

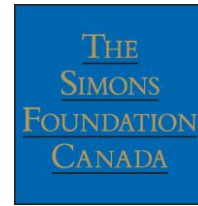


THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

School of Public Policy and Global Affairs



SCHOOL FOR
INTERNATIONAL STUDIES



Advancing Disarmament in a New Age of Insecurity

Vienna International Centre (VIC), Conference Room 2 (CR-2)

Vienna, Austria

21-22 September 2026

CONCEPT PAPER

Workshop co-convened by The Simons Foundation Canada, and the Simons Chair in Disarmament Global and Human Security at the University of British Columbia and the Simons Chair in Peace, Disarmament and Human Security at Simon Fraser University, in association with the United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs.

Context of the Vienna Workshop

The world has become significantly more dangerous in recent years. Armed conflicts have escalated globally, military spending has reached record levels, and governments around the world are investing heavily in new weapons systems and military technologies. At the same time, the institutions and agreements that once constrained nuclear competition continue to erode. The New START Treaty—the last remaining treaty limiting deployed strategic nuclear weapons in the United States and Russia—expired in 2026, and no replacement is currently in sight. All nuclear-armed states are modernizing their arsenals, and political leaders increasingly invoke nuclear weapons as symbols of national pride and power and instruments of “deterrence” and coercion.

These developments are unfolding alongside increased militarization in international politics. NATO has expanded its membership, while insisting on members dedicating a greater portion of their national budget to military spending. Many states, as mentioned earlier, have increased defence spending to record levels, but what is notable is their framing of military investment as the primary response to insecurity and geopolitical uncertainty. Defying research suggesting otherwise, national leaders also promote military spending as being economically beneficial.

Across diverse political contexts, there is growing acceptance of the idea that security is best achieved through stronger armed forces, expanded weapons procurement, and military preparedness. “Deterrence”—or the assumption that simply acquiring new weapons, nuclear or non-nuclear, will increase security and prevent attacks on one’s territory—is being used as though it is a diplomatic strategy and embraced with an alarming lack of critical reflection. This trend has contributed to narrowing public debate about alternative approaches to security and has reinforced the assumption that resources devoted to militarization should take precedence over investments in social programs, climate resilience, public health, education, and other forms of human security.

Together, these developments have contributed to what many observers regard as the most dangerous nuclear environment since the Cold War. The *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* has repeatedly warned that humanity faces unprecedented levels of risk, reflected in the Doomsday Clock inching closer to midnight. Unlike some earlier periods of concern about nuclear weapons, where the risks were primarily from accidents or miscalculation, today there are explicit threats of use of nuclear weapons to achieve political goals.

At the same time, new technological developments are reshaping both nuclear politics and public discourse. Artificial intelligence is increasingly integrated into military planning, targeting systems, intelligence analysis, and command-and-control structures. Governments and private corporations are investing heavily in AI-enabled military capabilities, raising concerns about escalation, transparency, accountability, and the future of human control over the use of force. Moreover, nuclear power and investments in nuclear technologies are being presented as a solution to the technological problem of the seemingly endless need for power for AI data centres. Because of the inextricable connections between nuclear energy and nuclear weapons, any expansion of nuclear energy also has negative implications for security.

Against this backdrop, it is worth noting that most educational institutions have few or no course offerings on disarmament, peace studies, and critical approaches to security, even though disarmament education is clearly more important than ever. Educational initiatives focused on disarmament remain under-resourced and fragmented. Public awareness of the dangers of nuclear weapons and militarization remains low, especially among younger generations. Renewed efforts are needed to strengthen disarmament education, connect educators and advocates across regions and disciplines, and develop innovative approaches for engaging new audiences. It is particularly important that young people gain more knowledge and awareness of the dangers inherent in nuclear weapons and excessive militarization as they begin their adult careers.

The intention of the inaugural *Advancing Disarmament in a New Age of Insecurity* workshop, held in Vancouver in April 2025, was to develop an international network of educators in nuclear disarmament and brought together academics, educators, activists, international organizations, and civil society leaders from around the world to explore how disarmament education can be strengthened in an increasingly volatile global context. Participants discussed many of the problems and dangers identified earlier in this document and emphasized the need to move beyond awareness of these dangers toward education that equips learners with the knowledge, tools, and pathways needed to advance disarmament and non-proliferation efforts.

Five interconnected themes emerged across the workshop. First, participants highlighted the importance of rigorous and accessible disarmament education, including stronger engagement with students, educators, and universities. Second, discussions focused on declining public engagement with disarmament issues and the need for new narratives, storytelling approaches, and communication strategies that connect nuclear risks to everyday concerns and human security. Third, participants emphasized the importance of better understanding and communicating the humanitarian impacts of nuclear weapons, including through lived experiences, arts-based approaches, and attention to gendered and marginalized perspectives.

The workshop also underscored the importance of building stronger networks, coalitions, and partnerships across disarmament, peace, justice, environmental, and educational movements. Participants identified collaboration as essential for expanding the reach and impact of disarmament education at a time of shrinking resources and increasing militarization. Finally, discussions explored the economic and social opportunity costs of militarization, including how educators and advocates can make defence spending and security choices more tangible and understandable to the public. A strong consensus emerged that the workshop should serve as the beginning of an ongoing international community of practice dedicated to advancing nuclear disarmament education through collaboration, curriculum development, resource sharing, and collective action.

Aim of the Vienna Workshop

This workshop builds on the 2025 Vancouver workshop to situate disarmament education as a key tool to addressing the growing dangers of nuclear escalation and helping students and a wider public imagine a peaceful world without weapons.

Key objectives include:

- Identifying successful arguments and approaches for disarmament advocacy, particularly nuclear disarmament
- Reviewing existing courses and materials focused on nuclear disarmament and assessing their impact.
- Sharing specific pedagogical strategies for teaching disarmament and incorporating ideas about disarmament in courses not specifically focused on security
- Learning from past initiatives to establish programs and curricula.
- Deepening and further establishing international partnerships and coalitions to further disarmament education, with a focus on nuclear disarmament
- Planning for an edited book or report on materials that would be useful to college instructors.

Workshop Themes

1. Disarmament Education in an Era of Rearmament

Governments around the world are increasing military spending, expanding weapons procurement, modernizing nuclear arsenals, and emphasizing military solutions to insecurity. How should disarmament educators respond to a political environment in which militarization is increasingly normalized and presented as both necessary and inevitable?

Questions for discussion:

- How has the global security discourse shifted in recent years?
- What explains growing public and political support for military spending?
- How can disarmament education engage with mainstream arguments about deterrence and military preparedness? More generally, how can disarmament pedagogy better incorporate concerns about “hard security”?
- How can we teach students outside of international relations and political science, and reach new audiences, including in science, engineering, mathematics, journalism, and artistic fields?

2. Artificial Intelligence, Emerging Technologies, and Nuclear Futures

Artificial intelligence is transforming warfare, military planning, surveillance, and public discourse. At the same time, renewed interest in nuclear energy is increasingly linked to technological growth and AI infrastructure.

Questions for discussion:

- How might disarmament educators incorporate concerns about AI reshaping nuclear decision-making and aggravate escalation risks?
- What new humanitarian challenges emerge from increasingly automated warfare and how might public concerns about these help advance disarmament?
- How can educational tools and approaches bridge the technical and policy dimensions associated with new technologies to promote greater public understanding of these risks?
- How should educators engage with emerging technologies, and how can they shape how these technologies are discussed publicly?

3. Universities, Academic Freedom, and the Future of Disarmament Education

Universities have traditionally played a central role in critical inquiry and public debate. Yet many institutions face increasing political polarization, funding pressures, declining support for humanities and social sciences, and growing reluctance to engage controversial political issues. Further, many universities are looking to research into military or dual-use technologies as a source of funding, without consideration of ethical or political problems associated with such funding.

Questions for discussion:

- What challenges face educators teaching disarmament today?
- How can we find spaces within universities to expand critical engagement with questions of war, peace, and security?
- What role should academic institutions play in public debates about militarization?
- How can disarmament education be integrated across disciplines and curricula?

4. Building Public Engagement for Disarmament

Despite growing nuclear dangers, public awareness and engagement remain limited. New approaches are needed to connect disarmament issues to everyday concerns and to engage younger generations.

Questions for discussion:

- What narratives resonate with contemporary audiences?
- How can storytelling, arts, film, gaming, and social media strengthen engagement?
- How can educators move beyond fear-based messaging?
- What lessons can be learned from successful public education campaigns?

5. Building and Sustaining an International Community of Practice

The Vancouver workshop identified a strong desire for greater collaboration among educators, researchers, activists, and institutions. The Vienna workshop provides an opportunity to deepen these relationships and develop long-term strategies.

Questions for discussion:

- What forms of collaboration are most needed?
- How can resources and curricula be shared internationally?
- What funding opportunities and institutional supports exist?
- What should the priorities be for a global network on disarmament education?