



briefing

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Nuclear Disarmament or Nuclear Ambivalence?

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Global Public Opinion on Nuclear Weapons, a new public opinion survey of six key states, reveals a challenging ambivalence toward nuclear weapons: it seems that people in nuclear weapon states think that these weapons make the world more dangerous but them safer.

Some 80 per cent of Americans think that nuclear weapons make the world a more dangerous place. Only 10 per cent think the world is safer because of nuclear weapons. But when the same Americans were asked how they felt about their own country's nuclear weapons, 47 per cent said the weapons made them feel safer, while 32 per cent said they made them feel less safe.

That is just one of the revealing findings of this extraordinary survey of five NATO states—Britain, France, Italy, Germany, and the United States—plus Israel conducted by Angus Reid Strategies on behalf of The Simons Foundation of Vancouver.¹

Nuclear ambivalence is most pronounced in Israel. There 87 per cent say nuclear weapons make the world a more dangerous place, but at the same time 73 per cent say they would feel safer knowing that Israel has nuclear weapons.²

It is tempting to call these contradictory views, but of course it is logically possible to believe that nuclear weapons make the world more dangerous and that the world would be better off without them, while still believing that as long as any state has them, one's own state should, too. That at least

seems to be the logic followed by people in states with nuclear weapons, which in turn may go some way to explaining why it is so difficult to advance nuclear disarmament even though that is what the world overwhelmingly wants.

In Britain and France respondents also said that nukes make the world more dangerous (73 per cent and 77 per cent respectively), but that they felt safer knowing that their country had them (in Britain 46 per cent felt safer compared to 37 per cent who felt less safe; in France 48 per cent felt safer while only 24 per cent felt less safe).

In states that do not possess nuclear weapons of their own (German and Italy³), respondents also felt overwhelmingly that nuclear weapons make the world more dangerous (92 per cent and 90 per cent respectively), but they also said that they felt safer knowing that their own country does *not* possess nuclear weapons (60 per cent and 45 per cent respectively). A smaller minority felt that the absence of nuclear weapons rendered them less safe (21 per cent and 34 per cent respectively).

In countries without nuclear weapons, people find all nuclear weapons threatening; in countries with nuclear weapons, people find all nuclear weapons threatening but their own.

That only confirms the basic truth that the overwhelming majority of people, in states with nuclear weapons as well as in states without them, think that the world is made more dangerous by

nuclear weapons and that such weapons should be eliminated. When the survey respondents were asked whether they would favour “eliminating all nuclear weapons in the world through an enforceable agreement,” huge majorities in all the countries surveyed answered in the affirmative: Britain, 85 per cent; France, 87 per cent; Italy, 95 per cent; Germany, 95 per cent; United States, 84 per cent; and Israel, 78 per cent.

It is interesting that this strong support for a treaty or agreement to eliminate nuclear weapons is maintained by respondents who at the same time have a rather dim view of the effectiveness of the current and central nuclear disarmament treaty, the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), which, by virtue of Article VI, requires all states to disarm (though without setting a timetable). Americans are least persuaded of the effectiveness of the NPT (only 16 per cent thought it to be effective). In Germany, which registered the highest confidence in the effectiveness of the NPT (38 per cent), more respondents still regard the NPT as ineffective (42 per cent). In Israel 63 per cent regard the NPT as ineffective while only 18 per cent regard it as effective.

Even so, support for a new international agreement is strong across the board and is reflected in the responses to a question regarding appropriate national policy goals. Here respondents showed a strong combined preference for policies aimed at reducing and eliminating arsenals (Britain, 91 per cent; France, 84 per cent; Italy, 93 per cent; Germany, 96 per cent; United States, 82 per cent; and Israel, 74 per cent). There was greater support for elimination than for reductions, except in France and Israel where there is stronger support for reductions than elimination.

Dr. Jennifer Allen Simons, President of The Simons Foundation, said that the survey results come at a critical time of mounting nuclear tensions and growing interest in nuclear technology. She notes that even though respondents in nuclear weapon states regarded nuclear weapons as a source of protection from aggression, the overwhelming weight of opinion in all the countries surveyed, including the nuclear weapon states, supports nuclear disarmament.

This survey highlights both the challenges and possibilities for nuclear disarmament and touches on a range of additional issues, including nuclear testing, diversion to non-state groups, moral attitudes, and views on nuclear use.

Notes

1. The full report is available at The Simons Foundation website (www.thesimonsfoundation.ca) and the Angus Reid Strategies website (www.angusreidstrategies.com/global).
2. While Israel is widely understood to have several dozen nuclear weapons, it maintains a policy of “strategic ambiguity” by which it refuses to publicly confirm that it has a nuclear arsenal.
3. Germany and Italy actually have US/NATO weapons on their soil, but are not themselves in “possession” of nuclear weapons, nor do their governments have control over those weapons. The Simons/Angus Reid survey also surveyed public attitudes on this practice.

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Project Ploughshares is the ecumenical agency of The Canadian Council of Churches that works with churches and related organizations, as well as governments and non-governmental organizations, in Canada and abroad, to identify, develop, and advance approaches that build peace and prevent war, and promote the peaceful resolution of political conflict. *“and they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation; neither shall they learn war any more” (Isaiah 2:4)*