Carnegie Council Lesson Plan for Issues in Nuclear Ethics (60 minutes)

Overview

This session explores several ethical issues around the use and development of nuclear weapons. It introduces students to ethical issues around nuclear deterrence, nuclear non-proliferation, and the use of nuclear weapons, along with providing an overview of the current state of global nuclear weapons treaties. Students will apply the four guiding principles of Carnegie Council—international cooperation, democracy, fidelity, and the humanitarian imperative—when thinking through the ethical risks that nuclear weapons pose.

Core Objectives

1. Students should understand the current regulatory landscape surrounding the development and testing of nuclear weapons.
2. Students should be able to identify ethical issues involving the use of nuclear weapons, and of deterrence.
3. Students will explore governance strategies to lessen a state's dependence on nuclear weapons for security.

Carnegie Council principles that the lesson addresses:

- **The commitment to international cooperation** is a moral proposition because it goes to the essence of ethics—recognizing what is common for all, while managing the intrinsic and inevitable differences between and among people.
- **The defense of democracy in the U.S. and globally** requires confronting autocrats who discriminate based on ethnicity, gender, and religion, and who deny basic freedoms to their citizens.
- **Fidelity** means honesty, integrity, and a good-faith effort at serving the truth. Rhetoric certainly matters, and in an age of disinformation, leaders must fight against lies, willful deception, and deliberate misrepresentation of facts.
- **The humanitarian imperative** is the duty to save lives and alleviate suffering through humane and equal treatment. As violence and cruelty abound in conflict zones around the world, mounting effective humanitarian responses remains the essential moral imperative of our time.

1. Opening Ethical Provocation (10 minutes)

- **Prompt:** Imagine that you are the leader of a nuclear-armed country tasked with writing instructions for what your military should do if an adversary kills you in a nuclear attack. What do you write? Retaliate? Do not retaliate? Place yourself under command of a specific ally? Or "use your own judgment"?
- Quick pre-write explaining why you choose your answer and then a class-wide brief discussion.

2. The Ethics of Nuclear Weapons (15 minutes)

- Nuclear weapons have only been used twice in war, both times by the United States against the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945. Today, nine countries possess nuclear weapons: United States, Russia, China, France, United Kingdom, Pakistan, India, Israel, and North Korea.

- States acquire nuclear weapons for their perceived security gains, largely centered around the idea of nuclear deterrence.

    i. "Nuclear deterrence refers to a principle in international relations where the retaliatory potential and destructive force of nuclear weapons prevents nations from launching a nuclear attack." (From Carnegie Council's "Nuclear deterrence" Key Terms page.)

    ii. During the Cold War, nuclear deterrence took the form of Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD), in which nuclear weapons were thought to provide security because any nuclear attack against the United States would be met with an overwhelming nuclear response ensuring the destruction of an attacking side.

    iii. In recent years, many simulations performed by AI have escalated their conflicts using nuclear weapons.

- However, the threat and use of nuclear weapons pose several important ethical issues relevant to the tradition of just war theory, particularly those aspects of humanitarian law (*jus in bello*) that seek to protect civilians.

    i. The Principle of Discrimination: Parties in combat must distinguish between combatants and civilians, along with military and non-military targets. Civilians and non-military objects should never be intentionally targeted.

    ii. The Principle of Proportionality: When combatants or military objects are targeted, combatants must use proportional force, or not excessive force, in relation to the expected advantages.

- Governance of Nuclear Weapons

    i. There is a treaty that attempts to limit the acquisition of nuclear weapons by new states (the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons); there are expired treaties to reduce nuclear stockpiles (e.g., expired and suspended START treaties between the United States and Russia); and there are treaties banning the testing of nuclear weapons (Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty).

    ii. However, in recent years the governance of nuclear weapons has stalled leading to a situation of what Carnegie Council's Kathleen Egan and Joel Rosenthal refer to as "nuclear complacency."

    iii. Pre-reading: Joel Rosenthal's *Politico* op-ed "Walking a Fraying Nuclear Tightrope" discusses the shortcomings of global nuclear governance. Rosenthal makes a moral argument in favor of arms control.

3. Learning Activity (25 minutes)

Students should read Kathleen Egan and Joel Rosenthal's report, *Nuclear Complacency*. In particular, students should focus on pages 3-5, which provide an overview of past treaties governing weapons that they can draw on for this activity.

Divide the class into four different teams, each of which will take on the identity of representatives from either a state or an organization:

- Group 1 represents a state that has hundreds of nuclear warheads.
- Group 2 represents a state that has three nuclear warheads, and is an adversary of Group 1's state.
- Group 3 represents a state that does not have nuclear weapons but is in the middle of a volatile region, and has not ruled out pursuing them.
- Group 4 represents a non-governmental organization that is devoted to nuclear abolition.

Part 1: 10 Minutes

Each team will answer the following questions from their group's perspective. This will allow the students to take on the perspective of the group and consider the relationship between nuclear weapons and security.

1. How does or would possessing nuclear weapons contribute to your security?
2. How do you view states that possess nuclear weapons?
3. Under what conditions, if any, would you view the use of nuclear weapons to be ethical?
4. How would you view a non-nuclear state that is in the process of acquiring nuclear weapons?
5. How would your perspective shift if more states acquired nuclear weapons?
6. Knowing what you know about AI and its tendency to escalate conflicts, how does this change your view about nuclear weapons?
7. What is your relationship to the other groups? How does their status and nuclear capacity (if relevant) relate to your state?

Part 2: 5 Minutes

After each group has answered the questions from Part 1, they will imagine that they are attending a conference devoted to nuclear arms control. Each group has 5 minutes to come up with one solution to propose to the other groups that, for instance: (a) helps to prevent other states from acquiring nuclear warheads, (b) convinces countries with nuclear warheads to disarm, (c) convinces countries with nuclear warheads to reduce their stockpile, or (d) some other possible mechanism.

Students should consider their own group's interests when coming up with a solution and try to propose a solution that they think could be acceptable to other groups.

Part 3: 10 Minutes

A representative from each group will present their group's proposal. After each proposal, there should be a brief discussion about the acceptability of that proposal from the perspective of the group.

4. Conclusion (10 minutes)

- Revisit Opening Example and re-evaluate initial judgments in light of the discussion of nuclear ethics as well as other solutions discussed in the activity.

Additional Resources

- Carnegie Council's "Nuclear Ethics for this Moment" event from 2023 is useful for exploring many of the current ethical dilemmas. This convening was centered around *Ethics & International Affair*'s symposium revisiting Joseph Nye's influential book, *Nuclear Ethics* (1986).

- See the articles for the Nuclear Ethics Revisited symposium here.