

World's Nuclear Arms on High Operational Alert — & Ready to Strike

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Global Research, June 18, 2021

[Inter Press Service News Agency](#) 15 June 2021

Region: [Asia](#), [Europe](#), [Middle East & North Africa](#), [Russia and FSU](#), [USA](#)

Theme: [Intelligence](#), [Military](#), [Military and Security](#), [WMD](#)

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The world's nine nuclear armed states have downsized their military arsenals, but made up for their loss by increasing the number of weapons on high operational alert, according to a new report from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI).

As a result, the world is increasingly within striking distance of nuclear weapons—either by accident or by design.

The most vulnerable region is Asia, which is home to four of the world's nine nuclear powers, namely, India, Pakistan, China and North Korea, the rest being the US, UK, France, Russia and Israel.

The study says the nine countries collectively possessed an estimated 13,080 nuclear weapons at the start of 2021.

This was a decrease from the 13,400 that SIPRI estimated these states possessed at the beginning of 2020, since some of these weapons have gone into “retirement”.

But despite this overall decrease, the estimated number of nuclear weapons currently deployed with operational forces increased to 3,825, from 3,720 last year.

Around 2,000 of these—nearly all of which belonged to Russia or the US—were kept in a state of high operational alert ready for a strike.

World nuclear forces, January 2021

| Country | Deployed warheads* | Other warheads** | Total 2021 | Total 2020 |
|--------------|--------------------|------------------|---------------|---------------|
| USA | 1 800 | 3 750 | 5 550 | 5 800 |
| Russia | 1 625 | 4 630 | 6 255 | 6 375 |
| UK | 120 | 105 | 225 | 215 |
| France | 280 | 10 | 290 | 290 |
| China | | 350 | 350 | 320 |
| India | | 156 | 156 | 150 |
| Pakistan | | 165 | 165 | 160 |
| Israel | | 90 | 90 | 90 |
| North Korea | .. | [40–50] | [40–50] | [30–40] |
| Total | 3 825 | 9 255 | 13 080 | 13 400 |

Source: SIPRI Yearbook 2021

While the US and Russia continued to reduce their overall nuclear weapon inventories by dismantling retired warheads in 2020, both are estimated to have had around 50 more nuclear warheads in operational deployment at the start of 2021 than a year earlier.

Russia also increased its overall military nuclear stockpile by around 180 warheads, mainly due to deployment of more multi-warhead land-based intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) and sea-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs).

The deployed strategic nuclear forces by both countries remained within the limits set by the 2010 Treaty on Measures for the Further Reduction and Limitation of Strategic Offensive Arms (New START), although the treaty does not limit total nuclear warhead inventories, according to SIPRI.

Meanwhile, a new report released last week by the Nobel Peace Prize-winning International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN), warned that nuclear-armed states spent \$72.6 billion on their nuclear weapons – even as the pandemic spread in 2020, an increase of \$1.4 billion from 2019.

The report, [Complicit: 2020 Global Nuclear Weapons Spending](#), showcases how during the pandemic, which had devastating health and economic consequences last year, governments were increasingly channeling tax money to defence contractors, which in turn increased the amounts to lobbyists and think tanks to encourage a continued increase of spending.

Out of the \$72.6 billion that countries spent on nuclear weapons in 2020 globally, \$27.7 billion went to less than a dozen defence contractors to build nuclear weapons, which in turn spent \$117 million lobbying and upwards of \$10 million funding most major think tanks writing about nuclear weapons.

“The climate and Covid emergencies are showing us what we really need for our security and safety as human beings, and it’s not nuclear weapons,” said Dr Rebecca Johnson of the Acronym Institute for Disarmament Diplomacy (AIDD) and a UK-based member of ICAN’s Steering Group.

“The UN system is struggling because its efforts to build cooperative peace and security are constantly undermined and strangled by aggressive nation states. Most people can see we need cooperation and sharing to solve global challenges, from vaccines to sustainable resources,” she told IPS.

But a minority of governments with nuclear dependencies and militaristic economies create the most dangers for everyone, said Dr Johnson.

“With their aggressive posturing, new types of weapons and corrupt selling practices they arm rivals, feed insecurity and wars, and undermine international security, law and human rights, she warned.

“As the UN Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) entered into force this year, it has come as little surprise to see some governments kick back with extra bells and whistles on their pointless and insecure nuclear weapons”.

She said privileged governments with vested interests have engaged in similar angry retaliations when faced with other international treaties that bring much-needed legal constraints.

Professor M. V. Ramana, Simons Chair in Disarmament, Global and Human Security, and Director, Liu Institute for Global Issues, School of Public Policy and Global Affairs at the University of British Columbia, told IPS the ICAN report documents the power of the political control wielded by companies involved in nuclear weapons production and maintenance is.

These companies profit enormously from their involvement in making these weapons of mass destruction and use a share of these profits to lobby for and shape the decision-making process in ways that further their profits, and loosen any semblance of democracy in this sphere, he said.

“To have such actions continue during a global pandemic is shocking, and reveals the completely misguided priorities of these nuclear weapon states and their allies,” said Dr Ramana, a [*scholar at the Peter Wall Institute for Advanced Studies*](#).

According to a breakdown provided by ICAN on global spending on nuclear weapons, the US leads the list:

- United States: \$37.4 billion
- China: \$10.1 billion
- Russia: \$8 billion
- United Kingdom: \$6.2 billion
- France: \$5.7 billion
- India: \$2.4 billion
- Pakistan: \$1 billion
- North Korea: \$667 million

The top 5 companies profiting from nuclear weapon contracts were:

- Northrop Grumman (\$13.6 billion)
- General Dynamics (\$10.8 billion)
- Lockheed Martin (\$2 billion)

- Raytheon Technologies (\$449.5 million)
- Draper (\$342 million)

Dr Johnson said stigmatising and banning nuclear weapons not only affects the profits of military-industrial businesses, but the careers of many bureaucrats, academics and politicians who for decades have promoted spending taxpayer's money on these weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) instead of investing more in their countries' health, education, peace-building relations and environment-saving technologies.

"Like all peace and security objectives, nuclear disarmament is not a one-off project, but a transformative process that needs to be built and maintained throughout our lives."

She said the TPNW puts UN bodies and activists in a stronger position in terms of international norms and law, but as will be seen as States Parties hold their first meeting in 2022, we have a lot of work ahead of us to construct the vital institutional, humanitarian and verification infrastructures for the Treaty to become universally effective."

"Nuclear weapons still have the potential to cause great harm, so these dying kicks of nuclear colonialism need to be stopped. In Britain, many are now promoting the TPNW while campaigning for 'Nurses not Nukes' and accusing Boris Johnson's government of violating Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) obligations with recent policies that increase the role and numbers of UK nuclear weapons," said Dr Johnson.

"ICAN's recent nuclear spending report 'Complicit' deals with another dimension where civil society can exert very effective pressure. Not only does ICAN expose the high financial costs to the nuclear armed governments (and therefore people), but also names some of the major military-industrial and bureaucratic-academic profiteers".

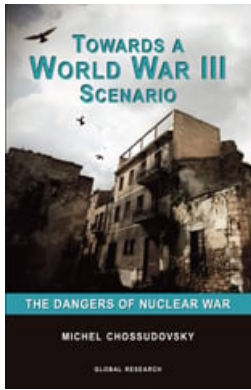
She said naming names is important, as civil society continues to lift the covers and expose the corrupt and dependent relations that have kept nuclear weapons in business since 1945.

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Featured image: Euratom inspectors conduct safeguards inspections at URENCO in the Netherlands. Credit: IAEA/Dean Calma



["Towards a World War III Scenario: The Dangers of Nuclear War"](#)

by Michel Chossudovsky

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ISBN Number: 978-0-9737147-5-3

Year: 2012

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[Michel Chossudovsky](#) is Professor of Economics at the University of Ottawa and Director of the Centre for Research on Globalization (CRG), which hosts the critically acclaimed website www.globalresearch.ca. He is a contributor to the Encyclopedia Britannica. His writings have been translated into more than 20 languages.

Reviews

"This book is a 'must' resource – a richly documented and systematic diagnosis of the supremely pathological geo-strategic planning of US wars since '9-11' against non-nuclear countries to seize their oil fields and resources under cover of 'freedom and democracy'."

-John McMurtry, Professor of Philosophy, Guelph University

"In a world where engineered, pre-emptive, or more fashionably "humanitarian" wars of aggression have become the norm, this challenging book may be our final wake-up call."

-Denis Halliday, Former Assistant Secretary General of the United Nations

Michel Chossudovsky exposes the insanity of our privatized war machine. Iran is being targeted with nuclear weapons as part of a war agenda built on distortions and lies for the purpose of private profit. The real aims are oil, financial hegemony and global control. The price could be nuclear holocaust. When weapons become the hottest export of the world's only superpower, and diplomats work as salesmen for the defense industry, the whole world is recklessly endangered. If we must have a military, it belongs entirely in the public sector. No one should profit from mass death and destruction.

-Ellen Brown, author of 'Web of Debt' and president of the Public Banking Institute



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