ICAN media guide: unpacking nuclear weapons jargon

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As the Russian government carried out nuclear weapons exercises, threatened to use nuclear weapons if anyone interfered with their invasion of Ukraine, and raised the alert levels of its nuclear forces, the threat of nuclear weapons is back at the top of the international agenda again. However, the nuclear weapons discourse has for the last 20 years been made intentionally inaccessible to the public, hiding the topic behind vague, technical language that are often confusing and unclear.

Statements and comments on nuclear weapons made by national leaders, government officials and military commanders are often vague, couched in euphemisms or abstractions, based on unexamined assumptions, and/or inconsistent with existing national policies and international obligations. This is especially the case during times of high tension and conflict.

Such communication may be intentionally misleading or ambiguous, or may reflect rushed policy and flawed analysis. Either way, asking the right questions is the key to decoding the real message, elaborating its implications, and illuminating the underlying situation.

This guide is intended to help journalists ask the questions that help the public get clear and direct information about nuclear weapons, nuclear threats and nuclear warfare. The examples are drawn from the ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine, but the advice applies to any situation in which leaders are talking about nuclear weapons.

1. Dealing with euphemisms and abstract language

No nuclear-armed state boasts of having weapons of mass destruction; many are reluctant even to refer to their nuclear weapons, preferring terms such as deterrent, strategic deterrent, or deterrent forces. Weapons much more powerful than the Hiroshima bomb are described as non-strategic or low yield. Nuclear attacks on cities are countervalue targeting; initiating actual nuclear warfare is escalating to de-escalate. Our adversary uses nuclear weapons to threaten or coerce; we use them
to deter. And nuclear threats are issued in perversely coy and poetic terms, like Putin’s “consequences you have never seen in your history”, or Trump’s “fire and fury”.

Possible questions

- When you say “strategic deterrent” are you referring to [country’s] nuclear weapons, its weapons of mass destruction?
- Is it correct that your country would be prepared to use weapons of mass destruction to achieve its military and political objectives?
- How does the explosive yield of the upgraded super-precision X-1234 warhead compare with that of the Hiroshima atomic bomb?
- What would be the effect of a nuclear weapon of this type detonating in or near a city like [Antwerp/Riga/Nagoya/Odessa/Portland]?

2. Examining threats to use nuclear weapons

Threats to use nuclear weapons are often vague or veiled, and may be intentionally ambiguous with the aim of creating uncertainty among adversaries. They are rarely specific and never go beyond the decision to “press the button”. The consequences should the nuclear threat actually be carried out are never explored, neither are any follow-up actions discussed. Responses to nuclear threats that imply retaliation with nuclear weapons are themselves nuclear threats, and these also are never elaborated upon.

Yet any actual use of nuclear weapons would have catastrophic and wide-ranging consequences, especially in densely populated regions such as Europe, South Asia and the Korean peninsula. Even so-called “tactical” or “battlefield” nuclear weapons of the kind that some speculate might be used in the Ukraine conflict typically have explosive yields in the range of 20 to 200 kilotons. In comparison, the atomic bomb that destroyed Hiroshima in 1945, killing 140,000 people, had a yield of just 15 kilotons. A single nuclear detonation would likely kill hundreds of thousands of civilians and injure many more; radioactive fallout could contaminate large areas, including in the country that used the weapon. Widespread panic would trigger mass movements of people and severe economic disruption – again, possibly including in the country that used the weapon. Multiple detonations would of course be much worse.

Possible questions

- Are you threatening to use nuclear weapons?
- Where would you use these weapons exactly? In Ukraine itself? In Europe?
- Will these weapons be used in accordance with International Humanitarian Law (the Law of Armed Conflict)? How will you ensure this?
Wouldn’t using nuclear weapons in this region cause massive and indiscriminate civilian casualties, including among the people you claim to be seeking to protect?

Even without retaliation, wouldn’t using nuclear weapons in this region risk radioactive contamination and other serious consequences in your own territory? What measures are in place to protect your population against your own nuclear strike?

How would such widespread and indiscriminate destruction help you achieve your objectives?

Under what conditions would you be willing to start nuclear war?

3. Checking consistency with laws and policies

Nuclear weapons rhetoric often involves contradiction and inconsistency, and these are rarely questioned, especially in the midst of a crisis. Nuclear-armed states, and in particular the five nuclear-weapon states recognized by the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT) – China, France, Russia, UK and USA – are bound by international law, their own political commitments, and their national laws, policies and doctrines. These are sometimes wildly at odds with the statements and actions of these countries. It is often forgotten, for example, that the NPT obliges these five countries to pursue nuclear disarmament, and that in the context of this treaty the five countries have given an “unequivocal undertaking to accomplish the total elimination of their nuclear arsenals” and have made commitments to “diminish the role and significance of nuclear weapons in all military and security concepts, doctrines and policies”. National doctrines typically envisage the use of nuclear weapons only in “extreme circumstances” such as when the existence of the state is under threat.

Possible questions

Does the government continue to support the goal of a world without nuclear weapons?

How is your decision [to expand arsenal/develop new weapons/modernize] consistent with your NPT commitment made in 2010 to reduce stockpiles and diminish the role of nuclear weapons in your security policy?

Russia has threatened to use nuclear weapons in the context of the Ukraine conflict. Doesn’t this threat contradict Russia’s stated doctrine of using nuclear weapons in a conventional conflict only if “the very existence of the state is in jeopardy”?

How do you reconcile your threat to use nuclear weapons with the recent joint statement by the five nuclear-weapon states that “a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought”?

Belarus, an NPT non-nuclear-weapon state, has offered to host Russian nuclear weapons on its territory. How would the weapons get there? Wouldn’t moving Russian nuclear weapons into Belarus violate articles 1 and 2 of the NPT?
4. Questioning double standards and implausible claims

Nuclear weapons rhetoric is also replete with double standards and special pleading. Several nuclear armed states condemned Russia’s threats to use nuclear weapons while maintaining a policy that it is legitimate to threaten to use nuclear weapons.

Nuclear-armed states typically claim that their own nuclear weapons are essential for ensuring security, stability and peace, while those of their rivals are threatening, destabilizing and dangerous. Curiously, the security and stability arguments used by nuclear-armed states to justify their retention of nuclear weapons do not apply to non-nuclear-armed states which might be considering acquiring them; nuclear proliferation is regarded as a grave threat to international security. Nuclear-armed states simultaneously claim to be committed to nuclear disarmament while insisting that nuclear weapons are essential to their security.

Possible questions

- North Korea claims its nuclear weapons are necessary to ensure its security and deter foreign aggression or coercion. Aren’t these the same reasons you use to justify your nuclear weapons? Is it possible your arguments are promoting proliferation?
- You argue that nuclear weapons are necessary for your security and are the ultimate insurance policy. Yet you have voluntarily joined the NPT which obliges you (eventually) to disarm, and you claim to be pursuing nuclear disarmament. If nuclear weapons are vital to your security, why do you want to get rid of them? Are they dangerous?
- Do you think a non-nuclear-weapon state facing an acute security threat would be justified in legally withdrawing from the NPT and acquiring nuclear weapons? Or can no security threat ever justify nuclear weapons?
- You have stated that the use of chemical weapons is unacceptable in any circumstances. Why is it different for nuclear weapons? Are they less destructive or abhorrent?
- You say that for as long as nuclear weapons exist, NATO will remain a nuclear alliance. Doesn’t this also mean that as long NATO remains a nuclear alliance, nuclear weapons will exist? How can NATO ever hope to achieve its nuclear disarmament aims with this policy?