

Abolish Nuclear Weapons

OEWG Report

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The second week of the [open-ended working group on nuclear disarmament \(OEWG\)](#) is illuminating a clear delineation between those who want to abolish nuclear weapons and those who don't.

Mexico's Ambassador Lomonaco challenged Japan and other nuclear-supportive states over their commitment to change, asking whether their so-called progressive approach is really about retrenchment of the status quo. The engagements from those states certainly give the impression they are seeking foremost to preserve a place for nuclear weapons in their political and military arsenals, and in those of their nuclear-armed allies. As negotiations begin on an instrument to prohibit nuclear weapons, however, those engagements will likely change.

Fear of change

With an increasing sense of desperation, the nuclear-supportive OEWG participants seem more eager to shut down discussions than respond to questions about their commitment to complying with their [nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty \(NPT\)](#) obligations and pursuing effective measures for nuclear disarmament. As [a treaty banning nuclear weapons](#) quickly gains traction as the most feasible, practical, and effective measure under consideration, these states spend the majority of their time opposing it rather than offering credible alternative suggestions. Japan's delegation even encouraged the Chair to end discussions at the OEWG on the question about elements for legal provisions, as there is "clearly no convergence" on the best way forward.

There is convergence, however. The trouble for Japan's delegation and its nuclear-supportive colleagues is that the convergence is around a legally binding instrument to prohibit nuclear weapons. The development of such a treaty probably appears problematic for these states—but only insofar as they insist on supporting nuclear weapons. If they instead choose to align their policies and practices with their legal obligations and stated commitments and values, agreeing to a prohibition on nuclear weapons would not be a problem for them.

The idea that nuclear weapons provide security has already been rejected by most of the world's governments. Several countries developing or possessing nuclear weapons renounced their arsenals, proving, as Algeria said, that it is possible to do so. Kathleen Lawand of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) emphasised today that weapons that risk catastrophic humanitarian consequences cannot seriously be viewed as protecting civilians or humanity. Those governments asserting a national security benefit

from these weapons will likely relinquish this view once ban treaty negotiations are underway, when debates in parliaments, articles in the media, public engagements, and bilateral and multilateral discussions increasingly challenge their support for nuclear weapons. Much like the Dr. Seuss character who resists trying green eggs and ham and then discovers he actually loves them, the nuclear-supportive states may find that their resistance to a prohibition on nuclear weapons can be overcome once they experience its economic, political, and security benefits.

Courage and ambition

But until then, it is up to non-nuclear-armed states to take the initiative to prohibit nuclear weapons. As delegation after delegation has pointed out, there can be no more waiting for leadership from the nuclear-armed or their nuclear-supportive allies. If the nuclear-armed states wanted nuclear disarmament, Brazil noted last week, we would have a nuclear weapon free world already. Similarly, [Ireland](#) pointed out that if article VI was being fulfilled, the OEWG would need not have been established. The interventions and working papers of the nuclear-supportive states participating in the OEWG, which Jamaica said seem aimed at obfuscation and maintenance of the status quo, could make us “pessimistic about overcoming the 70 year addition to nuclear weapons.” But as [Sokka Gakkai International](#)’s representative said, those who are ready for a nuclear weapon free world are ready to ban nuclear weapons.

A growing majority of states have expressed their readiness for this approach. Multiple [working papers](#) supported collectively by the vast majority of states urge negotiations on a legally binding instrument prohibiting nuclear weapons as at least one necessary and urgent step towards achieving the elimination of nuclear weapons. On Tuesday, committed states continued to discuss potential elements for such an instrument, each urging the development of a comprehensive set of prohibitions and positive obligations that lend to building and solidifying the norm against nuclear weapon possession and use. These discussions and proposals are laying the groundwork for the commencement of negotiations, even in the face of opposition from nuclear-supportive states.

While those states question the effectiveness of a prohibition, [New Zealand](#) and Mexico pointed out on Monday that the effectiveness of any particular measure or treaty cannot be proven advance. As Ambassador Higginson of New Zealand pointed out, such a requirement is a recipe for never doing anything—which is what has been happening for the past 20 years with the “progressive approach” agenda.

Prohibition is not premature, argued Ambassador Thomas Hajnoczi of Austria. We have waited 70 years. Looking at other weapons conventions one can see that prohibition precedes elimination and does not destabilise the security environment.

Such arguments are not based on facts but on fear of change. Overcoming this fear is imperative to making progress. “We know some find anything that disturbs the status quo to be too ambitious,” Kenya acknowledged on Tuesday. “But being ambitious is the only way we’ll make a contribution.”

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