



## Living with the Bomb: The Public and Nuclear Weapons

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### Summary

*Mass public action against nuclear weapons may have helped initiate some nuclear arms control negotiations, but has had disappointing impact on limiting growth in nuclear arsenals or on dissuading states from acquiring nuclear weapons. Public activism may also have contributed to the tradition of non-use of nuclear weapons since 1945, but other factors are likely to have been more significant, particularly policymakers' understanding of the potentially catastrophic consequences of such use. The limited mainstream public support for nuclear disarmament was understandable during the Cold War but this situation continues, with nuclear disarmament essentially moribund as a mass public movement. Public action should be a forceful voice in nuclear weapons policy making, compelling governments in the nuclear-armed states to justify convincingly their nuclear weapons decisions both in security/defence terms and as an effective use of public money. If this is to happen, far greater numbers of the general public will need to become engaged on nuclear weapons issues. Without nuclear weapons becoming a mainstream issue prospects for achieving a nuclear-weapon-free world are dim. The expertise of political campaign strategists, social psychologists and media experts, who understand how beliefs form, how hardened beliefs change, and how civic engagement on key issues is fostered, should be used to help identify and deliver nuclear weapons messages that have a better chance of mobilizing mass opinion.*

### Introduction

1. Governments of the nuclear-armed states continue to assure their publics that nuclear weapons remain essential to deterring potential enemies and reassuring allies, while critics, although not necessarily denying that there are some security advantages, argue that the risks and costs of nuclear weapons far outweigh any benefits.<sup>1</sup>

2. Public disquiet about nuclear weapons emerged soon after their first use in Japan and grew throughout the 1950s, peaking in the early 1960s before waning. A second major wave of public action began in the late 1970s, coinciding with a downturn in US-USSR relations and NATO plans to deploy intermediate range nuclear forces in Europe. This second wave tapered off from the mid-1980s. Public engagement on nuclear weapons issues has since been in decline, although still recurring periodically, such as during the 2005 demonstrations in New York sixty years after the Hiroshima and Nagasaki nuclear attacks.

<sup>1</sup> President Barack Obama's latest nuclear weapons guidance "affirms that the United States will maintain a credible deterrent, capable of convincing any potential adversary that the adverse consequences of attacking the United States or our allies and partners far outweigh any potential benefit they may seek to gain through an attack." The White House, *Fact Sheet: Nuclear Weapons Employment Strategy of the United States*, 19 June 2013, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/06/19/fact-sheet-nuclear-weapons-employment-strategy-united-states>. For a critical assessment of nuclear deterrence, see Gareth Evans, "Nuclear Deterrence in Asia and the Pacific," *Asia and the Pacific Policy Studies*, 1:1 (2014), pp. 91-111, <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/app5.11/pdf>.

3. This Policy Brief explores the impact of these anti-nuclear protests on nuclear policy, focusing primarily on early US thinking on the need to eliminate nuclear weapons, on the non-use of nuclear weapons since 1945, and on progress in nuclear arms control. Admittedly, assessing the influence of public action on policy making is a complex and difficult task: among numerous other variables, the nature of a state's political institutions, time lags between public discourse and policy responses, and cultural beliefs can all have a significant impact on whether and under what conditions different groups influence policy.<sup>2</sup> Diverse networks of social scientists from around the world are exploring these questions in some depth, and are generating a growing body of research. This Brief is intended to contribute to that literature by discussing the policy impact of two main periods of mass anti-nuclear weapons activism, and by identifying some of the factors that appear to be limiting the policy impact and public appeal of current efforts to generate a broad-based global anti-nuclear weapons movement. It concludes with a series of suggestions for overcoming these obstacles, pitched at groups working to generate and sustain more effective mainstream anti-nuclear weapons activism. This includes expert and high-level individuals and groups which play a crucial role in the public opinion-policy nexus.<sup>3</sup>

4. In referring to the potential of generating a broad-based anti-nuclear weapons movement, this Brief is not necessarily urging a repeat of past anti-nuclear weapons movements, nor of the tools then employed such as mass public

protests. The intention is to encourage discussion on whether finding ways to engage the general public on nuclear weapons issues should be a higher priority for advocates of a nuclear-weapon-free world. The difficulties of achieving the necessary levels of public engagement should not be underestimated. But US public attitudes to the Vietnam War showed that mainstream attitudes can change over a relatively short timeframe, going from clear majority support for the war to clear majority opposition in less than a decade – which then shaped US policy choices, in particular through the presidential election process.

### The Non-Use of Nuclear Weapons Since 1945

5. Elite understanding of the gravity of nuclear weapons use predated the emergence of public concern in the US, although President Harry S. Truman's announcement of the nuclear attacks on Japan showed no hint of this. In his statement on 6 August 1945, he presented the bombing as appropriate 'pay-back' for Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor, describing it as "the greatest achievement of organized science in history" and a means to "completely destroy Japan's power to make war." No mention was made of the radiation effects of atomic weapons.<sup>4</sup>

6. Behind Truman's wartime rhetoric, there was considerable disquiet in US policy circles over the dangers of nuclear weapons. Supreme Allied Commander in Europe, General Dwight D. Eisenhower advised against using the atomic bomb, warning Secretary of War Henry Stimson that the US should avoid "shocking world opinion" by using a weapon that he did not consider necessary to save American lives.<sup>5</sup> On 17 July 1945, a petition to Truman signed by Leo Szilard and 69 other Manhattan Project scientists cautioned that "a nation which sets the precedent of using these newly liberated forces of nature for purposes of destruction may have to bear the responsibility of opening

<sup>2</sup> For an introduction to the literature on public opinion and policy, see Sara Binzer Hobolt and Robert Klemmensen, "Responsive Government? Public Opinion and Government Policy Preferences in Britain and Denmark," *Political Studies* 53 (2005), pp. 379–402, [http://personal.lse.ac.uk/HOBOLT/Publications/PS\\_eprint.pdf](http://personal.lse.ac.uk/HOBOLT/Publications/PS_eprint.pdf); Paul Burstein, "The Impact of Public Opinion on Public Policy: A Review and an Agenda," *Political Research Quarterly* 56: 1 (2003), pp. 29–40; and Piers Robinson, "Media as a Driving Force in International Politics: The CNN Effect and Related Debates," *Global Policy*, 8 October 2013, <http://www.globalpolicyjournal.com/blog/08/10/2013/media-driving-force-international-politics-cnn-effect-and-related-debates>.

<sup>3</sup> The potential for high-level opinion to help shape and mobilize wider public opinion was shown by the re-energized nuclear weapons debate following the series of opinion pieces in the *Wall Street Journal* since January 2007 by George P. Shultz, William J. Perry, Henry Kissinger, and Sam Nunn. "A World Free of Nuclear Weapons," 4 January 2007; "Toward a Nuclear Free World," 15 January 2008; "How to Protect Our Nuclear Deterrent," 19 January 2010; "Deterrence in the Age of Nuclear Proliferation," 7 March 2011; and "Next Steps in Reducing Nuclear Risks," 5 March 2013.

<sup>4</sup> White House Press Release, 6 August 1945, archived in the Ayers Papers, Harry S. Truman Archive and Museum, US National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), [http://www.trumanlibrary.org/whistlestop/study\\_collections/bomb/large/documents/index.php?pagenumber=2&documentid=59&documentdate=1945-08-06&studycollectionid=abomb&groupid=](http://www.trumanlibrary.org/whistlestop/study_collections/bomb/large/documents/index.php?pagenumber=2&documentid=59&documentdate=1945-08-06&studycollectionid=abomb&groupid=)

<sup>5</sup> Peter J. Kuznick, "The Decision to Risk the Future: Harry Truman, the Atomic Bomb and the Apocalyptic Narrative," *Japan Focus*, 23 July 2007, [http://www.japanfocus.org/-peter\\_j\\_-kuznick/2479](http://www.japanfocus.org/-peter_j_-kuznick/2479).

the door to an era of devastation on an unimaginable scale.”<sup>6</sup>

7. Following the attacks on Japan, public opposition to nuclear weapons was quick to emerge in the US, but it was not instant. In fact, a US Gallup poll taken a few days after the bombings returned very strong public support, with 85 per cent approval, and only 10 per cent disapproval.<sup>7</sup> But as independent information on the devastation of Hiroshima and Nagasaki percolated through society, public opposition to their future use mounted. Truman himself, while never stepping back from the decision to use nuclear weapons on Japan, quickly grasped the potentially disastrous consequences of atomic weapons, stating publicly on 11 May 1946 that: “Civilization cannot survive an atomic war. Nothing would be left but a world reduced to rubble.”<sup>8</sup>

8. Subsequent administrations displayed a high level of self-restraint, despite the occasional temptation to resort again to nuclear use during the Cold War. The Eisenhower Administration’s official policy that nuclear weapons would be considered as available for use as any other munitions appears to have been more rhetorical than factual.<sup>9</sup> This is supported by Eisenhower’s rejection of the use of nuclear weapons during the Korean War, despite Secretary of State John Foster Dulles’ 1953 exhortation that: “Somehow or other we must manage to remove the taboo from the use of these weapons.”<sup>10</sup> Likewise, the Kennedy, Johnson

and Nixon Administrations considered but chose not to use nuclear weapons in the Vietnam War, even though low-yield nuclear weapons designed for battlefield use were available. Nina Tannenwald’s extensive analysis of why nuclear weapons were not used in the Vietnam War concludes that the motivations were “first, fear of inadvertent escalation, rooted in calculation about the risk of uncontrolled escalation, plus the potential for an infinitely catastrophic outcome”; “second, preserving the tradition of non-use”; and “finally, a taboo, a normative belief that using nuclear weapons would be wrong.”<sup>11</sup>

## Nuclear Arms Control Agreements

9. Evidence that public protest has had at least some influence on nuclear policy can be found in the major arms control initiatives that were launched during periods of mass action, such as the test ban negotiations of the late 1950s and early 1960s, and the Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty negotiations of the late 1970s and 1980s.<sup>12</sup> However, while there does seem to be a correlation between mass public protest and policy in these cases, the extent to which the impetus for negotiations represented a sincere commitment to arms control among the policy elite is unclear. Strategic calculations aimed at trumping Soviet capabilities, political tactics for taking the sting out of the tail of the peace movement, and responses to unexpected events also have to be considered. The linkage between mass protest and arms control momentum is therefore far from straightforward. It is striking, for example, that global public activism against nuclear weapons during the 1950s to the mid-1960s did nothing to limit growth in nuclear-weapons stockpiles. In 1950, the global nuclear-weapons stockpile was just 304 weapons; by 1965 the global stockpile had reached a staggering

<sup>6</sup> “A Petition to the President of the United States,” signed by Leo Szilard and 69 co-signers at the Manhattan Project Metallurgical Laboratory, Chicago, 17 July 1945, US National Archives, <http://www.dannen.com/decision/45-07-17.html>.

<sup>7</sup> The precise polling question was: “Do you approve or disapprove of using the new atomic bomb on Japanese cities?” David W. Moore, “Majority Supports Use of Atomic Bomb on Japan in WWII,” *Gallup News Service*, 5 August 2005, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/17677/majority-supports-use-atomic-bomb-japan-wwii.aspx>.

<sup>8</sup> Harry S. Truman, “Address at Fordham University,” New York City, 11 May 1946, archived in the Harry S. Truman Archive and Museum, <http://www.trumanlibrary.org/publicpapers/index.php?id=1554>.

<sup>9</sup> Thomas C. Schelling, “An Astonishing Sixty Years: The Legacy of Hiroshima,” Nobel Prize Lecture, 8 December 2005, [http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/economic-sciences/laureates/2005/schelling-lecture.html](http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/economic-sciences/laureates/2005/schelling-lecture.html).

<sup>10</sup> Schelling, “An Astonishing Sixty Years.” The reality of the nuclear taboo is evident from Dulles’ 1956 judgement that automatic employment by the United States of nuclear weapons in certain instances “would surely cost us our allies” and that “we’d be finished as far as present-day world opinion was concerned.” Quoted in Nina Tannenwald, *The Nuclear Taboo: The United States and the Non-Use of Nuclear Weapons* (Cambridge: Cambridge University

Press, 2007). p. 173.

<sup>11</sup> Nina Tannenwald, “Nuclear Weapons and the Vietnam War,” Nautilus Institute, March 2003, <http://nautilus.org/essentially-annihilated/essentially-annihilated-nuclear-weapons-the-vietnam-war/#axzz2vhFS7dki>.

<sup>12</sup> A statistical study by Jeffrey Knopf has concluded that anti-nuclear weapons protests also had an impact on the commencement by the United States of the first round of Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT I) and negotiations for the original Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START I). Jeffrey Knopf, “Domestic Sources of Preferences for Arms Cooperation: The Impact of Protest,” *Journal of Peace Research* 35:6 (1998), pp. 677–94.

37,591 weapons, peaking in the mid-1980s at over 70,000.<sup>13</sup>

10. From the mid-1950s, the atmospheric testing of hugely powerful hydrogen bombs intensified public engagement on nuclear weapons issues. Eisenhower appeared to accept that public opinion would eventually force an end to these tests, stating in May 1959 that “we were going to be forced by public opinion in the United States to stop tests unilaterally,” and adding that “we must find a reasonable and decent way to do this by agreement if possible.”<sup>14</sup> But public protest was not always a force in shaping Eisenhower’s position on a test ban. When Adlai Stevenson advocated limits on nuclear testing during the 1956 US presidential election, Eisenhower campaigned against Stevenson’s proposal, even though limiting nuclear testing was under discussion within his own administration.<sup>15</sup>

11. In office, Presidents Eisenhower and John F. Kennedy both followed a pattern of trying to shape US public opinion on atmospheric testing by emphasizing the dangers of radioactive fallout, but at the same time demonstrating a willingness to continue US tests until major technical advancements had been secured.<sup>16</sup> This was not unique to the US experience. British Prime Minister Harold MacMillan made UK participation in the 1958 atmospheric testing suspension dependent upon Britain being given access to US nuclear-weapons testing information.<sup>17</sup> And even after the Partial Test Ban Treaty (PTBT) was concluded in 1963, France and China continued to test in the atmosphere. France stopped atmospheric testing in 1974 and China in 1980.

12. The fact that the test ban talks dragged on without conclusion from 1958 to 1962 calls

into question the political priority given to a test ban, including as a response to public protest. In contrast, after the glimpse of nuclear disaster in the October 1962 Cuban missile crisis there was a strong political–security imperative to negotiate. When it became apparent that a comprehensive test ban would not be achieved quickly, it was shelved and the (admittedly less complex) PTBT was concluded on 25 July 1963 after just 12 days of negotiations.

13. In the case of the INF Treaty, US President Ronald Reagan was probably both responding to public opinion and leading it. Public opinion circumstances were certainly conducive in the 1980s, with the re-emergence of the mass anti-nuclear weapons movement, renewed public support for arms control, and Americans after 1982 taking the view that too much was being spent on defence. The US nuclear freeze movement, calling for a US–Soviet freeze on the further development, deployment and testing of nuclear weapons, was attracting strong public and some congressional support. In Western Europe, the anti-nuclear weapons movement had rebounded strongly with the planned deployment in Europe of new intermediate-range nuclear missiles. It also helped that, by 1984, Reagan had softened his anti-Soviet rhetoric and adopted a more compromising stance on arms control.<sup>18</sup>

14. Official documents from the period, which have recently been declassified, suggest that public opinion might have played a more significant role in generating the initial momentum for the INF negotiations than previously realized. Secret US Department of State cables dating from 1978–79 suggest that the United States and key NATO allies were worried about the growing nuclear allergy of European publics, who, at the time, were protesting loudly against the planned deployment of new US intermediate-range nuclear forces in Europe.<sup>19</sup> The “zero option” (the promise to negotiate the removal of all US and Soviet intermediate-range nuclear forces from the continent) was regarded as a strategy to help stem these public protests and maintain NATO cohesion.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Hans M. Kristensen, Robert S. Norris, “Global nuclear weapons inventories, 1945–2013,” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* (September/October 2013), <http://bos.sagepub.com/content/69/5/75.abstract?rss=1>.

<sup>14</sup> Quoted in Knopf, “Domestic Sources of Preferences for Arms Cooperation.”

<sup>15</sup> Barry H. Steiner, “The Test Ban and the 1956 Election,” *Arms Control Today* (December 2011), <http://www.armscontrol.org/print/5164>.

<sup>16</sup> Erin L. Richardson, *SANE and the Limited Test Ban Treaty of 1963: Mobilizing Public Opinion to Shape US Foreign Policy*, MA thesis, Ohio University, November 2009, pp. 21–80.

<sup>17</sup> Lewis L. Strauss, Memorandum for the Files, 20 August 1958, George Washington University, National Security Archive, <http://www2.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB94/tb06.pdf>.

<sup>18</sup> See Thomas Risse-Kappen, “Public Opinion, Domestic Structure, and Foreign Policy in Liberal Democracies,” *World Politics* 43:4 (1991), pp. 479–512; Knopf, “Domestic Sources of Preferences for Arms Cooperation: The Impact of Protest.”

<sup>19</sup> Tanya Ogilvie-White, ed., *On Nuclear Deterrence: The Correspondence of Sir Michael Quinlan* (Abingdon: IIS/Routledge, 2011), pp. 264–66, 398.

<sup>20</sup> The private correspondence of Sir Michael Quinlan (UK Defence Secretary 1987–91 and the brains behind British

Seemingly, the NATO leadership did not expect the INF negotiations to succeed; they were simply throwing the dog a bone.

15. The fact that the INF negotiations did succeed cannot be explained without an understanding of the unsettling events of the early 1980s, and the personal involvement of Reagan and Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev. NATO's 1983 "Able Archer" exercise (a simulated NATO nuclear attack on the Soviet Union, which was reportedly misinterpreted by Soviet intelligence and military personnel as an imminent nuclear attack) brought home to Reagan and other Western leaders the disturbing reality that Soviet leaders considered a NATO first strike nuclear attack a real possibility.<sup>21</sup> Other events of 1983 provided further worrying insights into the Soviet leadership's mindset, including the shooting down of Korean Airlines Flight 007 and the Soviet reaction to the deployment of Pershing II missiles in Europe. But it was Gorbachev's coming to power in 1985 that provided the possibility of a solution, delivering a new style of Soviet leadership with which the West could productively engage.

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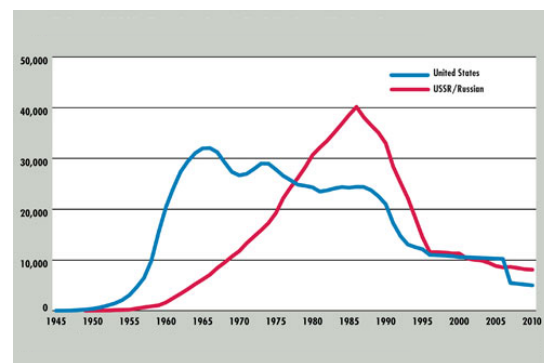
nuclear strategy) offers some interesting insights into how public opposition to nuclear weapons was handled by the British establishment during the Cold War. In contrast to their US counterparts, British officials were wary of using arms control negotiations as a way to placate nervous publics, preferring instead to use public information campaigns to sing the praises of nuclear deterrence (including stressing its morality as an essential war-prevention tool), and to engage in debates with influential anti-nuclear campaigners in an effort to convince the wider public of the potential dangers of disarmament. Ogilvie-White, *On Nuclear Deterrence*, pp. 261–362.

<sup>21</sup> Able Archer involved a simulated exercise of command and control, featuring a run-through of a NATO nuclear attack on the Soviet Union. It took place during a period of extremely tense US–Soviet relations, following Reagan's launch of the Strategic Defence Initiative, the scheduled deployment of Pershing II missiles, and the shooting down of Korean Airlines Flight 007. During the exercise, Soviet intelligence and military personnel reportedly feared that the US and NATO were mobilizing a surprise nuclear attack. Some scholars and historians claim that the situation could have triggered a nuclear exchange, had it not been for the actions of MI6 double agent, Oleg Gordievsky, who informed US and NATO allies of Soviet fears. See Patricia Lewis, Heather Williams, Benoit Pelopidas, and Sasan Aghlani, *Too Close for Comfort: Cases of Near Nuclear Use and Options for Policy* (London: Chatham House Report, 2014); and Paul Dibb, "The Nuclear War Scare of 1983," *ASPI Special Report* (October 2013), [https://www.aspi.org.au/publications/special-report-the-nuclear-war-scare-of-1983-how-serious-was-it/SR56\\_nuclear\\_war\\_scare-1.pdf](https://www.aspi.org.au/publications/special-report-the-nuclear-war-scare-of-1983-how-serious-was-it/SR56_nuclear_war_scare-1.pdf).

## Effectiveness of Public Anti-Nuclear Weapons Campaigns

16. It is difficult to draw firm conclusions on the impact of large-scale public campaigns against nuclear weapons on policy, but the limits of such action are readily apparent. With the exception of providing some of the impetus behind the INF and other arms control negotiations, anti-nuclear public action does not appear to have had significant impact on curbing nuclear weapon numbers or on dissuading states from taking the political decision to pursue nuclear weapons.

Figure 1: US and USSR/Russian Stockpiled Nuclear Warheads<sup>22</sup>



Source: Natural Resources Defense Council

17. Only with the Cold War's end did global nuclear warhead numbers begin to fall sharply, by which time public nuclear weapons activism had already fallen away. Figure 1 shows a gradual decline in US warheads from 1965, levelling off around 1980, and sharp declines in Soviet warheads from 1985, and in US and USSR/Russian warheads from the end of the Cold War.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> This graph does not include the most up-to-date figures for current stockpiles of Russian and US nuclear warheads. Recent disclosures and more accurate methodologies reveal a significantly lower number of Russian non-strategic nuclear weapons, leading to an aggregate figure that is closer to that of the US nuclear arsenal. Figure 1 remains useful, however, to provide a broad illustration of periods of rapid increase and decline in nuclear forces. For recent estimates of US and Russian nuclear arsenals see Ramesh Thakur and Gareth Evans, eds., *Nuclear Weapons: The State of Play* (Canberra: Centre for Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament, 2013), p. 19, or SIPRI's January 2014 estimates of world nuclear forces at <http://www.sipri.org/research/armaments/nuclear-forces>.

<sup>23</sup> Jonathan Reed Winkler, "Why the Stockpiles?" IPP Digital, US Department of State, 22 February 2010, <http://iipdigital.usembassy.gov/st/english/publication/2010/02/20100222190335ebypassedo3.511554e-02.html#axzz2sygCnPh8>.



18. Away from the nuclear-armed states, the influence of public opinion may be more evident. Anti-nuclear mass protests created the groundswell for New Zealand's rejection of extended US nuclear deterrence. Successive New Zealand governments, Labour and conservative alike, have maintained New Zealand's anti-nuclear stance since its introduction almost thirty years ago. Likewise, anti-nuclear public opinion in some NATO countries has imposed constraints on NATO nuclear planning and provided the impetus for some NATO countries to put an end to forward basing of US tactical nuclear weapons on their territory. The anti-nuclear movements of the late 1970s to mid-1980s also changed the political landscape in some European countries, fostering the rise of parties with strong anti-nuclear (both civil and military) positions, such as the Greens.

19. Anti-nuclear public opinion in New Zealand helped spur the regional campaign for a South Pacific nuclear-free zone. But movement on the zone issue and eventual conclusion of the South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone Treaty (SPNFZ) nevertheless had to await the election in Australia of the Hawke Labor government in 1983. Australasian and regional activism for conclusion of the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT) was also informed by the strongly negative domestic public reaction to French nuclear testing in the South Pacific. In Japan, the strong public anti-nuclear weapons sentiment is a powerful constraint on revisiting the nuclear weapons question.

20. Independently of public opinion, policy makers have appreciated from the outset that using nuclear weapons involved crossing a boundary with uncertain and possibly catastrophic consequences. That these concerns did not prevent the use of nuclear weapons in 1945 was due to the particular combination of circumstances at the end of World War II, when "there was no argument with great enough weight to stop their use."<sup>24</sup> In short, the grave and potentially self-harming nature of any decision to use nuclear weapons use is not lost on the holders of such weapons.<sup>25</sup> So while

public concerns about nuclear weapons use might have influenced policy makers' views along with the inertia of the tradition of non-use, a major consideration has likely been the simple self-interest of the nuclear-armed states. As Thomas Schelling noted "inhibitions on 'first use' may be powerful without declarations."<sup>26</sup>

## Boosting the Impact of Public Action

21. Understanding why public action has had limited influence on policy might help advocates of nuclear arms control and disarmament devise more effective, strategically targeted campaigns, improving prospects that nuclear disarmament messages will resonate strongly where it matters: in the general publics of the nuclear-armed states.

22. Despite at times attracting significant numbers, public anti-nuclear weapons activism in the nuclear-armed states has been too sparse and thus too easy to ignore. A weakness has been its on-again, off-again nature, public concern rising in response to negative developments, then falling away when some progress has been achieved. And the public can be too easily satisfied. After the conclusion of the PTBT, public activism (driven mainly by health concerns about atmospheric testing) fell away despite the fact the treaty did not cover underground testing. Successful public campaigns such as the anti-Vietnam War movement have been large-scale, broad-based and sustained, succeeding in changing public opinion to an extent that political leaders could not ignore.

23. Moral and ideological arguments with a pacifist overlay have featured strongly in the messages of major public activism against nuclear weapons. Yet against the backdrop of the Cold War, policymakers and publics alike saw such arguments as simplistic, unpersuasive and even dangerous. Such attitudes are still to be overcome. The powerful mythology around nuclear deterrence has made people believe that nuclear weapons provide security in an insecure world. For example, the US public sees nuclear weapons as the best/strongest weapon

<sup>24</sup> McGeorge Bundy, "Danger and Survival: Choices about the Bomb in the First Fifty Years," cited in Nina Tannenwald, "The Nuclear Taboo: The United States and the Normative Basis for Nuclear Non-Use," *International Organization* 53: 3 (1999), p. 443.

<sup>25</sup> This is not to downplay the risk of human error, misjudgement, miscommunication or system error leading to nuclear use. Harmless events can be read as threatening, such as in 1995 when Russia's President Boris Yeltsin was advised that he should immediately retaliate against an

incoming NATO missile, which proved to be a Norwegian scientific rocket launch. This and other 'near misses' were not prevented by command and control systems very much more sophisticated than those of some potential nuclear adversaries today.

<sup>26</sup> Schelling, "An Astonishing Sixty Years."

in the US arsenal, helping to keep America safe in a dangerous world.<sup>27</sup>

24. Nuclear weapons are deeply embedded in the political, economic and social dynamics of the nuclear-armed states. Scott Sagan has described nuclear weapons as “more than tools of national security; they are political objects of considerable importance in domestic debates and internal bureaucratic struggles and can also serve as international normative symbols of modernity and identity.”<sup>28</sup> Nuclear weapons would need to be devalued strategically as well as delegitimized normatively in the eyes of the majority if public action is to succeed. This will require the development of new approaches, because current highly credible and well-argued expert-level work arguing for nuclear disarmament is achieving little impact on the general public, suggesting messages are either not convincing or are not being heard.

25. Obstacles to effective public action should not be minimized. In addition to concerns over current power shifts and strategic instability, the nature of nuclear-weapons decision making itself poses major challenges, creating circumstances where even political leaders sometimes have limited influence on nuclear procurement decisions. The long lead-time on nuclear procurement and replacement decisions means that government scientists and defence officials have far more influence than they do in other areas of policy. Political leaders may find themselves locked into nuclear-weapons decisions taken many years previously and in which huge sums of money have already been invested. Manhattan Project military head, General Leslie Groves suggested Truman was swept along by events towards an inevitable outcome. “As far as I was concerned,” Groves wrote, Truman’s decision “was one of non-interference – basically, a decision not to upset the existing plans... As time went on, and as we poured more and more money and effort into the project, the government became increasingly committed to the ultimate use of the bomb.”<sup>29</sup>

<sup>27</sup> US in the World Initiative, *Talking about Nuclear Weapons with the Persuadable Middle, Final Report*, 2009. [http://www.stanleyfoundation.org/Talking\\_About\\_Nuclear\\_Weapons\\_-\\_Final\\_Report.pdf](http://www.stanleyfoundation.org/Talking_About_Nuclear_Weapons_-_Final_Report.pdf).

<sup>28</sup> Scott D. Sagan, “Why Do States Build Nuclear Weapons? Three Models in Search of a Bomb,” *International Security* 21: 3 (1996/1997), [http://cisac.stanford.edu/publications/why\\_do\\_states\\_build\\_nuclear\\_weapons\\_three\\_models\\_in\\_search\\_of\\_a\\_bomb/](http://cisac.stanford.edu/publications/why_do_states_build_nuclear_weapons_three_models_in_search_of_a_bomb/).

<sup>29</sup> Kuznick, “The Decision to Risk the Future.”

26. Official secrecy surrounding nuclear decision-making puts those who challenge the established wisdom on deterrence thinking at a disadvantage, with implications for the democratic process as well as disarmament. As former UK Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary, David Owen, explains in his book, *Nuclear Papers*, information on nuclear procurement decisions has been very closely guarded in the United Kingdom, including at Cabinet level.<sup>30</sup> As a result of this intense secrecy, very few members of the executive branch (let alone backbenchers, members of the opposition and the wider public) have access to the facts and figures that they would need to make a well-informed and detailed case for disarmament.<sup>31</sup> British nuclear decision-making has opened up to greater scrutiny since then, but much secrecy remains without apparent justification. Yet the United Kingdom and United States are the most transparent of the nuclear armed-states; secrecy is an even more serious obstacle to publicly-generated disarmament momentum elsewhere.

27. Despite these challenges, opportunities do exist to revive public action against nuclear weapons. According to a survey taken in 2008, the majority of populations in the nuclear-armed states support the idea of an internationally negotiated verifiable ban on nuclear weapons, which would see countries with nuclear weapons dispose of them within a fixed time-frame and no other countries acquire them.<sup>32</sup> That said, while publics in the nuclear-armed states may support the “motherhood” concept of all countries verifiably giving up nuclear weapons for all time, responses to specific questions reveal a more complex reality. A 2013 British survey asked whether the UK should give up nuclear weapons altogether, replace its current sea-based nuclear weapons system with four new submarines, or develop a cheaper system for keeping nuclear weapons. Only 20 per cent considered the United Kingdom should give up nuclear weapons altogether.

<sup>30</sup> David Owen, *Nuclear Papers* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2009), p. 10.

<sup>31</sup> In Owen’s case, critical information about the UK deterrent was withheld from him when he was Foreign Secretary from 1977–79. Owen, *Nuclear Papers*, p. 10.

<sup>32</sup> This is according to a survey conducted by the Program on International Policy Attitudes, Washington, DC. Of course, accurately surveying “world opinion” is a tall order, and, moreover, the survey is now six years old and opinions might have changed. See “Publics Around the World Favor International Agreement to Eliminate All Nuclear Weapons,” 9 December 2008, [http://www.worldpublicopinion.org/pipa/articles/international\\_security\\_bt/577.php](http://www.worldpublicopinion.org/pipa/articles/international_security_bt/577.php).

er, while 32 per cent supported replacing the current submarines and 34 per cent believed a cheaper system should be sought.<sup>33</sup> Another 2013 poll illustrated the scope of the public attitudes challenge in India, finding that an overwhelming majority (79 per cent) of Indians believe that nuclear weapons are important for achieving their nation's goals.<sup>34</sup>

### Does Public Engagement Matter?

28. Understanding within policy making elites (although obviously not by all individuals involved) of the gravity of any decision to use nuclear weapons has resulted in a de facto no first use regime. This represents a substantial barrier against the further first use of nuclear weapons, even though it falls short of a legally binding no first use commitment. But nuclear doctrines and modernization programs suggest that the same political and policy elites are committed to the indefinite retention of nuclear arsenals, contrary to political leaders' proclamations of support for a nuclear-weapon-free world.

29. Three questions need asking when considering the outlook for nuclear disarmament:

- Who needs to be convinced of the merits of nuclear disarmament?
- What are the messages that will engage and convince the target groups?
- How can these messages best be delivered?

30. If the answer to the first question is: only the policy making elites in the nuclear-armed states, then business as usual will suffice because much of the current work arguing for nuclear disarmament is pitched at this level. But while expert and high-level individuals and groups have an important role to play, it seems clear that their efforts alone will not achieve a nuclear-weapon-free world.<sup>35</sup> As Ramesh Thakur and Gareth Evans have put it: "On the

evidence of the size of their weapons arsenals, fissile material stocks, force modernization plans, stated doctrine and known deployment practices, all nine nuclear-armed states foresee indefinite retention of nuclear weapons and a continuing role for them in their security policies."<sup>36</sup>

31. Mass public engagement on nuclear weapons issues has the potential to force political leaders to take nuclear disarmament seriously, helping close the gap between disarmament rhetoric and concrete action. Governments would be compelled to explain convincingly why nuclear weapons remain essential to national security and to justify the vast current and planned expenditure on nuclear force retention and modernization. For this to happen, nuclear weapons need to become a politically mainstream issue.

32. US attitudes to the Vietnam War illustrate the potential for mass action to influence policy. When large-scale US involvement in the war began, only 24 per cent of Americans believed sending troops to Vietnam was a mistake. Less than a decade later, 60 per cent of Americans held this opinion.<sup>37</sup> Arguments against the war registered with the general public because ordinary people could relate to what was being said and what they could see around them. The mass media, particularly television, showed that the reality of the war differed markedly to official information, fuelling public questioning of government propaganda.

33. Engaging the general public on nuclear weapons issues is probably a more profound challenge than the Vietnam War example. Security/defence arguments about nuclear weapons inevitably involve quite abstract debates that are not easily accessible to non-experts. The Cold War's end has added to these difficulties, with complex threats such as North Korea, Iran and undefined future uncertainty cited as contemporary justification for retaining substantial nuclear arsenals.<sup>38</sup> But for advocates of a nuclear-weapon-free world, the basic challenge is identical to the Vietnam War

<sup>33</sup> <http://yougov.co.uk/news/2013/07/15/trident-keep-scrap-or-downgrade/>.

<sup>34</sup> <http://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/india-poll-2013>.

<sup>35</sup> The many initiatives over the years making the case for nuclear disarmament include The Canberra Commission on the Elimination of Nuclear Weapons, 1996; the Tokyo Forum for Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament, 1999; the UN Secretary-General's High-level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change, 2004; the Weapons of Mass Destruction (Blix) Commission, 2006; the International Commission on Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament, 2009; and the Global Zero Action Plan, 2009.

<sup>36</sup> Thakur and Evans, eds., *Nuclear Weapons: The State of Play*, p. 4.

<sup>37</sup> Frank Newport and Joseph Carroll, "Iraq Versus Vietnam: A Comparison of Public Opinion," Gallup News Service, 24 August 2005. <http://www.gallup.com/poll/18097/iraq-versus-vietnam-comparison-public-opinion.aspx#1>.

<sup>38</sup> See for example, David Cameron "We need a nuclear deterrent more than ever," *The Telegraph*, 3 April 2013.



case: arguments need to be found that strike a chord with the general public.

34. A 13 March 2014 US Gallup Poll showed that Americans' top concerns are unemployment, the economy, and dissatisfaction with the government. International issues including the crisis in Ukraine were not regarded as major issues.<sup>39</sup> Polls in other countries also show economic issues to be a leading concern. In these circumstances, arguments based on the opportunity costs of nuclear weapons<sup>40</sup> may have a better chance of resonating with the public than defence/security and humanitarian arguments. This may be the case especially where there is an existing national debate on nuclear weapons futures, such as the Trident replacement decision in the UK. Opportunity cost arguments, including the negative impact on conventional military capability, also offer some prospect of mobilizing populations in nuclear-armed countries where nuclear disarmament has never been a significant public issue, such as France.

35. One attempt to identify messages capable of engaging the mainstream public is the US in the World Initiative, titled *Talking about Nuclear Weapons with the Persuadable Middle*.<sup>41</sup> This project ran from 2008–09 and developed a series of recommendations based on three research projects that examined US public opinion on nuclear weapons issues. Top of the list of “don’ts,” according to the project’s final report, is “Don’t lead with moral arguments against nuclear weapons,” because US public opinion puts security above morality. This is an interesting claim, particularly in the context of current NGO and state-led efforts to emphasize the humanitarian impact of nuclear weapons. The study’s conclusions suggest that other messages to avoid in the US context include: presenting getting to zero as the primary goal; making the US solely responsible for the lack of progress on non-proliferation (and, presumably, disarmament); relying too heavily on President Barack Obama as a validator of non-proliferation and disarmament proposals; and focusing too much on fears about nuclear ter-

rorism. Top of the list of “do’s” is: “Let the public know that it is nuclear weapons themselves – not who has them – that is the problem.” Other effective messages include: informing people that creating a more manageable world is the ultimate goal; explaining that nuclear weapons are ineffective in addressing today’s security challenges; and reminding people that nuclear weapons are uniquely destructive and pose genuine risks of a nuclear accident with catastrophic consequences.

36. If the persuadable middle is to be engaged and convinced of the merits of a nuclear-weapon-free world, it will be necessary to understand the range of values the general public attaches to nuclear weapons among different groups and in different countries.<sup>42</sup> This will help the process of identifying counter-arguments capable of gaining the public’s attention. Efforts can then shift to devising the most effective means of delivering such messages to the target groups, taking into account that messages are likely to vary from country to country.

## Recommendations

37. Actions that would help generate higher levels of public mobilization, include:

### 1. Tailoring disarmament messages to resonate with target groups

The priority must be to increase understanding of the values people attach to nuclear weapons, in order to identify which nuclear disarmament messages will gain the attention of and convince different publics. Far more work is needed internationally to identify and understand these values. More use also needs to be made of the studies that have already been conducted. For example, in addition to utilizing economic arguments, research suggests that in the area of defence and security policy, US public opinion is much more concerned with safety and security than it is with morality and ethics. Based on this observation, it is likely that the disarmament community’s humani-

<sup>39</sup> Rebecca Riffkin, “Americans Cite Jobs, Economy, Gov’t as Top U.S. Problems” Gallup Politics, 13 March, 2014. <http://www.gallup.com/poll/167873/americans-cite-jobs-economy-gov-top-problems.aspx>.

<sup>40</sup> See John Page and Ramesh Thakur “Nuclear Weapons – The Opportunity Costs” APLN/CNND *Policy Brief* No.1 (Canberra: Asia-Pacific Leadership Network and Centre for Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament, June 2013).

<sup>41</sup> US in the World Initiative, *Talking about Nuclear Weapons with the Persuadable Middle*.

<sup>42</sup> In his study of nuclear weapons in the UK, Nick Ritchie argues that in addition to traditional security/defence attributes, the other values assigned to nuclear weapons need to be addressed when considering how they might be devalued. Nick Ritchie, “Valuing and Devaluing Nuclear Weapons,” *Contemporary Security Policy* 34: 1 (2013), <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/13523260.2013.771040>.

tarian consequences initiative will have more impact in the US if it emphasizes the dangers that nuclear weapons pose to the safety and security of the US public, rather than focusing on the evil they pose as indiscriminate weapons of mass destruction. Evidence of US nuclear accidents and close calls (and incidents of nuclear near-use) are helping emphasize the fallacy of nuclear deterrence arguments,<sup>43</sup> but positive messages on how peace and security can be maintained without nuclear deterrence are also crucial. Unfortunately these tend to be neglected by the disarmament movement.

## 2. Identifying the best means to deliver disarmament messages to publics

It is also necessary to draw more extensively on the expertise of those experienced in working with public opinion, such as political campaign strategists and media, advertising, and communications experts, to identify the best means of delivering anti-nuclear weapons messages. Some current disarmament initiatives, such as Global Zero, have had more success in messaging than others, but may require a more sophisticated strategy to overcome hardened deterrence optimism and disarmament pessimism. Drawing on the research that explores why people believe, and how and why their beliefs change, would be very helpful in developing these strategies. For example, recent research shows that people are much more likely to change long-held beliefs if they identify strongly with the person delivering a message.<sup>44</sup> High-profile expert opinion will continue to be an important contributor to shaping and mobilizing public opinion. In addition, disarmament advocacy will be strengthened and made more effective with the support of a diverse range of individuals viewed as cred-

ible by ordinary citizens. Efforts to recruit them should therefore be a central part of strategies to generate momentum for change.

## 3. Uniting around a core, achievable goal to maximize policy leverage

To maximize the chances of influencing nuclear policy, public groups need to coordinate among themselves both domestically and internationally. Historically, disarmament activism has had more impact on policy decisions when it has reached a critical mass, and when it has united around specific, achievable goals. As Joseph Cirincione has argued, although in the US “the heavy lifting for the [New START] treaty [is] done by the administration and the Senate leadership...in policy debates that are decided on the margins, the margins matters. Public groups could tip the balance.” The key is “to focus the efforts of many groups on core, achievable goals.”<sup>45</sup> The same applies at the international level. Currently, due to effective coordination, the humanitarian consequences initiative has the strongest potential to unite diverse groups into an effective global disarmament movement, but much depends on whether it can unite around a core, achievable goal. Rather than channeling efforts into the conclusion of a nuclear ban treaty, which many consider premature, it might be more productive to focus attention on rolling back nuclear weapons modernization programs, which are currently preventing progress towards a nuclear-weapon-free world, or on generating international support for a convention on the no first use of nuclear weapons.

<sup>43</sup> The following publications provide useful evidence to reinforce these arguments: Lewis, Williams, Pelopidas, and Aghlani, *Too Close for Comfort*; and Eric Schlosser, *Command and Control: Nuclear Weapons, The Damascus Accident, and the Illusion of Safety* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2013).

<sup>44</sup> The Cultural Cognition Project at Yale University conducts research on how cultural values shape public risk perceptions and related policy beliefs. “Cultural cognition” refers to the tendency of individuals to conform their beliefs about disputed matters (climate change, nuclear deterrence) to values that define their cultural identities. For insights, see the literature on the project website: [www.culturalcognition.net](http://www.culturalcognition.net). Also see Maria Konnikova, “I Don’t Want to Be Right,” *The New Yorker*, 19 May 2014 and Peter Aldous, “How Not to Change a Climate Sceptic’s Mind,” *New Scientist*, 18 March 2011.

<sup>45</sup> Joseph Cirincione, *Nuclear Nightmares: Securing the World before It Is Too Late* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), p. 179.

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The **Asia Pacific Leadership Network (APLN)** comprises some forty former senior political, diplomatic, military and other opinion leaders from fourteen countries around the region, including nuclear-weapons possessing states China, India and Pakistan. The objective of the group, convened by former Australian Foreign Minister and President Emeritus of the International Crisis Group Gareth Evans, is to inform and energize public opinion, and especially high-level policy-makers, to take seriously the very real threats posed by nuclear weapons, and do everything possible to achieve a world in which they are contained, diminished and ultimately eliminated. See further <http://apln.anu.edu.au>.

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former UN Assistant Secretary-General, and it is assisted by a distinguished International Advisory Board chaired by Professor Gareth Evans. See further <http://cnnd.anu.edu.au>.

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