



NEW ZEALAND
FOREIGN AFFAIRS & TRADE
Manatū Aorere

New Zealand Disarmament and Arms Control Strategy

2024-2026





Anti-Nuclear protesters in New Zealand in 1984. Courtesy Kete Christchurch under a Creative Commons Attribution-No Derivatives 3.0 New Zealand License.

Why a disarmament and arms control strategy?

New Zealand has long been active on disarmament, arms control and non-proliferation issues, often playing a leadership role in the region and globally. Through this work we have sought to achieve a safer and more secure world, free from nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction, where international humanitarian law is respected and civilians in conflict zones are protected from harm. Our principled approach to disarmament, arms control and non-proliferation issues is well respected internationally. This work has served New Zealand's national interests and made a contribution to the global public good, while aligning with our values.

Although achieving progress on disarmament and arms control is never easy, the current global context is particularly challenging. The New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade's 2023 Strategic Foreign Policy Assessment describes significant shifts in the international context from rules to power, and from economics to security among other changes.¹ For example, Russia's invasion of

¹ MFAT, [*2023 Strategic Foreign Policy Assessment – Navigating a Shifting World*](#).

Ukraine in February 2022 has directly challenged the international rules-based order, including fundamental rules of international law. Russia's nuclear threats and stationing of nuclear forces in Belarus in 2023 signalled the further entrenchment of nuclear deterrence and the escalation of a new arms race. Meanwhile, important and long-standing disarmament and arms control frameworks including the Intermediate Nuclear Forces Treaty have collapsed, and others such as New START are at critical junctures.

The international disarmament, arms control and non-proliferation architecture plays an important role in adding predictability and transparency to relations between states, thus reducing the prospect of conflict. But this architecture is increasingly under challenge, and requires active and strategic engagement to both preserve and adapt this where necessary, let alone extend it. The agreement generally seen as the international cornerstone in this architecture, the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), is under particular stress. The NPT was already under pressure given the ongoing modernisation and expansion by the nuclear-weapon states of their nuclear arsenals, the extension of nuclear alliances, and major proliferation challenges before Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Russia's obstruction of an outcome at the NPT's 2022 Review Conference further underlined the challenges to the regime's effectiveness.

Meanwhile, Russia and Syria have used chemical weapons in the last decade. Moreover, they have obstructed all accountability efforts and have sought to undermine the international architecture dedicated to their elimination, especially the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC). Recent conflicts have also seen violations of international humanitarian law, with devastating and long-term consequences for civilians, including in Ukraine and Israel-Gaza, as well as conflicts elsewhere around the globe. The prospect of armed conflict in outer space, and of the development and use of weapons not controlled by humans ('autonomous weapon systems'), are additional complex challenges.

Disarmament and non-proliferation must continue to compete for necessary resources and political attention with other important global challenges. At the same time, international tensions have compounded the divisions and inefficiencies of key disarmament fora just when they are needed most. 2023 was a comparatively bleak year in this respect, with the exception of the successful second Meeting of States Parties to the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) in November-December 2023, modest progress in multilateral talks on norms of responsible behaviour in space and autonomous weapons, respectively, and destruction of all declared chemical weapons stockpiles.

While acknowledging the difficult environment, this does not lessen the importance of preserving disarmament and arms control-related pacts and structures due to their security benefits and their contribution to a rules-based international system in which smaller states, such as New Zealand, can safely prosper. Historically, movement on disarmament, arms control and non-proliferation has not been solely conditional on an improved international situation but has contributed to its achievement. In light of that, the current global situation makes progress even more imperative with nuclear disarmament continuing to be a particular multilateral priority for New Zealand. Given the volume of challenges ahead and the resource constraints we face, however, there is a need to

remain deliberate about where we invest our effort. This is why we continue to update our disarmament and arms control strategy.

This strategy, revised and updated in early 2024, draws on our existing reputation, experience and relationships to continue pursuing long-standing New Zealand objectives, while also recognising the need to look further afield – and to the future – to ensure we take advantage of new opportunities and are ready for new challenges. It identifies our seven objectives for the period ahead grouped within three priority areas, the context in which we are pursuing these, and the means through which we aim to achieve them.



Priority Area 1: Nuclear Disarmament and Non-Proliferation

What is the issue?

Recent nuclear threats, new stationing of nuclear weapons, signs of expansion in the nuclear arsenals of some states, and improving understanding of the catastrophic humanitarian consequences of any such use underline why eliminating nuclear weapons is the most urgent item on the international disarmament agenda – and our top disarmament priority.

In recent years, reductions in global nuclear arsenals have slowed – and in some cases reversed. Estimated nuclear warhead stocks continue to hover around 13,000 (the vast majority of which are held by the US and Russia. China is now increasing its stockpile). Modernisation programmes continue in all the nine nuclear-armed states, and nuclear weapons remain a central aspect of their military doctrines and those of their allies. The risks of a nuclear detonation, whether by accident, miscalculation or design, continue to grow. The catastrophic humanitarian consequences of any use of nuclear weapons are increasingly the subject of focused international attention, as is the toxic legacy of past nuclear weapons testing in regions such as the Pacific.

The entry into force of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) in January 2021, and the outcomes of its first and second Meetings of States Parties (in June 2022 and November-December 2023), injected some much-needed optimism and momentum into nuclear disarmament efforts and refocused political attention on the need for further progress. The TPNW provides the legal framework for a world free of nuclear weapons and represents a necessary step on the pathway towards their total elimination by adding to the stigma against nuclear weapons. For this very reason, the Treaty does not enjoy universal support, and continues to face opposition from those still reliant on nuclear weapons for their security.

Trust and confidence within and between NPT nuclear-weapon states and non-nuclear-weapon states is in deficit, with concerns growing that those with nuclear weapons never intend to fulfil the



grand bargain enshrined in the NPT and relinquish them. A meeting of NPT State Parties in 2023 underlined the limited convergence in views, even on enhancing transparency and accountability under the Treaty's nuclear disarmament review pillar – something that New Zealand, along with others, has championed. The NPT also continues to face serious proliferation challenges from Iran and North Korea, and as a result of the ongoing absence of India, Pakistan and Israel as State Parties.

Meanwhile, the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty also faces headwinds. The CTBT is an important treaty, adopted in the 1990s, which establishes a global monitoring network under international control to detect nuclear detonations. The CTBT helps to underpin the norm against nuclear weapon use and testing, but has still not formally entered into force internationally as it lacks several key ratifications, including that of the US. Citing this as a reason, Russia de-ratified the CTBT in late 2023 (although it does remain a signatory).



New Zealand Representatives at the International Court of Justice in 1973 on nuclear testing. Courtesy Alison Quentin-Baxter.



Why do we care and what can we do?

Our ongoing prioritisation of nuclear disarmament is a continuation of New Zealand's historical leadership role in this area, borne out of the New Zealand public's horror at the use of the Pacific as a nuclear testing ground and our clear rejection of nuclear weapons as unlawful and illegitimate. It reflects our firm belief that nuclear war must be avoided, and that the elimination of nuclear weapons is the only way to properly address their risks and catastrophic humanitarian consequences. This underpins our support for a broad range of initiatives – both in law and policy – to achieve progress on strategic disarmament and arms control, and enable greater international stability and security.

The content and consistency of New Zealand's approach to both nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation is one of our biggest assets, providing clear evidence of our belief that nuclear weapons should be abolished for all states and not just some. This reputation, and our decades of advocacy, diplomacy and negotiation on nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation, have enabled us to build up deep knowledge of the issues as well as an extensive network of partner states, international organisations and civil society groups that share our commitment and aspirations. Importantly, the New Zealand public remains strident in its opposition to nuclear weapons and takes pride in the Government's ongoing advocacy on this issue.

Against this backdrop, we will pursue the following nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation objectives, focusing attention on these activities:

Objective one:

Play an active role in implementing the Vienna Action Plan, agreed at the first Meeting of States Parties to the TPNW.

- As co-chair of the work stream on verification with Malaysia, continue to lead inter-sessional efforts to progress implementation of Article 4 of the TPNW ahead of the third Meeting of States Parties in March 2025;
- Continue to work with partner states and civil society to promote uptake of the TPNW, and encourage implementation of Articles 6 and 7 on positive obligations, in part with a view to achieving progress on nuclear legacy issues in our region, in concert with existing regional initiatives;
- In line with the action plan, support initiatives to draw international attention to and build understanding about the humanitarian impacts of nuclear weapons, for instance through the UN General Assembly.



Objective two:

Engage in the 2023-2026 review cycle of the NPT to promote both the urgent implementation of existing nuclear disarmament commitments and increased accountability for the nuclear weapon states.

- Work with our New Agenda Coalition and other likeminded partners, and with civil society, to pursue concrete nuclear disarmament outcomes over the course of the current NPT review cycle;
- Develop initiatives to increase transparency and accountability of the nuclear-weapon states to implement their nuclear disarmament-related obligations and commitments.

Objective three:

Support the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) in the implementation of its critical mandates on nuclear safeguards, safety and security.

- Support efforts to address major nuclear non-proliferation challenges – in particular those posed by Iran and North Korea – and strengthen the nuclear safeguards system;
- Support the IAEA's central role in addressing nuclear safety and security issues, including in Ukraine and the Pacific region.





Priority Area 2: Defending International Humanitarian Law and the Protection of Civilians

What is the issue?

International humanitarian law (IHL) is a framework of rules to regulate conduct during armed conflict. It seeks to protect certain categories of people (like civilians) and property and restrict the means and methods of warfare.

Right now, it is clear that the biggest contemporary challenge to IHL is a lack of respect for it. Recent conflicts provide overwhelming evidence of serious violations of IHL even as conflicts are becoming more numerous in the current security environment. Implementing IHL is not optional, yet it is being treated as such by some parties to armed conflicts. Meanwhile, ratifications of key IHL treaties have slowed and implementation is patchy. Moreover, states have been slow to respond to technological and other developments in a way that ensures IHL remains responsive to new challenges.



Cleared remnants in Cambodia. New Zealand contributes funding for mine action. Credit: UNDP





RNZN Clearance Diving Group in the Pacific. Credit: NZDF

Why do we care and what can we do?

Humanitarian considerations including the protection of civilians are at the heart of New Zealand's approach to disarmament and arms control. In pursuing a more peaceful and secure world for New Zealanders to prosper, there is an intrinsic link between disarmament and arms control (which, broadly speaking, are avenues to gradually decrease military capabilities in step with increasing mutual confidence about others' intentions) and rules governing the conduct of parties engaged in armed conflict. We therefore place great importance on upholding, and where necessary, strengthening IHL.

New Zealand is deeply concerned about the ongoing use of prohibited weapons, including chemical and biological weapons, anti-personnel mines and cluster munitions, as well as the prohibited use of otherwise lawful weapons. We are also keen to help increase the rate of ratification and national implementation of a number of disarmament treaties to ensure their widest application and adherence. These disarmament treaties form an important part of IHL. It is also critical that New Zealand continues to articulate why IHL is important, and is prepared to help defend it, including weapons-related treaties and related agreements.

New Zealand has long championed IHL and played an active part in the development of several major conventional arms initiatives, including those resulting in the Convention on Cluster Munitions (CCM) and the Arms Trade Treaty (ATT). We have a history of working closely and constructively with international partners and organisations, and with civil society at home and abroad, to contribute to the strengthening of IHL. Drawing on this experience, we will prioritise efforts to promote compliance with conventional weapons treaties as part of regular engagement in them, as well as IHL rules in the interest of protecting civilian populations and combatants from superfluous injury and unnecessary suffering.

Chemical weapons are a particular category of weapon of mass destruction with inhumane effects. While official stockpiles have been destroyed under the Chemical Weapons Convention, nevertheless these weapons have been used in recent years and we need to continue to invest in efforts to uphold the global norm against their use.



Objective four:

Promote uptake and implementation of humanitarian disarmament treaties, norms and declarations.

- Raise New Zealand's voice in support of compliance with IHL-related disarmament treaties such as the Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention, Convention on Cluster Munitions, Arms Trade Treaty, and the UN Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons;
- Support further uptake and implementation of the Political Declaration on Strengthening Civilian Protection from the Use of Explosive Weapons in Populated Areas (EWIPA), in particular in the Indo-Pacific region, and play an active role in the follow-up process to maintain momentum and ensure implementation.

Objective five:

Contribute to the global norm against the use of chemical weapons, in particular through New Zealand's seat on the Executive Council of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons from May 2024.

- Promote universalisation and implementation of the Chemical Weapons Convention in the Pacific through a regional workshop in Suva in the first half of 2024.





Priority Area 3: Shape the future – outer space and autonomous weapons

What are the issues?

The outer space environment is becoming increasingly significant, both strategically and commercially. The amount of space activity and the number of space actors is rapidly growing. Space capabilities of all kinds also continue to improve. Also apparent is the increasing development and proliferation of counter-space capabilities to disrupt or destroy space systems.

States have so far avoided outright armed conflict in space. But activities such as jamming and other forms of electronic interference, attempts to hack satellites as well manoeuvre close to others' space assets have become more common and contribute to the rising risk of misunderstanding or miscalculation among space users. Outright armed conflict risks disruption to critical space-enabled services that underpin large parts of modern life, and could have severe and far-reaching consequences on Earth by creating large amounts of orbital debris that would impact on the continued use of the space environment.

There is an urgent need for to continue and, where possible, accelerate inclusive and transparent multilateral engagement to address threats and risks in space, including on responsible behaviours and issues pertaining to space weaponisation.

At the same time, there is increasing awareness of the legal, political and ethical implications of autonomous weapon systems (AWS) where decisions to kill could conceivably be made without adequate human control or involvement. The development of autonomous technologies in the military domain, including those linked to artificial intelligence (AI), is outpacing international policy and regulation, and we are beginning to see their deployment. The international community must ensure that the development and deployment of any such weapon systems complies with international law, including IHL, and is ethically acceptable.



Why do we care and what can we do?

Like many countries, New Zealand increasingly depends on space technologies and space-based infrastructure to support our daily lives and to help us tackle other challenges more effectively, such as climate change, illegal fishing, or disaster response. New Zealand has a regulatory system in place which governs domestic space launches and the payloads they can deliver. This regulatory system underpins our existing national and international legal obligations while supporting our vibrant and growing space industry.

As we have done for other aspects of space use, New Zealand must also address the complexities surrounding the militarisation and weaponisation of space. Navigating these issues is challenging and complex but important for New Zealand. As one of only around a dozen countries with space launch capabilities, and one of the top commercial launchers, New Zealand has a national interest in the development of new rules and norms for the sustainable use of outer space. We continue to work actively in the context of ongoing UN discussions on these issues along with a core group of likeminded states involving some of our major partners.

On AWS, New Zealand adopted a national policy in November 2021 committing us to the pursuit of new internationally-agreed, legally-binding measures on such systems, while also supporting interim measures that help move consideration of this issue forward. As part of this we have engaged in the multilateral process under way within the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons (CCW) in Geneva, although its progress has been modest. Alongside this, and in recognition of the limits of the CCW, we have played an active part in promoting initiatives in other fora such as a 2023 UN General Assembly resolution for the UN Secretary-General to collect the views of a wider range of states and others in 2024 as to how to move forward toward international agreement. We have also engaged with other initiatives at the regional and international level to build momentum to this end both directly on AWS, and more broadly within the context of use of artificial intelligence in the military domain.

Objective six:

Continue to support international development of responsible behaviours in space and related issues.

- Engage actively in multilateral processes aimed at achieving international agreement on responsible behaviours in space and on other normative and legislative frameworks to ensure the safe, secure, sustainable and peaceful use of outer space.

Objective seven:

Continue to work to progress effective multilateral rules and limits on AWS, in line with our national policy position.

- Continue to work with likeminded partners to lay the foundation for multilateral agreement on AWS, including in the UN and in relevant contexts such as those developing broader rules and norms for AI use in military applications.



How will we achieve our strategy?

- New Zealand's stance on disarmament, arms control and non-proliferation forms a critical part of our multilateral engagement and an important element of our international profile. New Zealand has always firmly supported the international rules-based order and this will be more important than ever as we respond to the particular security challenges of the 21st century.
- This strategy represents the Government's commitment to continue to work with key national stakeholders including civil society, academia, think tanks and the public on disarmament-related issues. We will ensure that Māori views are taken into account and that we consider disarmament-related issues through a gender lens in view of the disproportionate impacts of armed conflict on women and girls. Our engagement will also include young people, given the profound importance of this issue to future generations.
- As we have done in the past, we will work closely with partner governments and international organisations, drawing on our decades of experience to play a meaningful role in the elaboration and implementation of global norms and rules. We aim to be a creative, constructive and credible contributor on both long-standing and emerging disarmament, arms control and non-proliferation issues, working with our traditional partners and striving to build new relationships. Our collaborative, consistent and pragmatic approach is one of the key sources of our success in disarmament and will remain central to our work.

Staying on track

This strategy will guide New Zealand's work for the coming period, and will provide the basis for reporting back to Ministers.

MFAT

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