



ICRC

2026 Review Conference of the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT)

Working paper by the International Committee of the Red Cross

Reshaping risk reduction: steps to increase disincentives for using nuclear weapons

1. The humanitarian consequences of a nuclear weapon detonation, whether by accident, miscalculation or design, are too catastrophic for such a risk ever to be acceptable. While nuclear weapons have not been used in armed conflict since 1945, the probability of a detonation occurring has been steadily increasing since the last Review Conference. We are alarmed both by this evolution and by the lack of an appropriately urgent and focused collective response from the international community. This Review Conference must address this grave situation with decisive action.
2. The increasing risks stem from the maintaining of nuclear arsenals on high levels of alert; the vulnerability of nuclear weapon command-and-control networks to human error and cyberattack, which grows with technological developments that increase complexity and vulnerability of such networks; existing military doctrines and security policies that give a prominent and even increasing role to nuclear weapons; and the dangers of access to such weapons and related materials by non-State actors. The risks are exacerbated by growing international and regional tensions, explicit and implicit threats to use nuclear weapons, rhetoric that envisages or normalizes possible use of nuclear weapons, and the ongoing modernization and development of new nuclear weapons with novel, “more usable” capabilities.
3. The only way to guarantee that nuclear weapons are never used again is to prohibit and eliminate them. The ICRC repeats its call for NPT States Parties to implement their obligations under Article VI to achieve nuclear disarmament. The ICRC also reiterates the consistent call by the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement to all States that have not yet done so to promptly adhere to and faithfully implement the NPT as well as other mutually reinforcing instruments of international law that seek to achieve the goal of a world without nuclear weapons, including the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, the Comprehensive Nuclear Test-Ban Treaty and regional treaties establishing nuclear-weapon-free zones¹.
4. Pending the elimination of nuclear weapons, reducing the risk of their use is an urgent humanitarian imperative. Specific risk reduction measures are therefore urgently needed, and nuclear-weapon States and those allied to them bear the primary responsibility in this respect. But all other members of the international community also have a direct stake in ensuring that risk reduction measures are implemented, in order to protect their populations from threats to their security given the catastrophic, far-reaching and transboundary effects of any use of nuclear weapons.

¹ See Resolution 7 of the 2022 Council of Delegates, “Working towards the elimination of nuclear weapons: 2022–2027 action plan”, https://rcrcconference.org/app/uploads/2022/06/CD22-R07-Nuclear-weapons_22-June-2022_EN_FINAL.pdf

5. A number of risk reduction measures are well known and have been proposed at successive Review Conferences. They include unequivocal commitments never to use nuclear weapons first; removal of nuclear weapons from high operational alert; pre-notification of military exercises that may involve the launch of missiles or other vehicles associated with nuclear weapons; re-establishment of joint early warning centres to clarify in real time unexpected and potentially destabilizing events; and steps to progressively reduce the role of nuclear weapons in security policies. Such measures would be effective and are thus indispensable. They can and must be implemented urgently by the nuclear-weapon States (and, as appropriate, their allies) not in spite of the current international security situation, but because of it.

6. There is an additional approach to risk reduction that can be pursued in parallel, not just by nuclear-weapon States but by all NPT States parties, along with the International Red Cross Red Crescent Movement and civil society. This is risk reduction based on increasing disincentives for using nuclear weapons. This includes: strengthening the taboo against their use; highlighting the human costs and catastrophic consequences of use; raising political and ethical barriers to use; and condemning or otherwise discouraging behaviour that makes use more likely, such as nuclear threats or coercion, or discourse that envisages, normalizes, or encourages the use of nuclear weapons.

7. This approach to risk reduction has three core elements:

1. **Consistently and visibly highlighting the catastrophic humanitarian consequences of any use of nuclear weapons.** This involves targeted efforts to highlight such consequences in any relevant national and international fora and related debates, including as a response to any new nuclear weapons policy announcements or speculation.
2. **Condemning and stigmatizing any explicit or implicit threats to use nuclear weapons, and any other nuclear rhetoric that erodes the taboo against their use.** Such threats go against everything international law and the NPT stand for, and impede the implementation of Article VI. Consistent, coordinated and unequivocal condemnation, especially at senior political levels, of nuclear threats and other rhetoric that envisages or speculates about using nuclear weapons, lowers the risk of escalation and strengthens the taboo on use of nuclear weapons.
3. **Ensuring compliance with IHL at all times and undertaking IHL compatibility assessments of the current nuclear doctrines and postures of nuclear-weapon States.** The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement has repeatedly stated its assessment that it is extremely doubtful that nuclear weapons could ever be used in compliance with international humanitarian law (IHL)². States' views on the legality under IHL of the use of nuclear weapons may vary, but their catastrophic humanitarian consequences are beyond dispute. The scope for any conceivable use of nuclear weapons that could ever be considered to be consistent with IHL would in any case be exceptionally narrow compared with the wide range of uses that would clearly violate it. Accordingly, ensuring compliance with IHL in nuclear doctrines restricts the scenarios in which these weapons might be used, thus lowering the risk.

8. The ICRC recommends that these risk-reduction measures be included as commitments applying to all States Parties in the outcome document of the Review Conference.

9. Noting that nuclear risk reduction cannot become a substitute for the implementation of States Parties' legally binding obligations to achieve nuclear disarmament, the ICRC further

² Ibid.

recommends that these risk-reduction commitments be included in addition to specific commitments by the nuclear weapon States detailing steps to implement their unequivocal undertaking to accomplish the total elimination of their nuclear arsenals.