

Between disarmament and deterrence

For the second time in the last decade, the Nobel Committee awarded its [annual peace prize](#) to the laudable goal of nuclear disarmament. This year's recipient, the [International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons](#) (ICAN), has worked tirelessly to raise awareness of nuclear dangers. The Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons they helped birth at the United Nations reflects the ambition of many states to rid the world of nuclear weapons. This should be an exciting time for disarmament supporters.

But civil society actors and governments concerned about disarmament should not be tempted to rest on the laurels of this achievement. If they are to make further progress, they must also focus on practical steps to reduce the risks of nuclear weapons being used. Without such work, the prohibition treaty risks becoming merely a moral victory, rather than contributing to concrete steps towards a world without nuclear weapons.

The Nobel Committee's choice reflects an awarding of ambition. As much as the prohibition treaty creates a legal basis for proscribing nuclear weapons among adhering states, it hasn't actually banned such weapons. Nuclear arsenals exist and will continue to exist for years to come. The treaty establishes no new mechanisms to encourage states with nuclear weapons to dismantle them. Instead, it seeks to delegitimise nuclear weapons as tools of statecraft on the grounds of indiscriminate humanitarian effects. Ironically, the Nobel Committee essentially rewarded the same ambition just eight years ago, [when it gave the prize to former U.S. President Barack Obama](#) for offering a vision of a world without nuclear weapons. These days, that vision seems especially remote.

Since 2009, when Mr. Obama won the prize, nuclear dangers have increased, as have nuclear arsenals in several states. It is rare to pick up a newspaper or browse Twitter without encountering hair-raising threats traded between Washington and Pyongyang, or between New Delhi and Islamabad. The nuclear prohibition movement has no doubt gained momentum thanks to the fear inspired by the idea of Kim Jong-un or Donald Trump with his finger poised over the nuclear launch button. But neither the advent of a nuclear prohibition treaty, nor the increase in nuclear dangers seems to have diminished the belief in nuclear deterrence by officials and many experts from the states possessing such weapons.

Without nuclear weapons, some argue, there would be more violence, not less. Great power wars not seen since 1945 could return, with catastrophic consequences. Regional wars could increase in frequency and lethality. It is little surprise that many of the states opposed to the prohibition treaty are located in Europe and East Asia, regions whose politics continue to be shaped by the trauma and outcome of the Second World War.

For states facing nuclear threats in particular, the logic of nuclear deterrence remains seductive. It is hardly surprising, for example, that opinion polls consistently show more than 60% of South Korean citizens supporting the idea of acquiring nuclear weapons in order to counter the growing nuclear threat from North Korea.

It is such international security problems that the current ban movement and the nuclear prohibition treaty have trouble addressing. States facing potentially existential threats find few alternatives to nuclear deterrence.

Many states will join the treaty in the hope that it will stigmatise nuclear weapons and shame nuclear weapon possessors into eventual nuclear disarmament. But many states will reject the treaty and continue to hope that nuclear weapons and alliances backed by them will guarantee

their security.

Indeed, states with nuclear weapons are now engaged in efforts to modernise their arsenals to be useful for decades to come. The U.S., for instance, is considering building smaller nuclear weapons to target buried facilities. Pakistan has tested nuclear weapons that could be deployed on the battlefield. Russia may be developing new, intermediate-range missiles in contravention of an arms control treaty with the U.S. India is deploying nuclear weapons on new submarines. China is fielding new long-range missiles with multiple nuclear warheads. North Korea is racing to test and field a scary array of nuclear missiles. None of the weapons possessors seems particularly concerned with the stigma created by the prohibition treaty.

For international civil society actors who support the objective of disarmament, this situation presents an uncomfortable choice. They can seek to increase the number of states that join the prohibition treaty, with the knowledge that the treaty itself is unlikely to produce disarmament. Or they can work to reduce sources of nuclear danger, with the knowledge that such efforts, in many ways, legitimise nuclear deterrence.

Though it is notionally possible to work both angles, in reality the prohibition and nuclear disarmament camps are so divided that it is difficult to find credible middle ground. As in all matters of faith — and, increasingly, politics — theological arguments about nuclear weapons tend to further divide rather than bridge these camps. But there are useful means to push both sides towards a safer world.

In states possessing nuclear weapons, civil society actors can challenge the most expansive and dangerous ideas that extend nuclear deterrence objectives to absurd ends. Sharp analysis can highlight the magical thinking offered by many nuclear weapons advocates to paper over flaws in logic or distract from improbable assumptions. It is useful to foster debate that forces policymakers to justify their investment in nuclear weapons. In such debates, it is possible to question whether expenditures on weapons that can't be used might instead have higher returns if directed towards ventures that create alternative means of international leverage or suasion — economic or international political power.

In states desiring to prohibit nuclear weapons, civil society actors can encourage actions and policies that aim to mitigate security threats that drive demand for nuclear weapons. One such important threat is further proliferation. Strengthening international institutions and mechanisms that prevent proliferation and enhance the credible peaceful uses of nuclear technology is a critical enabler of disarmament.

Success in expanding the middle ground between nuclear disarmament and nuclear deterrence will require the same ambition and idealism that drove the conclusion of the nuclear prohibition treaty. It will require innovation and perseverance to identify and promote mechanisms to reduce risks of nuclear use. And it will require building trust that states and civil society actors on either side of the debate share the objective of mutual security.

Maybe in the future, states, multilateral institutions and civil society actors who join such efforts will be recognised by the Nobel Committee for tangible achievements to reduce nuclear dangers.

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The new U.S. Fed Chairman is unlikely to opt for policies that might upset the President's plan

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