

A ban treaty as a transformative process for nuclear disarmament

Traditional disarmament

Agree
to give up
nukes, then
conclude treaty

Ban treaty approach

Conclude treaty as
means of persuasion
to give up nukes

Use
public
interest to drive
states to treaty

Use treaty to revive
public interest in
nuclear disarm-
ament

Nuclear-
armed states
lead process
(others spectate)

States without nukes
lead process (nuke-
armed states
react)

How it works

A treaty banning nuclear weapons, by which we mean a treaty that imposes a clear legal prohibition on nuclear weapons but which does not deal with the actual disarmament or verification process, is best viewed as a transformative diplomatic and political process, rather than as a traditional disarmament instrument. How does it work?

First, it turns the usual purpose of a treaty upside-down. Generally in multilateral diplomacy, countries will first agree upon some course of action, then codify their agreed obligations in a treaty. In contrast, the ban treaty is not an end, but a means: a tool that is designed to move nuclear-armed countries closer to agreement on nuclear disarmament, by building a norm that delegitimizes and stigmatizes nuclear weapons. The aim is not to get the nuclear-armed states to join the treaty, but to use the treaty to influence their motivations and behaviour.

Second, the ban treaty inverts the usual role of public interest and pressure. In many settings, mobilizing public opinion and media interest is the key to getting governments to move. But for the general public and the mass media, nuclear disarmament is a dead issue. So rather than hope to get public pressure to drive nuclear-armed governments to negotiate a

disarmament treaty, the ban treaty is designed to revive and re-ignite public interest by demonstrating that something can be done and that something is actually happening. So pursuing the treaty drives public interest, rather than the other way around.

Third, the ban treaty swaps the roles of the players, fundamentally realigning the incentives for action. A ban treaty is something that is driven by the states that do not have nuclear weapons. It thus transforms them from what has been aptly described as “moralizing spectators” into actors directly pursuing their own interests. Conversely, the nuclear-armed states will be cast into a reactive role, as opposed to rather unrealistically being expected to take the lead in changing a status quo from which they benefit.

Finally, the ban can be seen as an example of rapid prototyping followed by iterative improvement (as opposed to endlessly “polishing the specification”). The ban treaty itself does not result in disarmament: the treaty is a prototype which elicits a reaction, based upon which subsequent practical steps are designed. This contrasts with the current approach of waiting for the “right conditions” that would allow complex undertakings to be magically implemented.