

Essay and Discussion Questions

Nuclear Proliferation Higher Education Questions

Help students understand nuclear proliferation through these essay and discussion questions.

Question 1

Evaluate the effectiveness of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT). To what extent is the NPT an effective tool for limiting the spread of nuclear weapons? In what ways has it succeeded and in what ways has it fallen short? What recommendations would you make to modify the NPT and other policy tools to advance nonproliferation? To what extent are each of the following policy tools effective in reducing nuclear risks: diplomacy, security guarantees, sanctions, cyber tools, military force?

- What policy tools have been effective in stopping or preventing nuclear proliferation, and why?
- Which goals are often prioritized over nonproliferation?
- Why does the United States extend security guarantees to some allies? Has this policy measure successfully served its purpose?

Question 2

Evaluate the ways in which non-nuclear weapons states deal with the impending reality of the nuclear world—acquiring nuclear weapons, declaring nuclear weapon free zones (NWFZs), or seeking security guarantees. Which approaches are the most effective in ensuring national and international security? Which are the least effective? Explain by citing specific examples.

- What countries possess nuclear weapons and what is their level of influence in global affairs?
- What countries are non-nuclear weapons states and how does their level of influence in global affairs compare to that of nuclear weapons states?
- What is a nuclear umbrella? To what extent is a nuclear umbrella a useful tool of nonproliferation?

Question 3

Do you believe that a world without nuclear weapons is attainable? If you agree, what steps would be necessary in order to create a world where nuclear weapons are obsolete? If you disagree, what aspects of nuclear proliferation are the most essential to ensuring international security and peace and how should governments most effectively pursue alternatives to nuclear weapons?

- Why is there such focus on the nonproliferation of nuclear weapons, as opposed to other kinds of weapons?
- What has been effective in nonproliferation efforts? What hasn't worked?

Question 4

Do you think it is fair that the NPT places limits on nonnuclear states when nuclear states have not disarmed? Why or why not? What obligations does the NPT impose on different categories of countries? Why have these obligations been the subject of disagreement in the decades since the treaty was negotiated?

- Why have some countries chosen to pursue nuclear weapons while others have not? How has the general international context and specific historical events affected certain countries' decisions?
- Why did South Africa give up its nuclear weapons?

- How did South Africa's domestic politics, international relations, and national security change after dismantling its nuclear program?
- In what ways are the peaceful use of nuclear energy and the production of nuclear weapons related and what are the challenges this relationship poses to nonproliferation efforts?

Question 5

What can the history of nuclear proliferation tell us about the current state of threats posed by nuclear weapons? In your opinion, are these threats greater today than in past decades? Why or why not?

- How have the priorities and tools of nonproliferation policies changed since the end of the Cold War? How have they stayed the same?
- Why is North Korea thought of as the biggest nuclear threat in the world?