



UN RESOLUTION FOR A NEW SCIENTIFIC STUDY ON THE EFFECTS OF NUCLEAR WAR: WHY INDIA ABSTAINED

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In early November this year, the UN General Assembly's First Committee on Disarmament and International Security approved a new resolution on nuclear war effects and scientific research.¹ This resolution called for a new scientific study to examine and advance the current knowledge on the effects of nuclear war. The study would be conducted by an international scientific panel of experts to assess the "physical effects and societal consequences of a nuclear war on a local, regional and planetary scale, including, inter alia, the climatic, environmental and radiological effects, and their impacts on public health, global socio-economic systems, agriculture and ecosystems, in the days, weeks and decades following a nuclear war".²

A total of 144 UN member states overwhelmingly voted in favour of the resolution, including China, the only nuclear-armed state to do so, as well as eight NATO allies such as Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, and Greece. The resolution, which was introduced by Ireland and New Zealand, was approved despite opposition from three nuclear weapon states – Russia, the United Kingdom, and France – that voted against it. Other nuclear powers, including India, the United States, and Israel, opted to abstain, along with 27 other member states.³ In a surprising move, North Korea, which was expected to vote 'no', also abstained.

Rationale for the Study

Several motivations have been driving efforts

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to initiate a new scientific study of the effects of nuclear war. The last time the UN conducted such an assessment was in 1988, with a report titled “Climatic and Other Global Effects of a Nuclear War”.⁴ But that was more than three

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decades ago, and today's world is very different: there are more nuclear-armed states, some of which are expanding their arsenals, and all of which are modernising. Nuclear risks are growing due to the corresponding increase in salience of nuclear weapons among nuclear-armed countries. There are other changes beyond the nuclear domain: the world's population has grown dramatically, with notable shifts in urbanisation and geographical distribution that would affect the scale and nature of potential losses and recovery, including subsequent displacement and disease during a nuclear war. In addition, modern economies are far more interdependent, increasing the potential for regional impacts to cascade globally, with severe disruptions to supply chains, financial markets and food security. Environmental fragility has also increased, and advances in climatic and scientific modelling suggest that even a limited nuclear exchange with low-yield nuclear detonations could cause nuclear winter effects with devastating long-term consequences for humanity.⁵

A new study would be more comprehensive and inclusive in scope, aiming to fill these knowledge gaps on the socio-economic, societal, and ecological impacts, rather than just the physical and environmental devastation. Some of the work on the technical aspects of nuclear weapon effects has been presented in the four Conferences on the Humanitarian Impacts of Nuclear Weapons (or Humanitarian Initiative Conferences) held in Oslo (March 2013), Nayarit (February 2014), Vienna (December 2014) and Vienna (June 2022).⁶ The result of these conferences was the adoption of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) in 2017.⁷ The push for a UN-mandated study on the consequences of nuclear war is not new – in 2023, the Scientific Advisory Group for the TPNW recommended in its report to the Second Meeting of TPNW states that a new study on the consequences of nuclear war be mandated by the UN General Assembly.⁸

However, the purpose of this proposed study is not simply to update the record – it is part of a larger attempt to make tangible progress towards nuclear disarmament. Zia Mian, a physicist at Princeton University and a strong supporter of the study, explains that “Ideally, the findings could build a basis for action toward the total elimination of nuclear weapons worldwide and secure a safer future for people and our planet... it also would help governments and people in nuclear-armed states better understand the nature, scale and severity of the many catastrophic consequences of nuclear war, not just for adversaries but for everyone, including themselves.”⁹

Explanation of Votes

Several nuclear-armed countries provided explanations of vote (EoV) to clarify their respective positions on the resolution. The United States emphasised its awareness of the devastating consequences of nuclear war, clarified that it was "not opposed in principle to a discussion", and recognised the stated objectives of the resolution. The US noted that it had previously funded scientific research and discussion on the issue. However, it questioned the potential impact of the panel, stating that

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The United Kingdom, in a similar vein, stated, "Against this background of clearly established views on the effects of a nuclear war, we are not persuaded of the utility of an Independent Scientific Panel as proposed by the Resolution. Such a panel could not change our collective understanding of the horror of a nuclear war...".¹¹

France shared this perspective, expressing doubts about the added value of a new expert panel. It noted that "we don't see the added value of creating a new panel of experts to study the consequences of nuclear war" and voiced "legitimate doubts about the value of this study for making progress with disarmament and non-proliferation efforts".¹²

China, who voted in favour of the resolution, expressed alignment with the resolution's vision and emphasised that it was in keeping with China's policy of the No-First-Use of nuclear weapons.¹³

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India stated that the overriding priority of the international community, in line with the outcome document of SSOD/1 (First Special Session on Disarmament), should be the total elimination of nuclear weapons. It reaffirmed its commitment to "universal, non-discriminatory and verifiable nuclear disarmament," to be achieved through a step-by-step process underwritten by a universal commitment and an agreed multilateral framework that is global and non-discriminatory.

Session on Disarmament),¹⁴ should be the total elimination of nuclear weapons. It reaffirmed its commitment to “universal, non-discriminatory and verifiable nuclear disarmament,” to be achieved through a step-by-step process underwritten by a universal commitment and an agreed multilateral framework that is global and non-discriminatory. While recognising the deep concern regarding nuclear weapons’ catastrophic humanitarian consequences, as reflected by the resolutions submitted to the First Committee, India conveyed scepticism about the necessity of an additional study. Furthermore, India voiced concerns regarding the panel’s working methods and stressed the importance of “consensus on matters of substance and procedure” in the panel’s approach¹⁵. Russia provided no explanation for its vote against this resolution.

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Understanding India’s Decision

There may be viewpoints suggesting that the lack of support from nuclear-armed states and their allies for this new study may be due to concerns that the findings could possibly give new momentum to the TPNW by the countries that have still not signed and ratified it¹⁶— a treaty that nuclear-armed states overwhelmingly rejected once again in the recent vote in the First Committee resolution on the matter.¹⁷ These fears may be on the basis that the TPNW originated from the Humanitarian Initiative conferences, which also highlighted the consequences of nuclear weapons use. Others ask if governments are “trying to actively suppress evidence that might inform policies”.¹⁸ It has also been argued that “some of the nuclear-armed states and their allies actively lobbied against this study, possibly out of concern that more knowledge on what these weapons of mass destruction do would further erode any citizens’ support for having nuclear weapons”.¹⁹

Some of these arguments may not be entirely unfounded. The nuclear-armed states have repeatedly and unanimously expressed their opposition to the TPNW and may not want to risk any initiative that could accelerate the adoption of the treaty by other countries or even form the basis for another treaty. India’s decision to abstain on this resolution may well have been influenced by this consideration (despite its support for and participation in the three initial Humanitarian Initiative Conferences).

While an abstention should generally indicate a more neutral or passive stance, UN diplomacy is not always straightforward, and the optics of India not overtly supporting this new study could appear irresponsible for a nuclear-armed state. However, a closer look at India’s reasoning does not suggest a fundamental disagreement, but rather a measured scepticism regarding the study’s added value.

India's emphasis on the complete elimination of nuclear weapons through a step-by-step, non-discriminatory approach likely focuses on direct, actionable steps towards nuclear disarmament. As such, it may view an additional study as a less direct step and more of a parallel, less impactful measure, potentially diverting attention and resources away from more practical disarmament initiatives.

Moreover, India may not be convinced that the study would provide significant new insights beyond what it has already consistently emphasised in its own initiatives. This scepticism is underscored by India's decision to abstain on the resolution's preambular paragraph 5, which calls for an updated scientific assessment of the effects of nuclear war. Notably, the United States, which also abstained on the resolution as a whole, voted against this particular paragraph.²⁰ The United States' vote against this paragraph may also indicate a reluctance to make such research public, perhaps viewing it as sensitive information for military assessments. India, however, may not share this concern, given its active role in drawing attention to the humanitarian impact of nuclear weapons. It may be worth highlighting that India was the only nuclear-armed state to vote in favour of a resolution on the humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons in early November this year.²¹

It is, therefore, unlikely that India abstained to 'save face' rather than vote against this study, as the optics might suggest, and more likely due to practical considerations. Conversely, if these concerns are sufficiently recognised and addressed, India may well support this study.

Next Steps

After passing in the First Committee, the resolution will go to the Fifth Committee for a review of its budgetary implications and then to the full UN General Assembly for a final vote in December. The appointed panel will begin its work in 2025, with a final report due in 2027. The submission of the resolution to the full UN General Assembly will again offer India a chance to reconsider its vote in light of the strong international support behind it. India could also participate directly by sending an expert to the UN Scientific Panel to ensure that its perspective is part of the process.

The punchline that nuclear war would have devastating consequences is well-known to all. But by supporting efforts to fill critical knowledge gaps on the effects of the use of nuclear weapons and refocus the spotlight on the dangers of nuclear weapons, India could re-assert its identity as a responsible nuclear power – an opportunity that should not be missed

Notes:

- ¹ United Nations General Assembly, “Nuclear War Effects and Scientific Research,” A/C.1/79/L.39, October 15, 2024, <https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/ltid/n24/296/60/pdf/n2429660.pdf>. Accessed on November 08, 2024.
- ² Ibid.
- ³ “Record of Votes on ‘Nuclear War Effects and Scientific Research’,” Reaching Critical Will, A/C.1/79/L.39, November 01, 2024, <https://reachingcriticalwill.org/images/documents/Disarmament-fora/1com/1com24/votes/L39.pdf>. Accessed on November 08, 2024.
- ⁴ United Nations Digital Library, “Study on the Climatic and Other Global Effects of Nuclear War: Report of the Secretary-General,” A/43/351, 1988, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/39166?v=pdf>. Accessed on November 15, 2024.
- ⁵ Laura Grego, “Why the World Needs a New UN Study on the Effects of Nuclear War,” Union of Concerned Scientists, October 29, 2024, <https://blog.ucsusa.org/lgrego/why-the-world-needs-a-new-un-study-on-the-effects-of-nuclear-war/>. Accessed on November 15, 2024.
- ⁶ Ray Acheson and Allison Pytlak, “Report on the Fourth Conference on the Humanitarian Impact of Nuclear Weapons,” Reaching Critical Will, June 20, 2022, <https://www.reachingcriticalwill.org/disarmament-fora/hinw/vienna-2022/report>. Accessed on November 15, 2024.
- ⁷ “Humanitarian Consequences of Nuclear Weapons,” Hiroshima for Global Peace, 2023, <https://hiroshimaforpeace.com/en/hiroshimareport/report-2023/page-8/>. Accessed on November 08, 2024.
- ⁸ Zia Mian, “First Committee Monitor: Civil Society Perspectives on the UN General Assembly First Committee on Disarmament and International Security,” Reaching Critical Will, vol. 22, no. 14, October 04, 2024, <https://sgs.princeton.edu/sites/default/files/2024-10/Mian-2024-FCM.pdf>. Accessed on November 15, 2024.
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- ¹⁰ United Nations, “Statement at the UN General Assembly First Committee,” UN Web TV, (video, 8:30), November 04, 2024, <https://webtv.un.org/en/asset/k1s/k1s8jpg53w>. Accessed on November 08, 2024.
- ¹¹ Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office, and David Riley OBE, UK Ambassador and Permanent Representative to the Conference on Disarmament, “The Devastating Consequences of a Nuclear War Are Already Clear: UK Explanation of Vote at the UN First Committee,” GOV.UK, November 04, 2024, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/the-devastating-consequences-of-a-nuclear-war-are-already-clear-uk-explanation-of-vote-at-the-un-first-committee>. Accessed on November 15, 2024.
- ¹² United Nations, France, Statement at the UN General Assembly First Committee, UN Web TV, (video, 12:21), November 04, 2024, <https://webtv.un.org/en/asset/k1s/k1s8jpg53w>. Accessed on November 08, 2024.
- ¹³ United Nations, “China, Statement at the UN General Assembly First Committee”, UN Web TV, (video, 46:36), November 04, 2024, <https://webtv.un.org/en/asset/k1s/k1s8jpg53w>. Accessed on November 09, 2024.
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- ¹⁵ United Nations, "India, Statement at the UN General Assembly First Committee," UN Web TV, (video, 01:04), November 04, 2024, <https://webtv.un.org/en/asset/k1s/k1s8jpg53w>. Accessed on November 08, 2024.
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- ¹⁷ "Record of Votes on 'Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons'," Reaching Critical Will, A/C.1/79/L.37, Reaching Critical Will, November 01, 2024, <https://reachingcriticalwill.org/images/documents/Disarmament-fora/1com/1com24/votes/L37.pdf>. Accessed on November 15, 2024.
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- ²⁰ "Record of Votes on 'Nuclear War Effects and Scientific Research'," Reaching Critical Will, A/C.1/79/L.39, November 01, 2024, <https://reachingcriticalwill.org/images/documents/Disarmament-fora/1com/1com24/votes/L39PP5.pdf>. Accessed on November 08, 2024.
- ²¹ "Record of Votes on 'Humanitarian Consequences of Nuclear Weapons'," Reaching Critical Will, A/C.1/79/L.36, November 01, 2024, <https://reachingcriticalwill.org/images/documents/Disarmament-fora/1com/1com24/votes/L36.pdf>. Accessed on November 08, 2024.



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