

The Negotiation of a Treaty Banning Nuclear Weapons

Courage is the crux of the ban treaty

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Applause broke out at the beginning of the day when the President of the [conference to negotiate a treaty banning nuclear weapons](#), Ambassador Elayne Whyte of Costa Rica, opened the proceedings. Applause also broke out at the end of the day when she declared the first meeting over. Clearly, diplomats and activists alike are excited about this treaty.

They should be. As [Ambassador Patricia O'Brien of Ireland](#) said in her remarks,

this “is a pivotal point in our international relations, a time to take stock and honour the testimony of the past, to decide what sort of present we wish to live in and what sort of legacy we wish to leave for future generations.” She noted, “We are not just writing a new and complementary treaty here, we are taking the opportunity to write a new history and in so doing to create a new, more stable, more secure and more equal future for all.”

This is the crux of the ban treaty. It is being negotiated on the basis of courage and hope, rather than fear and inequality. It is an act of states and civil society coming together to stand up to power and violence and say, enough, we are going to craft a different world, whether you like it or not.

Day one of the negotiations could not have gone better. Many delegations issued eloquent explanations of their belief in and hopes for this treaty. Several outlined in detail (in many cases for the first time) what they see as the preferred scope of the treaty in terms of prohibitions, shedding more light than ever on the possibilities for this instrument. The vast majority of countries clearly want a strong, comprehensive prohibition treaty that covers a wide range of nuclear weapon-related activities and that carves out space for future negotiations on nuclear disarmament and related verification measures.

That space is a sign to nuclear-armed states that we have faith in this treaty. That we believe that it will be effective in its normative, legal, political, economic, and social transformation of the nuclear world order and that will help compel them to eliminate their genocidal weapons.

Most of us—whether diplomats, activists, academics—have had to live in the space created for us by the nuclear-armed states that have decided they have the power and authority to determine when and where they will eliminate nuclear weapons. So far their obligations and commitments have amounted to naught, and now one of the states with the biggest

arsenals is [reconsidering](#) whether it even thinks disarmament is a “realistic objective” that it will continue even as a rhetorical commitment. Yet these states have controlled the narrative and even much of the scholarship for so long that most of the world believes they have the right and legitimacy to do so.

But they don't.

On Monday morning, a representative of the Trump regime stood outside of the General Assembly Hall to belittle the participants negotiating this treaty. The US ambassador to the United Nations, which is supposed to be the number one venue for multilateralism and the pursuit of cooperative peace and security, denounced the negotiations and suggested that the states pursuing this treaty must not have the security of their own citizens in mind.

Of course, the opposite is true. This treaty, and the pursuit of nuclear disarmament more broadly, is all about trying to protect civilians from harm. The vast majority of governments recognise that nuclear weapons are a risk to human beings and the environment everywhere. Nuclear weapons “are not useful deterrents,” said [Ambassador Walton Webson of Antigua and Barbuda](#) on behalf of the Caribbean Community. Rather, they “cultivate a state of insecurity and false defensiveness that only increases the chances of proliferation with devastating impact on all of us.” Thus prohibiting nuclear weapons, [Alfredo Labbe of Chile](#) said, is a “liberating initiative,” freeing us from the nuclear threat rather than being a threat to nuclear-armed states. States that have acquired nuclear weapons, he argued, are “captives in the Faustian trap of nuclear deterrence;” this is a way to help them out.

Certainly it is a better idea to try to help them out now than to wait until nuclear weapons are detonated, either by accident or design. As [Austria's Ambassador Alexander Marschik](#) stated,

waiting for a nuclear disaster is not a strategy. We must prohibit nuclear weapons now.

Over the past few years, those advocating for a ban on nuclear weapons have been told we are unrealistic or that we don't understand the “security dimensions” of nuclear weapons. Echoes of this played out in the sit-in attended by some of the nuclear-armed states outside the conference room on Monday morning. But we are neither unrealistic nor ignorant of security dimensions. We just have a different perspective—a perspective that is rooted in what [Ambassador Mr. Amr Aboulatta of Egypt](#) described as “*collective security as opposed to selective security.*”

We also understand how change happens. It happens “when this discomfort of doing something new becomes less than keeping things the same,” as [Ambassador O'Brien](#) said. A nuclear weapon ban treaty is already making nuclear-armed and nuclear-reliant states increasingly uncomfortable. The process of developing this treaty, and as well as its adoption and entry into force, will have a transformative effect on nuclear weapon policies and practices. It is only a matter of time.

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