



**Florida High Schools Model United Nations**

**FHSMUN FLAGSHIP 47**

**GENERAL ASSEMBLY FIRST COMMITTEE (GA1)**

Making Progress Towards Nuclear Disarmament

**Authors:** Noor Khokhar, Samuel Zhu, Joseph Accetta, Ramsey Zeidan  
January 2026

## Introduction

Nuclear weapons remain among the most destructive and controversial instruments ever created. Since their first use in the mid-twentieth century, nuclear weapons have posed a persistent threat to international peace, human survival, and global stability. While they have not been used in warfare since 1945, their continued existence, modernization, and proliferation present significant risks in an increasingly complex international security environment. The challenge of nuclear disarmament lies not only in reducing existing arsenals but also in preventing future use, proliferation, and escalation, which is the purpose of the General Assembly First Committee. The General Assembly First Committee has worked towards nuclear disarmament since its inception, and has several courses of action it can take for the future.<sup>1</sup> Though the committee cannot enforce regulations, it can make recommendations to the Security Council, hear testimony, and vote on passing cooperative measures.

## History

The development of nuclear weapons during World War II marked a turning point in the nature of warfare. The unprecedented destruction caused by the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki revealed the immense human, environmental, and moral consequences of nuclear warfare. These events demonstrated that nuclear weapons possess the capacity to destroy entire cities within moments, leaving long-lasting effects on human health and the environment.<sup>2</sup> Following World War II, nuclear weapons became central to global power dynamics, particularly during the Cold War. The rivalry between major powers led to rapid nuclear arms development and stockpiling, driven by the doctrine of deterrence: the belief that possession of nuclear weapons would prevent conflict by threatening mutual destruction. While this strategy avoided direct large-scale war, it also brought the world dangerously close to nuclear catastrophe on several occasions.<sup>3</sup> These historical experiences laid the foundation for future disarmament efforts by exposing the risks of unchecked nuclear competition.

The development of global norms surrounding nuclear disarmament has been shaped by the recognition that nuclear weapons pose a unique and existential threat to humanity. In response to the dangers revealed by early nuclear use and Cold War tensions, the international community began to establish frameworks aimed at limiting nuclear proliferation and encouraging arms reduction.<sup>4</sup> These efforts reflected a growing consensus that nuclear weapons should not be treated as conventional tools of warfare, but as exceptional weapons requiring strict international oversight.

## Evolving Norms

Over time, global norms evolved from merely managing nuclear rivalry toward promoting disarmament as a long-term objective. These norms emphasize transparency,

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<sup>1</sup> "DISEC: Disarmament & International Security Committee," 2024.

<https://www.imuna.org/nhsmun/nyc/committees/disecc-disarmament-international-security-committee/>.

<sup>2</sup> "Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons | United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs." 2025b. Unoda.org.

<http://disarmament.unoda.org/en/our-work/weapons-mass-destruction/nuclear-weapons/treaty-prohibition-nuclear-weapons>.

<sup>3</sup> ICAN. 2019. "ICAN | International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons." Icanw.org. 2019.

<https://www.icanw.org/>.

<sup>4</sup> "Japan a No-Show as 1st Meeting of U.N. Nuclear Ban Treaty Opens | the Asahi Shimbun: Breaking News, Japan News and Analysis." n.d. The Asahi Shimbun. <https://www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/14650089>.

confidence-building measures, and the gradual reduction of nuclear arsenals. Although progress has been uneven, the continued existence of these norms demonstrates how historical awareness of nuclear devastation continues to inform present-day efforts to reduce nuclear risks and prevent future catastrophe.<sup>5</sup>

The United Nations has played a central role in advancing international dialogue and cooperation on nuclear disarmament. Since its founding, the UN has served as a forum for negotiating treaties, encouraging arms control measures, and promoting peaceful uses of nuclear technology. Through resolutions, conferences, and specialized agencies, the UN has worked to reinforce the principle that nuclear disarmament is essential to international peace and security.<sup>6</sup> The UN has also emphasized the humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons, highlighting their incompatibility with sustainable development, public health, and environmental protection. By supporting verification mechanisms, confidence-building initiatives, and disarmament education, the United Nations has sought to translate historical lessons into concrete policy actions. Despite these efforts, progress remains limited by political divisions and security concerns, underscoring the ongoing challenge of achieving meaningful disarmament.<sup>7</sup>

### **Hiroshima and Nagasaki (1945)**

The atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945 provide the clearest evidence of the humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons, and remain relevant in modern discussions of disarmament. In Hiroshima, an estimated 70,000 people were killed instantly when the bomb detonated, with tens of thousands more dying from burns, radiation sickness, and injuries in the following months. Nagasaki experienced similar devastation just days later. Unlike conventional warfare, nuclear weapons caused immediate, indiscriminate destruction that did not distinguish between civilians and military targets. The long-term consequences were equally severe. Survivors, known as *hibakusha*, faced increased risks of cancer, chronic illness, and genetic damage.<sup>8</sup> Many also endured social discrimination due to fears of radiation exposure. Infrastructure was destroyed, ecosystems were contaminated, and economic recovery took decades. These effects revealed that nuclear weapons produce harm that extends far beyond the moment of detonation, challenging existing laws of war and humanitarian norms.

The global reaction to Hiroshima and Nagasaki shaped early discussions around nuclear restraint. Scientists involved in the Manhattan Project later warned against further nuclear use, while international movements emerged advocating for arms control and disarmament. These bombings remain a central reference point in modern nuclear debates, frequently cited by states and organizations arguing that nuclear weapons are incompatible with humanitarian principles and international law.

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<sup>5</sup> “The Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons: A Well-Intentioned Mistake.” n.d. United States Department of State.

<https://2017-2021.state.gov/remarks-and-releases-bureau-of-international-security-and-nonproliferation/the-treaty-on-the-prohibition-of-nuclear-weapons-a-well-intentioned-mistake/>.

<sup>6</sup> Abe, Nobuyasu. 2020. “The NPT at Fifty: Successes and Failures.” *Journal for Peace and Nuclear Disarmament* 3 (2): 224–33. <https://doi.org/10.1080/25751654.2020.1824500>.

<sup>7</sup> Diaz-Maurin, François. 2023. “The Ban Treaty, Two Years After: A Ray of Hope for Nuclear Disarmament.” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*. January 23, 2023.

<https://thebulletin.org/2023/01/the-ban-treaty-two-years-after-a-ray-of-hope-for-nuclear-disarmament/>.

<sup>8</sup> Shimizutani, Satoshi, and Hiroyuki Yamada. “Long-Term Consequences of the Atomic Bombing in Hiroshima\*.” *Journal of the Japanese and International Economies* 59, no. 101119 (November 2020): 101119. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jjie.2020.101119>.

## Case Study: The Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962

During the Cold War, nuclear weapons became the foundation of security strategies for both the United States and the Soviet Union. The Cuban Missile Crisis exposed the weaknesses of this system. When the Soviet Union secretly deployed nuclear missiles in Cuba, the United States responded with a naval blockade, bringing the two superpowers to the brink of nuclear conflict.<sup>9</sup> For thirteen days, misinterpretation or accidental escalation could have triggered a global catastrophe. The crisis highlighted how close nuclear-armed states could come to disaster even without intent to use nuclear weapons. The resolution of the crisis led to significant arms control developments. Both sides recognized the need for better communication and risk reduction, resulting in the establishment of the Moscow–Washington “Hotline” and the signing of the Limited Test Ban Treaty. The Limited Test Ban Treaty prohibited most forms of nuclear warhead testing, with an unlimited duration.<sup>10</sup>

After the crisis, other agreements such as SALT and START (discussed later) sought to limit and reduce nuclear stockpiles. The Cuban Missile Crisis remains a key example of how nuclear weapons can create instability while simultaneously motivating disarmament efforts. The Crisis also demonstrated how back-and-forth deterrence created a tense but fragile balance, where peace was predicated on the understanding that any use of nuclear weapons would destroy the planet. Each side rapidly expanded its arsenal under the assumption that possessing the ability to inflict catastrophic retaliation would prevent war. This military doctrine is known as Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD), and is the essential idea behind disarmament agreements.<sup>11</sup>

### Does MAD Work?

Coined in 1962, the MAD doctrine has been both foundational and destructive to progressing nuclear disarmament. While it has arguably prevented nuclear warfare during the Cold War era, the doctrine requires several things to be true at once for its logic to make sense. For MAD to hold true as a valid line of thinking, it requires perfect rationality and no human or technical mistakes. In reality, history shows numerous close calls caused by technical malfunctions, misinterpreted signals, or human error. This reliance on perfect judgment in moments of extreme pressure makes MAD inherently fragile. It also encourages massive stockpiling of weapons to maintain “credible” deterrence, increasing costs and risks while doing little to address the root causes of conflict.

Additionally, MAD does not prevent proxy wars, regional conflicts, or arms races; it merely discourages direct confrontation between nuclear powers. It offers no solution for nuclear proliferation, terrorism, or accidental launches, and it leaves civilian populations permanently hostage to catastrophic consequences. By framing security around the threat of total annihilation, MAD normalizes extreme violence as a policy tool and sidelines humanitarian concerns. Rather than promoting cooperation or long-term stability, the doctrine locks states into cycles of mistrust and escalation.

Aptly summarized by the Harvard International Review: “The problem that arises from [MAD’s] logic is that if you are not, as few can be, willing to exterminate millions for the sake of

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<sup>9</sup> Office Of The Historian. “The Cuban Missile Crisis, October 1962.” Office of the Historian. United States Department of State, n.d. <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1961-1968/cuban-missile-crisis>.

<sup>10</sup> BUREAU OF ARMS CONTROL, VERIFICATION, AND COMPLIANCE. “Limited Test Ban Treaty (LTBT).” U.S. Department of State, August 5, 1963. <https://2009-2017.state.gov/t/avc/trty/199116.htm>.

<sup>11</sup> Britannica. “Mutual Assured Destruction.” In Encyclopædia Britannica, 2019. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/mutual-assured-destruction>.

extermination, then MAD no longer functions as a deterrent.”<sup>12</sup> The growing possibility of developing anti-nuclear defense and the various critiques from modern analysts and historians all point to the urgency of a more cooperative approach to disarmament.

However, despite a new school of thought departing from this doctrine, MAD is still the driving force behind key Soviet Union and United States agreements that set an important precedent to this day.

### **SALT, START and Interim Agreements**

The Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT I and SALT II) and the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) were major milestones in the Cold War–era arms control between the United States and the Soviet Union. SALT I, signed in 1972, marked the first formal effort by the two superpowers to place limits on their nuclear arsenals.<sup>13</sup> It included the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty and an interim agreement that capped the number of strategic ballistic missile launchers. Rather than reducing weapons, SALT I focused on stabilizing the arms race by preventing unlimited expansion and reinforcing the idea that mutual restraint could enhance security.

SALT II, signed in 1979, went further by setting limits on the total number of strategic nuclear delivery vehicles and placing constraints on multiple-warhead (MIRV) systems.<sup>14</sup> Although SALT II was never formally ratified by the U.S. Senate—largely due to rising tensions after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan—both countries largely observed its terms for several years. This demonstrated that arms control agreements could still shape behavior even amid political strain, and it reinforced norms of transparency, verification, and dialogue between rivals.

The START agreements represented a significant shift from limitation to actual reduction. START I, signed in 1991 as the Cold War was ending, required deep cuts in deployed strategic nuclear weapons and introduced rigorous on-site inspections and verification measures.<sup>15</sup> Unlike SALT, which mainly froze growth, START mandated real decreases in warheads and delivery systems. Later START agreements built on this framework, continuing reductions while maintaining mechanisms for accountability and trust.<sup>16</sup>

Together, SALT I, SALT II, and START set an enduring precedent for nuclear disarmament by proving that competing powers could negotiate binding limits, accept verification, and reduce the risk of catastrophic conflict. These agreements defined an era of stability between two superpowers, but smaller regimes also adopted their own disarmament measures.

### **Case Study: South Africa’s Nuclear Rollback**

South Africa’s nuclear disarmament represents one of the most significant examples of a state choosing to dismantle its nuclear arsenal. During the 1970s and 1980s, the apartheid-era government developed several nuclear weapons in secret, driven by regional insecurity and

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<sup>12</sup> Harper, Theo J. “Salvation or Annihilation; Is MAD Mad?” Harvard International Review, April 3, 2023. <https://hir.harvard.edu/salvation-or-annihilation-is-mad-mad/>

<sup>13</sup> Britannica, “Strategic Arms Limitation Talks,” in Encyclopædia Britannica, July 19, 2016, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Strategic-Arms-Limitation-Talks>.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Colleen Moore, “From SALT to START: A Timeline of U.S.-Russia Arms Control Talks,” Global Zero, April 23, 2020, <https://www.globalzero.org/updates/from-salt-to-start-a-timeline-of-u-s-russia-arms-control-talks/index.html>.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

international isolation. Nuclear capability was viewed as a strategic safeguard against perceived external threats. However, as apartheid ended and the country transitioned toward democratic governance, South Africa reassessed its security priorities. The new leadership sought international legitimacy and recognized that nuclear weapons posed more political and economic costs than benefits. In the early 1990s, South Africa voluntarily dismantled its nuclear weapons, shut down production facilities, and allowed international inspections.<sup>17</sup> This decision demonstrated that nuclear disarmament is possible when political conditions change. South Africa's experience challenges the assumption that nuclear weapons are essential for national security and provides a rare example of trust-building through transparency. It remains a powerful model for future disarmament efforts.

### **Case Study: The Iran Nuclear Deal**

A landmark case in the 21st century, the Iran Nuclear Deal, formally known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), was a landmark diplomatic agreement reached in 2015 between Iran and the P5+1 group (the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Russia, China, and Germany), endorsed by United Nations Security Council Resolution 2231.<sup>18</sup> Under the deal, Iran agreed to accept rigorous limits on its nuclear program—such as reducing its stockpile of enriched uranium by 98 %, cutting centrifuge numbers, and capping enrichment at 3.67 %—in exchange for relief from U.S., EU, and UN nuclear-related sanctions. Crucially, the pact also imposed unprecedented verification measures, giving the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) regular access to monitor Iranian facilities and ensure compliance.<sup>19</sup> These provisions aimed to extend Iran's "breakout time", the time needed to produce enough fissile material for a weapon, to at least a year, significantly delaying any covert weapons effort while boosting transparency.

What made the JCPOA distinct in the landscape of nuclear agreements was how it addressed power asymmetry between Tehran and the major world powers. Unlike traditional arms control treaties between states of roughly equal strength, this deal involved a regional power under heavy international sanctions agreeing to intrusive inspections and substantial program reductions, while the global powers provided sanctions relief and diplomatic engagement in return. This dynamic required balancing concerns about Iran's sovereign rights and security with the international community's interest in nonproliferation, which was a diplomatic feat that set a precedent for negotiations involving structurally unequal actors. The inclusion of the snapback mechanism in U.N. Security Council Resolution 2231 also created a way for sanctions to be reinstated rapidly if commitments were violated, helping to reassure other parties about enforcement.<sup>20</sup>

However, the JCPOA also highlighted challenges inherent in such asymmetric deals. Critics argued that some limits were temporary and did not permanently dismantle Iran's nuclear infrastructure or account fully for its missile programs or past weaponization efforts. The U.S. withdrawal from the deal in 2018 and subsequent re-imposition of sanctions illustrated how external political shifts can destabilize asymmetric agreements when enforcement is linked to

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<sup>17</sup> migrate, "Why South Africa Built Nuclear Weapons and Gave up Nuclear Weapons," *The National Interest*, April 2024, <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/reboot/why-south-africa-built-nuclear-weapons-and-gave-nuclear-weapons-210335>.

<sup>18</sup> "The Iran Nuclear Deal: A Definitive Guide," *The Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs*, August 3, 2015, <https://www.belfercenter.org/publication/iran-nuclear-deal-definitive-guide/>

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

changing domestic priorities in powerful states.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, Iran’s loss of the economic incentives provided by sanctions relief revealed how dependent the diplomatic balance was on consistent cooperation by stronger powers.

Despite these weaknesses (and the fact that as of late 2025 major elements of the original agreement have lapsed or been declared terminated) the Iran deal remains an important model for future nuclear disarmament negotiations involving nuanced power relationships. Future frameworks inspired by the JCPOA could incorporate stronger safeguards, longer-term restrictions, and more resilient enforcement mechanisms that withstand political changes in powerful signatories. In this way, the Iran Nuclear Deal’s legacy continues to inform how the global community approaches disarmament diplomacy in contexts marked by asymmetry and mistrust.

### **Nuclear Proliferation Treaties and the IAEA**

Modern nuclear nonproliferation treaties form the backbone of today’s global efforts to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons while promoting disarmament and peaceful uses of nuclear energy. At the center of this system is the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), which entered into force in 1970 and remains the most widely supported arms control agreement in history.<sup>22</sup> The NPT rests on three pillars: preventing new countries from acquiring nuclear weapons, encouraging existing nuclear states to pursue disarmament, and allowing access to nuclear technology for peaceful purposes under international oversight. Nearly every country in the world is a party to the treaty, making it a cornerstone of international security.

A key feature of modern nonproliferation is verification, largely carried out by the International Atomic Energy Agency. Through inspections, monitoring, and safeguards, the IAEA works to ensure that civilian nuclear programs are not diverted toward weapons development.<sup>23</sup> These mechanisms increase transparency and trust among states, helping to reduce misunderstandings and discourage secret weapons programs. Over time, stronger inspection protocols have been added, reflecting lessons learned from past violations and the growing complexity of nuclear technology.

The IAEA is best known for such safeguard programs, where it conducts inspections, monitors nuclear materials, and verifies that countries are complying with their nonproliferation commitments under treaties like the NPT.<sup>24</sup> Through tools such as on-site visits, surveillance equipment, and detailed reporting, the agency increases transparency and builds confidence among states, helping reduce mistrust and the risk of secret weapons programs.

Beyond verification, the IAEA also supports cooperation and capacity-building, assisting countries with nuclear energy, medicine, agriculture, and safety standards. In agreements such as the Iran Nuclear Deal, the IAEA’s independent assessments were essential for credibility, showing how technical expertise can enable diplomacy. Overall, the agency provides the institutional backbone for modern nonproliferation, turning political commitments into measurable, enforceable realities.

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Kimball, Daryl. “The Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) at a Glance | Arms Control Association.” Armscontrol.org, 2024. <https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/nuclear-nonproliferation-treaty-npt-glance>.

<sup>23</sup> International Atomic Energy Agency, “Overview | IAEA,” Iaea.org, June 8, 2016, <https://www.iaea.org/about/overview>.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

## The TPNW and Beyond

Several newer agreements aim to build on the NPT's foundation by addressing specific aspects of nuclear weapons. The Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT), adopted in 1996, seeks to ban all nuclear test explosions, limiting states' ability to develop and refine new weapons, even though it has not yet entered into force. More recently, the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW), adopted in 2017, goes further by outlawing nuclear weapons entirely for its members, framing nuclear arms as a humanitarian issue as well as a security concern.<sup>25</sup> Unlike earlier treaties that focused mainly on limiting numbers or preventing spread, the TPNW frames nuclear weapons as unacceptable under international law, emphasizing their catastrophic humanitarian and environmental consequences. Although nuclear-armed states have not joined, the treaty reflects the collective will of many non-nuclear nations and civil society groups to challenge the legitimacy of nuclear deterrence.

The TPNW is important for modern disarmament because it changes the conversation from managing nuclear risks to eliminating them. By establishing a clear legal and moral norm against nuclear weapons, it increases pressure on nuclear states and financial institutions that support weapons production.<sup>26</sup> It also centers the voices of communities affected by nuclear testing and use, reinforcing accountability and justice.

Additionally, bilateral and regional agreements also play an important role. Treaties such as "New START" between the United States and Russia focus on reducing deployed strategic nuclear warheads and maintaining verification measures between the world's two largest nuclear powers.<sup>27</sup> Meanwhile, diplomatic frameworks like the Iran Nuclear Deal demonstrate how tailored agreements can address specific proliferation risks by combining limits on nuclear activities with inspections and sanctions relief. These efforts show that nonproliferation is not just global but also highly contextual, adapting to regional challenges and political realities.

## Conclusion

The age-old doctrine of Mutually Assured Destruction has overstayed its welcome, and its saliency is called into question day by day. At the same time, modernization of nuclear forces and emerging technologies have complicated arms control efforts, raising concerns about renewed arms competition. Cybersecurity threats, Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles, and the possibility of a militarized space have made nuclear disarmament more difficult than ever. Further, historical patterns of rivalry and mistrust persist, influencing present-day security calculations. Understanding this continuity is essential for developing realistic and effective disarmament strategies.

However, cases like the START agreements, South Africa's disarmament, and new Proliferation Treaties have proven disarmament is possible outside of the context of MAD and rapidly evolving arms races. It is important to consider both past agreements, a security/military perspective, and above all, an emphasis on saving lives. For the sake of global peace, the United Nations has the utmost responsibility to ensure disarmament from both emerging nuclear powers

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<sup>25</sup> "Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons | United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs," Unoda.org, 2025, <https://disarmament.unoda.org/en/our-work/weapons-mass-destruction/nuclear-weapons/treaty-prohibition-nuclear-weapons>.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Colleen Moore, "From SALT to START: A Timeline of U.S.-Russia Arms Control Talks," Global Zero, April 23, 2020, <https://www.globalzero.org/updates/from-salt-to-start-a-timeline-of-u-s-russia-arms-control-talks/index.html>.

and current superpowers. Overall, proper action requires examining the historical development of nuclear weapons, evolving international efforts toward disarmament, and confronting current challenges facing the global community.

### **Guiding Questions for Research**

1. How has your country historically approached nuclear deterrence and disarmament, and what treaties (NPT, TPNW, CTBT, START, JCPOA, etc.) has it supported or opposed?
2. What role does your state see for international institutions like the IAEA in verification and compliance, especially given concerns about sovereignty and power asymmetry?
3. How does your country assess the shortcomings of MAD, and what alternatives could it prioritize instead?

### **Guiding Questions for Debate**

1. Should global security continue to rely on deterrence (MAD), or is it time to shift toward humanitarian-based disarmament frameworks like the TPNW?
2. What mechanisms can ensure fair, enforceable disarmament in asymmetric or volatile situations, such as between nuclear and non-nuclear states?
3. How can the international community strengthen verification and trust, particularly through the IAEA, while respecting national sovereignty and preventing political withdrawals from undermining agreements?