

A less perilous world

The Nobel Peace Prize and nuclear disarmament have a long association, starting with the 1959 award to Philip Noel-Baker, and subsequently in the awards to people and organisations in 1969, 1962, 1974, 1982, 1985, 1990, 1995 and 2005. International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War, Joseph Rotblat and Pugwash, and several others have received the prize over the years. This year's Peace prize to ICAN (International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons) comes at a time when the threat posed by nuclear weapons has been all too evident in the global crisis triggered by North Korea's nuclear programme. ICAN is a coalition of civil society groups and governments campaigning for total disarmament. Their prize was "for its work to draw attention to the catastrophic humanitarian consequences of any use of nuclear weapons and for its ground-breaking efforts to achieve a treaty-based prohibition of such weapons". Earlier this year, the Geneva-based group capped a decade of efforts for a n-ban with an international treaty that was negotiated and concluded at the United Nations.

The treaty will come into effect only when 50 nations have ratified it; so far, only a handful have done so. When it comes into force, it will be binding only on those who have ratified it. Predictably, none of the nine nuclear powers, including India and Pakistan, which between them possess nearly 15,000 warheads by ICAN's own estimation, associated themselves with the treaty or the negotiations at the UN leading up to it. It underlined that the treaty is likely to remain an aspiration for a long time, perhaps forever. Moreover, powerful strategic communities across the world, and especially in India and Pakistan, view the possession of nuclear weapons as deterrents to war.

Officially, India, holds up its commitment to a nuclear weapons-free world, but says there must be "universal, non-discriminatory and verifiable nuclear disarmament". It stayed away from the treaty citing the Conference of Disarmament as the right forum to negotiate a "step-by-step process" to achieve a nuclear weapons-free world. That seems almost unachievable. The Geneva-based CD works by consensus, and nuclear powers, including India and Pakistan, assemble there mainly to block each other. Still, the Nobel to ICAN is, at the very least, a snub to the nuclear powers. It has served to highlight that despite the growing influence of the nuclear deterrence school, the cause of disarmament is not easily dismissed.

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