

ON THEORIES OF CHANGE: RETHINKING THE BAN TREATY AND DISARMAMENT STRATEGIES

Heather Williams
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About the Author

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Introduction¹

A week before Israel bombed Iran’s nuclear facilities, the Director General of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) Rafael Grossi had lunch with the *Financial Times*. In the interview, Grossi expressed both optimism and pessimism about the nuclear landscape: he was hopeful about prospects for diplomacy, including with Iran. But he also expressed longer-term concerns about a proliferation cascade and rising nuclear risks, in particular, Russia’s nuclear threats amidst the war in Ukraine. “In the past, this was quite taboo,” he said, “but now people talk about tactical nuclear weapons like something which could be contained or permissible.”² Given subsequent events in Iran, along with the expiration of New START in 2026 and expanding nuclear arsenals in Russia and China, pessimism would seem to trump hope for prospects for nuclear disarmament.

1 I am grateful to Mike Albertson, Rebecca Davis-Gibbons, and Brad Roberts for their thoughtful comments on drafts of this paper. Thanks also to the entire Project on Nuclear Issues team for their intellectual generosity in discussing this project, and in particular to Diya Ashtakala, Lachlan MacKenzie, Joseph Rodgers, Ben Ryan, Bailey Schiff, and Elena Tidens for their review of the manuscript at various stages and research support. I am also grateful to the organizers, participants, and speakers of the first three Humanitarian Impacts of Nuclear Weapons conferences, who expanded my “nuclear education” in unexpected and formative ways. Every student, practitioner, and expert on nuclear issues should go back to the transcripts and testimony of those conferences as a reminder of what is at stake when we talk about nuclear issues. The conference information, including testimonials of the victims of the nuclear bombings and testing, can be found at:

- Oslo Conference: Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Norway. “Conference: Humanitarian Impact of Nuclear Weapons” (March 11, 2013). https://www.regjeringen.no/en/historical-archive/Stoltenbergs-2nd-Government/Ministry-of-Foreign-Affairs/humimpact_2013/id708603/.
- Nayarit Conference: Reaching Critical Will. “Statements and Presentations to the Second Conference on the Humanitarian Impact of Nuclear Weapons.” <https://www.reachingcriticalwill.org/disarmament-fora/hinw/nayarit-2014/statements>.
- Vienna Conference: Federal Ministry European and International Affairs, Republic of Austria, “2014 Vienna Conference on the Humanitarian Impact of Nuclear Weapons.” https://www.bmeia.gv.at/fileadmin/user_upload/Zentrale/Aussenpolitik/Abruestung/HINW14/ViennaConference_BMEIA_Web_final.pdf.

2 Gillian Tett, “UN nuclear chief Rafael Grossi: ‘I am a calm person. I focus on what I can do,’” *Financial Times* (June 6, 2025). <https://www.ft.com/content/60cfc646-ab56-4347-ad85-687e871426c4>. Accessed November 19, 2026.

In light of these developments, the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW), a 2017 treaty banning possession and threats of use of nuclear weapons, might appear to be at risk of irrelevance. At present, the TPNW does not include any state possessing nuclear weapons or their allies among its members. In a joint 2022 statement, U.S. President Biden and French President Macron agreed that the TPNW “does not reflect the increasingly challenging international security environment and is at odds with the existing nonproliferation and disarmament architecture.”³ Indeed, short-term prospects for nuclear disarmament are grim and the Treaty’s approach to targeting democracies rings tone-deaf amidst collusion among authoritarian regimes in the “axis of upheaval.”⁴ And yet, over 70 countries have joined the TPNW and are committed to its mandate of delegitimizing and stigmatizing nuclear weapons on humanitarian grounds. Civil society groups were a particularly important player in the evolution of the TPNW, to include participation in the humanitarian impacts of nuclear weapons (HINW) conferences, mostly led by the international coalition the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN). The treaty has injected new momentum into nuclear diplomacy and ICAN won the 2017 Nobel Peace Prize. Ignoring the TPNW or assigning it into historical irrelevance would come with risks to extended nuclear deterrence and the nuclear order for the United States and its allies and partners.

Debates about the TPNW are fundamentally debates about theories of change for nuclear disarmament. Theories of change (ToC) seek to identify potential pathways to a desired outcome: in this case, nuclear disarmament. Both TPNW supporters and detractors alike share a common goal of nuclear disarmament. The controversy lies in the pathway, context, and timeline to achieve that outcome; but it also engages with deep and moral debates about nuclear weapons, deterrence,

3 “Joint Statement Following the Meeting Between President Biden and President Macron,” The White House (December 1, 2022). <https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/12/01/joint-statement-following-the-meeting-between-president-biden-and-president-macron/>. Accessed November 19, 2026.

4 Andrea Kendall-Taylor and Nicholas Lokker, *The Axis of Upheaval: Gauging the Growing Military Cooperation Among Russia, China, Iran, and North Korea*, Center for a New American Security (July 28, 2025). <https://www.cnas.org/publications/reports/the-axis-of-upheaval>. Accessed November 19, 2026. For arguments about the targeting of democracies, see, for example: Harald Müller, and Carmen Wunderlich, “Nuclear Disarmament without the Nuclear-Weapon States: The Nuclear Weapon Ban Treaty,” *Daedalus* 149, no. 2 (2020), pp. 171–89, 176, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48591319?seq=1> (accessed November 20, 2025). For counterarguments against this line of argument, see, for example: Alexander Kmett, *The Humanitarian Initiative and the TPNW*, Toda Peace Institute, Policy Brief No. 104 (February 2021). https://toda.org/assets/files/resources/policy-briefs/t-pb-104_the-humanitarian-initiative-and-the-tpnw-kmett.pdf (accessed November 19, 2026).

and international law. To date, the United States has followed a “step-by-step” approach to nuclear disarmament and Republican and Democratic policymakers alike have argued that nuclear reductions and elimination will happen in tandem with improvements in the security environment. Conversely, the TPNW ascribes to a delegitimization ToC based on “ideational reframing,” delegitimization through legal mechanisms, stigmatization of nuclear possession, and normative evolution eventually leading to changes in customary international law.

What comes next for the TPNW? How should nuclear possessors and their allies engage with the Treaty? And what do debates about the TPNW indicate as prospects for disarmament in both the near- and long-term? The TPNW is not only the manifestation of a theory of disarmament; it is also a political movement intended to express dissatisfaction with the increasing salience of nuclear weapons, and those political factors have also shaped the Treaty’s trajectory and will continue to do so. The United States is at a crossroads when it comes to nuclear disarmament and must decide if it wants to strengthen the existing nuclear order or allow it to decline. This paper will argue there is still an opportunity for these two camps to come together, preserve the nuclear order and the NPT, and collaborate to reduce nuclear risks and ultimately make progress towards nuclear disarmament. Both must begin to consider, however, unfamiliar and potentially deeply disruptive alternative ToCs and pathways towards nuclear disarmament.

There are numerous histories of the TPNW; however, they have predominantly been written by the Treaty’s supporters and offer only one side of the story. This paper makes an important contribution by focusing on the perspective of a nuclear possessor state, the United States, during the lead-up and negotiation of the Treaty. It draws on interviews with U.S. officials involved in the HINW conferences and the negotiation of the TPNW in 2017, along with personal reflections from my participation in three of the HINW conferences. Focusing on an alternate perspective provides original contributions to the history and analysis of the TPNW; for example, this monograph challenges the conventional wisdom that the nuclear possessors coordinated a “boycott” of the HINW conferences and TPNW negotiations and offers an original history of U.S. nuclear diplomacy during that era.⁵

5 See, for example, Kmentt, Toda Peace Institute paper. Austrian diplomat Alexander Kmentt asserts, “the nuclear-weapon states boycotted the humanitarian consequences, the open-ended working group and the treaty negotiations.” Alexander Kmentt, *The Humanitarian Initiative and the TPNW*, Toda Peace Institute, Policy Brief No. 104 (February 2021). https://toda.org/assets/files/resources/policy-briefs/t-pb-104_the-humanitarian-initiative-and-the-tpnw-kmentt.pdf. Accessed November 20, 2025.

The monograph proceeds with five chapters. Chapter One tracks disarmament efforts since the first nuclear test at Alamogordo through 2023 when Russia suspended participation in New START, and closes with an overview of the current disarmament landscape and challenges. Chapter Two considers two competing ToCs for how to achieve nuclear disarmament—the step-by-step approach favored by nuclear possessors and their allies, and the TPNW delegitimization model. Chapter Three provides a history of the HINW conferences from the U.S. perspective, based on interviews with senior policymakers in the Obama administration. Chapter Four continues the historical narrative through negotiation of the TPNW in the United Nations with interviews with senior Obama and Trump administration officials. The final chapter identifies five potential pathways for the future of the TPNW. It also explores three alternative ToCs for nuclear disarmament, and points to the best option for the way ahead for the TPNW. The Conclusion chapter makes the case for bridge-building between these competing ToCs and the need for more leadership on the part of the United States on risk reduction and on the part of TPNW supporters to hold states accountable for their international obligations.

Chapter One

A History of Nuclear Disarmament: Episodic Success for Both States and Civil Society

Nuclear disarmament was born a twin of the United Nations. The first resolution of the UN General Assembly in 1946 called for dealing with “the problems raised by the discovery of atomic energy” and the creation of a UN Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) to “make specific proposals... for the elimination from national armaments of atomic weapons and of all other major weapons adaptable to mass destruction.”⁶ These proposals, however, quickly faced the political realities of great power conflict and rising tensions in the early days of the Cold War. American proposals for limits on fissile material production were rejected by the Soviets because it would give the United States an atomic monopoly; and Soviet proposals for complete disarmament were rejected by Washington because of the lack of verification.

The goal of this chapter is to identify trends in disarmament proposals and debates, along with lessons about when and why nuclear disarmament has happened in the past. It tracks the historical trajectory of disarmament efforts from the dawn of the nuclear age through the 2020s and captures the competing pressures of top-down geopolitical rivalry and bottom-up civil society initiatives. Historical efforts are grouped into two distinct periods: the early atomic age through 1962, and efforts at disarmament through arms control following the Cuban Missile Crisis. The chapter ends by observing key trends in nuclear disarmament for the past eight decades that shape the current disarmament landscape. This story is both non-linear, with parallel and sometimes intersecting lines of effort, and lumpy, marked by ebbs and flows with a mix of periods of heightened activity and relatively quiet interludes.

⁶ *Establishment of a Commission to Deal with the Problems Raised by the Discovery of Atomic Energy I*, United Nations Resolution 1 (I), A/RES/1(I) (January 24, 1946). [https://docs.un.org/en/A/RES/1\(I\)](https://docs.un.org/en/A/RES/1(I)). Accessed November 19, 2025.

Date	Description
Early Atomic Age (1945-1962)	
November 15, 1945	In the wake of the bombings on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the U.S., UK, and Canada issued a joint declaration calling on the UN to find a way to eliminate nuclear weapons.
March 16, 1946	The State Department drafted the Acheson-Lilienthal Report, which proposed international ownership and control of “dangerous” nuclear activities.
June 14, 1946	The U.S. presented the Baruch Plan under which the Atomic Energy Authority would first establish an international atomic control agency before destroying existing bombs.
June 19, 1946	Russia introduced the Gromyko plan, which proposed an immediate ban on all nuclear weapons/destruction of existing stockpiles, followed by an international convention.
January 11, 1952	The UN General Assembly established the Disarmament Commission.
Disarmament through Arms Control (1963-2023)	
March 5, 1970	Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) entered into force with Article VI mandating “good-faith” negotiations toward disarmament.
December 8, 1987	U.S. and USSR signed the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty eliminating ground-launched cruise missiles with a 500-5,500 km range.
July 31, 1991	U.S. and USSR signed START I reducing the number of intercontinental ballistic missiles, submarine-launched ballistic missiles, and heavy bombers.
January 3, 1993	U.S. and Russia signed START II to eliminate land-based intercontinental ballistic missiles with multiple warheads.
May 11, 1995	The NPT was indefinitely extended reducing the negotiating leverage of non-nuclear states on progress on Article VI commitments.
April 23, 2007	International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN) was founded in Melbourne, Australia.
September 3-4, 2009	First P5 conference on confidence-building measures toward nuclear disarmament.

The Early Atomic Age, 1944-1962

Attempts to manage and eliminate weapons have evolved hand-in-hand with military competition for millennia. Some of the earliest efforts to ban weapons include the Second Council of Lateran in the 12th century in which Pope Innocent II banned crossbows and limited, “those detestable jousts or tournaments in which the knights usually come together by agreement and, to make a show of their strength and boldness, rashly engage in contests which are frequently the cause of death to men and of danger to souls.”⁷ In the early 20th century, efforts such as the Hague and Geneva Conventions similarly attempted to ban the production and use of specific weapons. Bans on exploding bullets, for example, were largely driven by medical professionals after seeing the effects of the weapons in colonial wars in South Asia and in the Franco-Prussian Wars, when one doctor observed their ability to, “shatter bones into a thousand pieces.”⁸

The inter-war period was an arms control bonanza. Disarmament was a founding principle of the League of Nations, with Article 8 of the League Covenant stating, “The Members of the League recognise that the maintenance of peace requires the reduction of national armaments to the lowest point consistent with national safety and the enforcement by common action of international obligations.”⁹ Despite the League’s limited success, it set the tone for further arms control efforts, including the 1925 Geneva Conventions banning the use of chemical and biological weapons in war because they were “repugnant to the conscience of mankind and that no effort should be spared to minimize this risk.”¹⁰ This ban built on other previous efforts, including the Hague Conventions. Perhaps one of the most ambitious arms control efforts during the inter-war period involved all the great powers in the Washington Naval Treaty, which was intended to manage the burgeoning arms race in naval vessels. It took the creative approach of establishing a ratio for tonnage among France, Italy, Japan, the United Kingdom, and the United States. These

7 Paul Halsall, “The Canons of the Second Lateran Council, 1123,” in *Medieval Sourcebook: Tenth Ecumenical Council: Lateran II, 1139* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1996).

8 Maartje Abbenhuis, Branka Bogdan, and Emma Wordsworth, *Humanitarian Bullets and Man-killers: Revisiting the History of Arms Regulation in the Late Nineteenth Century*, International Review of the Red Cross, IRRC No. 920-921 (November 2022). <https://international-review.icrc.org/articles/humanitarian-bullets-and-man-killers-920>. Accessed November 19, 2025.

9 Yale Law School Lillian Goldman Law Library, “The Covenant of the League of Nations,” in *The Avalon Project: Documents in Law, History and Diplomacy*. https://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/leagcov.asp. Accessed November 20, 2025.

10 Lewik, “Preamble (Biological Weapons Convention).” <https://www.lewik.org/term/18475/preamble-biological-weapons-convention/>. Accessed November 20, 2025.

efforts had some short-term successes, but their ultimate failure was a contributing factor to the outbreak of the Second World War.

The emergence of nuclear power and the devastation of the atomic bombs used in Hiroshima and Nagasaki demonstrated the potential for exponentially greater humanitarian consequences and environmental damage in warfare, prompting a host of disarmament efforts by non-governmental actors and statesmen alike, including by the very people who harnessed atomic energy. In a July 1944 letter to Roosevelt, scientist Niels Bohr called on the president to consider the implications of, “a weapon of an unparalleled power...which will completely change all future conditions of warfare.”¹¹ A June 11, 1945 report by the Committee on Political and Social Problems, headed by James Franck and including notable scientists, urged a demonstration of the atomic bomb before its use against Japan, and warned, “Unless an effective international control of nuclear explosives is instituted, a race of nuclear armaments is certain to ensue following the first revelation of our possession of nuclear weapons to the world.”¹² These warnings went unheeded.

Some of the first people to witness the humanitarian consequences of the atomic bombings came from the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), including Fritz Bilfinger and Marchel Junod. The ICRC report is worth quoting at length to capture the effects of the atomic bombs:

The first apparent effects to victims were burns of the exposed parts of their bodies by heat, possibly by the rays.... Another more serious consequence seemed to be the effects of the rays. Many dying cases were shown to the investigators with no apparent surface wounds. They showed black blood spots on the skin, were losing their hair, suffering from heavy fever, diarrhea, and died within a few days all showing these symptoms.... Those victims who were in the immediate vicinity of the centre in the streets were completely burnt and unrecognizable. The Military Authorities say that they could only identify the dead soldiers by

11 Niels Bohr, “Niels Bohr’s Memorandum to President Roosevelt,” AtomicArchive.com (July 1944). <https://www.atomicarchive.com/resources/documents/manhattan-project/bohr-memo.html#:~:text=Niels%20Bohr's%20Memorandum%20to%20President,all%20future%20conditions%20of%20warfare>. Accessed November 20, 2025.

12 James Franck et al., “Report of the Committee on Political and Social Problems,” *University of Chicago* (June 11, 1945). Atomic Heritage Foundation. <https://ahf.nuclearmuseum.org/ahf/key-documents/franck-report/>. Accessed November 20, 2025.

their shoes. The Police Authorities also mention that parents could not recognize their youngsters as all victims of the school looked completely alike.¹³

Following the bombings, Truman was inundated with letters and telegrams, including from religious leaders “deeply disturbed over use of atomic bombs against Japanese cities because of their necessarily indiscriminate destructive efforts and because their use sets extremely dangerous precedent for future of mankind.”¹⁴ Truman, for his part, saw the bombings as reciprocal in scale and proportionate to the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, treatment of prisoners of war, and the potential death and destruction from an ongoing conventional conflict if Japan did not surrender: “When you have to deal with a beast you have to treat him as a beast. It is most regrettable but nevertheless true.”¹⁵ This hawkish approach carried over into Truman’s position on prospects for nuclear disarmament.

Truman was historically skeptical of disarmament efforts because of the legacy of the inter-war period and, what he perceived, as unilateral disarmament by the United States that adversaries then took advantage of. On October 3, 1945, Truman gave a speech about the importance of international control of atomic energy, whereby, “The hope of civilization lies in international arrangements looking, if possible, to the renunciation of the use and development of the atomic bomb,” but made no mention of disarmament of existing weapons and arsenals.¹⁶ Rather than make the same mistake of the inter-war period, the administration took initiative by establishing a U.S.-UK-Canada dialogue agreeing to share nuclear technology relating to peaceful uses and on how to manage atomic energy.¹⁷ One important outcome of the Three Nation Agreement was a call on the UN to establish a commission to develop an international control system and a plan for the destruction of existing nuclear

13 International Review of the Red Cross, *ICRC Report on the Effects of the Atomic Bomb at Hiroshima*, IRC 97, no. 899 (2015), pp. 859-882. https://international-review.icrc.org/sites/default/files/irc97_18.pdf. Accessed November 20, 2025.

14 Harry S. Truman Letter to Samuel McCrea Cavert, letter (August 11, 1945). <https://www.shapell.org/manuscript/truman-defends-use-of-atomic-bomb-against-japan/>. Accessed November 20, 2025.

15 Ibid.

16 Harry S. Truman, “Special Message to the Congress on Atomic Energy,” Harry S. Truman Library and Museum (October 3, 1945). <https://www.trumanlibrary.gov/library/public-papers/156/special-message-congress-atomic-energy>. Accessed November 20, 2025.

17 “Position Paper Approved by the Executive Committee on Regulation of Armaments,” RAC D-30/1a, Office of the Historian (April 9, 1948). <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1948v01p1/d194>. Accessed November 20, 2025.

weapons. In December 1945, the Three Nation Agreement expanded to include the Soviet Union, and the first meeting of the UN General Assembly in January 1946 established the UN Atomic Energy Commission (UNAEC).¹⁸

Although control of nuclear weapons was embedded into the first actions of the United Nations, steps for actual progress towards nuclear elimination were more stuttered. For example, the resolution establishing the UNAEC also decided that the Commission should make proposals for “the elimination from national armaments of atomic weapons and of all other major weapons adaptable to mass destruction.”¹⁹ The first resolution of the General Assembly in 1946 subsequently called for nuclear disarmament. But the Commission faced a challenge as it was also tasked with ensuring access to nuclear energy for peaceful uses, and the UNAEC became mired in controversy and disputes. Arguably, the UN Charter didn’t provide a clear enough legal framework for a pathway towards nuclear disarmament.

Parallel to UN efforts, the Truman administration launched an initiative to generate proposals for the UNAEC’s consideration. A State Department committee which included J. Robert Oppenheimer and a Board of Advisors produced “A Report on the International Control of Atomic Energy,” which became known as the Acheson-Lilienthal Report. The report proposed the creation of an Atomic Development Authority to oversee and control production and manufacturing of nuclear materials and weapons, while also acknowledging that the United States would at some point have to destroy its nuclear arsenal.²⁰ The report was intended as a starting point for dialogue rather than as an end point.²¹

Based on the Acheson-Lilienthal Report, the United States presented a report to the UNAEC on June 14, 1946, known as the Burch Plan; however, the latter differed significantly from the former in terms of punishment for violations and eliminating veto power within the body.²² Like the Acheson-Lilienthal Report, it proposed UN members form an oversight body, which would also ensure other states did not produce nuclear weapons, with the UNSC serving as the enforcement body, but it

18 *Establishment of a Commission to Deal with the Problems Raised by the Discovery of Atomic Energy I*, United Nations Resolution 1 (I).

19 Ibid.

20 “The Acheson-Lilienthal & Baruch Plans, 1946,” Office of the Historian (1946). <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1945-1952/baruch-plans>. Accessed November 20, 2025.

21 Joseph M. Siracusa, *Nuclear Weapons: A Very Short Introduction*, 3rd ed. (Oxford University Press, 2020). <https://doi.org/10.1093/actrade/9780198860532.001.0001>. Accessed November 20, 2025.

22 “The Acheson-Lilienthal & Baruch Plans, 1946.”

could not use its veto to overrule the power of the proposed Atomic Development Authority. Baruch framed the plan as an effort to maintain world peace and an existential task: "We are here to make a choice between the quick and the dead. That is our business...If we fail, then we have damned every man to be the slave of fear."²³ The presentation of the Plan began a diplomatic tit-for-tat that would last for years.

The Soviet Union opposed the Baruch Plan, largely on the grounds that it would allow the United States to maintain a nuclear monopoly, and instead presented their proposal, the Gromyko Plan, on June 19, 1946. The Gromyko Plan had two main components: it would ban production and use of atomic weapons, with the United States committing to disarm within three months, and it would establish two committees to work towards the sharing of scientific information and another on enforcement. On the surface, American opposition to the plan was due to the lack of verification of states' nuclear-related activities and materials. In 1946, the plans were put to the UNAEC for a vote, which came out with 10 (out of 12) votes in favor of the Baruch Plan, with the Soviet Union and Poland abstaining. The plan ultimately failed, however, as the vote required unanimity, and the UNAEC failed to make any subsequent progress, ultimately suspending its work in November 1949. On the surface, disagreement over the plans was about veto power and monitoring production capabilities, but it also took place in the context of growing American-Soviet competition, and the UNAEC process lacked the "mutual confidence required" for tangible progress.²⁴

Throughout the 1950s, there were subsequent attempts at nuclear disarmament and the regulation of nuclear power. In 1952, the UN General Assembly established the Disarmament Commission, mandated with generating proposals for "the regulation, limitation, and balanced reduction of all armed forces and armaments" to include nuclear weapons; however, this did not include mention of a total ban.²⁵ On December 8, 1953, in his "Atoms for Peace" speech, Eisenhower outlined a vision for steps towards the elimination of nuclear materials for military purposes, but with the establishment of an international atomic energy agency to make it available for peaceful purposes. It is worth noting, however, that woven in

23 Joseph M. Siracusa, *Nuclear Weapons: A Very Short Introduction*, p. 30.

24 Edward Shills, "The Failure of the United Nations Atomic Energy Commission: An Interpretation," *The University of Chicago Law Review* 15, no. 4 (1948), p. 856. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1597971>. Accessed November 20, 2025.

25 United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs, "United Nations Disarmament Commission." <https://disarmament.unoda.org/en/united-nations-disarmament-commission>. Accessed November 20, 2025.

with Eisenhower's calls for peace and dialogue was also an enduring message of deterrence, often in heavy-handed language:

Should such an atomic attack be launched against the United States, our reactions would be swift and resolute. But for me to say that the defense capabilities of the United States are such that they could inflict terrible losses upon an aggressor, for me to say that the retaliation capabilities of the United States are so great that such an aggressor's land would be laid waste, all this, while fact, is not the true expression of the purpose and the hopes of the United States.²⁶

In July 1957, the IAEA was established.

Also during this era, some of the first nuclear disarmament civil society organizations emerged. Three important organizations were formed in 1957 alone: the Pugwash Conferences, Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, and the Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy. These civil society efforts would become more prolific and vocal throughout the nuclear era, but were typically consistent in maintaining absolutist views demanding the complete elimination of nuclear weapons.²⁷

Disarmament through Arms Control, 1963-2023

Arms control and disarmament efforts went into overdrive following the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis. These efforts included the NPT, along with bilateral measures, such as the 1972 Strategic Arms Limitation Interim Agreement (SALT I) and, later the 1987 Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty. The 1963 Partial Test Ban Treaty (PTBT) was the result of a multiyear effort, beginning in 1955, from a Soviet proposal to the UN Disarmament Commission. The proposal was initially rejected by the United States, United Kingdom, and France on the grounds that such a test ban should be tied to other disarmament efforts, rather than be a stand-alone, including a cutoff of fissionable material and guarantees against a surprise nuclear attack,

26 Dwight D. Eisenhower, "Atoms for Peace Speech," Atomic Heritage Foundation (December 8, 1953). <https://ahf.nuclearmuseum.org/ahf/key-documents/eisenhowers-atoms-peace-speech/>. Accessed November 20, 2025.

27 Lawrence S. Wittner, "The Forgotten Years of the World Nuclear Disarmament Movement, 1975-78," *Journal of Peace Research* 40, no. 4 (2003), pp. 435-456. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00223433030404005>. Accessed November 20, 2025.

along with a verification mechanism.²⁸ In a 1961 meeting, Khrushchev indicated a change in Soviet policy suggesting the test ban should be part of a wider effort to achieve “general and complete disarmament,” but this was later dropped and the test ban was again proposed as an independent step.²⁹

As part of the post-Cuban Missile Crisis rapprochement, a multilateral negotiation began in June 1965 following a vote by the UN Disarmament Commission, ultimately leading to the NPT, which was opened for signature in 1968. The crucial text with regard to disarmament, Article VI, reads: “Each of the Parties to the Treaty undertakes to pursue negotiations in good faith on effective measures relating to cessation of the nuclear arms race at an early date and to nuclear disarmament, and on a treaty on general and complete disarmament under strict and effective international control.”³⁰ Article VI is noticeably vague. It does not include a timeline or state what an “early date” is. It only commits states to “pursue” negotiations, and “good faith” is notoriously difficult to confirm.³¹ Nonetheless, this disarmament commitment was an essential breakthrough in concluding the NPT and part of a “grand bargain” whereby the non-nuclear weapon states (NNWS) agreed to forego nuclear weapons both in exchange for access to nuclear technology for peaceful uses along with a commitment by the then-five nuclear weapon states (NWS) to eventually disarm.³² But the NPT was not a complete ban on nuclear weapons, and, arguably, left a “legal gap” allowing for the (temporary) continued possession of nuclear weapons by the five recognized NWS.³³

The Conference on Disarmament (CD) was established in 1978 from a special session of the UN on nuclear disarmament.³⁴ The CD was the successor of

28 *Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons*, United Nations (July 1, 1968). <https://www.un.org/en/conf/npt/2015/pdf/text%20of%20the%20treaty.pdf>. Accessed November 20, 2025.

29 Nelson W. Polsby, *Political Innovation in America: The Politics of Policy Initiation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), p. 69.

30 *Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons*, art. VI.

31 Christopher A. Ford, “Debating Disarmament: Interpreting Article VI of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons,” *Nonproliferation Review* 14, no. 3 (November 2007), pp. 401-428.

32 United Nations Meetings Coverage and Press Releases, “Recalling Nuclear-Non-Proliferation Treaty’s ‘Grand Bargain,’ Secretary-General Urges Leaders at Review Conference to ‘Abandon Short-Sighted Posturing,’” UN Press Release DC/3551 (April 27, 2015). <https://press.un.org/en/2015/dc3551.doc.htm>. Accessed November 20, 2025.

33 See, for example, Beatrice Fihn, “The Logic of Banning Nuclear Weapons,” *Survival* 59, no. 1 (2017), pp. 43–50. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2017.1282671>. Accessed November 20, 2025.

34 United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs, “Conference on Disarmament,” <https://disarmament.unoda.org/en/our-work/disarmament-bodies/conference-disarmament>. Accessed November 20, 2025.

various other disarmament committees, including the Ten-Nation Committee on Disarmament (1960), the Eighteen-Nations Disarmament Committee (1962-68), both chaired by the United States and the Soviet Union, and the Conference of the Committee on Disarmament (1969-78). The CD grew out of frustration with slow progress towards nuclear disarmament in other forums, but focused on general disarmament, rather than solely on nuclear weapons. One important detail from the resolution establishing the CD was that it identified nuclear armed states as being primarily responsible for nuclear disarmament, and was adopted by consensus.³⁵

For the next three decades, particularly with the end of the Cold War, bilateral strategic arms control would prove to be a useful model for nuclear reductions ultimately leading to a 90% reduction in the U.S. nuclear arsenal.³⁶ This included the 1987 INF Treaty, the 1991 Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START), and Presidential Nuclear Initiatives (PNIs) that same year. Throughout these negotiations, missile defense and verification proved to be perennial challenges. Prior to a breakthrough in INF negotiations, for example, Reagan and Gorbachev came close to agreeing to a complete elimination of nuclear weapons by the year 2000; however, this ultimately failed because of Reagan's refusal to abandon plans for the Strategic Defense Initiative, although the seriousness of reaching global zero within 14 years was always questionable.³⁷

The decades after the Cold War saw an additional surge in arms control efforts to reduce nuclear stockpiles and threats of other weapons of mass destruction, including the 1997 Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) and 1997 Chemical Weapons Ban, negotiated in the CD, which established a series of international monitoring stations. One of the most momentous developments in the 1990s was the indefinite extension of the NPT in 1995, which was part of a package of agreements to include strengthening the review process, making progress towards a WMD-free zone in the Middle East, and on nonproliferation and disarmament. Interestingly, the language in the indefinite extension directly links progress on

35 Ibid.

36 As of 2023, the United States stockpile consisted of 3,748 warheads. This number represents an 88% reduction in stockpile from 1967 and 83% in 1989 after the fall of the Berlin Wall. U.S. Department of State Bureau of Arms Control, Deterrence and Stability, "Transparency in the U.S. Nuclear Weapons Stockpile" (July 19, 2024). <https://www.state.gov/bureau-of-arms-control-deterrence-and-stability/releases/2024/07/transparency-in-the-u-s-nuclear-weapons-stockpile>. Accessed November 20, 2025.

37 See, for example, Rhodes, who quotes Gorbachev: "No one within the Reagan administration whose opinion counted shared the president's enthusiasm for nuclear abolition." "Reagan and Gorbachev: The Reykjavik Summit," Atomic Heritage Foundation (August 7, 2018). <https://ahf.nuclearmuseum.org/ahf/history/reagan-and-gorbachev-reykjavik-summit/>. Accessed November 20, 2025.

disarmament to the security environment: “Nuclear disarmament is substantially facilitated by the easing of international tension and the strengthening of trust between States which have prevailed following the end of the Cold War.”³⁸ Thanks to improved relations between the United States and Russia, bilateral reductions and limitations continued with the 2002 Moscow Treaty and, more ambitiously, the 2010 New START Treaty which committed Washington and Moscow to limit their arsenals to 1550 operationally deployed warheads on 700 delivery vehicles and 800 launchers with on-site verification. New START was the apex of a “nuclear spring” from 2008-2010, which included a series of op-eds in the *Wall Street Journal* by George Schultz, William Perry, Henry Kissinger, and Sam Nunn, calling for U.S. leadership to build “a solid consensus for reversing reliance on nuclear weapons globally as a vital contribution to preventing their proliferation into potentially dangerous hands, and ultimately ending them as a threat to the world.”³⁹ From the U.S. perspective, the hope was not only to solidify the peace dividend, but also for others to follow America’s lead in pursuing arms control and nuclear reductions.⁴⁰

Multilateral arms control also made progress during this era with a successful outcome of the NPT RevCon in 2010, which included a consensus document with a 64-point Action Plan for working towards the Treaty’s objectives. Action 1 stated, “The Conference reaffirms and recognizes that the total elimination of nuclear weapons is the only absolute guarantee against the use or threat of use of nuclear weapons and the legitimate interest of non-nuclear-weapon States in receiving unequivocal and legally binding security assurances from nuclear weapon States which could strengthen the nuclear non-proliferation regime.”⁴¹ The Action Plan included other specific calls for progress, such as negotiation of a Fissile Material Cutoff Treaty (FMCT) and leveraging existing initiatives and institutions for progress

38 1995 Review and Extension Conference of the Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons: Final Document. Part 1, Organization and Work of the Conference, UN Doc. NPT/CONF.1995/32(Part I) (1995). <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/199294?v=pdf>. Accessed November 20, 2025.

39 George P. Shultz et al., “A World Free of Nuclear Weapons,” *The Wall Street Journal* (January 4, 2007). <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB116787515251566636>. Accessed November 20, 2025.

40 Brad Roberts, *The Case for US Nuclear Weapons in the 21st Century* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2016); Brad Roberts, “On Creating the Conditions for Nuclear Disarmament: Past Lessons, Future Prospects,” *The Washington Quarterly* 42, no. 2 (2019), pp. 7–30. doi:10.1080/0163660X.2019.1621650. Accessed November 20, 2025.

41 2010 Review Conference of the Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, United Nations, NPT/CONF.2010/50 Vol. I (2010). <https://www.reachingcriticalwill.org/images/documents/Disarmament-fora/npt/revcon2010/FinalDocument.pdf>. Accessed November 20, 2025.

towards disarmament. One of these initiatives would prove particularly important. In the lead-up to the 2010 RevCon, the United Kingdom established a “P5 process” with the intent of providing a forum for the five recognized NWS to cooperate and develop a dialogue on how to make progress towards disarmament. The Action Plan included calls for the P5 process to develop a common reporting form and take other steps towards disarmament.

Following this “nuclear spring,” however, many of the post-Cold War achievements in arms control and disarmament subsequently crumbled.⁴² In 2014, following Russia’s first invasion of Ukraine, the U.S. State Department’s annual Compliance Report found Russia to be in violation of the 1987 INF Treaty. Trump would subsequently withdraw from the Treaty in 2017 after years of U.S. attempts to resolve the issue with Moscow. Following Russia’s second invasion of Ukraine, Moscow suspended participation in New START in 2023 and rejected numerous attempts by the Biden administration to return to arms control and strategic stability dialogues. Things were not much better for multilateral disarmament efforts. The 2015 and 2022 NPT RevCons failed to reach consensus because of disputes over a WMD-Free Zone in the Middle East and Russia’s attacks on nuclear power plants in Ukraine respectively. North Korea withdrew from the NPT in 2006, and its nuclear activities became more prominent in the 2010s with a series of increasingly sophisticated nuclear tests. The one exception to this breakdown in disarmament diplomacy, of course, was the TPNW, which was negotiated in 2017 and entered into force in 2021.

The post-Cuban Missile Crisis era of arms control also saw the evolution of important civil society movements. At least three of these are particularly noteworthy. First, the nuclear freeze movement focused on ending the arms race and freezing testing, production, and deployment of nuclear weapons. The freeze movement was based on a “Call,” launched by Randall Forsberg, which envisioned building a coalition of peace organizations that would then expand to influence wider interest groups and public education campaigns.⁴³ It took a decidedly bottom-up strategy and had success in northern and western states. What made the Freeze Movement unique from many other disarmament efforts, however, was that it focused on influencing mainstream Americans, rather than more radical pacifists or progressives, and polls in 1983 indicated 72% of Americans supported the

42 From the Russian perspective, these changes were instigated by U.S. withdrawal from the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty in 2002.

43 Douglas Roche, “The Nuclear Freeze and Its Impact,” *Arms Control Today*. <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2010-12/nuclear-freeze-and-its-impact>. Accessed November 20, 2025.

movement.⁴⁴ While Democrats embraced the Freeze, Reagan questioned the group's motives and portrayed it as having a potentially detrimental impact on U.S. security interests, stating in October 1982, the movement was "inspired by not the sincere, honest people who want peace, but by some who want the weakening of America and so are manipulating honest people."⁴⁵

A second important initiative was the Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp, which was established in 1981 when dozens of protestors marched from Cardiff to Greenham Common to protest the deployment of cruise missiles to the nearby Royal Air Force base.⁴⁶ Numerous protestors chained themselves to the fence and were subsequently arrested, and one of the more high profile activities included "Embrace the Base," during which 30,000 women and children surrounded the base and decorated the fences with pictures of their families.⁴⁷ The protest intentionally linked itself to the women's movement, portraying the deployment of nuclear weapons and nuclear deterrence itself as part of a patriarchal system.⁴⁸ The success of the movement remains a topic of debate: American cruise missiles were deployed to Greenham Common in 1983, but were removed between 1989 and 1991. On the one hand, many of the protestors point to their ultimate success and statements by Gorbachev highlighting the impact of the protests on pressure to conclude the INF Treaty.⁴⁹ On the other hand, empirically-driven scholarship predominantly points to the influence of the security environment and trust-building between Reagan and Gorbachev as responsible for the INF Treaty and

44 Ibid.

45 Ronald Reagan, "Remarks in Columbus to Members of Ohio Veterans Organizations," The American Presidency Project (October 4, 1982). <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/remarks-columbus-members-ohio-veterans-organizations>. Accessed November 20, 2025.

46 Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, "30th Anniversary of Foundation of Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp" (August 30, 2011). <https://cnduk.org/30th-anniversary-foundation-greenham-common-womens-peace-camp/>. Accessed November 20, 2025.

47 Rebecca Johnson, "Date with History: What We Greenham Common Women Achieved," Chatham House (July 28, 2023). <https://www.chathamhouse.org/publications/the-world-today/2023-08/date-history-what-we-greenham-common-women-achieved>. Accessed November 20, 2025.

48 See, for example: Rebecca Johnson, "Date with History: What We Greenham Common Women Achieved;" Carol Cohn, "Sex and Death in the Rational World of Defense Intellectuals," *Signs* 12, no. 4 (Summer 1987), pp. 687-712. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3174209/>. Accessed November 20, 2025.

49 Ibid.

ultimate withdrawal of the weapons, though these two drivers may not be mutually exclusive.⁵⁰

A final important civil society movement during the 1980s was International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War (IPPNW), which won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1985. The group was founded in 1980 by a small group of American and Soviet physicians who documented the humanitarian and environmental impacts of nuclear testing and bombings in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The IPPNW's methods differed from those of the Freeze Movement and Greenham Common camp by focusing their efforts on the dissemination of research about nuclear effects with the publication of books and articles, which then guided lobbying efforts. The International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN), which proved essential for the TPNW, was an heir of IPPNW founded in 2007, but would ultimately pull together practices and lessons learned from these and other civil society disarmament efforts over the decades. To be sure, these three main civil society developments hardly capture the entirety of activist and scholarship work around nuclear disarmament during this period, and the evolution of the TPNW revealed the richness of non-government engagement in an holistic approach to nuclear disarmament.

Trends in Nuclear Disarmament Shaping the Current Disarmament Landscape

The historical record captures an enduring paradox for nuclear possessors such as the United States. On the one hand, American leaders have seen the value in nuclear weapons for deterrence, assurance, and international security purposes. They are particularly valued during times of strategic competition vis-à-vis a nuclear peer because nuclear weapons are believed to play a stabilizing role by preventing escalation or threats to the survival of the state. On the other hand, U.S. policymakers have consistently recognized the risks that come with continuing to live with nuclear weapons. In his second inaugural address, for example, Nixon said, “We must recognize that nuclear weapons are not a source of security—

50 See, for example, Andrew H. Kydd, “The Sturdy Child vs. the Sword of Damocles: Nuclear Weapons and the Expected Cost of War,” *Security Studies* 28, no. 4 (2019), pp. 645–76, doi:10.1080/09636412.2019.1631380 (accessed November 20, 2025); James H. Lebovic, *The False Promise of Superiority: The United States and Nuclear Deterrence After the Cold War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2023); Nicholas J. Wheeler et al., “Trust or Verification? Accepting Vulnerability in the Making of the INF Treaty,” in *Trust, but Verify: The Politics of Uncertainty and the Transformation of the Cold War Order, 1980–1991*, Martin Klimke, Reinhold Kreis, and Christian F. Ostermann, eds. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016), pp. 233–260.

they are a source of danger.”⁵¹ Additionally, since the entry into force of the NPT, members including the United States have recognized the Treaty’s value in terms of transparency, predictability, nonproliferation, and peaceful uses of nuclear energy; and the inherent bargain that underpins the NPT requires some show of progress towards Article VI and “general and complete disarmament.”

The historical record demonstrates that nuclear reductions happened when possessor states were able to find common interest in reducing their arsenals, typically, though not always, through legally-binding mechanisms with intrusive verification and forums for dialogue and dispute resolution. This typically happens when there is an improvement in the security environment and states have less perceived need or valuation of strategic weapons, as acknowledged in the 1995 indefinite extension of the NPT.⁵² The most significant progress toward nuclear disarmament was the massive nuclear reductions that accompanied the end of the Cold War through bilateral strategic arms control. The size of the U.S. nuclear arsenal has reduced by 88% since 1991, with the dismantlement of 11,683 warheads between 1994 and 2020.⁵³ The START I agreement alone reduced global arsenals by 9,000 warheads,⁵⁴ and the Cooperative Threat Reduction Program led to the deactivation of 13,300 warheads and the elimination of intercontinental ballistic missiles, bombers, and submarine launchers by 92% in the former Soviet Union.⁵⁵

51 Richard Milhous Nixon, “Second Inaugural Address of Richard Milhous Nixon,” Yale Law School Lillian Goldman Law Library (January 20, 1973). https://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/nixon2.asp. Accessed November 20, 2025.

52 This is also widely recorded in scholarship. Thomas C. Schelling and Morton H. Halperin, *Strategy and Arms Control* (New York: Twentieth Century Fund, 1961); Robert Jervis, “War and Misperception,” *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 18, no. 4 (1988), pp. 675–700, <https://doi.org/10.2307/204820> (accessed November 20, 2025); Marc Trachtenberg, *History and Strategy* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1991), <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv14163z4> (accessed November 20, 2025); Francis J. Gavin, *Nuclear Statecraft: History and Strategy in America’s Atomic Age* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012).

53 U.S. Department of State, “Transparency in the U.S. Nuclear Weapons Stockpile” (July 19, 2024). https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/U.S.-Nuclear-Weapons-Stockpile-Transparency-2024_2.pdf. Accessed November 20, 2025.

54 U.S. Department of State, “START I at a Glance” (July 12, 1995). <https://1997-2001.state.gov/global/arms/factsheets/wmd/nuclear/start1/starteif.html#:~:text=Overall%20strategic%20nuclear%20forces%20will,total%20of%20over%209%2C000%20warheads.&text=The%20START%20I%20Treaty%20was,Moscow%20on%20July%2031%2C%201991>. Accessed November 20, 2025.

55 Center for Arms Control and Non-Proliferation, “Fact Sheet: The Nunn-Lugar Cooperative Threat Reduction Program” (March 29, 2022). <https://armscontrolcenter.org/fact-sheet-the-nunn-lugar-cooperative-threat-reduction-program-2/>. Accessed November 20, 2025.

A final observation about historical disarmament trends is that the role of institutions has been declining, particularly over the past 25 years. Russia, for example, has violated or withdrawn from at least nine arms control agreements since Putin came to power in 2000.⁵⁶ The NPT has failed to reach consensus at numerous Review Conferences. This skepticism about existing institutions extends to NNWS and civil society, as well. Supporters of the TPNW argued that existing forums such as the CD and NPT were failing to make tangible progress towards disarmament. Although the NPT 2010 Review Conference resulted in a consensus Final Document with a 64-point Action Plan, by 2012, a group of states and civil society groups argued states were not moving fast enough in implementing the Plan. Additionally, the CD has failed to adopt a program of work since 2009, and efforts for an FMCT continue to be blocked by one country. The slow or stagnating progress in these forums was a major motivator for TPNW supporters.

These lessons—the paradox of deterrence and disarmament, success through verifiable legal mechanisms, and weakening of institutions—are now all playing out to shape the current disarmament landscape, which appears to be trending towards a potential reversal in progress towards nuclear disarmament and rising nuclear risks. States are showing an increased reliance on nuclear weapons which could work at cross purposes with disarmament. The strongest evidence for this has been Russia’s use of nuclear threats throughout the war in Ukraine, such as Putin’s announcement only two days after the February 2022 invasion began, that strategic forces would be put on “special alert status.”⁵⁷ Russia subsequently expanded its nuclear doctrine to include a wider range of scenarios in which it might use nuclear weapons.⁵⁸ Numerous studies suggest that these threats may have slowed Western support for Ukraine in the early days of the war, particularly on the part of the

56 Eric Edelman and Franklin C. Miller, “Nuclear Weapons and Arms Control: Old Myths and New Realities,” *The Dispatch* (May 13, 2022). <https://thedispatch.com/article/nuclear-weapons-and-arms-control/?s=r>. Accessed November 20, 2025.

57 Heather Williams et al., “Deter and Divide: Russia’s Nuclear Rhetoric,” Center for Strategic and International Studies (December 4, 2023). <https://features.csis.org/deter-and-divide-russia-nuclear-rhetoric/>. Accessed November 20, 2025.

58 Heather Williams, “Why Is Russia Changing Its Nuclear Doctrine Now?” Center for Strategic and International Studies (September 27, 2024). <https://www.csis.org/analysis/why-russia-changing-its-nuclear-doctrine-now>. Accessed November 20, 2025.

United States, which could serve as a lesson for other aggressors on the strategic value of nuclear threats during a quick land grab or for regional coercion.⁵⁹

Nuclear arsenals are expanding quantitatively and qualitatively. China's nuclear arsenal has consistently been expanding at a rate of 20% per year and is expected to reach 1,000 warheads by 2030.⁶⁰ In 2022, *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times* reported the discovery of two major missile fields in China with hundreds of silos,⁶¹ which was confirmed by the 2022 U.S. Department of Defense China Military Power Report.⁶² But the United States and its allies are also hinting at increasing their strategic forces in response to a growing number of nuclear requirements. A key finding of the 2023 Strategic Posture Commission was, "China, Russia, or both simultaneously, may believe that the United States and its Allies are unlikely to oppose their regional aggression with sufficient forces to guarantee victory, since doing so may leave the United States and its Allies vulnerable in another theater."⁶³ Deterring two peers simultaneously, rather than a single peer superpower as was the strategic balance during the Cold War, presents a new challenge for the United

59 Heather Williams et al., "Deter and Divide: Russia's Nuclear Rhetoric," Keir Giles, "Russian Nuclear Intimidation," Chatham House (March 29, 2023), <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2023/03/russian-nuclear-intimidation> (accessed November 20, 2025); Steven Pifer, "Russia, Nuclear Threats, and Nuclear Signaling," Brookings Institute (October 13, 2023), <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/russia-nuclear-threats-and-nuclear-signaling/> (accessed November 20, 2025).

60 Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, *SIPRI Yearbook 2025: Armaments, Disarmament and International Security* (2025). <https://www.sipri.org/yearbook/2025/>. Accessed November 20, 2025.

61 David E. Sanger and William J. Broad, "A 2nd New Nuclear Missile Base for China, and Many Questions About Strategy," *The New York Times* (July 26, 2021), <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/07/26/us/politics/china-nuclear-weapons.html> (accessed November 20, 2025); Joby Warrick and Ellen Nakashima, "China is Building More than 100 New Missile Silos in its Western Desert, analysts say," *The Washington Post* (June 30, 2021), https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/china-nuclear-missile-silos/2021/06/30/0fa8debc-d9c2-11eb-bb9e-70fda8c37057_story.html (accessed November 20, 2025).

62 U.S. Department of Defense, *2022 Report on Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China* (2022). <https://www.defense.gov/Spotlights/2022-China-Military-Power-Report/>. Accessed November 20, 2025.

63 Madelyn R. Creedon et al., *America's Strategic Posture: The Final Report of the Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States*, Institute for Defense Analyses, p. 8. <https://www.ida.org/-/media/feature/publications/a/am/americas-strategic-posture/strategic-posture-commission-report.aspx>. Accessed November 20, 2025.

States. The Strategic Posture Commission and other significant reports,⁶⁴ along with senior Biden administration officials, highlighted this challenge and its potential implications. Acting Assistant Secretary of Defense for Space Policy Vipin Narang concluded in 2024, “Absent a change in the nuclear trajectories of the PRC, Russia, and North Korea, we may reach a point where a change in the size or posture of our current deployed forces is necessary.”⁶⁵ Narang’s statement along with other Biden administration officials made clear that the United States has avoided this situation and had placed its hope and ambitions in a policy focused on reducing reliance on nuclear weapons.⁶⁶ Moscow, Beijing, and Pyongyang largely dashed those hopes. And amid concerns about regional proliferation or waning credibility of U.S. extended deterrence commitments, many U.S. allies and partners, such as Poland, South Korea, and Saudi Arabia, have indicated an interest in independent nuclear programs.⁶⁷

These historical lessons and contemporary trends, particularly the worsening security landscape, suggest nuclear disarmament may now be an abstract and

64 Center for Global Security Research, *China’s Emergence as a Second Nuclear Peer: Implications for U.S. Nuclear Deterrence Strategy* (Spring 2023), https://cgsr.llnl.gov/sites/cgsr/files/2024-08/CGSR_Two_Peer_230314.pdf (accessed November 20, 2025); U.S. Department of Defense, *2022 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America* (October 2022), <https://media.defense.gov/2022/Oct/27/2003103845/-1/-1/1/2022-NATIONAL-DEFENSE-STRATEGY-NPR-MDR.pdf> (accessed November 20, 2025); Heather Williams et al., *Project Atom 2024: Intra-War Deterrence in a Two-Peer Environment*, Center for Strategic and International Studies (November 18, 2024), <https://www.csis.org/analysis/project-atom-2024-intra-war-deterrence-two-peer-environment> (accessed November 20, 2025).

65 Vipin Narang, “Nuclear Threats and the Role of Allies,” remarks at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (August 2024). https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/2024-08/240801_Narang_Conversation_Secretary.pdf. Accessed November 20, 2025.

66 See, in particular, Pranay Vaddi, “Remarks at the Arms Control Association Annual Meeting 2024,” Arms Control Association (June 7, 2024). <https://www.armscontrol.org/2024AnnualMeeting/Pranay-Vaddi-remarks>. Accessed November 20, 2025.

67 A CSIS report by Victor Cha showcases the divide in polling of the public versus elites. Thirty-four percent of strategic elites support nuclearization, which is a significantly lower number than the widely cited 76% of the general public. Victor Cha, *Breaking Bad: South Korea’s Nuclear Options*, Center for Strategic and International Studies (April 2024), https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/2024-04/240429_Cha_Breaking_Bad.pdf (accessed November 20, 2025); Gnaneshwar Rajan, Pavel Florkiewicz, and Alan Charlish, “Poland’s President Urges US to Move Nuclear Warheads to Polish Territory, FT Reports,” Reuters (March 13, 2025), <https://www.reuters.com/world/polands-president-urges-us-move-nuclear-warheads-polish-territory-ft-reports-2025-03-13/> (accessed November 20, 2025); Choe Sang-Hun, “South Korea Seems to Be Reconsidering Nuclear Weapons. That Worries the U.S.,” *The New York Times* (January 12, 2023), <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/01/12/world/asia/south-korea-nuclear-weapons.html> (accessed November 20, 2025); “Saudi Crown Prince Says Kingdom will Get Nuclear Bomb if Iran Does,” BBC News (March 15, 2018), <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-43419673> (accessed November 20, 2025).

far-off vision. And yet, the disarmament project cannot be abandoned altogether. It is at the core of the NPT grand bargain, and abandoning nuclear disarmament would equate to abandoning the NPT, which could lead to a more proliferated and more dangerous world. Abandoning the disarmament project would also equate to a rejection of strategic stability tools and risk reduction measures that have served U.S. and others' interests for decades, such as monitoring and transparency of strategic arsenals, predictability about nuclear postures and signaling, crisis communication channels, and cooperative dialogue and efforts to prevent misperception and misunderstanding. These tools will be even more valuable in the worsening environment to serve as guardrails.

Conclusion

Efforts to contain and eliminate nuclear power predate the first nuclear explosion at Alamogordo in July 1945. Scientists, religious leaders, and academics sounded the alarm about the risks of atomic weapons since the time of their conception and amid the waning days of World War II. These efforts were never wholly successful, as evidenced by American and Soviet tensions over nuclear disarmament in the early meetings of the United Nations. Instead, progress towards disarmament was episodic, often a ripple effect of crises. The key players in these historical efforts were traditionally nuclear possessor states, particularly the United States and Soviet Union. For them, disarmament and arms control efforts had to work in tandem with an enduring reliance on nuclear deterrence for security reasons. But civil society groups have also had an increasingly prominent role in disarmament issues; although their involvement, too, has also been episodic and with limited success. These historical trends paint a grim scene for the current disarmament landscape. Specific disarmament challenges and competing theories for how to address them are taken up in the next chapter.

Chapter Two

Competing Theories of Change for Nuclear Disarmament

The challenges of nuclear disarmament came into stark relief in June 2025. Israel launched counterproliferation strikes on Iran's nuclear program in an attempt to eliminate its conversion and enrichment facilities, followed by U.S. strikes using the largest conventional weapon ever developed, the Massive Ordnance Penetrator (MOP). Following the strikes, however, Iran refused to abandon its nuclear program and instead halted inspections with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). Even after the strikes, Iran may retain some of the key components for rebuilding a nuclear weapons program, such as tacit knowledge, enrichment capabilities, and a stockpile of fissile material. Even in a non-nuclear armed state, nuclear disarmament is a challenge because of the dual-use nature of nuclear technology, states' ability to develop covert programs, and the security drivers behind nuclear ambitions.

Why would a state give up its nuclear weapons or a nuclear program? How can states reach the desired outcome of the peace and security of a world without nuclear weapons? And who would drive the nuclear disarmament process? Theories of change (ToC) offer explanations for how such change could happen, based on the concept of causal pathways leading to a desired end state. Debates around the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) ultimately represent competing ToCs and visions of those pathways towards disarmament. But ToCs are not purely academic or abstract; they capture underpinning assumptions about how the world works, why actors behave the way they do, and offer pathways for policy change.

This chapter proceeds in three sections. First, it offers an analytic framework for understanding the outcomes and processes of ToCs. This is an attempt to bridge Alexander George's gap between academia and policy communities to operationalize ToCs into policy relevance. Second, it outlines the step-by-step approach to disarmament, which essentially represents the ToC held by nuclear possessors and their allies. Finally, the chapter summarizes the TPNW ToC, the delegitimization model, and how it differs from past disarmament efforts. The chapter demonstrates that nuclear possessors and non-possessors have competing visions for how to make progress towards disarmament and who will lead the process. These ToCs are often working at cross purposes with each other.

Subsequent chapters will identify and test the assumptions of both theories, and Chapter 5 will evaluate them, while also offering alternative disarmament ToCs.

Theories of Change in Nuclear Policy

If nuclear disarmament is a policy puzzle, why bother looking to theories of change to explain disarmament challenges and opportunities? In this instance, and others, theory can help clarify assumptions about disarmament policies. Arguments by both TPNW supporters and detractors rest on assumptions about when, why, and how states will give up nuclear weapons. Understanding the way ahead for the TPNW, the role of various actors, and risks and opportunities of disarmament requires drilling down to explore and interrogate assumptions on both sides. Theory is particularly important in the case of the TPNW, as we will see, because its supporters include a cross-section of scholars from various disciplines who not only conceptualized how disarmament could happen, but also actively participated in the HINW conferences and TPNW negotiations that realized their theories.⁶⁸ Indeed, the TPNW is as much an actualization of academic theories as it is a policy goal for its supporters. In the process of identifying assumptions, theory can also contribute by expanding the options available; indeed, in this time of rapid geopolitical shifts and uncertainty, new thinking about disarmament, outside of existing silos, may be necessary for reconciling NPT disarmament obligations with security realities.⁶⁹ These opportunities for disarmament, outside of the traditional silos of the step-by-step approach and TPNW, are examined in Chapter 5.

Theories of change have been taken up explicitly by philanthropic foundations and think tanks to outline a vision and pathway to achieve a desired outcome; but what are they? According to the Aspen Institute Roundtable on Community Change, “A theory of change is essentially an explanation of how a group of stakeholders expects to reach a commonly understood long-term goal.”⁷⁰ There are three key components to this definition, which will also be helpful for understanding disarmament ToCs. First are the questions of why does a group of stakeholders want

68 Nick Ritchie, “A Contestation of Nuclear Ontologies: Resisting Nuclearism and Reimagining the Politics of Nuclear Disarmament,” *International Relations* 38, no. 4 (September 28, 2022), pp. 492-515. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00471178221122959>. Accessed November 20, 2025.

69 Alexander George, *Bridging the Gap: Theory and Practice in Foreign Policy* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 1993).

70 Andrea A. Anderson, *Theory of Change as a Tool for Strategic Planning: Report on Early Experiences*, The Aspen Institute (October 2023). <https://wallacefoundation.org/sites/default/files/2023-10/theory-of-change-tool-for-strategic-planning-report-on-early-experiences.pdf>. Accessed November 20, 2025.

to achieve a certain goal and what is that goal? Some ToCs work towards a similar goal, but for different reasons. Others inherently suggest they are working towards a common goal, but in actuality might be working towards variations on a common theme. Second, how will those actors work towards a long-term goal? Theories of change involve various types of interventions, such as an ambitious diplomatic push or more modest political shifts, which can include intermediary milestones.⁷¹ Change happens along impact pathways with causal linkages, and strong ToCs will identify underlying assumptions or necessary conditions about those pathways, with the understanding that if assumptions prove to be irrational or unrealistic, the desired change might not happen.⁷² In ToCs, assumptions are crucial.⁷³ A final factor is who drives the change, which, as we will see, is a defining difference between the TPNW and NWS ToCs. The majority of scholarship argues that the most powerful actors in a system also have the most influence and ability to change. The influence of powerful actors extends to normative change, whereby they can inhibit or inspire new norms by acting as norm entrepreneurs through persuasion and socialization.⁷⁴

We can think of ToCs in terms of the desired outcome and the process to get there. Outcomes can range from status quo to transformational shifts.⁷⁵ But outcomes can also be complex: there can be a single or multiple outcomes, they could represent the intentions of the ToC or go off-course, and can be self-reinforcing, self-dampening, or both.⁷⁶ Gunitsky gives the example of imperialism, which initially achieved the desired outcome of the great powers by increasing

71 Andrea A. Anderson, "The Community Builder's Approach to Theory of Change: A Practical Tool for Action, Results and Learning," *The Aspen Institute Roundtable on Community Change*. https://www.theoryofchange.org/pdf/TOC_fac_guide.pdf. Accessed November 20, 2025.

72 John Mayne, "Theory of Change Analysis: Building Robust Theories of Change," *Canadian Journal of Program Evaluation* 32, no. 2 (2017), pp. 155-173, 157.

73 Dana Hunter Taplin and Hel ne Clark, *Theory of Change Basics*, ActKnowledge (March 2012). https://www.theoryofchange.org/wp-content/uploads/toco_library/pdf/ToCBasics.pdf. Accessed November 20, 2025.

74 Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink, "International Norm Dynamics and Political Change," *International Organization* 52, no. 4 (1998), pp. 887-917. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2601361>. Accessed November 20, 2025.

75 Aseema Sinha, "Building a Theory of Change in International Relations: Pathways of Disruptive and Incremental Change in World Politics," *International Studies Review* 20, no. 2 (June 2018), pp. 195-203. <https://doi.org/10.1093/isr/viy031>. Accessed November 20, 2025.

76 Seva Gunitsky, "Complexity and Theories of Change in International Politics," *International Theory* 5, no. 1 (2013), pp. 35-63. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1752971913000110>. Accessed November 20, 2025.

material access, but also led to overstretch in the longer-term and thus was “self-dampening.”⁷⁷

Turning to process, ToCs are implemented on certain pathways that represent a causal logic, assuming one step will lead to the next. Sinha describes the process as operating across three dimensions: power and interests, ideas, and institutions.⁷⁸ In this sense, ToCs are not always in perfect alignment with a single international relations theory, although that is often the case, but rather can draw on elements from multiple disciplines and empirical data, tailored to the context and the desired outcome. For example, Hall argues that during times of uncertainty, values and institutions are more important as agents of change because they can provide some stability and predictability.⁷⁹ Processes of change might be slow or fast. Like outcomes, process can also be complex with linear and non-linear changes, and many second- and third-order effects are hard to predict.⁸⁰ The outcomes-process framework for understanding ToCs is represented in Table 1: Theories of Change Outcome-Process Framework.

Table 1: Theories of Change Outcome-Process Framework

	Slow and incremental	Sharp and sudden
Continuity of institutions		
Transformative		

We can now turn to the two predominant and competing ToCs for disarmament: the step-by-step approach advocated by NWS, and the delegitimization model used to achieve the TPNW.

The NWS Theory of Change: The Step-by-Step Approach

Nuclear weapons possessors and their allies consistently advocate for a step-by-step approach to nuclear disarmament. For them, the desired outcome is, as captured in NPT article VI, “general and complete disarmament,” or, as described

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Aseema Sinha, “Building a Theory of Change in International Relations.”

⁷⁹ Peter A. Hall, “Policy Paradigms, Social Learning, and the State,” *Comparative Politics* 25, no. 3 (April 1993), <https://doi.org/10.2307/422246> (accessed November 20, 2025); Aseema Sinha, “Building a Theory of Change in International Relations.”

⁸⁰ Seva Gunitsky, “Complexity and Theories of Change in International Politics,” pp. 40-41; Ernst B. Haas, *The Uniting of Europe: Political, Social, and Economic Forces, 1950-1957* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1958).

by Barack Obama in the 2009 Prague speech, “the peace and security of a world without nuclear weapons.” The pathway to achieving this change is through reciprocal and verifiable arms reductions when the security environment improves and is primarily the business of nuclear possessors and their allies.

Nuclear possessors champion this approach for security and political reasons. On the security front, they argue, states possess nuclear weapons because of their ability to deter. Whether or not states need a strategic deterrent, to include for ensuring survival of the state, depends on the security environment, perceived threats, alternative deterrent options such as conventional weapons, an adversary’s capabilities, and a host of other variables. If the security environment improves and states no longer require nuclear weapons for deterrence, then they will be in a position to make cuts and progress towards disarmament. Progress towards disarmament can reduce the risks of both arms racing and escalation due to misperception or accident. Political motives for disarmament for many NWS include upholding the NPT, which tied disarmament to nonproliferation and access to nuclear energy for peaceful uses, two principles which remain in the NWS’s national interests. But the ultimate objective of this ToC is to ensure disarmament does not undermine security and lead to conflict or nuclear weapons use.

The pathway to disarmament, therefore, begins with major changes in the security environment, allowing for the reduction and ultimately elimination of nuclear weapons. The steps in the step-by-step ToC include: improvements in the security environment, such as between great powers and nuclear possessors; internal capability assessments to respond to the changing security environment, to include identifying opportunities to reduce strategic weapons; dialogue and transparency about national interests; negotiation of terms of an agreement, to include verification measures; and implementation of the agreement and accountability. Brad Roberts has observed how the peace dividend between 1991 and 2014 allowed for the United States to engage in arms control and nuclear reductions, driven by a desire to “lead by example” in the hopes of solidifying these reductions and motivating other great powers, particularly Russia and China, to follow suit.⁸¹ And Frank Miller has explained that the nuclear reductions of START I and II were driven by the Department of Defense and new threat assessments,

81 Brad Roberts, “The Next Chapter in US Nuclear Policy,” *The Washington Quarterly* 47, no. 2 (2024), pp. 7–21. doi:10.1080/0163660X.2024.2364529. Accessed November 20, 2025.

allowing strategic planners to make cuts in the arsenal (not the other way around).⁸² For this reason, I categorize the step-by-step process as a continuity of institutions, as it assumes continuing to operate within the NPT and existing international order, to include nuclear deterrence, but the outcome is a sudden and sharp change in reductions driven by a parallel sudden and sharp change in in the security environment allowing. I acknowledge that the name “step-by-step” implies that this would be a gradual and incremental change, but reaching total elimination would require fundamental changes in the security environment, such as following a major war or crisis.

The theory that disarmament is dependent on the security environment is bipartisan in the United States and largely shared across nuclear possessors. For example, when the security environment was relatively stable in the early 2000s, Bush said in 2001, “We can, and will, change the size, the composition, the character of our nuclear forces in a way that reflects the reality that the Cold War is over.”⁸³ In a speech in Berlin 12 years later, Obama echoed this view and said, “I’ve determined that we can ensure the security of America and our allies, and maintain a strong and credible strategic deterrent, while reducing our deployed strategic nuclear weapons by up to one-third. And I intend to seek negotiated cuts with Russia to move beyond Cold War nuclear postures.”⁸⁴ In the late 2010s and early 2020s, however, as the security environment worsened, Republicans and Democrats alike reflected on how this would impact prospects for disarmament. In 2018, for example, Trump administration official Chris Ford called for “Creating a security environment in which nuclear weapons states find it in their mutual interest to advance nuclear disarmament.”⁸⁵ And in 2024, Biden administration

82 Lee Butler and Frank Miller, “Chapter 23: Masters of the Nuclear Weapons Enterprise,” in *Uncommon Cause: A Life at Odds with Convention*, vol. 2 (Denver: Outskirts Press, 2016). https://www.wagingpeace.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/butler_volume2.pdf. Accessed November 20, 2025.

83 George W. Bush, “Remarks by the President to Students and Faculty at National Defense University,” The White House (May 1, 2001). <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2001/05/20010501-10.html>. Accessed November 20, 2025.

84 Barack Obama, “Remarks by President Obama at the Brandenburg Gate—Berlin, Germany,” The White House (June 19, 2013). <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2013/06/19/remarks-president-obama-brandenburg-gate-berlin-germany>. Accessed November 20, 2025.

85 Christopher Ashley Ford, “The P5 Process and Approaches to Nuclear Disarmament: A New Structured Dialogue,” U.S. Department of State (December 10, 2018), <https://2017-2021.state.gov/the-p5-process-and-approaches-to-nuclear-disarmament-a-new-structured-dialogue/> (accessed November 20, 2025); U.S. Department of State, “Creating an Environment for Nuclear Disarmament (CEND),” <https://www.state.gov/creating-an-environment-for-nuclear-disarmament-cend> (accessed November 20, 2025).

official Vipin Narang said, “the security environment has continued to deteriorate in ways, and probably more rapidly—particularly [the] Indo-Pacific—in ways than we anticipated,” meaning, “We seek a smart and flexible posture, not an unlimited one. But achieving it may require deploying more and/or different capabilities than we feel today.”⁸⁶ Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov similarly concluded in 2023, “The possession of nuclear arms is today the only possible response to some of the significant external threats to the security of our country.”⁸⁷

This approach, whereby the security environment drives disarmament, has also been captured in numerous NPT consensus documents, including the 2000 Thirteen Steps and 2010 Action Plan, which stated, “The nuclear weapon states commit to accelerate concrete progress on the steps leading to nuclear disarmament, contained in the Final Document of the 2000 Review Conference, in a way that promotes international stability, peace and undiminished and increased security.”⁸⁸ Statements from the P5 process have consistently touted their shared commitment to this approach: “We continue to believe that an incremental, step-by-step approach is the only practical option for making progress towards nuclear

86 Vipin Narang, “Nuclear Threats and the Role of Allies,” remarks at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (August 2024). https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/2024-08/240801_Narang_Conversation_Secretary.pdf. Accessed November 20, 2025.

87 Reuters, “Russia’s Lavrov Says West Needs Continual Reminder of Risks of Nuclear War,” Al Jazeera (August 19, 2023). <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/8/19/russias-lavrov-says-west-needs-continual-reminder-of-risks-of-nuclear-war>. Accessed November 20, 2025.

88 *Final Document of the 2010 Review Conference of the Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons*, United Nations NPT/CONF 2010/50 Vol. I (May 28, 2010). <https://www.un.org/en/conf/npt/2010/>. I acknowledge that “security” is a contested term and can mean security for some as opposed to security for all. I take up this issue in Chapter 5.

disarmament...”⁸⁹ It has also been reaffirmed by U.S. allies, such as Japan,⁹⁰ the United Kingdom,⁹¹ and France.⁹² The step-by-step approach aligns with empirical evidence throughout the Cold War, which suggests that arms control and nuclear reductions happened during periods of détente between the superpowers.

While nuclear reduction agreements are the most obvious means of making progress towards disarmament within the step-by-step approach, other agreements and actors are also part of this ToC. Specific agreements that states are meant to be working towards include CTBT ratification and a Fissile Material Cutoff Treaty (FMCT) through the Conference on Disarmament. In addition to multilateral agreements, states can make progress towards disarmament through stabilizing behaviors, particularly transparency, verification, and irreversibility, as codified within the NPT 1995 Indefinite Extension and subsequent consensus Final Documents. The benefits

89 *Statement by the People's Republic of China, France, the Russian Federation, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and the United States of America to the 2015 Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons Review Conference*, United Nations (2015). https://www.un.org/en/conf/npt/2015/statements/pdf/P5_en.pdf. Accessed November 20, 2025. The 2022 P5 statement represented a similar approach. “We underline our desire to work with all states to create a security environment more conducive to progress on disarmament with the ultimate goal of a world without nuclear weapons with undiminished security for all. We intend to continue seeking bilateral and multilateral diplomatic approaches to avoid military confrontations, strengthen stability and predictability, increase mutual understanding and confidence, and prevent an arms race that would benefit none and endanger all. We are resolved to pursue constructive dialogue with mutual respect and acknowledgment of each other’s security interests and concerns.” “Joint Statement of the Leaders of the Five Nuclear-Weapon States on Preventing Nuclear War and Avoiding Arms Races,” U.S. Missions to International Organizations in Geneva (January 3, 2022). <https://geneva.usmission.gov/2022/01/03/p5-statement/>. Accessed November 20, 2025.

90 “We reaffirm our commitment to a step-by-step approach to nuclear disarmament and recognize the progress made since the height of the Cold War.” Japan Ministry of Foreign Affairs and United States Department of State, “U.S. and Japan Joint Statement on the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT),” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan (2015). <https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/000080427.pdf>. Accessed November 20, 2025.

91 “The best way to achieve the goal of global nuclear disarmament is through gradual multilateral disarmament, negotiated using a step-by-step approach ... It will provide for tangible steps towards a safer and a more stable world where countries with nuclear weapons feel able to relinquish them.” Matthew Rycroft, “A Step-by-Step Approach to Global Nuclear Disarmament Is What We Need to Build Trust and Confidence,” GOV.UK (March 27, 2017). <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/a-step-by-step-approach-to-global-nuclear-disarmament-is-what-we-need-to-build-trust-and-confidence>. Accessed November 20, 2025.

92 “France recalled that the step-by-step approach was the only way to produce concrete results when it comes to disarmament.” French Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, “Review Cycles.” <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/french-foreign-policy/security-disarmament-and-non-proliferation/disarmament-and-non-proliferation/treaty-on-the-non-proliferation-of-nuclear-weapons/review-cycles/>. Accessed November 20, 2025.

of transparency include an improved understanding of states' nuclear doctrines and postures. The P5 process has made progress in transparency promotion, such as through the common reporting form and dialogues on transparency of nuclear doctrines, although that has stalled in recent years. Verification efforts are intended to confirm that states are not violating any NPT obligations, such as through the IAEA, but other initiatives such as the International Partnership for Nuclear Disarmament Verification (IPNDV) have also made progress towards promoting trust-building verification activities and best practices. Finally, irreversibility has received relatively less attention until a recent UK-Norway initiative that is exploring the legal, technical, and political factors that would be required for long-term nuclear disarmament.⁹³

There is a strong historical case to be made that this step-by-step approach with reciprocal arms reductions during times of détente is responsible for progress towards nuclear disarmament to date, including approximately 90% reductions in global nuclear forces; however, stalled progress on this pathway also highlights its challenges and potential flaws in the ToCs assumptions. While the step-by-step ToC provides a clear pathway for reducing nuclear weapons from large arsenals of the Cold War, it does not have a clear vision for getting to zero. Nuclear possessors might continue to rely on nuclear weapons for deterrence purposes in perpetuity, albeit at lower numbers or in a state of nuclear latency. They have faced an historical paradox of relying on nuclear deterrence while also wanting to make progress towards disarmament. This balance might only become more acute and challenging to navigate as arsenals shrink. Arguably, the hardest nuclear weapon to eliminate will be the last one, which the step-by-step approach fails to address short of assuming sudden and dramatic change in the security environment.

A related challenge is that the step-by-step approach assumes the primary driver of nuclear possession is deterrence, but it misses the military and operational value of nuclear weapons. To be sure, any nuclear weapons use would be a strategic game changer; however, a nuclear weapon might be used on the battlefield for a specific military purpose, such as destroying a hardened and deeply buried target (HDBT). Additionally, polling research by Scott Sagan and Ben Valentino has shown that public support for nuclear use was higher when it was for a specific military

93 See, for example, Heather Williams, Jess Link, and Joseph Rodgers, *Irreversibility in Nuclear Disarmament*, Center for Strategic and International Studies (February 28, 2023), <https://www.csis.org/analysis/irreversibility-nuclear-disarmament> (accessed November 20, 2025); Wilton Park, *Moving Forward on Irreversibility in Nuclear*, WP3125 (March 2023), <https://www.wiltonpark.org.uk/event/moving-forward-on-irreversibility-in-nuclear-disarmament-2023/> (accessed November 20, 2025).

purpose, rather than purely as a deterrence signal.⁹⁴ States have historically been reluctant to abandon weapons that serve a unique military function unless something similar or better comes along to replace them. Therefore, while there is historical evidence that the step-by-step ToC can lead to reductions in nuclear weapons, there is a gap in the causal pathway about how to get from low numbers to complete disarmament and a world without nuclear weapons.

A final seemingly obvious assumption of the step-by-step ToC is that nuclear possessors share the goal of nuclear elimination and reducing risks associated with nuclear weapons. A flaw with the step-by-step ToC is that it somewhat deprives states of agency and suggests they are waiting for the security environment to improve, when in actuality they can shape the environment. Similarly, if one great power increases reliance on nuclear weapons while contributing to strategic instability, such as by invading a sovereign state, that jeopardizes the entire ToC. All to say, the step-by-step approach may have a strong historical record of progress but is particularly precarious in the current environment.

The TPNW Theory of Change: The Delegitimization Model and “Ideational Reframing”

The TPNW relies on a ToC used to ban land mines and cluster munitions, taking a bottom-up approach. The desired outcome for this ToC is the same as for the step-by-step approach, rooted in NPT Article VI and the desire for “general and complete disarmament.” The causal pathway to achieving the outcome includes a reframing of how we think about nuclear weapons, leading to legal mechanisms that can shift international norms and customary international law, resulting in nuclear elimination. In this model, the key actors are civil society and non-nuclear states that can not only change the public discourse but also leverage legal tools for change. A small core group of states along with strong civil society participation can generate change through what Johnson refers to as “integrative diplomacy.”⁹⁵

94 Scott D. Sagan and Benjamin A. Valentino, “Just War and Unjust Soldiers: American Public Opinion on the Moral Equality of Combatants,” *Ethics & International Affairs* 33, no. 4 (2019), pp. 411–44. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0892679419000431>. Accessed November 20, 2025.

95 Rebecca Johnson, “Arms Control and Disarmament Diplomacy,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Diplomacy*, Andrew Cooper, Jorge Heine, and Ramesh Thakur, eds. (Oxford University Press, 2013). <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199588862.013.0033>, Accessed November 20, 2025.

According to this ToC, disarmament happens because of changing public attitudes that would delegitimize and devalue nuclear weapons.⁹⁶ The theory draws largely on sociological approaches and posits that increasing awareness of the inhumane effects of weapons will undermine their legitimacy by reframing the narrative around the weapon's wider norms of acceptability.⁹⁷ A change in societal attitudes towards nuclear weapons requires an "ideational reframing" by "exposing dissonance between the claims of states and their actual behavior by focusing on the humanitarian risks and consequences of nuclear weapon detonations."⁹⁸ The construction of cognitive frames is a key step in the evolution of norms, according to Finnemore and Sikkink, because these "new frames resonate with broader public understandings and are adopted as new ways of talking about and understanding issues."⁹⁹ The idea is that once the ideational reframing has progressed, states can move towards establishing a legal mechanism in order to "codify the stigma against causing such inhumane consequences."¹⁰⁰ The ToC inherently targets democracies because they "will have open societal discussions on the issue of nuclear weapons, including the humanitarian consequences and risks associated with them.... Progress and change on these and other issues are expected to spring more from democratic debates and decisionmaking processes, than from closed and autocratic

96 See, for example, Nick Ritchie, "A Contestation of Nuclear Ontologies: Resisting Nuclearism and Reimagining the Politics of Nuclear Disarmament."

97 John Borrie, "An Introduction to Implementing the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons," *Journal for Peace and Nuclear Disarmament* 4, no. 1 (2021), pp. 1–12. doi:10.1080/25751654.2021.1947460. Accessed November 20, 2025.

98 John Borrie, "Humanitarian Reframing of Nuclear Weapons and the Logic of a Ban," *International Affairs* 90, no. 3, (May 2014), pp. 625–646, 644. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2346.12130>. Accessed November 20, 2025.

99 Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink, "International Norm Dynamics and Political Change."

100 Beatrice Fihn, "The Logic of Banning Nuclear Weapons," *Survival* 59, no. 1 (2017): 43–50, 44. doi:10.1080/00396338.2017.1282671. Accessed November 20, 2025.

political systems.”¹⁰¹ Johnson argues that this reframing is part of an historical evolution in which “Weapons that appear useful in one historic era may come to be seen more as problems than assets in a different political and security environment” and lead to public movements and groups to change political attitudes.¹⁰²

Following “ideational reframing,” the next link in delegitimization is for publics to pressure political leaders to abandon nuclear weapons, leading to the development of legal mechanisms and norms.¹⁰³ Ultimately, legal tools working within existing institutions, such as the NPT or the International Court of Justice, will contribute to normative change and a shift in customary international law pressuring all nuclear possessors to abandon the weapons. For this reason, I categorize the delegitimization model as working towards a desired outcome within existing institutions, including self-reinforcing legal mechanisms, and happening through an iterative process of normative and legal steps, as outlined by TPNW supporters.

A key trait of the TPNW’s theory of change is who drives change. While historically superpowers and nuclear possessors were the primary actors, ideational reframing and the delegitimization model rely on civil society to make progress towards stigmatization and delegitimization. Civil society groups, including the medical community, are seen as key actors in increasing public awareness about humanitarian consequences. Johnson outlines the importance of non-governmental actors in advancing this ToC, and is worth quoting in detail:

...integrative approaches in modern diplomacy reflect the increased importance of civil society and epistemic actors who use cognitive and communications strategies to change how governments view security issues, disarmament objectives, and the achievability of potential solutions and agreements... Treating

101 Alexander Kmentt, *The Treaty Prohibiting Nuclear Weapons: How It Was Achieved and Why It Matters* (London: Routledge, 2021), pp. 164. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003080879>. which challenged the established nuclear order. The work provides readers with an authoritative account of the complex evolution of the Humanitarian Initiative (HI). Kmentt’s response to these criticisms that the TPNW will asymmetrically target democracies is worth quoting at length: “This argument has nothing to do with the issue of nuclear weapons or the TPNW; it is a natural function of democratic political systems. It is to be expected, and must indeed be hoped for, that democratic systems will have open societal discussions on the issue of nuclear weapons, including the humanitarian consequences and risks associated with them. Democratic states also have more intense discussions on issues such as human rights. Indeed, progress and change on these and other issues is expected to spring more from democratic debates and decision-making processes, than from closed and autocratic political systems.”

102 Rebecca Johnson, “Arms Control and Disarmament Diplomacy,” p. 597.

103 John Borrie, “Humanitarian Reframing of Nuclear Weapons and the Logic of a Ban,” p. 625.

military and political interests as factors that can be altered, integrative diplomacy may be overtaking traditional arms control by employing a range of tools and techniques that reframe security concepts and objectives and build public and political momentum for disarmament on the basis of norms such as “unacceptable harm.”¹⁰⁴

What this meant in practice for the TPNW was that civil society’s function and goal was largely to reframe nuclear weapons in humanitarian terms to influence how governments and society viewed their role in international security. As subsequent chapters will demonstrate, the TPNW’s ToC was particularly unique due to civil society’s leadership role. Non-nuclear states are also key actors in this ToC, particularly in translating the desired ideational reframing into legal mechanisms and shaping government opinions. Borrie frames the role of states as seizing their agency and moving, “from lamenting their disempowerment and the state of the nuclear weapons control regime in forums such as the NPT and the deadlocked Conference on Disarmament (CD) to actively considering how they can best strengthen momentum towards elimination based on fresh assessments.”¹⁰⁵

But the delegitimization ToC rests on at least three potentially flawed assumptions. The first is that legal mechanisms, including customary international law, drive nuclear disarmament. The historical record, as demonstrated in the previous chapter, does not offer encouraging evidence for this assumption when it comes to nuclear weapons. Non-nuclear cases are also not particularly encouraging, given the recent withdrawal of six countries from the Ottawa Convention on the grounds of the worsening security environment in Europe. Similarly, several countries, including Russia and Ukraine, refused to join the Convention on Cluster Munitions due to the perceived military utility, and both have allegedly used them

104 Rebecca Johnson, “Arms Control and Disarmament Diplomacy,” pp. 601-602.

105 “Some governments have moved from lamenting their disempowerment and the state of the nuclear weapons control regime in forums such as the NPT and the deadlocked Conference on Disarmament (CD) to actively considering how they can best strengthen momentum towards elimination based on fresh assessments.” John Borrie, “Humanitarian Reframing of Nuclear Weapons and the Logic of a Ban,” p. 625.

since the 2022 Russian invasion.¹⁰⁶ Although TPNW supporters acknowledge that the ban treaty alone is “no panacea for solving the nuclear weapons issue, but one of many necessary steps to achieve a world without nuclear weapons,” their ToC does not clarify how it will interact with other potential drivers of disarmament.¹⁰⁷

A second assumption is that non-nuclear actors can incentivize change in nuclear possessors. While a vanguard group of civil society actors and non-nuclear weapon states may be able to make progress in ideational reframing, they will likely have a more limited effect on elimination without some involvement by the states that possess or rely on nuclear weapons in their national security policies. The TPNW itself will not lead to the elimination of a single nuclear weapon with the exclusion of nuclear possessors, as acknowledged by its supporters,¹⁰⁸ and the Nobel Committee when it was awarded ICAN the Peace Prize in 2017.¹⁰⁹ The theory assumes that bottom-up normative pressure will gradually wear away at some states (i.e., democracies), which will eventually join in a normative cascade and move the treaty towards norm entrenchment.¹¹⁰ But such a shift for many of these states would be dramatic and likely driven by external factors, in addition to norms, such as a change in the security environment, and would require compromise on

106 See Human Rights Watch, “Ukraine: Civilian Deaths from Cluster Munitions” (July 6, 2023), <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/07/06/ukraine-civilian-deaths-cluster-munitions> (accessed November 20, 2025); Thomas Gibbons-Neff and John Ismay, “Ukraine Forces and Cluster Munitions,” *The New York Times* (April 18, 2022). <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/18/world/europe/ukraine-forces-cluster-munitions.html>. Accessed November 20, 2025.

107 Alexander Kmentt, *The Treaty Prohibiting Nuclear Weapons*, p. 166.

108 *Ibid.*, p. 2.

109 “Of course, the TPNW cannot eliminate a single weapon in itself, as long as nuclear-weapon states are not joining. But apart from this point of logic, this argument misses the point that a legally binding non-discriminatory prohibition of nuclear weapons creates the legal basis for their elimination and a practical measure towards this objective. This was the case with the Biological as well as the Chemical Weapons Conventions. The pressure and momentum created by the TPNW for progress on nuclear disarmament as well as on non-proliferation, is intended to facilitate reductions of nuclear weapons and establish potential pathways to abandon them, once countries possessing these weapons are ready.” Alexander Kmentt, “The Treaty Prohibiting Nuclear Weapons,” p. 4; Beatrice Fihn, “The Logic of Banning Nuclear Weapons,” The 2017 Peace Prize announcement also captured this sentiment: “The Norwegian Nobel Committee is aware that an international legal prohibition will not in itself eliminate a single nuclear weapon.” The Norwegian Nobel Committee, “The Nobel Peace Prize for 2017,” press release (October 6, 2017), <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/2017/press-release/> (accessed November 20, 2025).

110 See, for example, Finnemore and Sikkink, “International Norm Dynamics and Political Change;” Jean-Baptiste Jeangene Vilmer, “The Forever-Emerging Norm of Banning Nuclear Weapons,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 45, no. 2 (2020), pp. 478–504, doi:10.1080/01402390.2020.1770732 (accessed November 20, 2025).

the part of the TPNW. It is unclear if and when such a compromise phase would emerge from the existing ToC.

A final assumption is that even if some nuclear possessors did join the TPNW, others would follow. A fundamental challenge of the TPNW is that by relying on a bottom-up approach, the theory inherently calls for democracies to disarm before authoritarian regimes.¹¹¹ Recent events should not inspire optimism that authoritarian regimes will be susceptible to customary international law, as evidenced by Russia's ongoing use of chemical weapons in Ukraine, China's rejection of human rights norms, and North Korea's continued practice of restricted movement and torture. While external pressure to uphold norms (sticks to accompany carrots)—such as international condemnation through the United Nations or sanctions—may have some influence on authoritarian regimes, this is not part of the TPNW's ToC. If successful, the TPNW ToC could have unintended and potentially dangerous “spillover effects,”¹¹² leaving authoritarian regimes with nuclear weapons and democracies disarmed if the norm fails to spread or delegitimization efforts are not, at some point, more targeted at outliers.

Conclusion

Ultimately, these ToCs represent competition between arms control (step-by-step) and disarmament (delegitimization), which are often mistakenly lumped together. Theories of change are shaped, among other factors, by their desired outcome (continuity or transformation) and process (slow or sharp). The step-by-step approach and delegitimization model are both ultimately working towards the same outcome and looking to work within existing institutions, such as the NPT and the International Court of Justice. Where they differ is in terms of the process of getting there. While the TPNW's delegitimization model is working to make slow and incremental change through ideational reframing, delegitimization, stigmatization, and customary international law, the step-by-step approach is relying on a sharp and

111 Nick Ritchie and Alexander Kmentt, “Universalizing the TPNW: Challenges and Opportunities,” *Journal for Peace and Nuclear Disarmament* 4, no. 1 (2021), pp. 70–93. doi:10.1080/25751654.2021.1935673. Accessed November 20, 2025.

112 “Two features of non-linear interactions are particularly important for theories of change in international relations. First, they can create loops of positive feedback, in which a cause and effect mutually reinforce each other. Common instances of positive feedback in international politics include arms races, the spread of financial crises, or the inertia of regional integration—what Haas (1958), discussing the development of the European Union, called ‘spillover effects.’ Positive feedback is highly destabilizing and difficult to predict, which means change in international politics can sometimes take the form of a punctuated equilibrium, in which periods of relative stasis are interrupted by sudden and dramatic transformations.” Gunitsky, “Complexity and Theories of Change in International Politics,” p. 40.

sudden change in the security environment to facilitate verifiable nuclear reductions and elimination among nuclear possessors. These ToCs are represented in Table 2: Nuclear Disarmament Theories of Change.

Table 2: Nuclear Disarmament Theories of Change

	Slow and incremental	Sharp and sudden
Continuity of institutions	Delegitimization	Step-by-step
Transformative		

Disarmament debates are essentially competing narratives and beliefs about what might drive states to give up nuclear weapons. For nuclear possessors, nuclear weapons serve an important deterrent function; therefore, they will give up their nuclear weapons when/if the deterrence requirements change, such as an improvement in the security environment. To quote Susan Martin, “Changes in how we think about nuclear weapons cannot strip them of their strategic value. Only a transformation of the nature of international politics or the emergence of an alternative means of strategic deterrence can do that.”¹¹³ Conversely, for nuclear skeptics, their narrative that nuclear weapons are primarily symbolic and their existence poses a greater risk to humanity than the risk of deterrence failure in a non-nuclear world translates into calls for a fundamental shift in how we think and talk about nuclear weapons.

Assumptions underpinning the TPNW’s ToC highlight questions for nuclear disarmament policy. To what extent do nuclear possessors need to be involved in the disarmament process? What legal tools can be used to incentivize disarmament? And can the delegitimization ToC be applied uniformly across all nuclear possessors? The rest of this paper will answer these questions by providing an historical overview of the treaty’s evolution and identifying trends that are likely to shape the future disarmament landscape for TPNW supporters and opponents alike.

113 Susan B. Martin, “The Continuing Value of Nuclear Weapons: A Structural Realist Analysis,” *Contemporary Security Policy* 34, no. 1 (2013), no. 174–194, p. 174. doi:10.1080/13523260.2013.771042. Accessed November 20, 2025.

Chapter Three

Delegitimization in Practice: Nuclear Narratives and the Humanitarian Impacts of Nuclear Weapons Conferences

During the short-lived “nuclear spring” of the early 2000s, the humanitarian impacts of nuclear weapons (HINW) conferences attempted to give voice to the historically overlooked individuals and states in nuclear diplomacy. Sue Coleman-Haseldine, for example, provided testimony at the 2014 Vienna Conference of how nuclear testing affected Aboriginal communities in Australia: “The first atomic bomb called ‘Totem 1’ spread far and wide and there are lots of stories about the ‘black mist’ it created, which killed, blinded, and made people very sick..... These tests contaminated a huge area and everything in it, but people hundreds of kilometres away were also impacted.”¹¹⁴ Civil society was deeply intertwined with the HINW conferences from the beginning. The first conference in Oslo was immediately preceded by an International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN) civil society conference involving spoken word poetry and a sing-along. The conferences were announced two years after a relatively successful NPT Review Conference (RevCon) and three years since U.S. President Barack Obama’s Prague speech calling for the “peace and security of a world without nuclear weapons.”¹¹⁵ While the HINW conferences were first announced amid a spirit of optimism, the world looked very different when the third conference concluded in December 2014. By that time, Russia was in a protracted conflict in Ukraine, and a 2014 State Department report found Russia to be in violation of the 1987 Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty.

Histories of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) often argue that nuclear weapon states (NWS) “boycotted”¹¹⁶ or “embargoed”¹¹⁷ these

114 Sue Coleman-Haseldine, “Speech by Sue Coleman-Haseldine – 8 December 2014,” *Reaching Critical Will* (December 8, 2014). https://www.reachingcriticalwill.org/images/documents/Disarmament-fora/vienna-2014/8Dec_Coleman.pdf. Accessed November 20, 2025.

115 Barack Obama, “Remarks by President Barack Obama in Prague as Delivered,” *Obama White House Archives* (April 5, 2009). <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-barack-obama-prague-delivered>. Accessed November 20, 2025.

116 Alexander Kmentt, “The Treaty Prohibiting Nuclear Weapons,” p. 37.

117 Harald Müller and Carmen Wunderlich, “Nuclear Disarmament Without the Nuclear-Weapon States: The Nuclear Weapon Ban Treaty,” *Daedalus* 149, no. 2 (Spring 2020), pp. 171–189. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48591319?seq=1>. Accessed November 20, 2025.

conferences. But questions and debate remain about how the HINW conferences evolved into the TPNW and the role of nuclear possessors in that process. The HINW conferences proved to have diverse and widespread participation, including by numerous nuclear possessors (India, Pakistan, the United States, and United Kingdom) and nearly all NATO members participated in at least one of the HINW conferences. These conferences could have continued with nuclear possessor involvement, but, as Ben Valentino and Scott Sagan observed, "The decision to use the momentum generated by concern for these humanitarian impacts to push instead for a divisive and ultimately ineffective ban, therefore, was a missed opening to make meaningful progress to reducing these hidden risks posed by nuclear weapons."¹¹⁸ This chapter provides evidence for the notion that the HINW conferences were a "missed opening," and introduces a more nuanced understanding of NWS participation.

While the perspective of TPNW supporters of the HINW conferences is relatively well known, the perspective of nuclear possessors is largely missing from the historical record. The goals of this chapter, therefore, are not only to provide important historical context about the years leading up to the TPNW, but also to introduce new primary source data about how the United States engaged with the HINW movement. It explores the widespread international support for the HINW initiative, including among nuclear possessors and their allies, for a facts-based discussion and opportunity to raise awareness about the humanitarian, environmental, and societal consequences of nuclear weapons. This finding is important because it highlights the near-universal interest in generating a wider public discussion about nuclear weapons, separate from debates about deterrence and disarmament, which could shape the future of the TPNW and the wider nuclear order. Another important finding is the noticeable influence of civil society on the conferences' radical turn towards a ban treaty in February 2014, which essentially sealed the Treaty's fate by excluding nuclear possessors and their allies. This, too, will prove to be a decisive factor not only in the movement towards a legal ban on nuclear weapons but also for the TPNW's future, as discussed in Chapter 5.

This chapter proceeds in three sections. First, it summarizes the history of the three HINW conferences in March 2013 in Oslo, Norway; February 2014 in Nayarit, Mexico; and in December 2014 in Vienna, Austria. As we will see, the Nayarit conference proved to be a "turning point" in multiple ways. Second, the chapter

118 Scott Sagan and Ben Valentino, "The Nuclear Weapons Ban Treaty: Opportunities Lost," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* (July 16, 2017). <https://thebulletin.org/2017/07/the-nuclear-weapons-ban-treaty-opportunities-lost/>. Accessed November 20, 2025.

examines the perspectives of Obama administration officials in the context of the conferences: whether or not to participate, how the conferences aligned with or contradicted U.S. policy priorities, and how to respond when the conferences became noticeably more political with the conclusion of the Mexico conference. Finally, it points to three important trends from the HINW conferences that went on to shape the trajectory of the TPNW and remain relevant: contrary to conventional wisdom, the nuclear possessors did not engage in some coordinated “boycott,” but rather were intentionally excluded as part of the driving theory of change (ToC); the move to a legal mechanism was not predetermined and ultimately prioritized a radical approach to disarmament over a more inclusive one; and civil society, rather than states, were a primary driver of the conferences’ outcomes.

Date	Description
May 28, 2010	NPT RevCon Conference included language on the humanitarian impacts for the first time, resulting in disarmament advocacy surrounding humanitarian issues by Switzerland and the ICRC.
November 26, 2011	The ICRC adopted a resolution appealing to states to negotiate a treaty on the prohibition of nuclear weapons.
May 2, 2012	Switzerland delivered the first humanitarian joint statement on behalf of 16 countries at NPT PrepCom.
March 4-5, 2013	The First Humanitarian Impacts of Nuclear Weapons (HINW) conference was held in Oslo.
February 13-14, 2014	The second HINW conference was held in Nayarit, Mexico.
September 3, 2013	The Open-ended Working Group final report referenced the “catastrophic humanitarian consequences of any use of nuclear weapons” and mentioned that States Parties discussed a treaty banning nuclear weapons as a potential means to fill the “legal gap” in achieving disarmament.
October 20, 2014	At the UNGA’s First Committee, New Zealand delivered a “Joint Statement on Humanitarian Consequences of Nuclear Weapons” on behalf of 155 states.
December 8, 2014	Prior to the Vienna HINW conference, the Holy See released a statement advocating for a moral case of nuclear disarmament.
December 8-9, 2014	The third HINW conference was held in Vienna.

The HINW Conferences

The politics of the HINW conferences are the focus of the majority of this chapter, but at the outset it is important to capture the substance of those meetings: the voices of survivors of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the victims of nuclear testing. At Oslo, Kanat Saudabayev, director of the Nazarbayev Center, spoke about the enduring effects of nuclear testing in Kazakhstan and noted that 70% of the victims of nuclear testing are children or grandchildren of those initially exposed to radiation fallout.¹¹⁹ At Nayarit, Toshiaki Fujimori, a survivor of the Hiroshima bombing shared his father's description of the city the day after the bombing: "What they saw was a hell on earth: The city was full of rubble, blood-stained victims and dead bodies. Along the river they saw countless bodies of girl students. They must have tried to flee from the raging fire and jumped into the water. A timber basin was filled with corpses floating on the surface."¹²⁰ Fujimori lost one of his sisters in the bombing. All conferences included presentations with data on the humanitarian and environmental consequences of nuclear testing as well, such as a presentation at the Vienna conference by Arjun Makhijani from the Institute for Energy and Environmental Research on the long-term impacts of nuclear testing associated with higher cancer rates, particularly among women, near the Nevada Test Site.¹²¹

As described by Norwegian Foreign Minister Eide in announcing the first conference, the conferences were intended to be facts-based discussions about the consequences of nuclear weapons use.¹²² This effort aligned with the call

119 Kanat Saudabayev, "Statement at the International Conference on the Humanitarian Consequences of Nuclear Weapons" (March 2013). https://www.regjeringen.no/globalassets/upload/UD/Vedlegg/Hum/hum_saudabayev.pdf. Accessed November 20, 2025.

120 Toshiaki Fujimori, "Assistant Secretary General Japan Confederation of A-and H-Bomb Sufferers Organizations (Nihon Hidankyo)," *Reaching Critical Will* (2014). <https://www.reachingcriticalwill.org/images/documents/Disarmament-fora/nayarit-2014/statements/Hibakusha-Fujimori.pdf>. Accessed November 20, 2025.

121 International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War and International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons, *The Devastating Consequences of Nuclear Testing: Effects of Nuclear Weapons Testing on Health and the Environment* (November 2023). https://www.ippnw.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/IPPNW_Report_Nuclear_Tests_EN.pdf. Accessed November 20, 2025.

122 Heather Williams et al., *The Humanitarian Impacts of Nuclear Weapons Initiative: The 'Big Tent' in Disarmament*, Chatham House (March 2015), https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/field/field_document/20150331nuclear.pdf (accessed November 20, 2025); John Borrie, *Viewing Nuclear Weapons through a Humanitarian Lens: Context and Implications*, United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research (UNIDIR), Humanitarian Impact of Nuclear Weapons Paper Series no. 2 (2013), <https://unidir.org/files/publication/pdfs/viewing-nuclear-weapons-through-a-humanitarian-lens-en-413.pdf> (accessed November 20, 2025).

for improved education about nuclear weapons from the 2010 Action Plan. Additionally, the United Nations described the aims of the conferences as, “to present a facts-based understanding of the short- and longer-term effects of a nuclear weapon detonation.”¹²³ These stories, voices, and origins are important to keep in mind in tracking the evolution of the TPNW as it became more politicized by supporters and detractors alike.

Humanitarian Foundations

As Chapter 1 demonstrated, humanitarian concerns have been a consistent driver for disarmament efforts by states and civil society since the Manhattan Project. In the era of nuclear optimism following President Obama’s Prague speech, humanitarian language gained momentum within the NPT and other international forums. The 2010 NPT Final Document stated, “The Conference expresses its deep concern at the catastrophic humanitarian consequences of any use of nuclear weapons and reaffirms the need for all States at all times to comply with applicable international law.”¹²⁴ While the NPT Review Conference’s expression of concern on humanitarian consequences falls short of stating that nuclear weapons violate international humanitarian law, for many NNWS and civil society participants, it was interpreted as opening the door to question the legality of the use and threat of use of nuclear weapons because international humanitarian law is “specifically intended to prevent catastrophic humanitarian consequences from warfare.”¹²⁵ To be sure, this approach was not universally accepted. After much objection and negotiation, France and other NWS eventually agreed to the humanitarian language in the Action Plan, but it should not be read as a concession towards a more ambitious disarmament agenda by all NPT States Parties.

One point of provenance of the humanitarian language in the NPT Action Plan was a speech by Jakob Kellenberger, President of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), to the Geneva Diplomatic Corps in April 2010, which called for reframing nuclear weapons as a humanitarian issue rather than one of “military

123 United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs, “Background.” <https://www.un.org/disarmament/tpnw/background.html>. Accessed November 20, 2025.

124 *2010 Review Conference of the Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons Final Document*, United Nations NPT/CONF.2010/50, Vol. I (2010). https://www.nonproliferation.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/2010_fd_part_i.pdf. Accessed November 20, 2025.

125 John Borrie et al., *A Prohibition on Nuclear Weapons: A Guide to the Issues*, United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research (UNIDIR) and International Law and Policy Institute (ILPI) (February 2016), p. 25. <https://unidir.org/files/publication/pdfs/a-prohibition-on-nuclear-weapons-a-guide-to-the-issues-en-647.pdf>. Accessed November 20, 2025.

doctrines and power politics.” Kellenberger’s comments also called for eliminating nuclear weapons through a treaty; however, he did so in the context of existing obligations under the NPT and existing international law.¹²⁶ Due to lobbying by the Swiss delegation and ICRC, much of this language found its way into the 2010 NPT Final Document.¹²⁷

The language aligned with the delegitimization ToC, which had been used for banning land mines and cluster munitions, and suggested nuclear weapons should be similarly reframed as a humanitarian issue. For groups such as ICAN, this reframing was directly tied to disarmament ambitions.¹²⁸ For some of the states supporting the humanitarian approach, this reframing was appealing because it challenged the position of NWS, which focused on, “the security, responsibility and legitimacy of the nuclear status quo,” in addition to elevating humanitarian concerns.¹²⁹ For others, it was an opportunity for education and awareness-raising, particularly for a new generation that might not be familiar with the data and human experiences associated with nuclear weapons use and testing.¹³⁰

The 2010 NPT outcome document set high expectations. Many states hoped that the 64-point Action Plan would lead to immediate progress in the Conference on Disarmament (CD). For decades, the CD had been stalled over a Fissile Material Cutoff Treaty (FMCT), and it failed to make progress in the immediate aftermath of the 2010 RevCon. Many TPNW supporters point to the lack of progress towards achieving the Action Plan as a primary motivator for the Treaty.¹³¹ If that’s the case, they only gave states one year to implement some of the Plan’s ambitious proposals, because, according to Austrian diplomat Alexander Kmentt, “In 2011, when no tangible progress in the implementation of the Action Plan was visible, Norway took a number of steps that can be considered the operational launch

126 International Committee of the Red Cross, “We Take Action, Not Sides.” <https://www.icrc.org/en>. Accessed November 20, 2025.

127 Rebecca Davis Gibbons, “The Humanitarian Turn in Nuclear Disarmament and the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons,” *The Nonproliferation Review* 25, no. 1-2 (2018), pp. 11–36. doi:10.1080/10736700.2018.1486960. Accessed November 20, 2025.

128 Ibid.

129 Alexander Kmentt, “The Treaty Prohibiting Nuclear Weapons,” p. 143.

130 Heather Williams et al., “The Humanitarian Impacts of Nuclear Weapons Initiative: The ‘Big Tent’ in Disarmament.”

131 See, for example, Alexander Kmentt, “The Treaty Prohibiting Nuclear Weapons;” John Borrie, “An Introduction to Implementing the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons;” and Beatrice Fihn, “The Logic of Banning Nuclear Weapons.”

of what became known as the Humanitarian Initiative.” Kmentt tied this to both distrust within the NPT but also an openness to new approaches to disarmament.¹³² According to this narrative, after only 18 months, NWS were considered to be negligent in achieving their obligations under the Action Plan. This trend of moving fast and trying to seize momentum would prove to be a theme not only in the HINW conferences but also for TPNW negotiations.

The culmination of these humanitarian discussions was Eide’s announcement in 2012 that Norway would host a conference on HINW. Two months later, on May 2 at the NPT Preparatory Committee, Switzerland delivered a humanitarian joint statement on behalf of 16 countries.¹³³ The Swiss statement recalled the 2010 RevCon language about humanitarian impacts and called for the elimination of nuclear weapons. Additionally, the statement pointed to the important role of civil society and called on “all States Parties, especially the nuclear weapon States, to give increasing attention to their commitment to comply with international law and international humanitarian law.”¹³⁴ This was followed by a statement to the UN General Assembly First Committee on behalf of 34 countries in October 2012 with similar language and put the call for disarmament in the context of the waning value of nuclear weapons in a post-Cold War environment and in addressing threats such as poverty and terrorism.¹³⁵

By this time, some states and civil society groups were already intent on working towards a ban treaty. In November 2011, the ICRC had adopted a resolution appealing to states to negotiate a treaty on the prohibition of nuclear weapons

132 Alexander Kmentt, “The Treaty Prohibiting Nuclear Weapons,” p. 19.

133 *Joint Statement on the Humanitarian Dimension of Nuclear Disarmament by Austria, Chile, Costa Rica, Denmark, Holy See, Egypt, Indonesia, Ireland, Malaysia, Mexico, New Zealand, Nigeria, Norway, Philippines, South Africa, Switzerland to the First Session of the Preparatory Committee for the 2015 Review Conference of the Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, Reaching Critical Will* (May 2, 2012). https://www.reachingcriticalwill.org/images/documents/Disarmament-fora/npt/prepcom12/statements/2May_IHL.pdf. Accessed November 20, 2025.

134 *Ibid.*

135 *Joint Statement on the Humanitarian Dimension of Nuclear Disarmament by Austria, Chile, Costa Rica, Denmark, Holy See, Egypt, Indonesia, Ireland, Malaysia, Mexico, New Zealand, Nigeria, Norway, Philippines, South Africa, Switzerland to the First Session of the Preparatory Committee for the 2015 Review Conference of the Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, Reaching Critical Will.*

framed around the humanitarian consequences of nuclear use.¹³⁶ It was also during this time, thanks to an influx of financial support from Norway, that ICAN allegedly shifted from working towards a nuclear convention towards a more ambitious ban treaty.¹³⁷ Support for a legal mechanism was not universal, however, nor was it framed as an objective of the first conference.

The HINW Conferences in Oslo, Nayarit, and Vienna

The first HINW conference was held in Oslo March 4-5, 2013. What was perhaps most distinct about Oslo was not necessarily what was discussed but rather who participated. Key conference participants can be grouped into three categories: core states driving the humanitarian initiative, states relying on nuclear weapons for their security, and civil society. These three groups were not monoliths, nor are they exhaustive. The first group included Austria, Mexico, Ireland, New Zealand, and Switzerland, although the Swiss position on HINW and the TPNW would shift over time. The second group included non-nuclear NATO members Japan, Australia, India, and Pakistan. The host, Norway, also fell into this category and consistently framed the conference as purely a facts-based discussion about the impacts of nuclear weapons.¹³⁸ This facts-based approach was reflected in Norway's read-out of the meeting, which emphasized three main findings from the conference: the international community cannot address the humanitarian disaster of a nuclear detonation, the immediate and long-term effects of a nuclear detonation are well known, and those effects would transcend national borders.¹³⁹ The third group of participants, civil society, proved decisive for the conference. Early in planning for the conference, the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs had designated ICAN as a non-governmental partner.

The five recognized NWS did not attend the conference and issued statements explaining their decision. Many of these statements captured similar themes on

136 International Committee of the Red Cross, "Resolutions of the 2011 Council of Delegates and 31st International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent: Geneva, November 26 - December 1, 2011" (2011). <https://www.icrc.org/sites/default/files/external/doc/en/assets/files/publications/icrc-002-1130.pdf>. Accessed November 21, 2025.

137 Alexander Kmentt, "The Treaty Prohibiting Nuclear Weapons," p. 28.

138 Rebecca Davis Gibbons, "The Humanitarian Turn in Nuclear Disarmament and the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons."

139 Espen Barth Eide, "Opening Statement at the Conference on Humanitarian Impact of Nuclear Weapons," Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (March 5, 2013). https://www.regjeringen.no/no/dokumentarkiv/stoltenberg-ii/ud/taler-og-artikler/2013/innlegg_humimpact/id715948/. Accessed November 21, 2025.

the importance of working through existing disarmament mechanisms and the relationship between disarmament and the security environment. On March 5, 2013, in the CD, for example, China stated, “the step-by-step approach should be adopted. The Action Plan in the Final Document adopted by consensus by the 2010 NPT Review Conference had formulated a detailed roadmap for the international nuclear disarmament process. This is an important agreement approved by all States Parties through hard negotiations.”¹⁴⁰ While four of the P5 members quickly rejected participation in the conference, participation by the United Kingdom was somewhat contentious. A freedom of information request found a series of emails suggesting London was planning to attend but was persuaded against doing so for the sake of P5 unity, in the hopes that the P5 would make progress towards their responsibilities in the 2010 NPT Action Plan.¹⁴¹

The second conference was held in Nayarit, Mexico on February 13-14, 2014 with wider participation from 148 states. Picking up on growing talks of a nuclear ban, many states, such as Germany expressed support for existing disarmament mechanisms and is worth quoting at length in juxtaposition to existing narratives that the conferences had overwhelming support for a ban:

Progress also requires maintaining a dialogue with the Nuclear Weapon States. As important as the humanitarian dimension is there is also a security dimension to nuclear weapons. They have greatly contributed to preventing armed conflict between the NATO-Alliance and the Warsaw Pact. We Europeans do remember this quite vividly. Today, the security situation we are facing allows for further progress with respect to nuclear disarmament. But it will be progress achieved in difficult negotiations with bilateral talks between the States with the largest arsenals later leading to multilateral negotiations. Over the last two days we have often

140 Wu Haitao, “Statement by H.E. Ambassador Wu Haitao of the Chinese Delegation at the Plenary of the Conference on Disarmament, on Nuclear Disarmament,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs People’s Republic of China (March 5, 2013). https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/wjb/zzjg_663340/jks_665232/kjfywj_665252/202406/t20240606_11405357.html. Accessed November 21, 2025.

141 The emails appear to no longer be publicly available; however, they were referenced in numerous documents at the time. See, for example: Andrea Berger and Malcolm Chalmers, *Great Expectations: The P5 Process and the Non-Proliferation Treaty*, Royal United Services Institute, RUSI Whitehall Report 3-13 (2013). https://static.rusi.org/whr_3-13_web.pdf. Accessed November 21, 2025. Original citation: Document released under Freedom of Information Request 02060-13, email: “Demarche on the Humanitarian Impact of Nuclear Weapons Conference” (February 28, 2013). Accessed August 14, 2013.

heard the analogy with banning landmines. This analogy with the Ottawa process is not a convincing one, however. After all, these weapons have, unlike nuclear weapons, never played a central role in the international system. In all likelihood, at some point in time on the way down to Zero a Nuclear Weapons Convention will be negotiated. But pressing forward without the Nuclear Weapon States today is not the best strategy for tangible progress. It might rather antagonize important players and thereby, against our best intentions, negatively impinge on the implementation of the NPT, the NPT Action Plan and on the Review Conference in 2015.

What this and other statements demonstrate is that it was not a foregone conclusion that the HINW conferences would lead towards a nuclear ban treaty. States wanted to continue to make progress through the NPT and the Action Plan, including nuclear possessors and NATO members. It additionally demonstrates the sense among many participants that NWS were intentionally being excluded from the process, but they would be an essential part of progress towards disarmament.

The Nayarit conference ended with a chair summary from Juan Manuel Gomez Robledo, the Mexican vice minister for multilateral affairs and human rights, calling for a “legally binding instrument” to ban nuclear weapons on humanitarian grounds. Austria had offered to host the third conference, but the call to fill the “legal gap” came as a surprise to Kmentt, the Austrian ambassador responsible for leading the third conference.¹⁴² Several states at the Nayarit conference, including NATO members and Australia, criticized this decision to move to a legally binding mechanism as being too extreme.¹⁴³ In their statement prior to the announcement, the Netherlands said, “As mentioned by others, banning nuclear weapons by itself will not guarantee their elimination without engaging the states with nuclear weapons and recognizing both the security and humanitarian dimensions of the nuclear weapons debate.”¹⁴⁴ For civil society, however, the announcement was a

142 Alexander Kmentt, “The Treaty Prohibiting Nuclear Weapons,” p. 40.

143 Ray Acheson, Beatrice Fihn, and Katherine Harrison, “Report from the Nayarit Conference,” *Reaching Critical Will* (February 2014), <https://www.reachingcriticalwill.org/disarmament-fora/hinw/nayarit-2014/report> (accessed November 21, 2025); Alexander Kmentt, “The Treaty Prohibiting Nuclear Weapons,” p. 44.

144 Netherlands, “Text: Netherlands Intervention – Nayarit Meeting,” *Reaching Critical Will* (February 2014). <https://www.reachingcriticalwill.org/images/documents/Disarmament-fora/nayarit-2014/statements/Netherlands.pdf>. Accessed November 21, 2025.

coup. Leaders of ICAN described a “sense of momentum” in moving forward with a ban and criticized ban detractors that arguments on the grounds of national security were “hollow against the testimonies of countries that have experienced the disastrous humanitarian impact of nuclear weapons.”¹⁴⁵ It is worth noting that Ukraine participated in the Nayarit conference with a presentation on its progress towards nuclear disarmament, including 170 launchers destroyed and 1,300 nuclear warheads transferred to Russia.¹⁴⁶ Only two weeks after the conference, Russian-backed troops annexed Crimea.

The third conference was held December 8-9, 2014, in Vienna with the largest participation yet, including 158 states, a more diverse mix of civil society groups, and some of the NWS. One of the more dramatic developments in the lead up to the Vienna conference was a statement by the Holy See in support of the TPNW. The statement made the case that, “The infliction of unnecessary suffering has long been banned by military codes and international law. What is true in conventional war is all the more true of nuclear conflict.”¹⁴⁷ The statement was also a departure from past Church statements in declaring, “as the defenders of nuclear deterrence contend, reliance on a strategy of nuclear deterrence has created a less secure world,” given that previous statements by the U.S. Council of Catholic Bishops, Pope John Paul II, and Pope Benedict had been more open to policies of deterrence under specific conditions, including progress towards disarmament.¹⁴⁸ But also during the interim, NWS came out more forcefully in opposition to the idea of a ban and reiterated their commitment to the step-by-step approach from the 2010 Action Plan. In a statement at UN First Committee on October 8, 2014, French Ambassador Jean-Hugues Simon-Michel said, “The NPT roadmap adopted by consensus in 2010 is based, as I have said, on a pragmatic, ‘step-by-step’ approach....

145 Ray Acheson, Beatrice Fihn, and Katherine Harrison, “Report from the Nayarit Conference.”

146 Bila Kateryna, “Humanitarian Impact of Nuclear Weapons: Ukrainian View,” *Reaching Critical Will*. <https://www.reachingcriticalwill.org/images/documents/Disarmament-fora/nayarit-2014/statements/Ukraine.pdf>. Accessed November 21, 2025.

147 Permanent Mission of the Holy See to the United Nations and Other International Organizations in Geneva, “Nuclear Disarmament: Time for Abolition,” Austrian Federal Ministry for European and International Affairs (February 2014). https://www.bmeia.gv.at/fileadmin/user_upload/Zentrale/Aussenpolitik/Abroestung/HINW14/HINW14_Holy_See_Contribution.pdf. Accessed November 21, 2025.

148 Ibid. See also, Heather Williams, “Ultima Ratio: Papal Statements on Nuclear Weapons and Just War Doctrine,” in *Morality and Nuclear Weapons: Practitioner Perspectives*, Brad Roberts, ed., pp. 33-63 (Livermore, CA: Center for Global Security Research, July 2023). https://cgsr.llnl.gov/sites/cgsr/files/2024-08/CGSR-Occasional_Paper_MoralityandNuclearWeapons_06302023.pdf. Accessed November 21, 2025.

Certain parties would like to push us into taking another path, into an ideological approach which aims to stigmatize and not to seek solutions. That is not how we can advance disarmament and international security.”¹⁴⁹ France and Russia did not participate in the Vienna conference in any fashion, whereas the United States and United Kingdom sent formal delegations and China sent a non-governmental representative.

At the Vienna conference, numerous U.S. allies again stressed the importance of continuing to work to implement the 2010 Action Plan, which was barely four years old, and the need for participation by nuclear possessors. Australia, for example, stated, “Prospects for disarmament are enhanced by engaging, not alienating, those states that will need to take the action to disarm.”¹⁵⁰ The conference concluded with a pledge by Austria’s Deputy Foreign Minister to take the HINW conferences’ findings to the NPT in order to “identify and pursue effective measures to fill the legal gap for the prohibition and elimination of nuclear weapons.”¹⁵¹ Additionally, the conference resulted in a Humanitarian Pledge signed by 114 countries.¹⁵² But like Nayarit, the outcome remained contested, particularly by NWS and states that relied on nuclear weapons for extended deterrence.

Although it was not formally announced, the Vienna Conference was meant to be followed by a conference in South Africa sometime after the 2015 RevCon. That conference never happened. RevCon ended in failure ostensibly because of disagreement about a WMD Free Zone in the Middle East; however, many TPNW supporters indicated they would not have accepted the draft language regardless because it did not go far enough on disarmament and implementing the findings

149 Jean-Hugues Simon-Michel, “Statement by Mr. Jean-Hugues Simon-Michel Ambassador, Permanent Representative of France to the Conference on Disarmament, Head of the French Delegation UN General Assembly First Committee General Debate,” Permanent Mission of France to the United Nations in New York (October 8, 2014). <https://onu.delegfrance.org/8-October-2014-UNGA-1st-Committee>. Accessed November 21, 2025.

150 Australia, “Australian Statement at the Vienna Conference on the Humanitarian Impact of Nuclear Weapons,” Federal Ministry of European and International Affairs Republic of Austria, https://www.bmeia.gv.at/fileadmin/user_upload/Zentrale/Aussenpolitik/Abruestung/HINW14/Statements/HINW14_Statement_Australia.pdf (accessed November 21, 2025); Michael Linhart, “Pledge Presented at the Vienna Conference on the Humanitarian Impact of Nuclear Weapons by Austrian Deputy Foreign Minister Michael Linhart,” Federal Ministry of European and International Affairs Republic of Austria, https://www.bmeia.gv.at/fileadmin/user_upload/Zentrale/Aussenpolitik/Abruestung/HINW14/HINW14_Austrian_Pledge.pdf (accessed November 21, 2025).

151 Ibid.

152 Ibid.

of the conferences.¹⁵³ This allowed the core group of states behind the HINW conferences and, ultimately, the TPNW to blame the United States for a failed RevCon and to use it as an excuse for what they did next: take the idea of a nuclear weapons ban to the United Nations.

U.S. Perspectives on the HINW Conferences

One of the more dramatic moments during the Vienna conference was when the U.S. delegation offered its national statement immediately following the testimony of victims of nuclear testing, rather than during the designated period for general statements. This was not seen as some minor issue in diplomatic procedure. While the timing of the statement was explained away as a miscommunication by U.S. Ambassador Adam Scheinman,¹⁵⁴ for many participants at the conference it was seen as a manifestation of the United States' lack of seriousness about the issue, and tone deaf. For many in the U.S. government who had debated whether or not the United States should participate, this reaction was evidence that the conference organizers were inherently opposed to the U.S. position, and that they shouldn't have attended.¹⁵⁵

The Obama administration's approach to the HINW conferences was shaped by a mix of internal and external factors. Internally, with a few exceptions,¹⁵⁶ there was limited interest in the conferences until Nayarit when senior leadership in the State Department thought there might be an opportunity to shape the narrative about humanitarian consequences. As described by one senior official, there were discussions with the Mexican government about whether or not the United States would attend the Nayarit conference but they did not suffice to convince opponents of the conference that the USG should participate.¹⁵⁷ Externally, U.S. decisions about whether to participate were shaped by allies, who largely encouraged Washington to send a delegation. But another significant driver of the U.S. position was Washington's

153 Alexander Kmentt, "The Treaty Prohibiting Nuclear Weapons," p. 42; Adam Scheinman, interview by author (May 31, 2024); Laura Kennedy, interview by author (June 11, 2024).

154 Adam Scheinman, interview; Rebecca Davis Gibbons, "The Humanitarian Turn in Nuclear Disarmament and the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons."

155 Adam Scheinman, interview.

156 Brad Roberts, "On Creating the Conditions for Nuclear Disarmament: Past Lessons, Future Prospects," Rose Gottemoeller, "Global nuclear governance: Quo Vadis?," remarks at the Bled Strategic Forum (BSF) Slovenia (September 5, 2017), https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_146617.htm (accessed November 21, 2025).

157 Laura Kennedy, interview.

engagement and relationship with the conference organizers and the core group of states leading the humanitarian approach, particularly Mexico and Austria.

Oslo Conference

At the time Eide announced the first HINW conference, the U.S. government was operating on consensus for the president's Prague vision. It's worth recalling that the speech called for the "peace and security of a world without nuclear weapons" while also recognizing that it was not a short-term goal. Obama expanded on this vision in his Nobel Peace Prize speech, which made it clear he continued to support a policy of nuclear deterrence and was skeptical of anything other than a security-driven step-by-step approach to disarmament. In the speech, Obama offered a more measured vision for international security: "I face the world as it is, and cannot stand idle in the face of threats to the American people. For make no mistake: Evil does exist in the world."¹⁵⁸ What this vision meant in practice at the time of the HINW conference was prioritization of New START implementation and a follow-on. In a 2013 speech in Berlin, Obama laid out a vision for arms control beyond New START by cutting the deployed nuclear arsenal by up to one-third.¹⁵⁹ Russia did not reciprocate the offer. The other main priority at the time was the ongoing nuclear negotiations with Iran, ultimately culminating in the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2015.

The announcement of the Oslo Conference was initially met with confusion. According to the U.S. Ambassador in Geneva at the time, when she and senior Washington officials first discussed the proposed meeting in Oslo with her Norwegian counterpart, "the format and goals were unclear. It was possible they hadn't yet decided how to hold it (which would also require consultation with many other parties). The Norwegian disarmament department may have had a different impulse from that of the whole of this NATO ally government." The Norwegian ambassador in Geneva, who was a strong disarmament supporter, had played a key role at the NPT RevCon.¹⁶⁰ As more information became available, the State Department was being encouraged by some to be somewhat open to the idea of participation on the grounds that "The U.S. shouldn't be afraid to show up at a conference on humanitarian consequences when we could make a presentation

158 Barack Obama, "Nobel Prize Lecture: A Just and Lasting Peace," The Nobel Prize (December 10, 2009). <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/2009/obama/lecture/>. Accessed November 21, 2025.

159 Barack Obama, "Remarks by President Obama at the Brandenburg Gate—Berlin, Germany."

160 Laura Kennedy, interview.

about how to deal with it.”¹⁶¹ Conversely, views across the Defense Department were mixed. Some were opposed to the idea of participation and argued, “There’s nothing new here, everyone knows nuclear weapons would have horrific effects.”¹⁶² Others, such as Brad Roberts, recall, “My view all along was that it was important for the U.S. to have a seat at any table where the international community (of states) discusses nuclear weapons.”¹⁶³ This debate reflected a previous one about the 2010 NPT Final Document’s humanitarian language, which initially caused “consternation” in some circles, but ultimately, “the U.S. lawyers fine-tuned it in subtle ways and found an acceptable compromise.”¹⁶⁴ But the decision not to attend the Oslo conference appears to have been largely driven by confusion about the conference’s intention and some minor internal opposition.

Skepticism within the Obama administration was also driven by frustration and distrust with some of the NNWS. From its perspective, the administration made a series of major achievements when it concluded New START further reducing the U.S. nuclear arsenal, the president delivered one of the most landmark speeches in U.S. history calling for nuclear disarmament, and they had launched a new initiative to strengthen nuclear security involving a multilateral “gift baskets” approach. But still, the United States and other NWS received widespread criticism from NNWS at the 2012 PrepCom that they weren’t doing enough or moving fast enough on disarmament. Numerous U.S. officials expressed the sentiment, “no matter what you do, the next day is always, ‘you haven’t done enough.’” According to U.S. Ambassador Susan Burk, who led the U.S. delegation at the 2010 RevCon, some of the NNWS wanted to “reinvent the wheel” and never gave the 2010 Action Plan a chance.¹⁶⁵ According to another U.S. ambassador, if NNWS wanted to see more progress on specific steps in the Action Plan, such as an FMCT, “why wasn’t everyone helping us to push the Pakistanis?,” who had consistently blocked progress in the CD.¹⁶⁶ This impatience from some NNWS had an impact on the NPT and contributed to distrust on the side of U.S. policymakers, especially as they believed

161 Susan F. Burk, interview by author (May 29, 2024).

162 Elaine Bunn, interview by author (May 29, 2024).

163 Brad Roberts, private correspondence with author.

164 Susan F. Burk, interview.

165 Susan F. Burk, interview

166 Laura Kennedy, interview.

Obama truly cared about disarmament and was doing as much as he could given domestic and international constraints.

While there was consideration (and exasperation) about the HINW initiative, the official message from Washington was to decline participation in the Oslo conference on the grounds that it might “divert discussion away from practical steps to create conditions for further nuclear weapons reductions. The practical, step-by-step approach that we are taking has proven to be the most effective means to increase stability and reduce nuclear dangers.”¹⁶⁷ At the time of the Oslo conference, there appeared to be potential for real progress in this step-by-step approach within the P5 process. The P5 released a joint statement saying “We remain concerned that the Oslo Conference will divert discussion away from practical steps to create conditions for further nuclear weapons reductions. The practical step-by-step approach that we are taking has proven to be the most effective means to increase stability and reduce nuclear dangers.”¹⁶⁸

Nayarit Conference

Following the Oslo Conference, a small number of senior State Department officials argued the Nayarit conference could be an opportunity to shape the narrative and share existing information about the humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons. This did not meet with major opposition within the U.S. interagency because, again, few government officials were tracking the conferences or saw them as a serious issue for U.S. nuclear policy. The State Department indicated they cared more than any other agencies about the issue and were willing to take the lead.

But ultimately, the primary issue for U.S. policymakers about participating was a dispute over the agenda. State Department officials offered to send a U.S. expert to the Nayarit conference to present on incident response. This offer, however, went ignored and, according to Burk, “in the end Mexico sent out the agenda before the U.S. agreed to it.”¹⁶⁹ Burk’s successor Adam Scheinman confirmed this: “Mexico went ahead and released the agenda, we ended up not going. No engagement.

167 Rose Gottemoeller, “The Obama Administration’s Second Term Priorities for Arms Control and Nonproliferation,” remarks at the Geneva Centre for Security Policy (March 20, 2013). <https://2009-2017.state.gov/t/us/206454.htm>. Accessed November 21, 2025.

168 “P5 Oslo Statement,” Reaching Critical Will (2013). https://www.reachingcriticalwill.org/images/documents/Disarmament-fora/oslo-2013/P5_Oslo.pdf. Accessed November 21, 2025.

169 Susan F. Burk, interview.

They had their direction and wanted to move out with that.”¹⁷⁰ This aligns with research by Rebecca Davis Gibbons, who found the State Department was “rebuffed by the conference organizers”¹⁷¹ and by Bill Potter, who acknowledged the Obama administration was “disappointed” with the agenda and chose not to attend.¹⁷² What this indicates is that rather than the U.S. outright refusing to participate, the organizers made no serious effort to involve them or address their questions and concerns about the direction of the conferences.

An alternative argument for why the United States did not participate was a push by other NWS for “P5 solidarity.”¹⁷³ According to U.S. officials, numerous allies either supported or encouraged the United States to participate at Nayarit, but some members of the P5 were “outraged” because it might break P5 solidarity, particularly Russia.¹⁷⁴ According to those same officials, however, this was not the driving force behind the U.S. decision not to go to Nayarit. Mexico’s reluctance to engage with the United States’ offer to send an expert proved to be the deciding factor.

Vienna Conference

The outcome of the Nayarit conference with the call for a legally-binding ban on nuclear weapons prompted renewed skepticism within the Obama administration about the HINW initiative’s intentions. Prior to the Vienna Conference, according to Undersecretary of State for Arms Control and International Security Rose Gottemoeller:

...the basic worry that we have had is that we don’t have a straightforward or a clear view on the up-and-up about what these conferences are about. We are very supportive of the notion that we need to be educating the public, we need to be informing the international community, we need to be enhancing people’s understanding of the human impacts of nuclear weapons use....

170 Adam Scheinman, interview.

171 Rebecca Davis Gibbons, “Humanitarian Turn in Nuclear Disarmament.”

172 William C. Potter and Benjamin Pack, “Advancing Nuclear Disarmament: The US Role,” Asia Pacific Leadership Network for Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament, APLN/CNND Policy Brief No. 10 (March 2014). <https://cms.apln.network/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Policy-Brief-No-10-Advancing-Nuclear-Disarmament-The-US-Role.pdf>. Accessed November 21, 2025.

173 See, for example, *ibid.*

174 Adam Scheinman, interview.

But at the same time that some conference organizers say this is all about informing, educating, getting the story out there, others say this is about establishing a pathway to a convention banning nuclear weapons and outlawing them under international humanitarian law. With that goal, we cannot agree, so we need to understand on the up-and-up what the conferences are about.¹⁷⁵

According to U.S. officials interviewed, Gottemoeller was the key to U.S. participation in the Vienna Conference. Interagency discussions about participation were again extremely limited. The decision to participate was made at the interagency level, but there was never a specific meeting or formal process to make the decision. According to an NSC official at the time, “It was very much a State thing.”¹⁷⁶

Arguments in favor of attending included proximity to the 2015 RevCon, demonstrating an openness to discussion, and seizing a potential “opportunity to inject more realism into the process.”¹⁷⁷ Arguments against participating were that doing so could give the initiative and subsequent steps legitimacy.¹⁷⁸ An example from subsequent interactions between U.S. officials and TPNW supporters can help to demonstrate the mood. In the lead-up to the 2015 NPT RevCon, a senior NSC official met with a leader of the TPNW movement both to layout the Obama administration’s position on disarmament and to explore what more the United States could be doing. According to the former NSC official, the TPNW leader’s response was, “I’m not interested in the U.S. doing more.”¹⁷⁸ While this was not expressed on behalf of the HINW initiative or the TPNW, the sentiment clearly carried over to those processes and negotiations. It was clear that the core group of states behind the HINW conferences had a mission that did not include compromise or seriously engaging the United States or any other nuclear possessor, despite growing calls from a number of states participating in the conferences, such as Germany, the Netherlands, and Australia. By this point, the core group of NNWS driving the conferences was committed to a ban treaty, and the involvement of the United States or any other NWS could be a distraction or hindrance to their desired process.

175 Rose Gottemoeller, “Arms Control in the Near Term: An Interview With Undersecretary Of State Rose Gottemoeller,” interviewed by Daniel Horner and Daryl G. Kimball, *Arms Control Today* (November 2014). <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2014-11/interviews/arms-control-near-term-interview-undersecretary-state-rose-gottemoeller>. Accessed November 21, 2025.

176 Lynn Rusten, interview by author (June 11, 2024).

177 Adam Scheinman, interview.

178 Jon Wolfsthal, interview by author (May 31, 2024).

According to numerous experts involved with and researching the conferences, American and British participation came only after Austrian assurances that the humanitarian initiative was “in line” with the goals of the NPT and that all views would be given equal representation in the chair’s summary.¹⁷⁹ According to American policymakers, Austrian officials reassured them before the conference that it was a fact-based exercise.¹⁸⁰ As Gottemoeller explained, the ultimate objective of the conferences remained a source of confusion and potential distrust, and the outcome of the Vienna Conference and turn towards a UN working group and, ultimately, a treaty only confirmed those concerns for many U.S. officials.

Setting the Stage for the TPNW

The objectives of the HINW conferences were not static. In hindsight, it is shocking that all these events occurred in less than 22 months between the first conference in Oslo and the last in Vienna. But during that short time, the key sets of actors shifted their positions. As one interviewee described it, “they were figuring themselves out.”¹⁸¹ The core group of states and civil society actors believed they had succeeded in shifting the narrative about nuclear weapons and laid the groundwork for moving towards a legal ban. This interpretation about achieving the “ideational reframing” was crucial for implementing the delegitimization ToC. And the United States and United Kingdom ended up gradually attempting to engage with the initiative and steer it back towards focusing on disarmament efforts in the NPT. But by the final conference in Vienna, it was clear the more exclusive approach had taken precedent, and the movement would move towards a legal ban.

The Myth of a “Boycott”

The U.S. perspective on the HINW conferences can best be described as ambivalence. Aside from Gottemoeller, the conferences received no senior-level attention and were never the topic of senior meetings. When asked if the NWS positions could be described as a boycott, U.S. officials consistently rejected this term both because “nobody cared enough” and because “it wasn’t a coordinated effort” among the NWS not to participate. Scheinman acknowledges all NWS shared a risk

179 Alexander Kmentt, “The Treaty Prohibiting Nuclear Weapons,” pp. 45-46.

180 Rebecca Davis Gibbons, “Humanitarian Turn in Nuclear Disarmament;” William C. Potter, “Disarmament Diplomacy and the Nuclear Ban Treaty,” *Survival* 59, no. 4 (July 16, 2017), pp. 75–108, doi: 10.1080/00396338.2017.1349786 (accessed November 21, 2025).

181 Susan F. Burk, interview.

perception about the HINW conferences and, eventually, the TPNW, but “it was just a common view.”¹⁸² It was not something done out of protest or pre-coordinated. Prior to and during the conferences, the P5 process was making progress and wanted to focus on efforts linked to the Action Plan, such as working on a glossary, common reporting form, and discussions about nuclear doctrines.¹⁸³ The United States was taking a leading role in many of these efforts, such as by offering visits to the former USG nuclear test site. Ambassador Kennedy and other officials rejected the notion that the NWS were not making progress towards their 2010 Action Plan goals: “We were doing worthwhile work in the P5, bilateral work for NST follow-on. The U.S. was serious about wanting to go forward with Obama’s policy.”¹⁸⁴

Instead of a coordinated boycott, HINW conference organizers and supporters intentionally limited efforts to engage NWS. The agenda for the Nayarit conference was released without discussion with Washington about the U.S. offer to provide an expert on incident response. The Austrian organizers repeatedly told their U.S. counterparts that the conference was not moving towards a ban treaty, when the Humanitarian Pledge at the Conference’s conclusion indicated that was exactly its direction of travel. A favorable interpretation of these events is that they were simple misunderstandings within nuclear diplomacy. An alternative interpretation is that organizers were duplicitous in their representation of the conferences and their intentions and always intended to work towards a ban treaty but wanted to give an impression of attempting to engage NWS. Regardless, this perspective by U.S. policymakers contributed to a deepening distrust on the part of the NWS.

Filling the “Legal Gap”

One of the key arguments for a turn from facts-based HINW discussions to a ban treaty was that there was a “legal gap” in multilateral nuclear treaties.¹⁸⁵ While the NPT prohibited proliferation and called for disarmament, it had allowed five countries to temporarily maintain their nuclear weapons. It was not a ban equivalent to the Chemical Weapons Convention or landmines. International humanitarian law had also failed to definitively ban nuclear weapons. A 1996

182 Adam Scheinman, interview.

183 Laura Kennedy, interview.

184 Laura Kennedy, interview.

185 Beatrice Fihn, “The Logic of Banning Nuclear Weapons;” Alicia Sanders-Zakre and Beatrice Fihn, “Implementation of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons: Hopes and Expectations for the Future,” *Journal for Peace and Nuclear Disarmament* 4, no. 1 (2021), pp. 94–99, doi:10.1080/25751654.2021.1932232 (accessed November 21, 2025).

International Court of Justice (ICJ) Advisory Opinion unanimously condemned the use of nuclear weapons as “contrary to the rules applicable to armed conflict,”¹⁸⁶ and pointed to nuclear possessors’ “obligation to pursue in good faith and to conclude negotiations leading to nuclear disarmament in all its aspects under strict and effective international control.”¹⁸⁷ The Court was divided, however, on the legality of threatening to use nuclear weapons, particularly when the existence of the state was under threat.¹⁸⁸

This chapter also demonstrates that the move towards a ban treaty was not a foregone conclusion and did not have the overwhelming support of states participating in the HINW conferences. Not a single nuclear possessor or state that relies on extended nuclear deterrence for its security spoke in favor of a ban treaty. By the time of Nayarit, many states were using their national statements to voice opposition to a ban in favor of the step-by-step approach and advocating for the participation of NWS. Eide summarized this opposition, whereby, “some believe in new legal instruments, like a convention, to ban nuclear weapons. This was not the subject of the Oslo Conference, but I do believe that the meeting introduced new knowledge, prompted some fresh thinking, and injected a renewed sense of urgency into the international nuclear weapons discourse.”¹⁸⁹ Kmentt, a champion of the TPNW, also acknowledged the very intent of the conferences was a facts-based discussion, albeit because it would be “more difficult to criticize” and potentially isolate the NWS.¹⁹⁰

By the conclusion of the HINW conferences, however, it was clear that the intention of a facts-based discussion about the effects of nuclear weapons use

186 Alyn Ware, “The 1996 ICJ Opinion and the Legality of Nuclear Weapons,” *Arms Control Today* (June/July 1998). <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/1998-06/arms-control-today/1996-icj-opinion-and-legality-nuclear-weapons>. Accessed November 21, 2025.

187 Italics added. International Court of Justice, “Legality of the Threat or Use of Nuclear Weapons” (July 8, 1996). <https://www.icj-cij.org/sites/default/files/case-related/95/7497.pdf>. Accessed November 21, 2025.

188 The original Advisory Opinion language reads: “whether the threat or use of nuclear weapons would be lawful or unlawful in an extreme circumstance of self-defense, in which the very survival of a State would be at stake.” International Court of Justice, “Legality of the Threat or Use of Nuclear Weapons,” p. 103.

189 John Borrie and Tim Caughley, eds., *Viewing Nuclear Weapons through a Humanitarian Lens*, United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research (UNIDIR), UNIDIR 2013/4 (2013), p. x. <https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/171626/viewing-nuclear-weapons-through-a-humanitarian-lens-en-601.pdf> Accessed November 21, 2025.

190 Alexander Kmentt, “The Treaty Prohibiting Nuclear Weapons,” p. 41.

had been sidetracked by the move towards a legal ban. This was indeed a missed opportunity for a more consensus-based long-term approach to increase public awareness and education of nuclear issues. As I wrote shortly after the Vienna conference, the HINW initiative could have offered a “big tent” approach by bringing together nuclear possessors and non-possessors alike in an education and awareness-raising effort to talk about the humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons.¹⁹¹ That would have required the type of dialogue and engagement envisioned by Gottemoeller, Eide, and in the 2010 Action Plan. But it was not the vision of the actors that drove the HINW discussion to a TPNW.

Role of Civil Society

One explanation for both why NWS were intentionally excluded and why the HINW conferences turned towards a legal mechanism is the influential role of civil society. In his description of the Vienna conference, which he chaired, Kmentt explains that it was ICAN that pushed for the conference to lead a ban treaty.¹⁹² The period of the HINW conferences saw ICAN develop and establish certain practices that aligned with its ToC and would become mainstays for the group. First of these was targeting U.S. allies that relied on America’s nuclear deterrent for their security, by referring to them as “weasel states.” The website Wildfire focused its attention on these U.S. allies, mocking their security concerns and even including a mechanical “weasel” exhibition at the 2016 UN Open-Ended Working Group.¹⁹³ Kmentt credited Wildfire, ICAN, and other civil society actors as being effective in convincing states that existing disarmament approaches wouldn’t work and laying the ground for progress towards a ban treaty.¹⁹⁴

In some ways, the 2010 Action Plan never stood a chance. For its part, ICAN described its objectives for the HINW conferences as “to side with the people who have experienced the all too real humanitarian effects of nuclear weapons, and show, to the media and to governments, that we are a coordinated, focused, and energized movement, and that we will not stop until we have a global ban treaty in

191 The counterargument to the “big tent” approach would be that states and civil society had tried this approach through the NPT and it failed to achieve the desired ends. My framing, however, is focused specifically on raising awareness around humanitarian consequences without tying those efforts to a specific political outcome or change.

192 Alexander Kmentt, “The Treaty Prohibiting Nuclear Weapons,” p. 42.

193 “Wildfire>_ News,” Wildfire. <https://www.wildfire-v.org/news.html>. Accessed November 21, 2025.

194 Alexander Kmentt, “The Treaty Prohibiting Nuclear Weapons,” p. 149.

place.”¹⁹⁵ International institutions, particularly the NPT, tend to prioritize consensus over speed. The spirit of the “nuclear spring” put unrealistic pressure on a process, namely implementing the 2010 Action Plan, that could never meet the ambitious expectations of some states and civil society groups.

As the NGO partner for the HINW conferences, ICAN received an influx of government funding. From 2010 to 2015, ICAN received its funding principally from the Norwegian government, with smaller contributions from Austria and Switzerland.¹⁹⁶ After the fall 2013 general election in Norway, this funding from the central government ended when the center-left coalition of Labour, the Socialist Left, and the Centre Party was replaced by a right-wing coalition composed of the Conservative Party and Progress Party. The Conservative party, led by Erna Solberg, took a more critical stance on the TPNW that was closer to other NATO members and advocated for cutting funding to a range of organizations, including ICAN.¹⁹⁷ Following the end of funding from the Norwegian central government, the Republic of Geneva, the Holy See, Ireland, New Zealand, Austria, Sweden, and Ploughshares Fund provided grants and donations to ICAN, as noted in its annual reports.¹⁹⁸ Ahead of the 2014 Vienna Conference, ICAN also received modest contributions from Germany and the Netherlands.¹⁹⁹ ICAN converted this money into vocal and visible civil society engagement at all three conferences, along with an influential voice in steering the conferences towards a more radical outcome.

195 “Report: ICAN Civil Society Forum 2013,” Goodbye Nukes, <https://goodbyenukes.wordpress.com/> (accessed November 21, 2025); Patricia Lewis and Heather Williams, “The Meaning of the Oslo Conference on Humanitarian Impacts of Nuclear Weapons” in *Viewing Nuclear Weapons Through a Humanitarian Lens*, John Borrie and Tim Caughley, eds., UNIDIR (2013), [viewing-nuclear-weapons-through-a-humanitarian-lens-en-601.pdf](#) (accessed November 21, 2025).

196 Tilman Ruff, “Negotiating the UN Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons and the Role of ICAN,” *Global Change, Peace & Security* 30, no. 2 (May 4, 2018), pp. 33–41. doi:10.1080/14781158.2018.1465908. Accessed November 21, 2025.

197 Kjølvi Egeland, “Oslo’s ‘New Track’: Norwegian Nuclear Disarmament Diplomacy, 2005–2013,” *Journal for Peace and Nuclear Disarmament* 2, no. 2 (July 3, 2019). <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/25751654.2019.1671145>. Accessed November 21, 2025.

198 ICAN has listed the Holy See, Ireland, New Zealand, Austria, and Sweden as providing grants and donations in its annual reports from 2019–2022, but data from individual countries on how much they provided is not publicly available.

199 William C. Potter, “Disarmament Diplomacy and the Nuclear Ban Treaty.”

Conclusion

Were the HINW conferences a “missed opening,” as suggested by Sagan and Valentina? At the outset, the HINW conferences had widespread appeal because of their facts-based approach and as an opportunity to advance education and awareness of nuclear impacts, as called for in the 2010 Action Plan. The conferences were intended as facts-based discussions; however, for some states and civil society groups, they were political theater to lay the groundwork for a legal mechanism banning nuclear weapons. There were numerous opportunities for the conference organizers to take a different trajectory that would have included nuclear possessors. Alternative pathways might have emerged if the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs had provided a clearer vision of the conference beforehand and assured NWS of their intentions. Had NWS engaged earlier, they might have provided a convincing counternarrative to ICAN’s. Another turning point could have been if states had rejected civil society’s calls for radical action in the lead-up to Nayarit and instead decided to continue the HINW conferences as facts-based discussions. Another turning point at Nayarit was the rejection of the U.S. agenda proposal, without engaging Washington, that could have led to U.S. participation.

From the U.S. perspective, the HINW conferences did not receive significant senior-level political attention, largely because policymakers in the Departments of State and Defense and in the National Security Council were focused on implementing the 2010 NPT Action Plan. External pressures on the U.S. decision of whether or not to participate included encouragement by allies and skepticism by some P5 members. Internal considerations included distrust of the process. Some initial U.S. exploratory discussions about participating in Oslo and Nayarit resulted in confusion and refusal by the organizers. It is hard to conclude, therefore, that the position of NWS was a “boycott;” rather, it was mutual distrust. For the conference organizers, particularly ICAN, involvement of NWS was not necessary for their ToC. If anything, it could complicate their ambitions. And for NWS, the conferences were a distraction from the step-by-step approach.

Chapter Four

The Price of Momentum: The Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons Negotiation and its Aftermath

If the Humanitarian Impacts of Nuclear Weapons (HINW) conferences were the first step in implementing the delegitimization theory of change (ToC), then the next link in the chain was to fill the perceived “legal gap” in nuclear disarmament. The history of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) negotiations, particularly the perspective of nuclear possessors about the process, demonstrates that Treaty supporters prioritized momentum over membership, and took a more adversarial approach that seemingly works at cross purposes with the ToC of eventually bringing on board nuclear possessors. This could undermine the ToCs progress over time. If anything, events between the closing of the final HINW conference on December 9, 2014, and the final negotiation session of the TPNW on July 7, 2017, would prove decisive in contributing to further distrust on both sides of the debate.

This chapter proceeds in three sections. First, it provides a timeline of the lead-up, negotiation, and eventual entry into force of the TPNW, with an historical overview of the TPNW negotiations and the UN process leading up to them. Second, it examines U.S. perspectives with regards to the treaty, particularly attempts by ICAN to pressure U.S. allies into the negotiations. Finally, the chapter again returns to the themes of the role of civil society and the legal questions flowing from the treaty, and examines how these played out after the Treaty’s entry into force in 2021, including in the First Meeting of States Parties and at the NPT Review Conference (RevCon). It finds that TPNW supporters refused to engage with nuclear possessors to compromise on the process out of concern that they would play a spoiler role and distract from the momentum coming out of the HINW conferences. Ultimately, the small core group of states and ICAN prioritized maintaining momentum and proceeding immediately to negotiation of a TPNW over addressing some states’ concerns about verification and involvement by nuclear weapon states (NWS). This chapter, in particular, highlights the important role of more ambitious civil society groups in shaping the process and outcome, driven by their ToC. As the next chapter argues, the future of the TPNW will hinge on the role of these groups and whether there is room for compromise in the delegitimization ToC.

Date	Description
April 27 - May 5, 2015	The 2015 NPT RevCon was held in Australia.
August 16 - 19, 2016	The TPNW open-ended working group adopted its final document.
March 27 - 31, 2017	The first session of negotiations for the TPNW took place in New York City.
July 7, 2017	On the final day of the second session of negotiations for the TPNW, the treaty was adopted.
September 20, 2017	The TPNW opened for signature after receiving 50 ratifications.
July 2-3, 2019	First plenary of CEND took place in Washington DC.
November 20 - 2022, 2019	The second plenary of CEND took place at Wilton Park in the UK.
January 22, 2021	The TPNW officially entered into force.
June 21-23, 2022	The First TPNW Meeting of State Parties took place in Vienna, Austria.
November 21-December 1, 2023	The Second TPNW Meeting of State Parties took place in New York.
March 3-7, 2025	The Third TPNW Meeting of State Parties took place in New York.

Polarization in Nuclear Diplomacy: 2015 NPT RevCon - 2017 TPNW Negotiations

At the end of the Vienna Conference, some of the conference participants felt a sense of momentum for moving towards a legal ban; but distrust was prevalent for everyone. On the part of ban supporters, the U.S. statement at Vienna and continued opposition from some nuclear possessors were the latest evidence of a lack of seriousness about disarmament and NPT Article VI obligations. For many nuclear possessor states, they felt lied to by the HINW movement and its supporters, who insisted that it had been a “facts-based initiative.”²⁰⁰ This distrust and polarization would only be exacerbated in the subsequent 2015 RevCon, 2016 Open-Ended Working Group (OEWG), and 2017 TPNW negotiations.

200 See previous chapter about Austrian assurances to USG. Michael Linhart, “Pledge Presented at the Vienna Conference on the Humanitarian Impact of Nuclear Weapons by Austrian Deputy Foreign Minister Michael Linhart.”

2015 NPT RevCon

Progress within the NPT was always subjective, but the diversity of views going into the 2015 RevCon may have been unprecedented for the time. From the perspective of NWS, as will be discussed below in greater detail, there was the impression that real progress was being made in implementing the 64-point 2010 Action Plan. Within the P5, for example, the NWS completed an agreed common reporting framework, a first edition of the Glossary of Key Nuclear Terms, increased engagement with the wider disarmament community, and outlined a vision for entry into force of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) and negotiation of a Fissile Material Cutoff Treaty (FMCT).²⁰¹ Conversely, among some states and many non-governmental organizations (NGOs), this progress was much too slow. For example, at RevCon South Africa indicated it was “seriously concerned about the lack of urgency and seriousness with which these solemn undertakings, particularly in respect of nuclear disarmament, continue to be approached.”²⁰²

Prior to RevCon, the New Agenda Coalition, which included Austria, New Zealand, and South Africa, delivered a working paper at the 2014 NPT Preparatory Committee (PrepCom) outlining four options for a future legal instrument, but its primary purpose, according to one of the authors, was to make the case that the NPT was incomplete and not a viable pathway for disarmament.²⁰³ During RevCon, NWS—led by the United States—pushed back on the notion that there was a “legal gap” in the NPT or that disarmament should have any timeline, leading Kmentt to question the “integrity” of the NPT process because “it appears that the preparations for the Review Conference, the input and the working papers, as well as the proceedings and statements during the early phase of the Conference have only limited relevance for the actual result of the Conference.”²⁰⁴

There remains debate about why the 2015 RevCon failed to agree on a consensus Final Document. The ostensible reason was disagreement about language supporting a WMD Free Zone in the Middle East. The draft final document

201 *Statement by the People's Republic of China, France, the Russian Federation, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and the United States of America to the 2015 Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons Review Conference*, United Nations (2015). https://www.un.org/en/conf/npt/2015/statements/pdf/P5_en.pdf. Accessed November 21, 2025.

202 South Africa, “South Africa’s National Statement for the General Debate at the 2015 NPT Review Conference,” United Nations (2015). https://www.un.org/en/conf/npt/2015/statements/pdf/ZA_en.pdf. Accessed November 21, 2025.

203 Alexander Kmentt, “The Treaty Prohibiting Nuclear Weapons,” p 54.

204 *Ibid.*, p. 67.

called for a United Nations Conference on a Zone by March 1, 2016;²⁰⁵ however, after rounds of discussions, the United States, United Kingdom, and Canada rejected the document on the grounds that it was an “arbitrary deadline” and Ottawa insisted that any negotiations include Israel.²⁰⁶ But even if there had been consensus on a Middle East Zone, consensus would have been challenging, if not impossible because of disagreement about the disarmament language.²⁰⁷ Non-governmental organizations described the draft text as “sells out nuclear disarmament and serves those who seek to preserve and embolden false perception and legitimacy of nuclear weapons asserted by nuclear-armed and their nuclear allied states.”²⁰⁸ Others described it as “watered down”²⁰⁹ and lacking in deadlines for delivering on past commitments.²¹⁰ Humanitarian impacts were mentioned over a dozen times throughout the document, more than in the 2010 document and other past RevCons, and 159 states supported a joint statement on humanitarian consequences, compared to 16 states in 2012. In a statement delivered on behalf of 49 countries, Kmentt observed, “a reality gap, a credibility gap, a confidence gap, and a moral gap” within the NPT.²¹¹ The NPT RevCon ended without a consensus document and frustration on both sides that progress was not being recognized by the other, whether that be progress towards the 2010 Action Plan or progress towards a humanitarian-driven approach to disarmament.

205 2015 Review Conference of the Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons Draft Final Document, United Nations NPT/Conf.2015/R.3 (2015). <https://www.reachingcriticalwill.org/images/documents/Disarmament-fora/npt/revcon2015/documents/DraftFinalDocument.pdf>. Accessed November 21, 2025.

206 Wilfred Wan, “Why the 2015 NPT Review Conference Fell Apart,” UNU-CPR (May 28, 2015). <https://unu.edu/cpr/blog-post/why-2015-npt-review-conference-fell-apart>. Accessed November 21, 2025.

207 See, for example, Harald Müller and Carmen Wunderlich, “Nuclear Disarmament without the Nuclear-Weapon States,” *Daedalus* 149, no. 2 (Spring 2020), pp. 171-189, https://doi.org/10.1162/daed_a_01796 (accessed November 21, 2025); William C. Potter and Benjamin Pack, “Advancing Nuclear Disarmament: The US Role.”

208 Alexander Kmentt, “The Treaty Prohibiting Nuclear Weapons,” p. 68.

209 Harald Müller and Carmen Wunderlich, “Nuclear Disarmament without the Nuclear-Weapon States.”

210 Daryl G. Kimball and Kingston Reif, “NPT Conference Fails to Reach Consensus,” *Arms Control Today* (June 2015). <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2015-06/news/npt-conference-fails-reach-consensus>. Accessed November 21, 2025.

211 Ibid.

2016 Open-Ended Working Group

Despite the failure to agree on a consensus Final Document, the 2015 NPT RevCon laid important groundwork for the pathway to a TPNW negotiation. Mueller and Wunderlich claim that the weak compromise language on disarmament in the draft document was further motivation for supporters of a legal ban on nuclear weapons, observing, “Frustration was certainly a powerful motivation.”²¹² One item from the draft Final Document that endured was plans for an OEWG: “The Conference recommends that the General Assembly establish at its seventieth session an open-ended working group to identify and elaborate effective measures for the full implementation of article VI, including legal provisions or other arrangements that contribute to and are required for the achievement and maintenance of a world without nuclear weapons.”²¹³ Supporters of a ban treaty moved ahead with an OEWG, even though it wasn’t as part of an NPT consensus document nor did it reflect the compromise language.

Six months after the conclusion of the NPT RevCon, the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution on October 29, 2015, in a vote of 138 in favor to 12 against, with 34 abstentions, establishing an OEWG to “substantively address concrete effective legal measures, legal provisions and norms that will need to be concluded to attain and maintain a world without nuclear weapons.”²¹⁴ The Resolution also clarified that the OEWG would use United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) rules of procedure, with decisions taken by a majority vote rather than consensus, although the Resolution did encourage all states to “make their best endeavors to reach general agreement.”²¹⁵ This was not the first OEWG established for the purposes of making tangible progress towards nuclear disarmament.

212 Harald Müller and Carmen Wunderlich, “Nuclear Disarmament without the Nuclear-Weapon States,” p. 177.

213 “Working Paper of the President of the Final Document,” United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research, NPT/Conf.2015/WP.58 (Spring 2015). <https://app.unidir.org/sites/default/files/2021-05/2015%20NPT%20President%27s%20working%20draft.pdf>. Accessed November 21, 2025.

214 United Nations General Assembly, “Taking forward multilateral disarmament negotiations,” A/C.1/70/L.13/Rev.1, Reaching Critical Will (October 29, 2015). <https://reachingcriticalwill.org/images/documents/Disarmament-fora/1com/1com15/resolutions/L13Rev1.pdf>. Accessed November 21, 2025.

215 United Nations General Assembly, “Report of the Open-ended Working Group to develop proposals to take forward multilateral nuclear disarmament negotiations for the achievement and maintenance of a world without nuclear weapons,” Reaching Critical Will (September 3, 2013). <https://www.reachingcriticalwill.org/images/documents/Disarmament-fora/OEWG/Documents/finalreport.pdf>. Accessed November 21, 2025.

In December 2012, UNGA Resolution 67/56 called on states to “establish an open-ended working group to develop proposals to take forward multilateral nuclear disarmament negotiations for the achievement and maintenance of a world without nuclear weapons.”²¹⁶ At the time, NWS opposed the OEWG because it was outside of established fora, such as the CD. While the OEWG mandate and report were not specifically about a ban treaty, it did acknowledge “catastrophic humanitarian consequences of any use of nuclear weapons” and mentions, “The Group discussed options to fill the legal gaps in achieving the objective of a world without nuclear weapons, including in the current international legal framework, through a multilateral legal instrument, or several instruments, complementary to existing ones.”²¹⁷ The OEWG report also acknowledged security drivers for nuclear possession, and called for taking into account “the security perceptions of States possessing nuclear weapons and to build dialogue, trust, and confidence among these States. Proposals were made regarding reducing the salience of nuclear weapons in existing security doctrine. The need for engagement between non-nuclear weapons states and those possessing nuclear weapons was also raised.” While the former mandate gained traction among NNWS and civil society, the latter did not. The most distinctive difference between the 2012 and 2016 OEWGs was the shift in attitude towards the “security concerns” of nuclear possessors and their allies, which was noticeably absent from the 2016 version.

Over the course of three meetings in February, May, and August 2016, OEWG participants considered details about how to negotiate a legal ban on nuclear weapons and what such a ban might entail. Drawing on a Brazilian working paper, one key point was about sequencing, whereby states would focus on “prohibition now, elimination and verification later,” according to Kmentt.²¹⁸ Another point of discussion, which Kmentt described as the most contentious issue, was who to include and whether or not the treaty vote should be done by consensus, despite being in the UNGA. The result was a First Committee resolution adopted in October

216 United Nations General Assembly, “Taking forward multilateral disarmament negotiations.”

217 United Nations General Assembly, “Report of the Open-ended Working Group to develop proposals to take forward multilateral nuclear disarmament negotiations for the achievement and maintenance of a world without nuclear weapons.”

218 Alexander Kmentt, “The Treaty Prohibiting Nuclear Weapons,” p. 93.

2016 to begin negotiations for a “legally binding instrument to prohibit nuclear weapons” by a vote of 123-38 with 16 abstentions.²¹⁹

For supporters of a legal ban, the motivation behind an OEWG was to adopt UNGA rules of procedure and avoid a consensus-based forum in order to build on momentum around humanitarian resolutions.²²⁰ Because of its consensus-based format, the CD was likely to slow and potentially kill momentum generated by the HINW conferences and the Humanitarian Pledge. The UNGA forum and voting rules would allow for faster progress and negotiation. The OEWG, “fueled by ICAN,” essentially allowed ban supporters to exclude the NWS and, according to Müller and Wunderlich, “Throughout this process, the NWS were reduced to protesting powerlessly outside the negotiation room, while the have-nots were suddenly in control.”²²¹ This approach may have been in alignment with the TPNW supporters’ ToC, but it was not without its opponents. Australia was one country that led opposition from within the OEWG to the draft document because it seemingly portrayed the OEWG as having reached consensus, but numerous U.S. allies opposed moving to a ban and instead sought a “building blocks approach”²²² and greater involvement by nuclear possessors in order to make the treaty more effective.²²³

2017 TPNW Negotiations

Negotiations for a TPNW commenced in a first session from March 27-31, 2017, presided over by Costa Rican Ambassador Elaine Whyte-Gomez. The second session of the TPNW conference took place in New York from June 15 - July 7, 2017. The treaty was adopted on July 7, 2017, by a vote of 122-1-1, with the Netherlands voting against the treaty and Singapore abstaining.

219 United Nations General Assembly, “General and complete disarmament: taking forward multilateral nuclear disarmament negotiations,” A/C.1/71/L.41, *Reaching Critical Will* (October 14, 2016). <https://reachingcriticalwill.org/images/documents/Disarmament-fora/1com/1com16/resolutions/L41.pdf>.

220 Alexander Kmentt, “The Treaty Prohibiting Nuclear Weapons,” pp. 73-74.

221 Harald Müller and Carmen Wunderlich, “Nuclear Disarmament without the Nuclear-Weapon States,” p. 177.

222 Rebecca Davis Gibbons, “How Great Powers Resist Emerging Norms: The United States and the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons,” *Peace Review* 36, no. 2 (2024), pp. 335–44, 339. doi:10.1080/10402659.2024.2328539. Accessed November 21, 2025.

223 Alexander Kmentt, “The Treaty Prohibiting Nuclear Weapons,” p. 96.

Two interrelated issues emerged in the course of negotiations, which would continue to haunt the TPNW. First was the question of how to verify elimination. As Müller and Wunderlich observed, when the ban supporters decided to move towards a legally-binding mechanism without participation by nuclear possessors, it meant they wouldn't be able to take advantage of NWS technical expertise in verification. This was particularly important so as to ensure that verification activities did not inadvertently violate the NPT and lead to the sharing of proliferation-sensitive information. Language on verification changed between the first and second negotiation sessions and ultimately concluded with vague and incomplete verification language, arguably because hashing out the verification details would have slowed the process and was not necessary for the "normative reframing" that was the driver for many of the ban supporters.²²⁴ The Treaty adopted a "South Africa-plus" model for verification, whereby if nuclear possessors joined the treaty, they would have to declare their nuclear stockpiles and then cooperate with IAEA inspections during and after elimination.²²⁵ It is worth noting that South Africa was believed to have 10 or less nuclear weapons at the time of abandoning its nuclear program in the early 1990s. The Treaty called for future meetings of member states to address, "Measures for the verified, time-bound and irreversible elimination of nuclear-weapon programmes, including additional protocols to this Treaty."²²⁶ Essentially, supporters of a ban treaty prioritized getting a treaty over the details of that treaty.

224 See Nick Ritchie, "The Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons: Delegitimizing Unacceptable Weapons," in *Breakthrough or Breakpoint? Global Perspectives on the Nuclear Ban Treaty*, Shatabhisha Shetty and Denitsa Raynova, eds., European Leadership Network (2017), <https://www.europeanleadershipnetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/ELN-Global-Perspectives-on-the-Nuclear-Ban-Treaty-December-2017.pdf> (accessed November 21, 2025); Nick Ritchie, "A Hegemonic Nuclear Order: Understanding the Ban Treaty and the Power Politics of Nuclear Weapons," *Contemporary Security Policy* 40, no. 4 (2019), pp. 409–34, doi:10.1080/13523260.2019.1571852 (accessed November 21, 2025).

225 "Non-paper by the President: Indicative list of objectives of the verification of the completeness of its inventory of nuclear material and nuclear installations in States Parties that have manufactured, possessed or otherwise acquired nuclear weapons or other nuclear explosive devices after 5 December 2001," United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs (May 2017). <https://s3.amazonaws.com/unoda-web/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/Non-paper-verification-objectives-for-former-nuclear-weapon-programmes.pdf>. Accessed November 21, 2025.

226 *Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons*, United Nations (2017). <https://d3n8a8pro7vhmx.cloudfront.net/tectodevms/pages/2417/attachments/original/1571248124/TPNW-English1.pdf?1571248124>. Accessed November 21, 2025.

One particular criticism of the TPNW's verification language was that it did not require members to adopt the Additional Protocol (AP).²²⁷ The AP, known by its document number INFRC 1540, is a voluntary agreement that "significantly increases" the IAEA's ability to verify nuclear material is being used for peaceful uses as opposed to being diverted for military programs.²²⁸ While the TPNW repeatedly points to the IAEA as the verification authority for the treaty if/when nuclear possessors join, it does not explicitly require members to sign the AP, but instead says, "The competent international authority shall report to the States Parties. Such a State Party shall conclude a safeguards agreement with the International Atomic Energy Agency sufficient to provide credible assurance of the non-diversion of declared nuclear material from peaceful nuclear activities and of the absence of undeclared nuclear material or activities in that State Party as a whole." According to Kmentt, the IAEA opted not to participate in TPNW negotiations because then-Secretary General Amano was "intimidated" by opposition from nuclear possessors, and numerous states involved in the negotiations objected because they had not yet adopted the AP themselves, including Brazil, Egypt, Iran, and Venezuela.

The second main issue for the negotiations was future participation by nuclear possessors. According to Kmentt, exclusion of nuclear possessors was intentional and NNWS wanted to pursue the treaty without them: "They (NNWS) felt compelled and able to pursue this (an unequivocal legal norm) themselves, without the support or participation of nuclear weapon States, and in the face of their very strong opposition."²²⁹ The lack of attempts to include nuclear possessors was a theme throughout the HINW conferences, and carried over into TPNW negotiations. In a statement in conjunction with the negotiations, High Representative for Disarmament Affairs Izumi Nakamitsu emphasized the importance of including nuclear possessors, whereby, "The door must be open to all States. This inclusiveness will have to be built into the treaty. I hope concerns expressed by non-

227 See, for example, John Carlson, *The Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons: Considerations for States*, Nuclear Threat Initiative (October 2021). https://live-nuclear-threat-initiative.pantheonsite.io/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/NTI_TPNW-Paper_r2.pdf. Accessed November 21, 2025.

228 International Atomic Energy Agency, "Additional Protocol." <https://www.iaea.org/topics/additional-protocol>. Accessed November 21, 2025.

229 Alexander Kmentt, "The Treaty Prohibiting Nuclear Weapons," p. 2.

participants will be taken into account by those negotiating the treaty.”²³⁰ This hope was not fully realized.

While some concerns such as a legal ban’s compatibility with the NPT were mentioned in the Treaty text, others were not. First and foremost was the influence of the security environment on opportunities for disarmament. The 2015 RevCon P5 statement, for example, refers to the importance of security over 30 times in an eight-page paper, particularly in the context of making progress towards disarmament, with phrases such as “in a way that promotes international stability, peace, and security.”²³¹ As a result, as later articulated by Japan’s ambassador, working on a treaty that failed to account for security concerns and “without the involvement of nuclear weapon states [would] only deepen the schism and division” in the international community.²³²

U.S. Ambitions, NATO Unity, and Disarmament Creativity

In the years leading up to the TPNW negotiations, the Obama administration was also striving to maintain momentum for disarmament and arms control. This was the era of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) with Iran, efforts to negotiate a New START follow-on with Moscow, and, although it seemed unlikely, there remained an interest in working towards CTBT ratification.²³³ The Trump administration took a different approach to multilateral nuclear diplomacy. Negotiation of the TPNW came less than two months after the Trump administration took office. But according to senior U.S. officials in both administrations, participation in the OEWG and TPNW negotiations were never seriously discussed. Instead, the U.S. focus was on maintaining a united NATO approach to the TPNW, despite intense domestic pressure for some European allies, and making progress on disarmament in traditional formats, such as bilateral arms control, or new ones.

230 Izumi Nakamitsu, “INTERVIEW: ‘Disarmament matters’ in times of crisis, stresses new High Representative,” UN News (July 5, 2017). <https://news.un.org/en/story/2017/07/561002-interview-Isquodisarmament-mattersrsquo-times-crisis-stresses-new-high>. Accessed November 21, 2025.

231 *Statement by the People’s Republic of China, France, the Russian Federation, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and the United States of America to the 2015 Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons Review Conference*, United Nations (2015). https://www.un.org/en/conf/npt/2015/statements/pdf/P5_en.pdf. Accessed November 21, 2025.

232 “World nuclear ban ‘not realistic,’ says US ambassador to UN,” *BBC News* (April 7, 2017). <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-39410173>. Accessed November 21, 2025.

233 Kingston Reif, “Time Expires on Obama Nuclear Agenda,” *Arms Control Today* (January 11, 2017). <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2017-01/news/time-expires-obama-nuclear-agenda>. Accessed November 21, 2025.

OEWG and TPNW

While the United States was an active participant in drafting language about the OEWG for the 2015 RevCon Final Document, the result was far from what American diplomats had hoped for. According to Ambassador Scheinman, a new OEWG was “an opportunity for greater dialogue on how to get to disarmament” and he had tried to steer the OEWG process in a more inclusive direction, based on consensus, during the RevCon final document negotiations. The language in the Final Document was not easy to achieve, particularly because other NWS were less enthusiastic, such as Russia, and many NNWS thought it didn’t go far enough, such as Austria.²³⁴ The language was ultimately moot since the Final Document was never agreed to by consensus, but the more measured approach it had envisioned was essentially abandoned from the perspective of many senior U.S. officials. Scheinman said in an interview, “It (the 2016 OEWG) wasn’t the OEWG we had worked hard to establish.... We wanted to shape the direction, inject some realism into the process. Even more so than the Vienna Conference, coming out of 2015 RevCon, it was clear there was an ulterior motive here to denigrate the Final Document, whether agreed or not. If the Middle East Zone hadn’t blocked (consensus), others might have on insufficient disarmament text.”²³⁵

The United States had never seriously considered participating in the 2012 OEWG, and there was limited discussion in 2016, as well, once the OEWG’s mandate became clear and made no mention of operating on consensus. Many U.S. officials had the impression the deck was stacked against them and there was a lack of transparency about the process.²³⁶ Instead, U.S. officials issued statements and began engaging allies with the message that any nuclear ban treaty would be “polarizing” and “unverifiable” and potentially at odds with the NPT.²³⁷ American justification for not participating in the TPNW negotiations was similarly captured in a series of statements by U.S. officials. One particularly notable point of opposition

234 Adam Scheinman, interview.

235 Adam Scheinman, interview.

236 William C. Potter, “Disarmament Diplomacy and the Nuclear Ban Treaty,” *Survival* 59, no. 4 (2017), pp. 75–108. doi:10.1080/00396338.2017.1349786. Accessed November 21, 2025.

237 As U.S. official Anita Friedt stated in 2016, “a group of countries are pursuing a polarizing and unverifiable nuclear weapons ban treaty that could actually end up harming the proven, practical, and inclusive efforts that have achieved tangible results on disarmament.” Rebecca Davis Gibbons, “How Great Powers Resist Emerging Norms: The United States and the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons,” *Peace Review* 36, no. 2 (2024), p. 338. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10402659.2024.2328539>. Accessed November 21, 2025.

came from U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations, Nikki Haley, who said in a statement on March 27, 2017, that a nuclear ban would be ineffective because it would essentially allow “bad actors,” such as North Korea and Iran, to maintain their nuclear arsenals while pressuring “those of us that are good trying to keep peace and safety, not to have them.”²³⁸ Ban supporters’ ToC did, indeed, asymmetrically target democracies because of the bottom-up approach that relied on democratic processes and working with local civil society groups, leaving autocracies such as North Korea, Iran, Russia, and China largely ignored.

NATO and P5 Engagement

According to State Department officials, “success” with regards to the TPNW equated to preventing allies from participating in the negotiation of the treaty and ultimately prevent them from joining the treaty.²³⁹ Washington’s efforts to dissuade allies from participating in TPNW negotiations became the focus of extensive criticism by supporters of a ban treaty. In October 2016, the United States circulated a non-paper to NATO allies stating “we strongly encourage you to vote ‘no’ on any vote at the UN First Committee on starting negotiations for a nuclear ban treaty.”²⁴⁰ Additionally, the United States demarched NATO members urging them not to participate, which a senior U.S. official described as part of the “need for frank discussion” and “This is being straight with your partners in a nuclear alliance.”²⁴¹ Arguments against NATO member participation focused on the treaty’s incompatibility with NATO’s policy of extended nuclear deterrence. There were also practical concerns, however, such as NATO member involvement in nuclear planning and exercising activities, along with practical considerations such as handling nuclear-related classified materials and sharing secure office space if a NATO member did join the TPNW.²⁴² Around the time of the Treaty opening for

238 “World nuclear ban ‘not realistic,’ says US ambassador to UN.”

239 Tom Countryman, interview by author (June 10, 2024). This was confirmed by an NSC official who defined success as keeping NATO members and allies from participating in the negotiations. Jon Wolfstahl, interview.

240 Christina Chesier, “United States Letter to Allies,” United States Mission to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, Annex 1 AC/333-N(2016)0029 (INV) (October 17, 2016). https://d3n8a8pro7vhmx.cloudfront.net/icar/pages/821/attachments/original/1590165765/NATO_OCT2016.pdf?1590165765. Accessed November 21, 2025.

241 Laura Kennedy, interview.

242 Heather Williams, “What the Nuclear Ban Treaty Means for America’s Allies,” War on the Rocks (November 5, 2020). <https://warontherocks.com/2020/11/what-the-nuclear-ban-treaty-means-for-americas-allies/>. Accessed November 21, 2025.

signature in September 2017, NATO issued a statement outlining concerns that the Treaty “disregards the realities of the increasingly challenging international security environment.”²⁴³

The position of ban supporters about NATO states’ potential membership remains inconsistent, with some arguing they can join the TPNW without major changes to the alliance, but others insist it would require a change in NATO’s doctrine. According to ICAN, “History shows that previous divergence on controversial weapons did not tear apart the alliance. NATO members are not currently, and have never been, in lockstep about the role of nuclear weapons in the alliance. And over time the role of nuclear weapons in NATO may very well change to adapt to an evolving security environment and shifting norms.”²⁴⁴ Based on this line of argument, NATO and the TPNW in their current forms are incompatible, and NATO would have to adapt if a member joined the TPNW or the member would have to withdraw from NATO. Others, however, suggest the TPNW is not incompatible with NATO as-is, but TPNW members would have to distance themselves from “statements or alliance documents endorsing the potential use of nuclear weapons.”²⁴⁵ This latter view suggests a lack of understanding about just how integrated nuclear deterrence is within NATO operations and identity, particularly in deterrence policy and planning. The former view is the more likely one, and a TPNW state would likely have to withdraw from NATO to remain in compliance with its obligations, especially if all other NATO members refused to change the Alliance’s posture.

If the metric of success for the State Department was preventing allied participation in the TPNW, the U.S. approach was relatively successful, as the Netherlands was the only NATO member and U.S. ally to participate in negotiations, but voted against adoption of the Treaty. Dutch participation was mandated by the Parliament, which was heavily influenced by NGO activism and a petition with

243 North Atlantic Treaty Organization, “North Atlantic Council Statement on the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons” (September 20, 2017). https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_146954.htm. Accessed November 21, 2025.

244 ICAN, “Briefing paper: NATO and the TPNW” (December 2020). https://d3n8a8pro7vhm.cloudfront.net/ican/pages/1832/attachments/original/1608214504/Briefing_paper_NATOTPNW_FINAL_December_2020.pdf. Accessed November 21, 2025.

245 Kjølsv Egeland, “Arms, Influence and the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons,” *Survival* 61, no. 3 (2019), pp. 57–80. doi:10.1080/00396338.2019.1614786. Accessed November 21, 2025.

40,000 signatures.²⁴⁶ The Netherlands voted against the treaty on the grounds that it was “incompatible with NATO obligations.”²⁴⁷ As an observer of the 2022 TPNW Meeting of States Parties (MSP), a Dutch representative stated, “The Netherlands remains firmly committed to NATO, including its policy of nuclear deterrence and our nuclear task. And this NATO Membership remains essential for our collective security.”²⁴⁸ When given the choice between a NATO nuclear deterrent and the TPNW, states decisively chose NATO.

While the NATO and P3 position may have been the result of diplomacy on the part of the Washington and London, there was not a similar level of coordination within the P5 and the shared position was “coincidental.”²⁴⁹ According to U.S. officials, there was little if any coordination among the P5 about their positions on the TPNW; however, there was debate about how strongly to speak out in opposition to it. France and Russia favored vocal opposition and focusing on the Treaty’s potential impact on customary international law. Speaking out in opposition to the TPNW, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said, “Efforts to coerce nuclear powers to abandon nuclear weapons have intensified significantly recently...It is absolutely clear that the time has not yet come for that.”²⁵⁰ According to a U.S. representative to the P5 process at the time, “China didn’t say much,”²⁵¹ although opposition in Paris, Moscow, and Beijing hardened over time as the HINW evolved into the OEWG and then TPNW.²⁵² Conversely, the United States and United Kingdom consistently opposed the Treaty, but were more receptive to engagement

246 Paul Meyer and Tom Sauer, “The Nuclear Ban Treaty: A Sign of Global Impatience,” *Survival* 60, no. 2 (2019), pp. 61-72. doi :<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2018.1448574>. Accessed November 21, 2025.

247 “Explanation of vote of the Netherlands on text of Nuclear Ban Treaty,” Reaching Critical Will (July 7, 2017). https://www.reachingcriticalwill.org/images/documents/Disarmament-fora/nuclear-weapon-ban/statements/7July_Netherlands.pdf. Accessed November 21, 2025.

248 “Statement by the Netherlands at the First Meeting of States Parties of the TPNW,” Reaching Critical Will (June 22, 2022). https://reachingcriticalwill.org/images/documents/Disarmament-fora/nuclear-weapon-ban/1msp/statements/22June_Netherlands.pdf. Accessed November 21, 2025.

249 Jon Wolfsthal, interview.

250 Quoted Lavrov as saying “Russia ready to discuss further reduction of nuclear capacities — Lavrov,” TASS Russian News Agency (March 23, 2017). <https://tass.com/politics/937006>. Accessed November 21, 2025.

251 Christopher Ford, interview by author; confirmed by Obama administration officials as well.

252 Laura Kennedy, interview.

at various points in time, including under the Trump administration.²⁵³ Rather, P5 opposition was not so much a coordinated boycott as a shared interest.

The First Trump Administration and Creating an Environment for Nuclear Disarmament

An ongoing topic of internal debate for the U.S. government was whether or not to engage at all with the movement towards a legal ban. As demonstrated in the previous chapter, there were modest disagreements within the Obama administration on the potential value of participating in the HINW conferences, to the extent that the topic drew any attention. Those trends carried over to the TPNW and the Trump administration, which proved remarkably consistent with its predecessor on the issue. On the one hand, those opposed to engagement argued it was a waste of time and wouldn't convince anyone to switch their position on the treaty or impact its trajectory. On the other hand, some senior officials saw engagement as a worthwhile effort to prevent further polarization in the NPT and to demonstrate the significance of the security environment for disarmament efforts.

What is remarkable is the U.S. interagency's similar reactions to both Rose Gottemoeller during the Obama administration and Chris Ford in the Trump administration. Both Gottemoeller and Ford were open to engagement with TPNW proponents and optimistic that they could at least shape the narrative around the treaty. For Gottemoeller, according to former senior officials, "this was a State thing" and "Rose cared about attending (the HINW conferences) more than anyone objected to it."²⁵⁴ During the Trump administration, in his own words, Ford was "given a free hand" to engage (with TPNW supporters), and nobody disrupted his efforts, likely because nobody cared enough to put up a fight, and many senior officials were inclined to dismiss or ignore it entirely. According to Ford, the justification for engagement was that "Not engaging was ceding intellectual terrain....Not letting them build fortifications on that strategic hill was easier than having to route them out later."²⁵⁵

The time of the TPNW negotiation was during the Trump administration transition, when policymakers considered new policies and opportunities. In the early years of the administration, senior leaders conducted a "nuclear vision review," run in parallel with the Department of Defense *Nuclear Posture Review*,

253 Christopher Ford, interview.

254 Tom Countryman, interview.

255 Christopher Ford, interview.

which examined the previous administration's efforts to make progress on arms control and disarmament. One result of the review was an internal document that captured the "aftermath" of the Prague speech, and found that attempts at U.S. leadership on disarmament were not reciprocated by other nuclear possessors, as intelligence assessments increasingly showed nuclear expansion by America's adversaries.²⁵⁶ Ford, who led the review from within the National Security Council, saw it as an opportunity to develop a long-term vision for U.S. nuclear policy. To assist in this thinking, Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory convened a small working group with non-governmental experts in 2017 to meet with Ford and others from the interagency to discuss how to strengthen the NPT and engage with the TPNW. The result of those discussions would eventually become the Creating an Environment for Nuclear Disarmament (CEND) initiative.

The CEND initiative was the brainchild of Ford and his colleagues at the State Department, where he moved after the NSC. The objectives of the CEND initiative included, "identify a list of issues or questions relating to the international security environment affecting disarmament prospects and establish subgroups to examine and address some of these factors."²⁵⁷ According to Ford, he received no opposition from within the administration to CEND, although some did seem to be watching to see if it would fail, but ultimately concluded, "this is just a weird Ford thing."²⁵⁸ The first plenary of CEND in July 2019 included 42 countries, divided into three subgroups led by non-governmental facilitators.²⁵⁹ The result of the first plenary was agreement to move ahead with the initiative and establish subgroups with topics on reliance on nuclear weapons, institutions, and risk reduction. A second CEND plenary was held in November 2019 in the United Kingdom, but the informal and interactive format of the group struggled to adapt to the virtual environment during the pandemic.

256 Ibid.

257 Daryl G. Kimball, "U.S. to Host Disarmament Working Group," *Arms Control Today* (July/August 2019). <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2019-07/news/us-host-disarmament-working-group>. Accessed November 21, 2025.

258 Christopher Ford, interview.

259 Heather Williams, "CEND and a changing global nuclear order," European Leadership Network (February 13, 2020). <https://europeanleadershipnetwork.org/commentary/cend-and-a-changing-global-nuclear-order/>. Accessed November 21, 2025.

When a Theory Becomes Reality

Throughout RevCon, the OEWG, and TPNW negotiations, ban supporters' ToC motivated a continued narrative reframing about the humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons and the need to bring in more voices to nuclear diplomacy. At the same time, TPNW supporters undermined NWS involvement in the process because nuclear possessors might slow momentum and take the treaty away from its more radical ambitions and civil society roots.²⁶⁰ During 2015, 2016, and 2017, ban treaty supporters prioritized maintaining momentum not only over inclusivity of membership in the treaty but also over addressing concerns about verification and other implementation details. They rejected any legacies of the step-by-step approach, still supported by nuclear possessors and their allies and partners. While the majority of the action in this chapter took place in official forums, non-governmental actors were behind much of that action and are key to understanding why the TPNW evolved and looks the way it does.

Maintaining Momentum

What stands out most about the process of TPNW negotiations was the blistering pace. The treaty was negotiated within less than four months and opened for signature within six months of the first negotiation session. It was possibly the fastest disarmament negotiations in history: both the land mines and cluster munition bans took over a year to negotiate, despite being negotiated outside of the more formal UN process, and even bilateral negotiations such as New START took 11 months. This pace was neither coincidental nor was it due purely to expert diplomacy; rather, it was done intentionally to maintain momentum, which required excluding a large number of states and skipping over some key treaty details, ostensibly to be addressed at a later date.

As demonstrated in the previous chapter, the absence of NWS in the OEWG and TPNW negotiations was not the result of a coordinated boycott on their part but rather was due to their intentional exclusion by many of the states and NGOs behind the TPNW. When asked if “boycott” was an accurate description of the U.S. decision not to participate, all interviewees gave the same answer: “no.” For many, the word didn’t bother them—it was understandable why a frustrated group of states and change-oriented civil society actors would choose that word. For others, it was a simple misunderstanding, because the P5 did not need to coordinate or cooperate

260 Harald Müller and Carmen Wunderlich, “Nuclear Disarmament without the Nuclear-Weapon States;” Kmentt, “The Treaty Prohibiting Nuclear Weapons;” William C. Potter, “Disarmament Diplomacy and the Nuclear Ban Treaty.”

in deciding not to attend the OEWG or TPNW negotiations. But words matter, and the term “boycott” carries a punitive connotation that simply is not reflected in the historical record. For U.S. officials, there was no coordinated effort to undermine the TPNW because it was not a high enough policy priority. There was a concerted effort to maintain allies’ unity for NATO’s nuclear mission, but that did not equate to sabotaging or undermining the Treaty negotiations, which were clearly going ahead. This approach was more rooted in concerns about upholding nuclear deterrence for the sake of allies’ security, rather than trying to disrupt or derail TPNW negotiations.

The decision to move fast rather than address fundamental questions about how disarmament would happen and who would be involved was intentional and aligned with the TPNW movement’s ToC; however, it was based on two flawed assumptions and has left lasting legacies that continue to haunt the Treaty. Essentially, TPNW supporters are banking on a future in which there is a recognized norm against nuclear possession, and in which states are influenced by normative pressure over security concerns. These two assumptions are worth considering in detail. First, at present, there is no norm against nuclear weapons possession. A norm is defined as “a standard of appropriate behavior for actors with a given identity.”²⁶¹ Scholarship describes the process of norm formation as a lifecycle, including norm emergence, cascade, and internalization.²⁶² For some ban supporters, the very act of establishing a legal ban, regardless of members or scope, enshrined a norm against nuclear weapons writ large, which was more expansive than the well-recognized taboo against nuclear use, along with norms against nuclear proliferation and testing.²⁶³ But, as demonstrated in both scholarship and international law, a treaty does not make a norm. Vilmer, for example, has argued that the TPNW would be an “ever-emerging norm” because it did not include NWS and skepticism about its compatibility with the NPT would prevent it from progressing to a cascade and internalization. The lack of participation by nuclear possessors was seen as decisively undermining the TPNW’s prospects for norm internalization: “A norm that excludes the main actors it seeks to constrain cannot be considered as fully

261 Martha Finnermore and Kathryn Sikkink, “International Norm Dynamics and Political Change.”

262 Ibid.

263 Nina Tannenwald, “How Strong Is the Nuclear Taboo Today?” *Washington Quarterly* 41, no. 3 (2018), pp. 89–109, doi:10.1080/0163660X.2018.1520553 (accessed November 21, 2025); Michael Krepon, *Winning and Losing the Nuclear Peace: The Rise, Demise, and Revival of Arms Control* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2021); Heather Williams and Doreen Horschig, *House of Cards? Nuclear Norms in an Era of Strategic Competition*, Center for Strategic and International Studies (July 2024), https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/2024-07/240718_Horschig_House_Cards.pdf?VersionId=Sqzdjw8H67iNGEuxLEJqKKbaySqfEE (accessed November 21, 2025).

emerging, let alone universal.”²⁶⁴ As the next chapter will demonstrate, the TPNW also faces an enforcement challenge in order to strengthen its intended norm, whereby some members may be in noncompliance with the treaty but are not being held accountable.

The second assumption of ban supporters was that normative pressure would trump states’ interests, such as alliance obligations, and lead to change. There is, indeed, sound evidence for the emergence of nuclear norms, such as the nuclear taboo, along with prohibitions against chemical and biological weapons use, which now occur only in rare instances, but are consistently denied in implicit recognition of the norm. A problem with the assumption that a similar norm could extend through a legal mechanism to include nuclear possession and threats of use, however, is that normative influence does not happen in a vacuum. Security and normative drivers do not work in isolation of one another, but rather work in tandem. And international law and treaties, arguably intended to encapsulate norms, acknowledge that in the case of “extraordinary events” that jeopardize “supreme interest,” security concerns can trump norms and legal constraints allowing for states to withdraw from a treaty (the above language comes from the TPNW).

Abandoning the Step-by-Step Approach

The TPNW should be interpreted as a full-throated rejection of the “step-by-step” approach to disarmament that has led to the elimination of nearly 90% of the world’s nuclear weapons. As discussed in the previous chapter, the decision to focus on a legal ban was driven by a ToC that a treaty would contribute to the wider stigmatization of nuclear weapons. ICAN’s strategy at this stage was later described by Beatrice Fihn as, “What we sought was less an instrument of surveillance and sanction than a treaty that casts as pariahs those who continue to deploy, stockpile, and defend the persistence of nuclear weapons. Building such a stigma has been crucial for the process of working towards the elimination of other unacceptable weapons.”²⁶⁵ Stigmatization and a legal ban took an holistic approach to nuclear weapons, refusing to disaggregate nuclear possessors and attempting to treat all

264 Jean-Baptiste Vilmer, “The forever-emerging norm of banning nuclear weapons,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 45, no. 3 (2022), pp. 478-504. See also Lucrecia Garcia Iommi, “Norm Internalization Revisited: Norm Contestation and the Life of Norms at the Extreme of the Norm Cascade,” *Global Constitutionalism* 9, no. 1 (2020), pp. 76–116, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S2045381719000285> (accessed November 21, 2025).

265 Beatrice Fihn, Matthew Breay Bolton, and Elizabeth Minor, “What persuaded 122 countries to ban nuclear weapons?” *Just Security* (July 10, 2017). <https://www.justsecurity.org/46249/persuaded-122-countries-ban-nuclear-weapons/>. Accessed November 21, 2025.

nuclear weapons-related activities (e.g., deterrence, threats of use, proliferation, modernization) as equally repugnant.

From the U.S. perspective, this rejection of the step-by-step approach was ill-timed because the Obama administration had a window of opportunity for progress on disarmament. All interviewees from the Obama administration shared the view that they were making significant progress in establishing new institutions and practices to advance disarmament, more so than at any point since the end of the Cold War. Priorities during the 2012-2016 timeframe, according to interviewees, included:

- JCPOA negotiations;
- New START follow-on, with the U.S. vision outlined in the Berlin speech calling for a further one-third cut in operationally deployed strategic weapons;
- New START implementation, to include regular bilateral consultative committee meetings and dialogue;
- Regular U.S.-Russia dialogues, including at the head of state-level, to increase transparency and understand Russia's approach to the "strategic equation," a position they increasingly applied to future arms control;
- Upholding and preserving the INF Treaty after a 2014 finding of Russian non-compliance;
- Making progress towards a meeting about a WMD Free Zone in the Middle East that was in alignment with long-standing U.S. policy;
- Nuclear monitoring and verification work, such as the International Partnership for Nuclear Disarmament Verification (IPNDV); and
- Increasing transparency and dialogue in the P5 process, such as the glossary and common reporting form.

Every former Obama administration official interviewed described this era as one of "optimism" about prospects for further arms control and disarmament, particularly for a follow-on to New START.²⁶⁶ But as one official said, "Progress is

²⁶⁶ Admittedly, the U.S. Senate could have presented a challenge to any future treaties requiring their consent and ratification.

contingent on having a partner to work with.”²⁶⁷ In this sense, the TPNW was a distraction from these initiatives, many of which were tied to the 2010 NPT Action Plan, and some of the states that got caught up in the TPNW could have been helping to pressure Russia to come to the negotiating table, building capacity within IPNDV, or holding China accountable for its NPT obligations as its arsenal rapidly expanded. By treating all nuclear possessors the same during this period, TPNW supporters essentially ignored Russian non-compliance with the INF Treaty and its ongoing rapid expansion in strategic capabilities.

Rejection of the step-by-step approach bled into the NPT review process, wherein TPNW members and supporters adopted a narrative of treating all nuclear possessors as a monolith and blaming nuclear weapons on the worsening security environment, rather than the geostrategic ambitions of some nuclear possessors. Diplomatic activity was delayed by the pandemic, which meant the TPNW First MSP and NPT RevCon ended up occurring within two months of each other. At the TPNW MSP in June 2022, a common theme throughout the conference was that the only way to mitigate the risk of nuclear weapons is through elimination, and the Chair’s Summary attempted to blame the worsening security environment on the presence of nuclear weapons, stating, “Russia’s invasion of Ukraine underscores the fact that nuclear weapons do not prevent major wars, but rather embolden nuclear-armed states to start wars.”²⁶⁸ Austrian Foreign Minister Alexander Schallenberg stated, “The logic that nuclear deterrence provides security is a fundamental error because deterrence requires credibility, meaning the readiness to actually use these weapons. This is nothing less than a massive nuclear sword of Damocles hanging over the heads of all of us, of all of humanity. We must take, and we have taken a different path.”²⁶⁹ This narrative would prove to be consistent among TPNW supporters, focusing on the weapons as the source of insecurity and instability, rather than on state behavior. Treating all nuclear possessors as a monolith allowed TPNW States Parties to avoid holding Russia accountable for its repeated threats of use throughout the war in Ukraine and instead focus on democracies. Again, this aligned with the Treaty’s ToC. Ultimately, the First MSP concluded with a 50-point

267 Adam Scheinman, interview.

268 “2022 Vienna Conference on the Humanitarian Impact of Nuclear Weapons—Chair’s Summary,” FINAL, 20.6. 18:15 h, Reaching Critical Will (June 2022). <https://www.reachingcriticalwill.org/images/documents/Disarmament-fora/vienna-2022/ChairSummary.pdf>. Accessed November 21, 2025.

269 Daryl G. Kimball, “States Parties Meet on Nuclear Arms Ban Treaty,” *Arms Control Today* (July/August 2022). <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2022-07/news/states-parties-meet-nuclear-arms-ban-treaty>. Accessed November 21, 2025.

action plan, based on the Humanitarian Statement. It also established working groups, most notably a Science and Technology Advisory Group (STAG) to provide technical advice on the treaty's monitoring and verification, along with victim assistance and environmental remediation.

Numerous NATO members participated in the first MSP as observers, including Finland, Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden, and Norway. Germany and Norway released statements reiterating NATO's declaratory policy regarding the treaty with Rüdiger Bohn, the German deputy commissioner for arms control and disarmament, stating at the conference, "as a member to NATO, and as long as nuclear weapons exist, NATO will remain a nuclear alliance, and confronted with an openly aggressive Russia, which has not only invaded Ukraine but is threatening the rules-based international order and peace in Europe, Germany cannot accede to the TPNW, which would collide with our membership in NATO including nuclear deterrence."²⁷⁰ NATO members also raised concerns about the Treaty's verification regime, compatibility with the NPT, and lack of engagement with NWS, similar to points raised during the OEWG and TPNW negotiations.²⁷¹

Approximately two months after the TPNW MSP, the NPT RevCon convened in New York. After four weeks of negotiation, the States Parties came close to agreeing on a consensus Final Document, but at the last minute, Russia objected over paragraph 34, which expressed concern over "military activities conducted near or at nuclear power plants and other facilities or locations subject to safeguards under Ukraine's comprehensive safeguards agreement, in particular the Zaporizhzya nuclear power plant."²⁷² What this meant was that the NPT was in an unprecedented position after two failed RevCons in a row, along with the aggregate challenges of attacks on nuclear power plants, the discovery of a major increase in China's nuclear arsenal, and new technologies which could impact the Treaty's implementation in a host of ways.²⁷³ As a result, the NPT faces extreme

270 Ibid.

271 See, for example, "Statement by the Netherlands at the First Meeting of States Parties of the TPNW," Reaching Critical Will.

272 "Draft Final Document," 2022 NPT Review Conference, United Nations NPT/Conf.2020/CRP.1/Rev.2 (August 25, 2022). https://reachingcriticalwill.org/images/documents/Disarmament-fora/npt/revcon2022/documents/CRP1_Rev2.pdf. Accessed November 21, 2025.

273 Heather Williams, *The Nuclear Order and Emerging Technologies*, King's College London Centre for Science and Security Studies (February 2024). <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/csss/assets/the-nuclear-order-and-emerging-technologies.pdf>. Accessed November 21, 2025.

pressure to reach consensus in its forthcoming meetings, particularly given developments in Iran since the 2022 RevCon.

In a statement delivered by Mexico at the 2022 RevCon, TPNW supporters addressed concerns with the Treaty, but maintained a position of treating all nuclear possessors as equally guilty of failing to meet their NPT obligations. The statement explained that TPNW members saw their membership in the Treaty as a means of upholding their obligations to Article VI of the NPT. The statement also addressed concerns that the TPNW might somehow undermine the NPT: "... we recognize the NPT as the cornerstone of the disarmament and nonproliferation regime, and deplore threats or actions that risk undermining it. We reaffirm the complementarity of the TPNW with the NPT."²⁷⁴ The statement also reiterates the Treaty's ToC, whereby, "We will move forward with its implementation, with the aim of further stigmatizing and de-legitimizing nuclear weapons and steadily building a robust global peremptory norm against them." It also reproaches nuclear threats, without calling out any states by name or holding them accountable and says no nuclear possessors or their allies are "taking any serious steps to reduce their reliance on nuclear weapons," again treating all nuclear possessors as a monolith.

Role of civil society

Another trend from TPNW negotiations that stood out was the level of civil society involvement. ICAN had a self-described "active presence" and hosted side events during the negotiations.²⁷⁵ This directly followed on from the model of land mines and cluster munitions, which included over 1,000 and 350 non-governmental organizations respectively.²⁷⁶ Approximately 100 organizations were involved in the TPNW negotiations, many as part of the ICAN consortium. Civil society members were allowed on the floor of the UN during TPNW negotiations and were allowed to deliver official statements and work with delegates in real time as they were negotiating.

274 Juan Manuel Gomez Robledo, "Joint Statement to NPT 2022 Review Conference Delivered by Ambassador Juan Manuel Gomez Robledo on Behalf of the TPNW State Parties and Signatories," *Reaching Critical Will* (August 17, 2022). https://reachingcriticalwill.org/images/documents/Disarmament-fora/npt/revcon2022/statements/17Aug_MCI_TPNW.pdf. Accessed November 21, 2025.

275 International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons, "The Road to a World Free of Nuclear Weapons." https://www.icanw.org/ican_history. Accessed November 21, 2025.

276 See "International Campaign to Ban Landmines: History," *The Nobel Prize* (1997), <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/1997/icbl/history/> (accessed November 21, 2025); "Cluster bomb ban treaty takes effect worldwide," *Reliefweb* (August 1, 2010), <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/cluster-bomb-ban-treaty-takes-effect-worldwide> (accessed November 21, 2025).

NATO members were a focus of ICAN efforts in the lead-up to the negotiations. One tactic included parliamentary engagement and outreach, such as letter-writing campaigns. In the United Kingdom 60 parliamentarians supported UK membership in the TPNW following an ICAN campaign, and according to ICAN, a 2017 YouGov poll found 75% of the British public thought the government should participate in negotiations.²⁷⁷ Another tactic was highlighting U.S. efforts to prevent NATO members from participating in negotiations, such as by publishing the U.S. non-paper and national documents, along with a statement by the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs.²⁷⁸ More aggressive tactics, such as Wildfire, referred to “the obsequious caution and vague disquiet of the nuclear weasel states” and “self-serving arguments and veiled threats of the nuclear-weapon states.”²⁷⁹ Civil society’s influence, therefore, was both direct in shaping the negotiations and the treaty itself and indirect by adding to the polarization and growing distrust within nuclear diplomacy.

Following the TPNW’s opening for signature in September 2017, some of the most dramatic developments involved civil society groups, rather than the Treaty itself. Most notably, ICAN won the 2017 Nobel Peace Prize. During her acceptance speech, Beatrice Fihn referred repeatedly to the ToC underlying the Treaty, such as, “It’s an affront to democracy to be ruled by these weapons. But they are just weapons. They are just tools. And just as they were created by geopolitical context, they can just as easily be destroyed by placing them in a humanitarian context.”²⁸⁰ Additionally, ICAN held a fourth HINW Conference immediately preceding the first MSP for the TPNW, clearly solidifying the link between ICAN and the TPNW official proceedings.

277 The original polling data appears to no longer be available, but both ICAN and Quaker websites refer to the polling: International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons, “United Kingdom,” https://www.icanw.org/united_kingdom (accessed November 21, 2025); Quakers in Britain, “Nuclear weapons declared illegal under international law” (January 22, 2021), <https://www.quaker.org.uk/news-and-events/news/nuclear-weapons-declared-illegal-under-international-law> (accessed November 21, 2025).

278 Xanthe Hall, “Under Pressure,” International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War Peace and Health Blog (November 3, 2016). <https://peaceandhealthblog.com/2016/11/03/under-pressure/>. Accessed November 21, 2025.

279 Wildfire, “Confronting the Sceptics, Rousing the Downtrodden.” <https://www.wildfire-v.org/p110.html>. Accessed November 21, 2025.

280 Beatrice Fihn, “ICAN Nobel Lecture,” International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (December 10, 2017). <https://d3n8a8pro7vghmx.cloudfront.net/ican/pages/129/attachments/original/1595949747/ICAN-Nobel-Lecture.pdf>. Accessed November 21, 2025.

In the years following the Treaty's entry into force, ICAN also ramped up pressure on democracies to join the Treaty, such as through its Cities Appeal, along with the Parliamentary Pledge campaign, which gained signatures from legislators in the United States, France, and the United Kingdom.²⁸¹ The Cities Appeal has signatures from hundreds of mayors in support of the TPNW, including numerous European capitals, such as Berlin and Rome, along with U.S. cities including Washington DC and New York.²⁸² Another focus of TPNW supporters includes attempts to divest from companies involved in the production of nuclear weapons. According to ICAN, banks, pension funds, and investment firms invested \$748 billion towards nuclear weapons between 2017 and 2019. In 2019, the Netherlands' largest pension fund divested from nuclear weapons and the tobacco industry.²⁸³ Scholarship funded by TPNW-favorable governments and philanthropic foundations is also contributing to TPNW efforts and disarmament activism, such as new public opinion polling, and academic research that attempts to undermine nuclear deterrence and support the TPNW's aims.²⁸⁴

Conclusion

It's important to put the TPNW negotiations in the appropriate place and time. The place was the UN General Assembly (UNGA), which operated on a majority rather than on consensus. Negotiations proceeded without participation by any nuclear possessor or ally, other than the Netherlands. The time was within five years of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) humanitarian statements launching a Humanitarian Initiative that came to include three conferences, and within seven years of the successful 2010 RevCon and conclusion of New START. This set the scene for maintaining momentum generated through the HINW conferences, but at the expense of a consensus-based approach and involvement of a wider and

281 Alicia Sanders-Zakre and Beatrice Fihn, "Implementation of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons: Hopes and Expectations for the Future," *Journal for Peace and Nuclear Disarmament* 4, no. 1 (January 2, 2021), pp. 94–99. doi:10.1080/25751654.2021.1932232. Accessed November 21, 2025.

282 International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons, "ICAN Cities Appeal." https://cities.icanw.org/list_of_cities. Accessed November 21, 2025.

283 "Largest Dutch pension fund ABP to divest from nuclear weapons," Don't Bank on the Bomb. <https://nonukes.nl/largest-dutch-pension-fund-abp-divest-nuclear-weapons/>. Accessed September 24, 2025.

284 International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons, "Polling: Support for the UN Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons" (last modified: June 2019), https://www.icanw.org/polling_tpnw (accessed November 21, 2025); Kjølsv Egeland and Benoît Pelopidas, "European Nuclear Weapons? Zombie Debates and Nuclear Realities," *European Security* 30, no. 2 (2020), pp. 237–58, doi:10.1080/0962839.2020.1855147 (accessed November 21, 2025).

more diverse group of states, particularly those that relied on nuclear deterrence for their security.

The way the TPNW was negotiated demonstrates that it prioritized momentum over inclusivity, and legal symbolism over details about implementation. Negotiation of the TPNW left many key questions unanswered. How to verify nuclear elimination? How much impact could a ban treaty have without the participation of nuclear possessors? And what would the TPNW hope to achieve in a worsening security environment in which some states were increasing reliance on nuclear weapons and expanding their nuclear arsenals? While many of the substantive questions about the TPNW went unanswered, the lead-up and negotiations left an indelible stain on nuclear politics by exacerbating existing polarization.

This chapter, like the previous one, demonstrates competing narratives about the TPNW and ToC about disarmament. Ban supporters consistently said nuclear possessor states were “boycotting” the negotiations, actively working to undermine the Treaty’s progress, and pressuring allies not to participate. But interviews with U.S. officials suggest a more nuanced approach, whereby they were open to engagement at various points, even making strides toward the same goal in the CEND initiative, but didn’t want NATO allies participating because it could impact the Alliance’s nuclear deterrence, which was at its core for decades. This nuance is an important one. The chapter also shows that ban supporters actively chose an extreme approach to concluding the Treaty that would capitalize on momentum and prioritize speed over detail. This approach was heavily influenced by civil society, particularly ICAN, and left unresolved major questions about the Treaty’s verification, compatibility with the NPT, and potential for success.

Chapter Five

Evaluating the TPNW and Imagining Alternative Futures for Nuclear Disarmament

How should we judge progress of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) to date? Where does it fit into the wider nuclear diplomacy landscape? And what is its future? Since its negotiation and entry into force in 2021, the TPNW has held three Meetings of States Parties (MSP) and appears to be staying true to its theory of change (ToC) by focusing on reframing the conversation around nuclear weapons to focus on their humanitarian effects and emphasizing the legal benefits of the Treaty in the hopes of working towards a change in customary international law. Treaty supporters may have stayed the course, but the nuclear landscape has changed dramatically since the 2017 negotiations. There has been limited consensus within the NPT, and polarization has worsened between nuclear weapon states (NWS) and non-nuclear weapon states (NNWS). As a result of the worsening security environment, along with questions about the credibility of U.S. extended deterrence, proliferation pressures are rising with a 2024 public opinion poll of South Koreans found 71% supported the development of a domestic nuclear weapons program.²⁸⁵ All to say, the nuclear order is under unprecedented pressure, and the TPNW has the potential to either undermine or strengthen that order, depending on its direction of travel.

This chapter proceeds in three parts. First, it provides an evaluation of the TPNW's success, based on the metrics identified by its supporters, before turning to decision points for the Treaty's future. It concludes that the TPNW has thus far been relatively successful in implementing its ToC; but this has not translated into success in disarmament. The chapter then considers five potential pathways for the TPNW and argues that if TPNW supporters stay the course, it risks further polarization in nuclear diplomacy, failing to hold states accountable for their existing obligations, and empowering nuclear expansion by authoritarian regimes. Finally, the chapter

285 See Park In-kook, "Result of the 2nd Gallup Poll on 'North Korean Nuclear Crisis and Security Situation Perception,'" CHEY Institute for Advanced Studies (February 6, 2024), <https://chey.org/Kor//Notice/NoticeView.aspx?seq=236> (accessed November 21, 2025).9,25]], "issued":{"date-parts":["2024",2,6]]}}, "schema":"https://github.com/citation-style-language/schema/raw/master/csl-citation.json"). However, it is worth acknowledging that there is some variation in polling with elites as demonstrated by Victor Cha, "Breaking Bad: South Korea's Nuclear Option."

returns to the ToC framework to consider alternative ToCs for disarmament beyond the step-by-step approach and delegitimization model. Ultimately, this chapter argues that the best way forward for disarmament is developing a “bridgehead” bringing together supporters of both the step-by-step and delegitimization ToCs; the alternatives are a return to strategic and technological anarchy.

The TPNW Scorecard

The TPNW is unique from past disarmament efforts in some key ways. Civil society groups played an unprecedented direct role in multilateral nuclear diplomacy, not only through the HINW conferences and reframing the narrative around nuclear weapons, but also in the TPNW negotiations. Another unique trait of the TPNW is that it is a total ban on nuclear weapons, to include their possession and threat of use. The only other notable historical example of such an effort was in 1997 when Costa Rica submitted a “Model Nuclear Weapons Convention” to the United Nations that was drafted and initiated by non-government experts.²⁸⁶ This convention was revisited in 2007, but never gained significant momentum, arguably because it lacked the alleged “ideational reframing” that the HINW conferences provided in the lead-up to the TPNW. Previous disarmament efforts, such as the NPT, allowed for the continued possession of nuclear weapons on a pathway towards disarmament, and arms control agreements focused on the elimination of weapons categories, such as intermediate-range systems.

Given the uniqueness of the TPNW, how are we to judge its success to date? TPNW supporters have identified at least three main metrics of success: implementation, norm adherence, and membership. As outlined by Zakre and Fihn:

In the first few years, we can expect that States Parties will start to implement the treaty’s positive obligations, and that entities within states outside the treaty will begin to adhere to the new norm set by the treaty. Within the next decade, we can anticipate additional engagement with the treaty from outside states, including weapons possessors, and changes in their weapon policies to more closely adhere to the treaty. Over time, states outside the treaty are expected to sign and ratify the TPNW as the norm grows and the treaty approaches universalization. The

286 Tobias Vestner, “Treaty Law to Signal to Outsiders: The Case of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons,” *Washington International Law Journal* 31, no. 3 (2022), p. 437.

obligation to assist victims of nuclear weapon use and testing and begin to remediate contaminated areas is likely to be a major topic of discussion at the first meeting of States Parties. States can adopt an action plan, as previous weapons prohibitions have done, to explain in more incremental and time-bound terms how states will implement the obligations.

Admittedly, the Treaty has only been in force for five years, but given the emphasis on momentum and speed, as demonstrated in the previous chapter, these metrics serve as a useful reference point for evaluating the treaty's progress.

Turning first to implementation and objectives outlined in the Treaty, the TPNW addressed victims assistance and environmental contamination in all its Meetings of States Parties (MSP) and also established a science and technology working group (STAG) to create an implementation plan and timeline. Thus far, the only timeline offered is that nuclear armed states must give up their weapons "immediately;" however, given that no nuclear armed states are party to the treaty, this requirement seems moot at this stage. Thus far, as of fall 2025, the STAG's work on monitoring and verification has largely reiterated the Treaty language and outlined plans for a flexible framework focused on cooperation and transparency, rather than a strict verification regime. It has also outlined plans to establish a wider network of scientific experts, but the research design and objectives of the group and the wider network remain unclear.²⁸⁷

In practice, the TPNW has had reporting and compliance challenges. Members were meant to develop reporting guidelines by the second MSP; however, as of this writing, they were still struggling both to develop reporting guidelines and to have consistency in reporting, with only half of States Parties submitting reports.²⁸⁸ There are additional concerns that some members could be in noncompliance with their TPNW obligations. Kazakhstan is a TPNW member, but hosts Russia's Shary-Shagan missile test site, where a nuclear-capable missile was tested in 2023. The TPNW prohibits assistance with nuclear weapons-related activities, but the Kazakh government insisted this was in compliance with its TPNW obligations

287 Pavel Podvig, *Verifying Disarmament in the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons*, UNIDIR (June 22, 2022). <https://unidir.org/publication/verifying-disarmament-in-the-treaty-on-the-prohibition-of-nuclear-weapons/>. Accessed November 21, 2025.

288 Bonnie Docherty, *Reporting Guidelines for Articles 6 And 7 of The Treaty On The Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons: Precedent and Recommendations*, Harvard Law School International Human Rights Clinic (2023).

because no nuclear weapons or nuclear explosive devices were part of the test.²⁸⁹ Another compliance concern is with states that have a Compact of Free Association (COFA) with the United States, such as Palau and the Philippines. The COFAs do not explicitly mention nuclear weapons; however, they do give the United States responsibility and authority for defense and security matters, including operations and stationing of forces, potentially to include nuclear weapons. Additionally, these states may be implicitly covered by U.S. extended nuclear deterrence, which could be at odds with the Treaty, as previously discussed in the context of NATO membership. While these and other instances may seem like nuanced definitional details, the TPNW has largely remained silent on them, potentially undermining the authoritative implementation and norm development its supporters hoped for.

The second metric of success is norm adherence, whereby Treaty supporters hoped it would delegitimize and stigmatize nuclear weapons, creating the conditions for nuclear disarmament.²⁹⁰ Evidence of nuclear devaluing, stigmatization, and a norm against nuclear possession taking hold might include reduced reliance on nuclear weapons worldwide or shrinking nuclear arsenals. Nick Ritchie offers a vision of “collective resistance to those aspects of nuclear hegemony, nuclear hierarchy, and practices of nuclear control that legitimize and perpetuate the existence of nuclear weapons, the practice of nuclear deterrence, and the risks of catastrophic nuclear violence.”²⁹¹ Another way of thinking about norm adherence is by an increase in activism and civil society pressure on states to adopt a norm. Tannenwald, for example, points to the TPNW’s potential as a focal point for nuclear activism.²⁹²

For norm adherence, there is some evidence of a deepening norm within existing member states, but there is little evidence of success in expanding the norm or creating a normative cascade. Civil society efforts have been limited to democracies and not targeted the countries expanding their arsenals at the fastest pace, such as China and North Korea. Additionally, civil society groups beyond ICAN remain divided

289 Daryl G. Kimball, “An Early Test for the TPNW,” *Arms Control Today* (May 2023). <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2023-05/focus/early-test-tpnw>. Accessed November 21, 2025.

290 Kjølsv Egeland, “Arms, Influence and the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons,” *Survival* 61, no. 3 (2019), p. 57. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2019.1614786>. Accessed November 21, 2025.

291 Nick Ritchie and Kjølsv Egeland, “The Diplomacy of Resistance: Power, Hegemony and Nuclear Disarmament,” *Global Change, Peace & Security* 30, no. 2 (2018), p. 17. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1478115.8.2018.1467393>. Accessed November 21, 2025.

292 Nina Tannenwald, “How Strong Is the Nuclear Taboo Today?,” *The Washington Quarterly* 41, no. 3 (2018), pp. 101–102. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2018.1520553>. Accessed November 21, 2025.

on the TPNW. Within NATO states, some non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have praised the TPNW's approach and called on the United States to engage, if not join, the Treaty,²⁹³ and a growing body of scholarship, often funded by pro-TPNW states or institutions, has pointed to the Treaty's importance in devaluing nuclear weapons and how it could be compatible with NATO.²⁹⁴ But numerous other NGOs and renowned academics have raised concern about the Treaty's impact on nuclear deterrence at a time of rising nuclear risks. Lawrence Freedman, for example, is somewhat dismissive of the notion of a legal ban on nuclear weapons because it would have no real impact on policies and postures without addressing the political motivations for relying on nuclear deterrence.²⁹⁵ Leading voices on arms control, including Rose Gottemoeller, have also expressed skepticism about the TPNW.

One potential reason for this lack of wider engagement with the TPNW's norms is its radical, black-and-white approach to nuclear weapons, with little room for compromise or accounting for the perceived security benefits of nuclear deterrence. As described by Mueller and Wunderlich, "Small and middle powers and civil society demonstrated that they could accomplish something in nuclear policy despite its highly asymmetrical power distribution. The resulting emotional satisfaction is certainly motivating, but goes occasionally overboard"²⁹⁶ and described their methods as "frantic intimidation campaigns."²⁹⁷ Supporters of the TPNW's ToC would likely dismiss this shortcoming because their efforts will hopefully pay off over time, whereby, "Other governments and non-governmental actors have demonstrated what can be achieved with a progressive, dynamic approach to negotiations in which disarmament is framed as humanitarian action to protect vulnerable civilians."²⁹⁸ While this strategy might make sense in achieving a legal mechanism, it somewhat defies logic if the intent is to actually eliminate nuclear weapons.

293 Daryl G. Kimball, "The Nuclear Ban Treaty: A Much-Needed Wake-Up Call," *Arms Control Today* (November 2020). <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2020-11/focus/nuclear-ban-treaty-much-needed-wake-call>. Accessed November 21, 2025.

294 See, for example, Egeland, "Arms, Influence and the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons," p. 69.

295 Lawrence Feedman, "Disarmament and Other Nuclear Norms," *The Washington Quarterly* 36, no. 2 (May 2013). <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/0163660X.2013.791085>. Accessed November 21, 2025.

296 Harald Müller and Carmer Wunderlich, "Nuclear Disarmament without the Nuclear-Weapons States."

297 *Ibid*, p. 182.

298 Rebecca Johnson, "Arms Control and Disarmament Diplomacy"

Supporters of the TPNW could argue that a legal norm has emerged which renders the possession of nuclear weapons illegal, but there are numerous problems with this line of argument. As Mallory Stewart and Newell Highsmith argued in 2018, customary international law would only exist if all states decided not to possess nuclear weapons and if there was evidence this was caused by a legal obligation. The settled practice of nuclear weapons states, however, is to possess nuclear weapons for the purposes of deterrence. Numerous international treaties, including the NPT, are predicated on the fact that some states do have nuclear weapons. An additional challenge with this legal argument is that the treaty only binds its members, which does not include all states possessing nuclear weapons and approximately half of the world's population.²⁹⁹ For TPNW supporters such as Kmentt, even unsuccessful legal efforts could be counted as a success because it "has the potential to impact current nuclear weapons-related practices and nuclear deterrence."³⁰⁰ To date, there has been no evidence for that, so continuing on the legal pathway, such as bringing a case before the International Court of Justice or insisting on a customary international law argument, may have limited payoffs and could actually undermine the treaty if the decision goes against the TPNW's objectives.

A final metric of success, albeit anticipated as a medium-long-term one, would be wider membership, to include nuclear possessor states or their allies. Supporters of the TPNW have understandably targeted democracies, given their ToC, which tend to be U.S. allies. Kmentt explains this focus on democracies in detail and is worth quoting at length:

It is to be expected, and must indeed be hoped for, that democratic systems will have open societal discussions on the issue of nuclear weapons, including the humanitarian consequences and risks associated with them. Democratic states also have more intense discussions on issues such as human rights.....Progress and change on these and other issues are expected to spring more from democratic debates and

299 Müller and Wunderlich, "Nuclear Disarmament without the Nuclear-Weapon States," p. 179.

300 Alexander Kmentt, "The Humanitarian Initiative and the TPNW 1," in *The Nuclear Ban Treaty*, 1st ed., Ramesh Thakur, ed. (Routledge, 2021), p. 4.

decisionmaking processes, than from closed and autocratic political systems.³⁰¹

As described by Egeland, this pressure may not necessarily translate into membership in the treaty, but “could just as likely translate into an increased willingness in those countries to engage the other nuclear-armed states in meaningful negotiations.”³⁰²

Here, too, the TPNW is falling short. Two of the most damning verdicts on the TPNW came from staunch supporters of the HINW and OEWG, Sweden and Switzerland. A 2019 Swedish report concluded explicitly that the country should not join the TPNW because “Unless the Treaty text is amended, the accession of Sweden to the TPNW would without any doubt prevent a possible future Swedish membership of NATO...Accession may also be expected to lead to a stagnation of current Swedish cooperation with NATO and bilaterally with NATO members.”³⁰³ ICAN expressed “disappointment” that the report misunderstood and misrepresented the TPNW’s aims and objectives; but the report’s findings proved to be prescient and Sweden became a NATO member in 2024.³⁰⁴ Switzerland has repeatedly taken up the issue of TPNW membership following a series of public opinion polls and instructions from the parliament to join the TPNW; however, the government has consistently refused to do so on the grounds of the worsening security environment and a desire to instead focus efforts on the NPT.³⁰⁵ Reluctance to engage with thorny details about verification and membership during negotiations are coming back to haunt the TPNW and may be one of many factors inhibiting wider membership.

Even if the TPNW has not met the metrics of success set by ICAN, it has impacted nuclear policy in important ways. The HINW conferences preceding the TPNW were an important education and awareness-raising opportunity, and their reframing

301 Alexander Kmentt, “The Humanitarian Initiative and the TPNW 1,” p. 4.

302 Kjølsv Egeland, “Arms, Influence and the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons,” p. 73.

303 “Report for the Swedish parliament on Swedish accession to the TPNW: an ICAN perspective,” Svenska Läkare Mot Kärnvapen (January 19, 2019), p. 46. <https://slmk.org/nyheter/ican-kommenterar-lundins-utredning/>. Accessed November 21, 2025.

304 Beatrice Fihn, “Disappointing Report from the Swedish Inquiry into Joining Nuclear Ban Treaty,” ICAN (January 18, 2019). https://www.icanw.org/disappointing_report_from_the_swedish_inquiry_into_joining_nuclear_ban_treaty. Accessed November 21, 2025.

305 International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons, “Switzerland.” <https://www.icanw.org/switzerland>. Accessed November 21, 2025.

and facts-based discussions have had a lasting impact on the field, particularly a new generation of nuclear experts, including this author. The TPNW has also had success in creating bottom-up pressure on democracies. Many Northern European countries experienced a wave of public interest in nuclear disarmament for the first time in decades during the 2010s, as evidenced by the parliamentary pledges and the Netherlands parliamentary mandate to participate in the TPNW negotiations. For some TPNW supporters, part of its ToC has required treating nuclear weapons as a black-and-white issue, which has caught on with a growing number of NNWS. This was not an accident. Skeptics of the TPNW were often dismissed as “weasels” or “addicted” to nuclear weapons or “hypocrites” or “obstructionist.”³⁰⁶ A small number of TPNW supporters have now taken to calling for states to withdraw from the NPT in favor of the TPNW because, “Withdrawal will be legitimately based on the grounds that the nuclear weapon states are in breach of Article VI.”³⁰⁷ An additional source of polarization has been TPNW supporters’ treatment of nuclear possessors as a monolith, essentially treating Russia’s threats of nuclear use during the war in Ukraine and China’s unprecedented expansion of its nuclear arsenal as politically and morally equivalent to long-planned U.S. nuclear modernization plans at a consistent arsenal size.

It is also important to acknowledge that “security” is a complicated term. While nuclear possessors and their allies claim to rely on nuclear weapons for national security, such as survival of the state, other states perceive that to come at a cost to their security. Kmentt stresses that NNWS perspectives on security have been given less consideration than those of nuclear possessors. They, too, have threat perceptions and security concerns derived from the worsening security environment: “The threat perceptions of non-nuclear weapon States, stemming from the concern about the humanitarian consequences and risks of nuclear weapons are thus not merely a humanitarian perspective but based on equally valid and pertinent security considerations. It is these security considerations that have not been taken into account adequately, rather than the other way around.”³⁰⁸ Kmentt is quite right to point out that states relying on nuclear deterrence do not get a monopoly on “security” and what it means in the context of the NPT, nor are

306 Nuclear Weapons Ban Monitor, “The Status of the TPNW.” <https://banmonitor.org/tpnw-status>. Accessed November 21, 2025.

307 Joeli Pretorius, “The Power of a Ban: Outlawing Nuclear Weapons Practices,” Toda Peace Institute (November 24, 2020). <https://toda.org/global-outlook/2020/the-power-of-a-ban-outlawing-nuclear-weapons-practices.html>. Accessed November 21, 2025.

308 Alexander Kmentt, “The Treaty Prohibiting Nuclear Weapons,” p. 166.

they the “sole arbiter of whose security perspectives are more valid than others.”³⁰⁹ What is needed is a more holistic, intersectional, multidisciplinary approach for both TPNW supporters and opponents that brings together these different approaches to security, rather than treating them as a zero sum game.

Five Futures for the TPNW

Given this slowed momentum and the breakdown of nuclear institutions and guardrails, this is an inflection point for TPNW supporters to decide if they stay the course with their existing ToC or consider a course correction. There are a couple potential explanations for why these successes haven’t translated into more progress for the TPNW in nuclear disarmament. One potential reason for this slowing momentum is that the TPNW’s ToC is ill-suited to the moment, and the assumptions identified in Chapter 2 may indeed be flawed. The Treaty is still relatively new and may take years or decades to achieve its more ambitious aims. Another potential explanation, of course, is that, like other arms control agreements, the hard part comes after negotiation and during treaty implementation. Supporters of the TPNW ultimately must decide whether to ignore external and internal changes that may impact on the potential for success of the TPNW. Depending on how they address those pressures, I identify five potential futures for the TPNW: status quo, retrenchment, reinforcement, success, or failure.

Status Quo: The TPNW could stay on its current trajectory, making slow progress within the STAG, continue to treat nuclear possessors as a monolith, empower ICAN, and wait for an opportunity to revisit the ICJ Advisory Opinion so as to continue to rely on legal mechanisms. In 1996, the ICJ ruled, “the threat or use of nuclear weapons would generally be contrary to the rules of international law applicable in armed conflict, and in particular the principles and rules of humanitarian law,” except in circumstances when the survival of the state was at risk.³¹⁰ This was one of the “legal gaps” TPNW supporters aimed to fill. But staying the course despite a change in context would come with risks. Any attempt to further advance the TPNW’s legal case, such as through the ICJ, could be met with failure and instead undermine the credibility of the TPNW itself and the work that its supporters have achieved to date. Additionally, as the NPT faces additional proliferation pressures, the TPNW could play a compounding role by undermining the Treaty. This might

309 Ibid., p. 167.

310 International Court of Justice, “Legality of the Threat or Use of Nuclear Weapons.”

not result in a dramatic collapse of the NPT, but rather slowly turn it into a “zombie treaty” with limited participation and restraining power.

Retrenchment: A second future would be for the TPNW to stick to its existing ToC but return to an emphasis on reframing the narrative. Arguably, that stage in the ToC was not fully realized before moving to legal mechanisms, given that the Treaty has not had the normative impact its supporters desired. They could essentially retrace their steps and turn their attention away from filling a “legal gap” and return to a focus on HINW and public awareness and education. This would entail getting back to the humanitarian roots of the movement, prior to the “turning point” at the end of the Nayarit Conference. In this scenario, States Parties and civil society would continue to work closely together to raise awareness about the consequences of nuclear use, testing, and proliferation for a new generation of practitioners and experts alike. Treaty supporters would shift from attacking NWS for their continued reliance on nuclear weapons to highlighting the potential humanitarian consequences of any nuclear weapons use. Prior to the TPNW negotiations, there was widespread support, including among a more diverse group of civil society experts and nuclear possessors and their allies, for the renewed emphasis and education on HINW. One avenue for Treaty supporters would be to re-anchor the humanitarian dialogue in the UN Scientific Body on Nuclear War Effects established in late 2024.³¹¹ As nuclear risks rise, these issues should again be part of the conversation, separate from the polarizing and politically divisive issue of the TPNW.

Reinforcement and Accountability: Another option would be to shift course at this stage in the ToC away from legal efforts and toward strengthening the NPT in the current security environment, such as by focusing on reducing the risks of nuclear proliferation and/or nuclear use. This would entail a tweak to the existing ToC with a shift in narrative to focus on partnership with some NWS and their allies. Rather than a focus on blaming and shaming states that rely on deterrence within the NPT, TPNW states might instead focus on shared interests of risk reduction, transparency and accountability, nonproliferation, and peaceful uses in partnership with a more diverse group of states. Such an approach would take a more holistic approach to strategic empathy to include not only the victims of nuclear weapons and testing, along with historically disenfranchised states in the Global South, but also states facing existential risks were it not for the protection of nuclear deterrence or guarantees. This could be done through new bridge-building

311 United Nations General Assembly, “Nuclear War Effects and Scientific Research,” United Nations A/Res/79/238 (December 31, 2024). <https://docs.un.org/en/a/res/79/238>. Accessed November 21, 2025.

efforts, but a narrative change would also go a long way towards rebuilding trust and reducing polarization. An additional shift in focus and narrative would be to differentiate among nuclear possessors to work with states that prioritize and value transparency and risk reductions, while holding accountable those that do not.

Success: The other possibility, of course, is that the TPNW succeeds. In this scenario, civil society efforts convince policymakers in democracies of the dangers of continuing to rely on nuclear weapons, or the Treaty gains support thanks to the election of more progressive movements, such as Green parties. Membership by NATO members, for example, would likely be seized upon as a success by TPNW supporters (and in Moscow) and touted as evidence of a growing norm against nuclear possession. Similar progress towards disarmament would likely not be witnessed in non-democracies which have little regard for customary international law, particularly in the short term, and Russia, China, and North Korea would continue to expand their arsenals. This scenario would have the potential to undermine deterrence in democracies, such as by creating bottom-up pressure for NATO disarmament when the war in Ukraine ends. The result of this scenario would be weakened deterrence for U.S. allies, potentially empowering nuclear authoritarians such as Russia and China to leverage nuclear threats for regional expansion and a breakdown of the international order and respect for norms such as sovereignty.

Withdrawals and Failure: The TPNW could also follow the trajectory of the Land Mines Ban, one of the inspirations for the nuclear ban's ToC, and lose members and relevance in the worsening security environment. In 2025, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, and Finland withdrew from the Ottawa Convention because they refused to be "put in a straitjacket that would prevent us from defending our homeland."³¹² Some members that might be pulled away from the nuclear ban for security reasons include the Philippines or states in COFAs with the United States, such as Palau, depending on the strategic risks in the Indo-Pacific region. Because no nuclear allies, however, ever joined the TPNW, a more likely scenario might be if membership plateaus.

Of all these scenarios, the most risky in terms of likelihood and impact for TPNW supporters appears to be staying the course, which could either result in a slow slide into irrelevance or dramatic failure, given the current security environment. Even if the Treaty "succeeds" in generating participation from democracies, this still would

312 Daniel Tilles, "Parliament Approves Poland's Withdrawal from International Anti-Landmine Treaty," Notes from Poland (June 26, 2025). <https://notesfrompoland.com/2025/06/26/parliament-approves-polands-withdrawal-from-international-anti-landmine-treaty/>. Accessed November 21, 2025.

not lead to the elimination of nuclear weapons, could empower countries such as Russia, and actually increase the risks of nuclear escalation and use.

The direction of the TPNW will largely be determined by whether or not it engages with nuclear possessors and their allies, continues to emphasize legal tools, and what degree of influence states give to civil society. Thus far, TPNW supporters have intentionally excluded NWS and rejected bridge-building, as evidenced by Chapters 3 and 4. Kmentt explained the rejection of cooperating on risk reduction because while the TPNW wanted to talk about risks associated with the very existence of nuclear weapons, NWS were more interested in “countering risks that could undermine deterrence.”³¹³ Based on the historical evolution of the TPNW, to include the HINW conferences and OEWSG, one of the biggest factors that will determine the way ahead for the TPNW will be the role of civil society, given ICAN’s historically decisive role in the Treaty’s evolution, negotiation, and implementation. The TPNW’s focus on democracies is facilitated by ICAN’s advocacy efforts. For example, ICAN has 86 partner organizations in the United States, 31 in the United Kingdom, and 57 in France; however, it only has one in Russia and two in China. Another organization in Russia, Bellona, was shut down in 2022 and labeled as “undermining the Russian economy, discrediting the domestic and foreign policy pursued by the authorities.” Kmentt himself has confronted this question about ICAN’s involvement in his history of the TPNW:

Does the partnership that was so instrumental in the road to the treaty survive the negotiations, or is it the job of NGOs to always push governments forward, no matter what? The partnership model would require a readiness by NGOs to accept tactical considerations and compromises, even from their vantage point unsatisfactory ones, for the sake of achieving the overall objective. The more activist approach will lead civil society representatives to promote specific positions and to exert pressure even on States with whom there had been close cooperation before.³¹⁴

Other determinative factors will include developments in the NPT and multilateral diplomacy, the security environment and states’ reliance on nuclear

313 Alexander Kmentt, “The Humanitarian Initiative and the TPNW,” p. 9.

314 Alexander Kmentt, “The Treaty Prohibiting Nuclear Weapons,” p. 139.

weapons, and dynamics among TPNW members some of which have complicated relationships with nuclear possessors.

Rather than risk irrelevance, instability, or collapse, I recommend Treaty advocates adopt a more pragmatic approach, such as the reinforcing and accountability role by pursuing bridge-building efforts with nuclear possessors. This shift could operate within the existing ToC but adopt lessons learned from the Treaty's evolution and changes in the security environment to demonstrate its relevance even during times of geostrategic competition with growing risks of arms racing. It could strengthen the NPT at a time when it risks decline due to growing risks of nuclear proliferation and use. It would also rebuild trust in more widely accepted nuclear norms and institutions, which also aligns with the TPNW's original ToC.

Alternative Theories of Change for Nuclear Disarmament

But both the step-by-step approach, favored by nuclear possessors, and the delegitimization model are struggling to demonstrate a pathway to the desired outcome of the peace and security of a world without nuclear weapons. The two ToCs have exacerbated polarization and "silo-ing" within the nuclear community. Given that there are shortcomings with the assumptions of both theories, we should consider alternative ToCs that might help illuminate pathways towards nuclear disarmament.

A Bridgehead Theory of Change

The step-by-step approach and delegitimization model both hinge on two overarching assumptions. The first assumption is the desired outcome: general and complete disarmament, to include elimination of nuclear weapons. Both ToCs claim to be working towards a shared goal of the peace and security of a world without nuclear weapons; changing the pathway might first require changing the desired outcome. Rather than abandon the goal of nuclear disarmament, a new desired outcome could be a bridgehead or interim step on the way to disarmament. In the late 2000s and early 2010s, numerous scholars picked up on Sam Nunn's idea of a "base camp" as part of the pathway towards the summit of nuclear disarmament.³¹⁵ The benefits of the "base camp" framing were that it identified intermediate milestones that could be achieved without necessarily having to see the final outcome, which could remain shrouded in cloud, like the summit of a mountain.

315 See, for example, Michael O'Hanlon, "Is a World Without Nuclear Weapons Really Possible?," Brookings (May 4, 2010). <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/is-a-world-without-nuclear-weapons-really-possible/>. Accessed November 21, 2025.

Both step-by-step arms control and the TPNW could be seen as traits of the “base camp,” but we need a different metaphor for the current security environment and to visualize the next steps in progress towards disarmament.

I suggest the new desired outcome be a “bridgehead,” a place to reinforce existing institutions, such as the NPT and avoid further backsliding before focusing on progress and the way ahead. The benefits of a bridgehead outcome would be that it could bring together various disarmament initiatives and reinforce remaining tools for nuclear reductions and shared goals, such as maintaining the NPT and preventing nuclear weapons use. Establishing a bridgehead will require multidisciplinary and intersectional approaches in order to imagine the future strategic landscape, which could be technologically unrecognizable with the expansion of AI. Some of the activities for NWS, NNWS, and civil society to make progress towards a bridgehead could include:

Strengthen the NPT and other forums for multilateralism. To achieve this, steps might include reforming the NPT review process, a recommitment by all states to all three pillars of the NPT, and identifying accountability measures within the NPT.

Establish a new international initiative, drawing on lessons learned from efforts such as the Stockholm Initiative and CEND to help identify what the “bridgehead” would look like. This could be a Track 1.5 informal dialogue, drawing on disarmament scholarship and multilateral nuclear diplomacy.

Conduct intersectional studies on how the changing nature of nuclear risks and progress towards disarmament will be impacted by other existential risks, to include AI and biological threats. The goal of these studies should be to provide a clear picture about the physical, technological, and strategic landscape of the future and where there might be opportunities and challenges for nuclear disarmament.

Identify a new theory of strategic stability. Current concepts of arms control and risk reduction remain deeply rooted in Cold War concepts, such as the book *Strategy and Arms Control* by Schelling and Halperin written in 1960. There is an urgent need for

assessing whether these tools are still relevant and whether they align with national security interests of the NWS—and identifying what new tools might be necessary. This phase could include a Track 1.5 working group to meet on the margins of P5 meetings, during which time civil society experts and scholars can present original research on strategic stability and arms control.

Coordinate collaborative efforts across a wider spectrum of civil society to increase education and awareness of the consequences of nuclear weapons use. An international conference could bring together a range of civil society groups, including ICAN, academia, and think tanks to review existing research, identify gaps in scholarship, and generate new research on nuclear effects with policy relevance to both NWS and NNWS. For example, there is a growing interest among some nuclear possessors about nuclear effects, such as EMP, and how to operate in nuclear-contaminated environments.

The bridgehead ToC is not simply maintaining status quo, but also includes real action to lay the groundwork for progress on disarmament, particularly by fostering and sustaining the next generation of nuclear leaders. As identified earlier in this chapter, the best way forward for the TPNW may be to engage in bridge-building with NWS and a more diverse sector of civil society. A bridgehead is not only an opportunity to regroup, but could also, as the name suggests, facilitate bridge-building efforts before different camps are totally ready to walk across the bridge.

Like any ToC, the bridgehead ToC hinges on certain assumptions that may be flawed. It assumes that states want to reinforce the NPT and are not interested in undermining it. It also assumes that the security environment will improve and when it does, these efforts will provide a launchpad for pursuing opportunities for nuclear reductions in due course. A potential problem with these assumptions is that we may be entering a new world order to be defined by enduring competition and existing institutions simply aren't fit for purpose. I would make the case, however, that before we abandon them altogether, NWS, NNWS, and civil society should collectively collaborate to save the NPT, in particular.

Transformative Theories of Change

An assumption of both the step-by-step approach and delegitimization model was that change can happen within the existing international order and institutions, namely the United Nations and the NPT. While the TPNW is indeed a new institution, it was negotiated through a UN process, its supporters insist it is meant to support the NPT and other existing institutions, and it appears to have ambitions to change existing legal mechanisms, such as the ICJ Advisory Opinion. As the original ToC framework in Table 2 shows, the step-by-step approach and delegitimization model both assume a continuity of institutions. But Table 2 can also help identify opportunities for transformative change outside of existing institutions. Two such options might be 1) a nuclear deterrence replacement, which could happen at a slow and incremental pace of technological innovation (but outside of the existing nuclear order), or 2) a technological transformation and breakthrough that quickly makes nuclear weapons irrelevant. The fully populated ToC framework is represented in Table 3: Transformative Theories of Change for Nuclear Disarmament, and these two alternative ToCs are discussed below in greater detail.

Table 3: Transformative Theories of Change for Nuclear Disarmament

Process/Outcome	Slow and incremental	Sharp and sudden
Continuity of institutions	Delegitimization	Step-by-step
Transformative	Nuclear deterrence replacement	Technological transformation

States might not intentionally pursue these transformative options, but rather it would happen organically through technological breakthroughs in the private sector. Ritchie and others argue that nuclear disarmament will require devaluing nuclear weapons. While normative change and ideational reframing are one way for devaluing to occur, another would be through replacement, where an alternative technology can perform the same functions—deterrence, prestige, military utility—as nuclear weapons. Arguably, historical cases of disarmament were facilitated by the availability of a more effective or efficient alternative technology; airplanes replaced zeppelins, guns replaced bayonets, and tanks replaced horses in warfare. Some military or dual-use technology may come along with the same effect on nuclear weapons.

One potential contender which would likely happen through slow technological innovation and incrementally spread would be synthetic biological agents. I refer

to this ToC as nuclear deterrence replacement, whereby biological agents that can target a specific population would have a strategic deterrent effect, along with an operational deterrent effect in the event of conflict. Gene editing could target a specific ethnicity, gender, or other unique trait that would equate to a weapon of mass effect with catastrophic humanitarian consequences.³¹⁶ These weapons could be perceived as more usable because of their discriminatory and non-kinetic nature, meaning there would be limited, if any, environmental impacts. Advances in AI could facilitate development of these capabilities by both state and non-state actors.

Another alternative ToC would be a technological transformation making nuclear weapons obsolete, through a sudden and sharp and highly disruptive process. The strongest contender for this would be a technology or paradigm to be determined (TBD) by generative AI. The AI 2027 report asks, “What if AI undermines nuclear deterrence? What if it’s so skilled at cyberwarfare that a six-month AI lead is enough to render an opponent blind and defenseless? What if it could orchestrate propaganda campaigns that beat intelligence agencies at their own game? What if some AIs ‘go rogue?’”³¹⁷ A general intelligence AI system could determine that nuclear disarmament is a desirable goal by any means necessary and, given enough computing power, suggest an alternative to nuclear weapons to replace them. This scenario is particularly concerning given the absence of AI governance or guardrails, such as existed in the early atomic age and explored in Chapter 1.

The TBD solution might be a single capability, or it could be a combination of a novel and disruptive technology within a new international order to facilitate rapid elimination of nuclear weapons and sending them into irrelevance. As an act of humility to the power of AI, I will refuse the temptation to imagine exactly what such a capability or paradigm shift might be but share the obvious caution that it may not necessarily be more stabilizing or have a higher regard for human life than the current international order.

Whether or not these ToCs are desirable alternatives to the current nuclear world deserves greater scrutiny before they are pursued and/or translated into reality. Technology might be pushing us towards a post-nuclear world faster than we realize. Whether or not technological transformation is a more stable ToC—whereby it reduces risks of war and associated humanitarian consequences—cannot be

316 See, for example Christopher A. Mouton, Caleb Lucas, and Ella Guest, *The Operational Risks of AI in Large-Scale Biological Attacks: Results of a Red-Team Study*, RAND (2024). https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA2977-2.html. Accessed November 21, 2025.

317 Daniel Kokotajlo et al., *AI 2027: Scenario-Based Forecasting for Transformative AI*, AI Futures Project (2025). <https://ai-2027.com/ai-2027.pdf>. Accessed November 21, 2025.

known. But surely this is a topic worthy of creative and in-depth study by TPNW supporters and detractors alike.

Conclusion

The TPNW remains relatively young. It left a lot of details unresolved during negotiations. And, according to Rebecca Johnson, “progress is unlikely to be quick or smooth. The institutions, expectations, and conduct of arms control and disarmament are slow to change.... Despite their resistance, however, new configurations in international security and strategic stability are knocking at the door, requiring more effective theories and strategies for disarmament and diplomacy.”³¹⁸ Despite internal dissent, the Treaty has evolved on an exclusionary pathway that brooked no compromise, largely driven by advocacy organizations; however, that extreme approach has not proven successful. Supporters of the TPNW will have to identify ways to maintain the momentum that brought about negotiations without alienating potential members that are impacted by the worsening security environment. If TPNW supporters are playing a short game and want to prioritize momentum over staying power, they may decide to stay the course and empower ICAN to take evermore radical approaches to pressuring NATO allies, for example, to abandon the Alliance and join the treaty. This approach comes with risks not only for NATO, but also for the TPNW as such efforts have proven unsuccessful to date and only further exemplify the TPNW’s irrelevance. If TPNW supporters are playing a long game, however, and see the treaty as slowly building towards a norm that can work in tandem with the NPT, then now is the time for a pivot to compromise, bridge-build with nuclear possessors, and return to the humanitarian roots and education behind the Treaty in the first place.

Given that neither the step-by-step approach nor the delegitimization model inspire much optimism about nuclear disarmament at present, we should consider the idea of collaborative, intersectional work to establish a bridgehead towards nuclear disarmament. This will require imagining a future world technologically altered by AI. The role of nuclear weapons in such a world may be very different than the world of today. So while we work to reinforce existing institutions, particularly the NPT, we should also work to develop new and adaptable tools for these future environments to ensure nuclear weapons are never again used in warfare. The alternatives, whether that be a nuclear deterrence replacement or AI-determined capability or something as-yet inconceivable, may not be safer than the world we live in now.

318 Rebecca Johnson, “Arms Control and Disarmament Diplomacy,” p. 607.

Conclusion and the Way Ahead for Nuclear Possessors

The Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) has reawakened challenging moral and political debates around nuclear weapons. I recently heard a Polish official say, “My country wouldn’t exist if it wasn’t part of a nuclear alliance.” Arguably, policies of nuclear deterrence and extended nuclear deterrence have prevented escalation in great power conflict and nuclear proliferation for decades. For TPNW opponents, the Treaty raises uncomfortable questions about the catastrophic risks associated with deterrence and reliance on nuclear weapons. But for TPNW supporters, the case of Poland and other states facing imminent security risks and relying on nuclear deterrence cannot be ignored. Nuclear weapons require policymakers and civil society alike to wrestle with questions of security for whom and at what price, while also holding accountable states undermining the nuclear order and standing up to nuclear bullying. This is often an excruciating paradox.

The overarching story of this monograph is that debates about the TPNW are fundamentally debates about ToCs and why disarmament happens. It has offered three main findings. First and foremost is that the evolution of the TPNW has been decisively and dogmatically driven by a ToC rooted in “ideational reframing” and delegitimization efforts, which were successful in achieving land mines and cluster munitions bans. This ToC was again successful in achieving a treaty banning nuclear weapons; however, the legal mechanism has failed to translate into normative change or any nuclear reductions. Short-term momentum has not equated to progress towards nuclear disarmament.

The TPNW got some things right. Progress towards nuclear disarmament is slowing. Nuclear norms are under threat. And there is a legal gap for further reductions in nuclear arsenals, particularly through traditional legal mechanisms such as bilateral verifiable limits on strategic weapons which are at the mercy of a mutual interest in arms control, strategic stability, and risk reduction. This paper does not contest the TPNW’s desired outcome of the peace and security of a world without nuclear weapons, nor does it contest the premise that nuclear disarmament has slowed in recent years. It also acknowledges the value of the TPNW process of increasing awareness of the consequences of nuclear weapons use, and giving voice and agency to a wider group of states. The TPNW’s approach to inclusivity should not

be lost. Rather, this paper shows that ToCs that intentionally exclude key actors and disregarding the concerns of uniquely affected states will have limited impact.

This monograph has also captured the U.S. perspective on the HINW conferences and the lead-up and negotiation of the TPNW. It shows that the United States and other nuclear possessors did not launch a coordinated “boycott” of the TPNW, but rather were intentionally excluded from proceedings and there was no attempt at compromise to involve them in the discussions. As such, the HINW conferences and TPNW never received senior-level engagement or consideration within the Obama, Trump, or Biden administrations. Exclusion of the United States and other nuclear possessors did not go unnoticed and was a consistent point of objection in the HINW conferences, OEWG, and TPNW negotiations. Other points of debate included the Treaty’s verification mechanisms, signature of the Additional Protocol, and relationship with the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), none of which were fully addressed in the Treaty’s conclusion.

A final and important finding of this monograph is the widespread support and potential bridge-building function of a return to discussions on reinforcing the NPT, existing norms, and the humanitarian impacts of nuclear weapons. As described by Sagan and Valentino, the TPNW was a “missed opening” to enhance education and awareness about the consequences of nuclear weapons testing and use. While facts and testimonies about the humanitarian, environmental, and societal impacts of nuclear weapons detonations might be familiar to nuclear experts in nuclear possessor states or older generations, it would be new material for a new generation of nuclear experts and civil society. The HINW roots of the TPNW should not be abandoned for the sake of a potentially marginal legal mechanism—the testimony of the survivors are too important for that.

A collaborative bridgehead ToC will not be an easy pivot for supporters of either the step-by-step approach or delegitimization model. Supporters of the TPNW face a decision point as to whether it stays the course of a radical and black-and-white approach to nuclear disarmament, or pivots to compromise with nuclear possessors and bridge-building efforts, such as returning to the principles of the HINW conferences in the face of rising nuclear risks. One of the most difficult decisions for TPNW States Parties will be the future relationship with ICAN. For many TPNW supporters, the worsening security environment justifies the TPNW approach and urgency of disarmament efforts, and “The argument that one must wait for a future security environment in which nuclear deterrence is no longer needed as a precondition for nuclear disarmament is disingenuous. There will always be real or perceived security imbalances between states, which, if one

follows this line of argument, will provide excuses in perpetuity for not altering the nuclear status quo.”³¹⁹ Supporters of the TPNW must now decide how to navigate the practical challenges of the security environment with their vision for a pathway to disarmament.

But the United States and other nuclear possessors also face difficult questions: should Washington engage with the TPNW? How might the TPNW impact U.S. extended deterrence and assurance with allies and partners? What risks does the TPNW present to the nuclear order, including the NPT, and how can the United States and its allies mitigate these risks? In an era of great power competition, with adversaries colluding and increasing their reliance on nuclear weapons, U.S. nuclear policy, to include arms control and disarmament, must adhere to certain principles. First and foremost is the maintenance of a safe, secure, and credible nuclear deterrent, particularly for the purposes of extended nuclear deterrence. The TPNW’s attempts to asymmetrically disarm NATO looks particularly threatening from Warsaw, Tallin, and Tokyo. Disarmament and deterrence, therefore, will need to work in parallel, a familiar relationship; but given the rising nuclear threats, deterrence may need to take precedent for the foreseeable future.

Another priority must be strengthening and upholding the NPT. Stalled progress on disarmament should not equate to the collapse of the NPT. The United States and its allies and partners should focus on information sharing and accountability, so that all NPT States Parties have facts about why disarmament has slowed. Combatting Russian and Chinese disinformation on extended deterrence will also work towards strengthening the NPT, and towards this end in particular, the United States will need to do a better job of engaging and relationship-building with the Global South. The Biden administration made important initial steps in this direction. But the Global South has the potential to hold Russia and China accountable for their nuclear expansion and aggression. Many of these countries joined the TPNW on the grounds of wanting more agency, and NPT accountability is one opportunity for them to seize that agency.

A third priority for Washington will be maintaining NATO cohesion and unity. Alliance unity seems to have taken Moscow by surprise in the face of its 2022 invasion of Ukraine, and proved to be one of the strongest deterrence signals throughout the war. The TPNW’s ToC explicitly targets that unity by seeking to pressure national governments to abandon nuclear deterrence and participation in a nuclear alliance. A non-nuclear NATO is not an option in the face of Russian

319 Alexander Kmentt, “The Treaty Prohibiting Nuclear Weapons,” p. 5.

regional aggression, backed by nuclear threats. While the Alliance has remained strong in its nuclear mission and deterrence posture, this cannot be taken as a given in the coming years, particularly when the war in Ukraine ends. At such a time, TPNW supporters may increase their pressure drawing on heightened risks of nuclear use and domestic unease with rising defense spending. The United States will have to reassure allies and maintain NATO unity both in words and in deeds. A more challenging requirement will be listening and working closely with allies to understand and address their domestic pressures, which may require a shift in narrative or prioritization of nuclear risk reduction over time.

Relatedly, a fourth priority will need to be reducing the risks of nuclear use, particularly if the United States changes the size or makeup of its strategic arsenal. Risk reduction efforts can include cooperative efforts on crisis communication, exercise and launch notifications, or other transparency measures, and working through existing and new initiatives, such as those discussed in the bridgehead ToC in Chapter 5. Progress on risk reduction will be particularly important following the expiration of New START in February 2026. Supporters of the TPNW would be valuable partners in U.S. risk reduction efforts, such as by identifying risks associated with emerging technologies or the environmental risks of attacks on nuclear facilities.

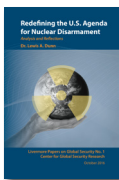
A final policy priority must be nuclear education and awareness. Nuclear weapons are likely to exist for decades to come. During that time, the world and the United States, in particular, will need well-trained experts to keep those weapons safe, secure, and effective. We will also need thought leaders to identify creative solutions for nuclear arms control and risk reduction amidst an era of geostrategic and technological uncertainty. We will need scientific expertise to continue to maintain nuclear weapons without a return to nuclear testing. And we will also need language experts prepared to re-engage in arms control dialogue when moments of opportunity arise.

This new generation of experts will also need awareness on the consequences of their jobs and the weapons they work on. The TPNW does not get a monopoly on humanitarian impacts discussions. Throughout all these policy efforts, the United States should remain open to engaging with TPNW supporters for the purposes of strengthening the NPT, cooperating to reduce risks of nuclear weapons, and for holding Russia and others accountable for manipulating nuclear risk for illegal regional ambitions. But perhaps the best opportunity for engaging with the TPNW is on nuclear education and awareness, and setting aside different political objectives and legal interpretations for the shared goal of making sure nuclear weapons are never used in warfare.

Ultimately, the TPNW is a product of its time. From 2012 when the first HINW conference was announced to 2021 when the Treaty entered into force was a decade of political and social upheaval. While the TPNW captured long-held views about the humanitarian impacts of nuclear weapons and frustration with lack of progress towards disarmament, the wider social and geopolitical environment were also permissive and favorable to the evolution and codification of something like a TPNW. As the environment changes, however, a fundamental question will be which principles endure and will facilitate the progression of the TPNW and which will be undermined and could challenge its relevance. The lesson of the TPNW should be one of miscommunication and well-intentioned people working at cross purposes. Both sides felt and continue to feel unheard. A new approach to disarmament, such as establishing a “bridgehead” or seriously engaging in discussion about emerging technologies and how they might disrupt and transform the existing nuclear order, might not only generate creative thinking about opportunities for progress but also bring together these two sides.

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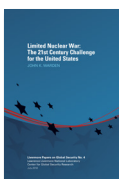
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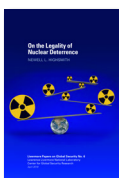
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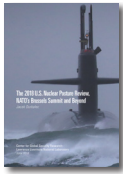
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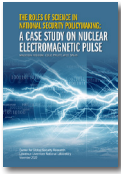


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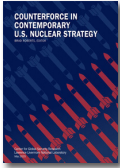


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Heather Williams has explained why bridgebuilding and finding overlapping purpose between the divergent theories of change in the nuclear policy arena is the only path forward for TPNW advocates and nuclear deterrence supporters alike. All of us are striving to reduce the risk of nuclear use. It is only through listening to each other and respecting and building upon our common concerns that any long-lasting progress can be achieved. ””

Mallory Stewart

Chief Executive Officer, Council on Strategic Risks