsday weapons”.

The founder of The Elders, **Nelson Mandela**, set the tone in September 1998 when, as President of South Africa, he issued a passionate call from the podium of the UN General Assembly to member states to work towards the elimination of nuclear weapons. Other Elders have followed where he led.

Ernesto Zedillo and **Gro Harlem Brundtland**, former Mexican President and Norwegian Prime Minister, were both Commissioners in the 2009 International Commission on Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament (ICNND). **Ernesto Zedillo** was also the Chair of the 2007 Commission of Eminent Persons on the future of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). **Mary Robinson**, former President of Ireland, and **Helen Clark**, former Prime Minister of New Zealand, have both been champions of nuclear disarmament over many decades, while **Elbegdorj Tsakhia**, former President of Mongolia, worked as President to secure international recognition of Mongolia’s nuclear-weapon-free status. Founding Elder **Jimmy Carter** (who died in 2024), the 39th US President, had first-hand experience of the topic: as a nuclear submarine commander in the US Navy and later as the US military’s Commander-in-Chief from 1977-81. **Ban Ki-moon**, the Deputy Chair of The Elders and former UN Secretary-General, invested much time and energy in discussing non-proliferation and disarmament with UN member states.

Martti Ahtisaari, Gro Harlem Brundtland, Mary Robinson and Jimmy Carter with Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs of North Korea Ri Yong Ho during an Elders’ visit to North Korea, 2011.
Photo: Richard Lewis / The Elders



Nuclear Bomb Explosion, Baker Day Test, Bikini, 25th July 1946.
Photo: Digital Vision / Getty Images

Executive summary

The Elders support a world without nuclear weapons. This is the only way to remove the catastrophic risk of nuclear weapons being used again.

Achieving sustained political agreement to implement verified elimination of nuclear weapons will be politically difficult, and will take time and global effort. As a first step, the nuclear states must get serious about reducing their arsenals, and the risk of nuclear use, to reverse the dangerous direction in which the world is currently heading.

We face a greater existential threat from nuclear conflict today than at any time since the height of the Cold War, with the erosion of the taboo against nuclear use (including President Putin's open threats to use nuclear weapons), the near total breakdown of the nuclear arms control architecture between Russia and the United States of America, and the emergence of potentially destabilising new technologies (including AI).

China's decision to significantly expand its arsenal, political instability in Pakistan, North Korea's defiance of the UN Security Council, and conflict in the Middle East all add further pressures to this dangerous context. Meanwhile, declining confidence in the USA's security guarantees to its allies is fuelling a growing interest in nuclear weapons in Europe, the Middle East and East Asia, which could undermine the entire global non-proliferation and nuclear disarmament regime.

Yet unlike in previous decades, when anti-nuclear movements had mass public support, there is insufficient public pressure to reduce the existential threat that nuclear weapons continue to pose to humanity. This is despite increasing public concern in some countries about the possibility of nuclear war.

So long as nuclear weapons remain in existence, it is highly likely that they will eventually be used – if not by design, then by human error, miscalculation or misjudgement. The more countries that possess nuclear weapons, the more these dangers increase.

Any such use will be catastrophic for life on this planet as we know it. Even a limited nuclear war has been estimated to kill up to 2 billion people from the climatic impacts of nuclear winter, while a full-scale nuclear conflict could kill 5 billion people in the first two years, and potentially cause the extinction of humanity.

The only guarantee of the non-use of nuclear weapons is their complete abolition, and this must be the ultimate goal of international efforts.

Unfortunately, it is clear that total elimination will not be achievable in the near future. The nuclear powers, far from moving towards disarmament, continue to modernise and expand their arsenals, and to reaffirm the role of nuclear weapons within their security planning.

The USA and Russia bear particular responsibility for this, given they possess around 90% of the world's nuclear weapons, and both countries have taken dangerous steps to undermine nuclear arms control over the past two decades. China is expanding its arsenal, yet remains far below the levels of the USA and Russia. Its nuclear expansion, however, risks fuelling a dangerous new nuclear arms race. Meanwhile other nuclear states (including India, Pakistan, North Korea and the UK) are also expanding their capabilities. All nuclear states except China have explicit doctrinal positions to consider first use of nuclear weapons in at least some circumstances, and even China's "no first use" position is being increasingly called into question by its rapid nuclear expansion.

In this dangerous context, a concerted international effort is needed to move the world away from the brink of destruction. This requires an immediate focus on getting buy-in from the nuclear states on reducing the threat of nuclear catastrophe, with elimination of nuclear weapons as a longer-term goal. The Elders have proposed a nuclear minimisation agenda that we believe could provide a helpful framework for this.

> The only guarantee of the non-use of nuclear weapons is their complete abolition.

The Elders have also identified three long-term outcomes which we will work towards under our 2023-27 strategy, as a pathway to create the necessary conditions in which a minimisation agenda, and ultimately total disarmament, can become a reality:

01 Increasing international attention on the nuclear threat

02 Protecting and strengthening the international architecture on non-proliferation, arms control and risk reduction

03 Building an inclusive nuclear policy community and grassroots movement that can challenge status quo thinking on nuclear weapons

Politicians and military strategists who subscribe to the doctrine of realpolitik have decried nuclear disarmament as a naïve fantasy ever since the end of the Second World War. But this perspective tends to rely on a series of questionable assumptions, including that nuclear weapons can exist in perpetuity without eventually being used, and that a two-tier system – in which some states are allowed to possess nuclear weapons, while others are prevented from doing so – can be indefinitely maintained.

There is an unanswerable political, strategic, security and moral case for redoubling efforts to secure meaningful nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation as a global priority.

In his State of the Union speech in 1962, US President John F. Kennedy said that although nuclear weapons may offer us present security, they threaten the future survival of the human race. He warned that the bomb has turned the world into a prison in which humanity awaits its execution. The Elders work to help humanity escape from that prison.

UN Security Council meeting on the 'maintenance of peace and security of Ukraine'.
Photo: Lev Radin/Pacific Press/LightRocket / Getty Images

Asks of world leaders and decision-makers

Minimisation Agenda

The Elders urge the nuclear powers to establish serious dialogue on reducing nuclear risks, and to commit to a minimisation agenda to make meaningful progress towards eventual disarmament, in line with The Elders' "4 Ds":

Russian nuclear submarine in the Kola Bay.
Photo: Shutterstock

DOCTRINE

Every nuclear-armed state should make an unequivocal "No First Use" declaration.

DE-ALERTING

The highest priority must be given to taking as many weapons as possible off their current high-alert status.

DEPLOYMENT

More than one-quarter of the world's stockpile of nuclear weapons is currently operationally deployed. This proportion must be dramatically and urgently reduced.

DECREASED NUMBERS

The number of nuclear warheads should be reduced from 12,000 to the lowest possible level, with the USA, Russia and China reducing to no more than 500 each.

Other asks of world leaders and decision-makers

Nuclear states should enter into sustained high-level dialogue on the role of AI in nuclear weapons systems, to increase mutual understanding about how to maintain meaningful human control over nuclear arsenals and to build consensus about shared principles of responsible behaviour. The emerging norm that humans, and not AI, must make any major decision related to nuclear use must be better defined and expanded.

Nuclear states and their allies should engage constructively with the **Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW)**, including through attending states parties meetings as observers, and should build common ground with TPNW states around a shared goal of ultimate nuclear disarmament.

TPNW states should work to help turn the TPNW into a binding and effective reality, including through strengthening the treaty's verification and enforcement provisions.

All countries should work to strengthen the **global non-proliferation architecture**, including through:

- Increasing safeguards to track the flow of materials inside civil reactors
- Introducing real penalties for countries that withdraw from or violate the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT)
- Strengthening the capacity of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA)
- Ratifying the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) and bringing to conclusion the long-proposed Fissile Material Cut-Off Treaty

Kofi Annan, Ernesto Zedillo and Martti Ahtisaari speaking to press during an Elders' visit to Iran, 2014.
Photo: Morteza Nikoubazl / The Elders

Juan Manuel Santos joins speakers Herb Lin, Suzet McKinney and Robert Socolow on stage for the unveiling of the Doomsday Clock, January 2025.
Photo: Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists

The urgency of the nuclear threat

The world is now closer to nuclear catastrophe than at any time since the height of the Cold War. In January 2025, Juan Manuel Santos joined the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists in announcing that the hands of the Doomsday Clock were moving to 89 seconds to midnight, the closest in the Clock's 78 year history.

As long as any state has nuclear weapons, others will want them. And as long as any nuclear weapons are still viewed as legitimate tools of state security, they are increasingly likely to be used - if not by design, then by human error, system error, miscalculation or misjudgement.

Any such use will be catastrophic for life on this planet as we know it. New research suggests that even a "limited" nuclear exchange between India and Pakistan could result in up to 2 billion deaths from starvation, due to a collapse in crop production caused by rapid and prolonged climatic cooling combined with widespread ozone depletion. A full-scale nuclear war between Russia and the USA has been modelled to kill as many as 5 billion people in the first two years following a nuclear conflict. Total human extinction in such a scenario is possible. A nuclear conflict would also have devastating wider environmental impacts, and could lead to the extinction of over half of all animal species. The UN General Assembly voted overwhelmingly in 2024 to establish an independent Scientific Panel on the Effects of Nuclear War, to update its understanding of research of the impact for the first time in 35 years. (Only three countries, all nuclear powers - France, Russia and the UK - voted against.)

No country individually, nor the international system collectively, has the capacity to cope with the humanitarian and environmental consequences of the use of nuclear weapons. For the very survival of humanity, nuclear weapons must never be used again, under any circumstances. The only guarantee of the non-use of nuclear weapons is their complete abolition. Humans are fallible, and leaders make mistakes. With nuclear weapons, there is no margin for error.

Over the years, civilian rocket launches have been mistaken for nuclear missile launches; military exercises have been mistaken for real mobilisation; technical glitches have triggered real-time alerts; and live nuclear weapons have been transferred by mistake from one end of a nuclear state to another. Nuclear weapons have fallen out of the sky and off the end of ships, some never recovered.

Given this record, the fact that the world has survived for eight decades without a nuclear weapons catastrophe is not a matter of inherent system stability or moral leadership. It has involved a lot of luck.

Hiroshima Genbaku Atomic Bomb Dome at night.
Photo: Shutterstock

The destructive power of the global nuclear arsenal

While the global inventory of nuclear weapons has declined significantly from its peak at around 70,000 warheads in the mid-1980s to around 12,000 today, the gains from these reductions should not be overstated. The remaining weapons still have a combined destructive capability of close to 100,000 Hiroshima or Nagasaki-sized bombs, and maintain the capacity to destroy human civilisation as we know it.

Nearly 90% of these weapons are in US and Russian hands, and nearly 4,000 remain operationally deployed.

Even more disturbing is that nearly 2,000 of the US and Russian weapons remain on a dangerously high state of alert, ready to be launched in the event of a perceived attack within a “decision window” for each President of four to eight minutes.

The breakdown of nuclear arms control

These dangers have been exacerbated by the collapse of the nuclear arms control safeguards that were negotiated between the USA and the Soviet Union/Russia in the latter years of the Cold War and early post-Cold War era. The origins of this breakdown in cooperation can be traced back to President George W. Bush’s decision to withdraw the USA from the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty in 2002. The US ambition over the subsequent two decades to develop comprehensive missile defence systems is widely seen to have contributed to the emergence of a new nuclear arms race, as Russia and other states have sought to acquire a range of destabilising new weapons systems that could evade any future US missile defence capabilities.

This breakdown of arms control has accelerated in recent years, as Russia chose increasingly to violate the terms of the arms control agreements it had signed. Furthermore, the first Trump Administration’s scepticism towards arms control led the USA to withdraw from the Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, the Open Skies Treaty, and the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) which had been effective in constraining Iran’s nuclear capabilities. The final remaining arms control treaty limiting US-Russia nuclear arsenals, the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START), is no longer functioning following President Putin’s decision to suspend Russian participation in February 2023 over US support for Ukraine. New START is set to expire in February 2026 unless a successor agreement can be reached. President Trump has made repeated statements in his second term supporting new nuclear reduction agreements with Russia and China. This should be followed through with sustained high-level arms control dialogue between the USA and Russia to achieve results as soon as possible.

The emergence of a multipolar nuclear world

These dangers are made more acute by the increasingly multipolar nature of the nuclear threat. As severe as the risks were during the Cold War, the main threat was a US-Soviet nuclear confrontation. China's ongoing rapid expansion of its nuclear arsenal and the prospect that it might in time join the ranks of the "nuclear superpowers" is a particularly dangerous development. Equally, the emergence of India, Pakistan, Israel and North Korea as nuclear states has multiplied risks and added to global nuclear proliferation. Growing interest in nuclear weapons in some countries in Europe, the Middle East and East Asia reinforces these growing concerns.

These newer areas of nuclear tension share certain worrying features: regional volatility; a history of violent conflict; and a lack of command-and-control sophistication, military-to-military communication systems, and the practice of regular strategic nuclear policy dialogues which historically existed between the USA/NATO and the Soviet Union/Russia. In the case of Pakistan, growing internal instability and the risk of nuclear weapons falling into the hands of terrorists or other non-state actors is an additional source of concern.

While multilateral efforts under the NPT have helped to limit nuclear proliferation, they have also been undermined by double standards from the major powers. For instance, the USA's long-standing policy of shielding Israel from accountability over its non-declared nuclear arsenal, and growing Chinese and Russian unwillingness to impose additional sanctions on North Korea for its expanding nuclear programme, have undermined global non-proliferation efforts. Divisions between the major powers has also been a significant factor in obstructing international cooperation to limit Iran's nuclear capabilities.

The erosion of the nuclear taboo

In January 2022, the leaders of the five recognised nuclear weapon states under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (USA, China, Russia, France and the UK) reiterated Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev's 1985 declaration that "a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought". Yet despite this lofty rhetoric, none of the existing nuclear weapon states are adopting policies consistent with the implications of the Reagan-Gorbachev statement, and all are making plans to fight a nuclear war in at least some circumstances. Less than two months after the statement Russia invaded Ukraine while making overt threats to use its nuclear weapons.

This reflects the alarming erosion of the nuclear taboo in recent years, as nuclear threats by leaders have become increasingly common and overt, from Donald Trump to Narendra Modi and Kim Jong-un. President Putin's explicit threats to use nuclear weapons over Ukraine, in an attempt to limit international support for Ukraine, is the most egregious and explicit example. However, it also reflects a wider pattern of threats of nuclear use becoming increasingly normalised as a tool of international diplomacy and power projection.

New technological developments

Adding to these global nuclear risks has been the emergence of potentially destabilising new technologies, including new weapons systems, cyber warfare and AI. The development of hypersonic missiles by several nuclear states presents particular risks, in reducing decision-making time for leaders in the event of a crisis, and increasing the risk of a nuclear exchange occurring by mistake or miscalculation. Similar risks of accidental nuclear escalation are present around the potential use of cyber warfare to obstruct command and control systems, which could be misinterpreted by countries as a prelude to a nuclear attack.

The integration of AI into nuclear systems presents a new set of risks and uncertainties, and the long-term implications of AI for nuclear command and control remain poorly understood. Greater research and dialogue are needed to better understand the potential risks and benefits of integrating AI technology within nuclear weapons systems.

While it is important that a number of nuclear states have committed to maintaining a "human in the loop" on nuclear decision-making, this commitment is insufficient to address the complexity of the potential risks posed by AI. For instance, in a system where all of the data inputs for making a decision about launching nuclear weapons are provided by AI, meaningful human control over nuclear arsenals would be seriously undermined, even if a human is still required at the end of the chain to physically "press the nuclear button".

It will be important to ensure that any use of AI is backed by other means to verify situational awareness. It is also essential for nuclear states to take steps to ensure the accountability and accuracy of any automation introduced into the nuclear decision chain, as well as to make sure that any decision to consider nuclear use is controlled effectively by human beings and not machines or AI models.

As AI inevitably expands into the military sphere, steps must be taken to protect nuclear decision-making and decision time from the acceleration that AI will likely bring. Adopting measures in line with the proposed nuclear minimisation agenda, including de-alerting and taking warheads out of deployment, would be the best way to ensure this.

Sustained high-level dialogue by the nuclear states is urgently needed to increase mutual understanding about what meaningful human control over nuclear arsenals means in the context of rapid advances in AI capabilities, and on developing a set of shared principles of responsible behaviour in this area.

In this and other areas, it is deeply unfortunate that addressing and limiting the risks posed by new technologies is being significantly hampered by mistrust and the lack of effective dialogue between the nuclear powers. Dialogue among civilian and military leadership is not a favour or a concession, but a responsibility that comes with leadership.

The paralysis of the multilateral system

The multilateral system has proven unable to address the collapse of international cooperation around nuclear weapons. The unanimous consent requirements for agreement within the Conference on Disarmament have for decades turned it into an irrelevant body, while similar unanimity requirements for the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) have prevented the NPT's five yearly Review Conferences from adopting any kind of ambitious framework for reducing nuclear risks and making progress towards disarmament.

In the face of current nuclear dangers, two thirds of the world's countries voted for the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) adopted in 2017, with 94 having signed it and 73 having ratified it by 2025. But, despite the recent efforts of many UN member states, all the current nuclear-armed states, and the majority of their partners and allies, vigorously oppose even tentative first steps toward disarmament and have refused to engage with the TPNW. Despite the majority of the world's countries wanting to see nuclear weapons banned entirely, the nuclear powers continue to maintain nuclear weapons as a central part of their military planning and increasingly view them as a means of wielding global power.

Koro Bessho, Japan's Permanent Representative to the UN, delivers remarks after the Security Council issues a Presidential Statement on North Korea's ballistic missile launch, August 2017. **Photo:** UN / Mark Garten

Missile silo at the Minuteman Missile National Historic Site Visitor Center, South Dakota, USA. **Photo:** Shutterstock

The challenges and our position

Increasing international attention on the nuclear threat

As a low probability (but very high impact) risk in the short-term, the nuclear threat can too easily be ignored by leaders pre-occupied with more immediately pressing issues. This leaves military establishments in control of nuclear policies, who tend to be reluctant to take steps that could reduce their nuclear capabilities. Vested interests, particularly arms manufacturers who financially benefit from nuclear armament, also undertake intensive lobbying efforts to preserve the nuclear status quo. This needs to be addressed to build the necessary pressure and sense of urgency on the nuclear states to act.

The nuclear threat needs to be treated as a top-order priority in relevant international fora, from the UN Security Council to the G7 and G20 summits. Generating a sense of urgency in addressing risks will be a necessary, although not sufficient, step for making progress with the nuclear states. Public attention and pressure can also be helpful in generating pressure and momentum for the nuclear states to act.

At present, it is deeply concerning that dialogue between the USA and Russia on nuclear risk reduction is suspended, while no dialogue exists to manage risks between the USA and China. This absence of dialogue raises real risks of misunderstanding and miscalculation in the event of a crisis, and makes it impossible to build trust over the longer-term that could enable progress on reducing nuclear arsenals and achieving eventual disarmament. Nuclear states must urgently prioritise the establishment of sustained dialogue channels for cooperation on risk reduction measures, which could potentially build confidence towards making progress on more substantive nuclear reductions.

Challenging the nuclear status quo

Decision-making on nuclear weapons has remained in the hands of a narrow policy-making elite, who lack diverse perspectives and tend to have a vested interest in preserving the current status quo. Nuclear policymakers remain largely committed to the doctrine of nuclear deterrence and have tended to downplay the risks associated with nuclear weapons. This entrenched nuclear elite therefore represents a significant obstacle to making longer-term progress towards elimination of nuclear weapons.

Diversification of the nuclear policy field will be an essential step for creating the conditions in which nuclear disarmament can become a plausible reality, alongside a greater democratisation of nuclear policy debates to incorporate the perspectives of grassroots movements, general publics and non-nuclear states. The international grassroots movement coordinated through the International Campaign Against Nuclear Weapons (ICAN) has set an inspiring example of the power of global civil society to influence the global debate surrounding nuclear weapons. Equally, the survivors of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki (the hibakusha) have been powerful moral leaders in campaigning for a nuclear-free world.

Women's leadership and equitable gender representation in nuclear decision-making should be a particular priority, especially given the disproportionate harms that women and girls would bear in the event of a nuclear conflict. It is unacceptable that women are hugely under-represented in international nuclear debates, with half of delegations at the NPT Review Conferences having no women delegates at all.

The debate on nuclear weapons must also acknowledge the pernicious legacy of colonialism and global economic and racial inequalities in shaping the nuclear order, from the historical testing of nuclear weapons on areas inhabited by Indigenous and colonised populations, to the two-tier system of nuclear haves and have-nots established under the Non-Proliferation Treaty.

The victims of nuclear use and testing, from Japan to Kazakhstan and the Marshall Islands, have a particular right to be present and heard in international nuclear debates. The awarding of the 2024 Nobel Peace Prize to Nihon Hidankyo is a timely recognition of the leadership role that survivors of nuclear use and testing have been playing in galvanising international action towards the elimination of nuclear weapons.

Reinvigorating momentum towards arms control and disarmament

Russia's decision in February 2023 to suspend participation in New START has placed the last remaining bilateral US-Russia arms control treaty in severe jeopardy, while no risk reduction or arms control frameworks exist between the other nuclear states. The lack of serious action by the NPT nuclear weapon states to implement their disarmament commitments under Article 6 of the Treaty is further undermining the international architecture and making it more difficult to maintain the global consensus around non-proliferation.

The Elders support the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW), which has emerged in response to this deteriorating international environment, and which as of early 2025 has been ratified by 73 countries and signed by a further 21 states.

By seeking to ban outright the development, possession, use, threat of use, stationing or transfer of all nuclear weapons, the Treaty has generated real, normative momentum and made clear that a large proportion of UN member states regard the existence of nuclear weapons as a moral stain on humanity that needs to be completely eradicated.

The Elders encourage all states to engage constructively with the TPNW, including at a minimum through participating in the treaty's Meetings of States Parties (MSPs) as observers. It is disappointing that no NATO states attended the third MSP of the TPNW in March 2025 as observers, a step backwards from the first MSP in 2022 which Belgium, Germany, the Netherlands and Norway attended. It unfortunately remains the case that no nuclear-armed states, or their allies or treaty partners, have joined the Treaty, or are likely to for the foreseeable future.

The Elders therefore believe that strengthening the TPNW needs to be combined with concerted efforts to get buy-in from the nuclear states and their allies around a practical step-by-step agenda to preserve and strengthen arms control and reduce immediate risks. That means, for the medium term, focusing on nuclear minimisation, to be followed eventually by the elimination of nuclear weapons as the ultimate end goal.[1] An incremental step-by-step process is the most likely pathway to achieve nuclear disarmament.

[1] As outlined in the 2009 report of the International Commission on Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament (ICNND), Eliminating Nuclear Threats: A Practical Agenda for Global Policymakers.

Achieving a world without nuclear weapons

While it is desirable that nuclear states agree a concrete timetable for nuclear minimisation, The Elders recognise that a comparable timeline for elimination is less realistic.

It will prove challenging to persuade states in volatile regions like South Asia, North-East Asia and the Middle East to give up their nuclear weapons without prior major reductions in the US and Russian stockpiles, and unless and until the underlying tensions in those regions are resolved.

Every nuclear-armed state will thus have to be persuaded that verification and – most importantly – enforcement arrangements are in place, which will ensure that no state will be able to rearm without being detected in ample time and can be stopped from going further.

The challenges to achieving the final elimination of nuclear weapons are daunting. They will require significant amounts of political will and creative solutions to be overcome. But this is not a reason for despair.

Just as pessimism can feed on itself, positive developments can be self-reinforcing and become a virtuous circle. What seems unthinkable now is likely to seem much more achievable ten years from now, if the minimisation agenda we propose develops real momentum.

Origami peace cranes endorsed by members of The Elders in 2020 to mark the 75th anniversary of the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. **Photo:** The Elders

Limiting the threat of nuclear proliferation

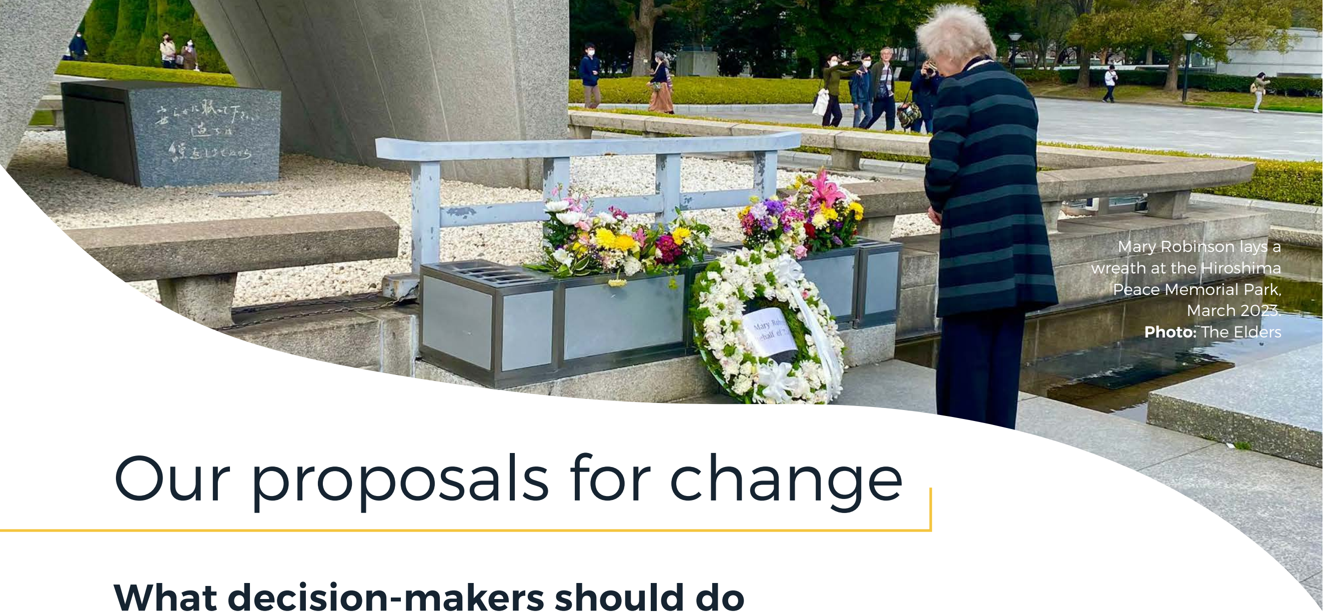
Minimisation and the ultimate elimination of nuclear weapons must remain the priority, not only in their own right but as essential prerequisites for preventing the further proliferation of nuclear weapons. It will be extremely difficult to persuade non-nuclear states to maintain their commitment to non-proliferation indefinitely if the nuclear powers are not taking serious steps to reduce their arsenals and make progress towards eventual disarmament. Directly preventing further immediate proliferation of nuclear weapons is therefore an important, but subsidiary, priority in The Elders' view.

It is important for states to maintain a hard-headed but pragmatic approach to dealing with the specific nuclear proliferation threat posed by Iran. The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) agreement reached between Iran and the USA, Russia, China, the United Kingdom, France, Germany and the European Union in 2015 was a diplomatic achievement, sadly undermined by the US decision to unilaterally withdraw from the JCPOA in May 2018. Iran has dramatically expanded its nuclear capabilities since 2018 and negotiating a new agreement to reverse these developments looks difficult.

In dealing with non-proliferation threats, it is important for policymakers not to make the perfect the enemy of the good, and to be willing to make concessions, if these can lead to the elimination or significant reduction of the nuclear threat posed by specific countries.

In the case of Iran, even a partial agreement to contain Iran's nuclear capabilities in exchange for limited sanctions relief may be worthwhile if it can delay or prevent a nuclear breakout. Conversely, threats of military action against Iran's nuclear facilities are likely to be counterproductive in the long-term, and risk emboldening those within Iran who want to see Iran become a nuclear-armed state. A long-term solution may also require the development of new inclusive regional security frameworks, as well as addressing Israel's non-declared nuclear arsenal.

There must also be an ongoing dialogue among states who might consider pursuing nuclear weapons in the future as to whethersuch steps are in their national interests, or the interest of global security. Nuclear weapons – even if human beings get every decision right – bring with them considerable risks of escalation and worst-case scenario planning. When one adds in the reality of human error, the danger of misuse, inadvertent or accidental use, or theft and diversion, the dangers posed by nuclear acquisition clearly outweigh the perceived benefit. All countries must ensure that any discussion of nuclear options is informed by reality, history and probable consequences.



Mary Robinson lays a wreath at the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Park, March 2023.
Photo: The Elders

Our proposals for change

What decision-makers should do

Build momentum around a nuclear minimisation agenda

The Elders urge the nuclear powers to establish serious dialogue on reducing nuclear risks, and to commit to a minimisation agenda to make meaningful progress towards eventual disarmament. The Elders have set out a proposed framework for this, summarised as the “4 Ds”:

Doctrine: Every nuclear-armed state should make an unequivocal “No First Use” (NFU) declaration, committing itself not to use nuclear weapons either preventively or pre-emptively against any adversary, or even reactively against non-nuclear attacks. If not prepared to make such a declaration, every nuclear state should accept the principle that the sole purpose of possessing nuclear weapons – until such time as they can be eliminated completely – is to deter others from using such weapons against that state or its treaty allies, while ideally recognising the limitations of deterrence.

De-alerting: With some 2,000 US and Russian weapons remaining on a dangerously high state of alert – ready to be launched within minutes of receiving information (or misinformation) about an opponent’s attack – the risk remains very high of nuclear war being triggered by accidental or unauthorised launches. The prospect of human or system error is an omnipresent reality, with the risk compounded by the prospect of cyber sabotage of communications systems. The highest priority must therefore be given to taking as many weapons as possible, if not all weapons, off their high-alert status.

Deployment: With over a quarter of the world’s stockpile of nuclear weapons operationally deployed, an important step should be to drastically reduce that number. In this context, priority must be given to seeking agreement between the USA and Russia on a successor agreement to New START, which expires in February 2026. So long as nuclear weapons exist, it is probably unavoidable that states will want to retain demonstrably survivable retaliatory forces, with some weapons kept intact and useable at short notice. But in a world serious about moving to nuclear disarmament, it ought to be possible for the great majority of nuclear weapons to be not only moth-balled, but at least partially dismantled as well. It is worth noting that despite the growth of its arsenal, the vast majority of China’s nuclear weapons are not deployed in the field – an approach that should be maintained and expanded to the other nuclear powers.

Decreased numbers: The number of nuclear warheads in existence should be reduced from 12,000 to the lowest possible level, with the USA, Russia and China reducing to a total of no more than 500 each. There should be no increase in the arsenals of the other nuclear states, and ideally there should be significant, matching reductions. US and Russian leadership is, however, crucial. Given that they hold almost 90% of the world’s arsenal, without massive cuts by them, there is little prospect others will show restraint. Even if the USA and Russia believe in the value of nuclear deterrence, it can be maintained with much lower numbers than at present. A 2010 study by the US Air Force’s Strategic Plan and Policy Division has estimated that effective nuclear deterrence could be achieved with as few as 311 nuclear warheads, demonstrating that the proposed reductions are eminently achievable if US and Russian leaders have the necessary political will to do so.

Strengthen understanding of the implications of AI for nuclear weapons systems

Greater research and dialogue are needed to better understand the potential risks and benefits of integrating AI technology within nuclear weapons systems. Sustained high-level dialogue by the nuclear states is particularly needed to increase mutual understanding about how to maintain meaningful human control over nuclear arsenals in the context of rapid advances in AI capabilities, and on developing a set of shared principles of responsible behaviour for the integration of AI into nuclear command and control systems. The emerging norm that humans, and not AI, must make any major decision related to nuclear use must be better defined and expanded.

Nuclear states must take steps to protect nuclear decision-making and decision time from the acceleration that AI will likely bring. Adopting measures in line with our proposed nuclear minimisation agenda, including de-alerting and taking warheads out of deployment, would be the best way to ensure this.

Reduce divisions around the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons

Concerted efforts should also be made to reduce divisions between supporters and opponents of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons. The Elders encourage all countries, including nuclear states and their allies, to attend TPNW states parties meetings as observers, and to address any opposition to the TPNW through constructive engagement with treaty supporters, acknowledging the shared ultimate objectives of the NPT and the TPNW on achieving a world without nuclear weapons.

The TPNW states should in turn take steps to help turn the TPNW into a binding and effective reality, including through strengthening the treaty's verification and enforcement provisions. The action plan agreed at the first states parties meeting of the TPNW in 2022 sets out a positive framework on which further progress can be built.

Strengthen the nuclear non-proliferation architecture

While this is a secondary priority for The Elders, we support the following steps to strengthen the existing nuclear non-proliferation architecture:

- Increasing safeguards to track the flow of materials inside civil reactors
- Introducing real penalties for countries that withdraw from or violate the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT)
- Strengthening the capacity of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA)
- Ratifying the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) and bringing to conclusion the long-proposed Fissile Material Cut-Off Treaty.

Elbegdorj Tsakhia addresses the United Nations General Assembly's high-level meeting on nuclear disarmament in New York, 2013. **Photo:** UN / Rick Bajornas

What civil society/business/others should do

Build a diverse global movement

Concerted efforts are needed to help build public engagement and pressure on leaders to act. While there is evidence that Russia's nuclear threats over Ukraine have generated greater public concern about the threat of nuclear war, more work is needed to turn this concern into a mass global movement that can generate significant active public pressure on governments and leaders. This is particularly true for civil society, businesses and individuals in nuclear states, who have disproportionate ability to influence the global trajectory of nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament efforts.

Existing international grassroots networks such as the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN) has done important work to build support for nuclear disarmament. But sustained civil society and business support is needed to turn these efforts into a prominent international mass movement that can capture mainstream public attention. Greater coordination is also needed within the nuclear policy and activist communities around a shared commitment to ultimate elimination of nuclear weapons and reducing the risks of nuclear war.

These efforts should include greater efforts to make links between the nuclear threat and other issues of global concern, from climate change and AI to gender equality and racial justice, and to bring new organisations and groups into the nuclear field. Greater funding is also needed to help ensure a greater diversity of voices in the nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament field, and to support the growth of activist movements.

A protest for nuclear disarmament outside the White House, USA. **Photo:** Maria Oswalt via Unsplash

Elders together at their bi-annual board meeting in London, October 2024.
Photo: Jeff Moore

Conclusion

A nuclear minimisation agenda which implicitly accepts the continued existence of nuclear weapons over the medium-term is far from ideal. However, it appears to be the most likely agenda to achieve real progress, create a safer world in the short to medium-term, and maximise the possibility for nuclear weapons to be eliminated in the future.

Public engagement will be essential for making progress on minimisation, and ultimately disarmament. Without sustained public pressure, it will be too easy for the narrow circles of nuclear decision-makers and vested interests to shield themselves from scrutiny and preserve the status quo. Meaningful accountability is needed because it is the lives of ordinary people around the world who are ultimately put at risk by nuclear weapons.

The challenges to achieving a nuclear-free world are undoubtedly significant and daunting, regardless of whether the agenda proposed by The Elders is adopted by nuclear states, or whether people around the world become more engaged on this issue. But the costs of failing to move in this direction could be unimaginable.

This is why all states must urgently and seriously recognise the need for nuclear disarmament, and must not cease until all nuclear weapons are removed from existence.

The Elders

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The Elders Foundation

3 Tilney Street
London
W1K 1BJ
United Kingdom

theElders.org

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Published in July 2023

Last updated April 2025 > Design by coastline.agency