

# Nuclear disarmament or nuclear ambivalence?

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“**Summary:** A new public opinion survey in six key states reveals a challenging ambivalence toward nuclear weapons: it seems people in states that have them think they make the world more dangerous but make themselves safer.”

Some 80 percent of Americans think that nuclear weapons make the world a more dangerous place. Only 10 percent 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 percent said they made them feel safer and 32 percent said they made them feel less safe.

That is just one of the revealing findings of an extraordinary survey of six states (five NATO states: Britain, France, Italy, Germany, and United States; plus Israel) conducted by Angus Reid Strategies and The Simons Foundation of Vancouver.[\[i\]](#)

Israel is where this nuclear ambivalence is most pronounced. There 87 percent say nuclear weapons make the world a more dangerous place, but at the same time 73 percent say they would feel safer knowing that Israel has nuclear weapons.[\[ii\]](#)

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, but then still believe 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 percent and 77 percent respectively), but in their own case they felt safer knowing their country had them (in Britain 46 percent felt safer compared to 37 percent who felt less safe; in France 48 percent felt safer while only 24 percent felt less safe).

In states that do not possess nuclear weapons of their own (German and Italy[\[iii\]](#)), respondents also felt overwhelmingly that nuclear weapons make the world more dangerous (92 percent and 90 percent respectively), but they also said they felt safer knowing that their own country does *not* possess nuclear weapons (60 percent and 45 percent respectively). In each case a smaller minority felt that the absence of nuclear weapons rendered them less safe (21 percent and 34 percent 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.

But 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 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 percent; France, 87; Italy, 95; Germany 95; United States, 84; and Israel, 78 percent.

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, namely 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 percent thought it to be effective). In Germany, which registered the highest confidence in the effectiveness of the NPT (38 percent), more respondents still regard the NPT as ineffective (42 percent). In Israel 63 percent regard the NPT as ineffective while only 18 percent regard it as effective.

Even so, support for a new international agreement is strong across the board and reflected in the responses to a question regarding appropriate national policy goals. Here respondents showed strong combined preference for policies aimed at reducing and eliminating arsenals (Britain, 91 percent; France, 84; Italy, 93; Germany, 96; United States, 82; and Israel, 74 percent). In each case there was greater support for elimination than simply 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 the survey results come at a critical point 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 in the nuclear weapon states, supports nuclear disarmament.

It is a revealing survey that 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.

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[i] The full report is available at The Simons Foundation website ([www.thesimonsfoundation.ca](http://www.thesimonsfoundation.ca)) or the Angus Reid Strategies website ([www.angusreidstrategies.com/global](http://www.angusreidstrategies.com/global)).

[ii] 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.

[iii] German and Italy actually have US/NATO weapons on their soil, but are not themselves states in “possession” of nuclear weapons, nor do their governments have control over those weapons – the Simons/Angus Reid survey also surveyed public attitudes toward this practice.