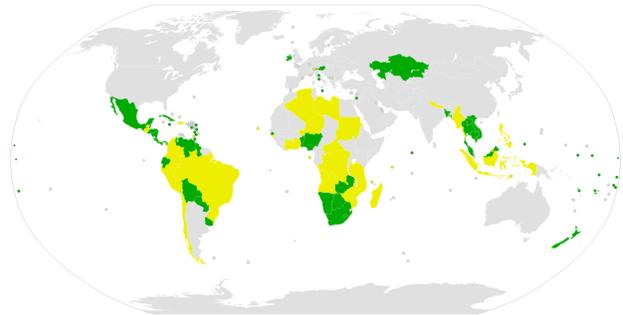


Will the Nuclear Powers Ever Be Willing to Forgo Their Nuclear Weapons?

Lawrence S. Wittner

Abstract: *This article examines the reluctance of nuclear-armed nations to divest themselves of their nuclear weapons. After the U.S. government produced and used nuclear weapons to obliterate Japanese cities in 1945, a nuclear arms race ensued among a limited number of nations. Although treaties, agreements, and unilateral actions eventually reduced the number of nuclear weapons in nuclear arsenals, this reversal in public policy was above all the result of massive popular pressure. However, with the decline of popular pressure, the nuclear arms race resumed. Despite the entry into force of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons in January 2021, signed thus far by 86 non-nuclear states and ratified or acceded to by 52, the nine nuclear powers have strongly resisted it. Although the Biden administration has begun initiatives to get nuclear disarmament back on track, these actions will fall short of producing the nuclear weapons-free world called for by the new treaty. Furthermore, given continuing international rivalries, it remains unclear whether even limited disarmament initiatives will proceed or will restrain the nuclear ambitions of the nuclear powers.*



Signatories and Parties to the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons

Parties Signatories

Two related events—the 75th anniversary of the January 24, 1946 [UN General Assembly Resolution 1](#) (which established a commission to plan for the abolition of nuclear weapons) and the January 22, 2021 entry into force of the [UN Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons](#) (designed to finally implement that goal)—should be a cause for worldwide celebration.

In fact, however, they are a cause for shame. The nine nuclear powers [have refused to sign the treaty](#) and, instead, today continue to engage in a nuclear arms race and to threaten nuclear war—a war capable of destroying virtually all life on earth..

This reckless pattern characterized the [nuclear arms race](#) that emerged out of World War II

and continued for decades. Shortly after the U.S. government used atomic bombs to obliterate the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in a bid to force Japan's surrender in the final days of the war, it made the fateful decision to retain its nuclear weapons monopoly and to develop an atomic arsenal. The Soviet government, in turn, rushed to produce its own nuclear weapons, as did the British. After the Soviet Union became a nuclear power in 1949, the U.S. government began a crash program to develop the hydrogen bomb, a weapon with vastly greater destructive power. And the Soviet and British governments were not far behind. In short order, they were followed by the French, the Chinese, the Israeli, and the South African governments, which succeeded in entering the nuclear club. Meanwhile, the world teetered dangerously close to nuclear war, particularly during violent conflicts that erupted over the fate of Korea, China, Vietnam, and Cuba.

But, in response to the nuclear danger, [upsurges of popular protest](#), led by peace and disarmament organizations, succeeded in reducing the likelihood of nuclear war. This activism not only helped stigmatize nuclear weapons and their military use, but fostered nuclear arms control treaties and unilateral actions that dramatically curbed nuclear testing, inhibited nuclear proliferation, and halted the growth of nuclear arsenals. Beginning with a [U.S.-Soviet-British moratorium on nuclear testing](#) in 1958, these measures included the [Partial Test Ban Treaty](#) of 1963 (which banned nuclear weapons testing in the atmosphere, in outer space, and under water), the [Non-Proliferation Treaty](#) of 1968 (an agreement by non-nuclear powers to forswear development of nuclear weapons and by nuclear powers to divest themselves of their nuclear weapons), the [Anti-Ballistic Missile \(ABM\) Treaty](#) of 1972 (which reduced the incentive to develop strategic ballistic missiles by prohibiting the deployment of anti-missile defenses), and the [SALT Treaties](#) of the 1970s

(which capped the production of strategic nuclear weapons).

In the late 1970s and 1980s, another [wave of mass antinuclear protest](#), the largest thus far, led to even more dramatic advances. Governments approved the [Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty](#) of 1987 (which banned all Soviet and U.S. intermediate-range nuclear and conventional ground-launched ballistic and cruise missiles), the two [Strategic Arms Reduction \(START\) Treaties](#) of the 1990s (which reduced the number of U.S. and Russian strategic nuclear warheads and delivery systems), and the [Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty](#) of 1996 (which banned all nuclear weapons testing).

Admittedly, [threats of attack](#) by nuclear-armed nations continued during the postwar decades, as did disastrous and near-disastrous [nuclear accidents](#). Furthermore, although the nuclear powers claimed that the significant reductions in their nuclear arsenals that they undertook satisfied their Non-Proliferation Treaty obligations to disarm, they did not, with the exception of [South Africa](#), fully disarm. But, overall, thanks to the advance of popular resistance and the accommodation to it by numerous governments, the level of nuclear danger declined and the world avoided nuclear attacks in the three quarters of a century since 1945.

Unfortunately, however, as the nuclear danger receded, particularly after the disintegration of the Soviet Union, [the nuclear disarmament campaign ebbed](#). As a result, government officials, no longer constrained by popular pressure, began to revert to their traditional behavior, based on the assumption that nuclear weapons promoted national "strength." India and Pakistan became nuclear powers. North Korea developed nuclear weapons. In the United States, Senate Republicans blocked ratification of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty in 1999, and the subsequent

administration of George W. Bush withdrew from the ABM Treaty and pressed hard to begin building “mini-nukes.”

Ascending to the presidency in 2009, Barack Obama made a dramatic attempt to rally the planet behind [the goal of building a nuclear-free world](#). But [neither Republican nor Russian leaders](#) liked the idea, and the best measures he could deliver were an [agreement with Iran](#) to forgo its development of nuclear weapons and the last of the major nuclear disarmament treaties, the [New START Treaty](#), which further reduced the number of Russian and U.S. strategic nuclear warheads, bombs, ICBMs, submarine-launched ballistic missiles, and nuclear bombers. And even that treaty came at a heavy price—an [agreement with Senate Republicans](#), whose support was necessary to secure treaty ratification, to back a major U.S. nuclear weapons “modernization” program.

After Donald Trump entered the White House, nuclear arms control and disarmament were no longer on the agenda—for the United States, and therefore, for the world. [Trump](#) not only failed to generate any new international constraints on nuclear weapons production or use, but withdrew the United States from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, the Iran nuclear agreement, and the Open Skies Treaty, three vital international measures restricting nuclear weapons development and use. Trump also failed to extend the New START Treaty, and—ignoring the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty—toyed with the resumption of U.S. nuclear testing. Nor did the other nuclear powers show much interest in retaining these agreements. Indeed, [the Russian government](#), after a brief, perfunctory protest at Trump’s destruction of the INF Treaty—a treaty that it had long privately deplored—immediately ordered the development of the once-prohibited missiles. [The Chinese government](#) said that, although it favored maintaining the treaty for the United States and Russia, it would not accept treaty

limits on its own much smaller arsenal of weapons.

Meanwhile, [all nine nuclear powers](#), instead of reducing the immense danger to the world from their possession of 13,400 nuclear weapons (91 percent of which are held by Russia and the United States), have been busily “modernizing” their nuclear forces and planning to retain them into the indefinite future. In December 2019, [the Russian government](#) announced the deployment of the world’s first hypersonic nuclear-capable missiles, which President Vladimir Putin boasted could bypass missile defense systems and hit almost any point on the planet. Indeed, the Russian president touted several new Russian nuclear weapons systems as ahead of their time. “Our equipment must be better than the world’s best if we want to come out as the winners,” [he explained](#).

Trump, always determined to emerge a “winner,” whatever the cost, [had publicly stated](#) in December 2016: “Let it be an arms race. We will outmatch them at every pass and outlast them all.” Consequently, expanding the earlier U.S. nuclear “modernization” plan to a [\\$2 trillion extravaganza](#), he set the course for the upgrading of older U.S. nuclear weapons and the development and deployment of a vast array of new ones. These include the development of a new intercontinental ballistic missile (at a cost of \$264 billion) and the production and deployment of a new submarine-launched ballistic missile warhead with a reduced yield that critics charge will make starting a nuclear war easier. Trump found [space weapons](#) particularly appealing. In May 2020, lauding the U.S. Space Force he had created to defeat America’s putative enemies, he bragged of developing “the most incredible weapons anyone’s ever seen.” The United States, he said, now had a “super-duper missile,” and it’s “17 times faster than what they have right now.”

The new U.S. nuclear weapons are designed to not only win the arms race, but to intimidate other nations and even “win” a nuclear war. Early in his administration, Trump publicly threatened to obliterate both [North Korea](#) and [Iran](#) through a nuclear onslaught. Similarly, North Korea’s [Kim Jong-un](#) has repeatedly threatened a nuclear attack upon the United States. Furthermore, the U.S. government has been engaging recently in a game of “[nuclear chicken](#)” with [China](#) and [Russia](#), dispatching fleets of nuclear bombers and nuclear warships dangerously close to their borders. Such provocative action is in line with the Trump administration’s [2018 Nuclear Posture Review](#), which expanded possibilities for displays of nuclear “resolve” and the first use of nuclear weapons. Subsequently, the Russian government also [lowered its threshold for initiating a nuclear war](#).

Even so, there are rays of light in this rather gloomy picture. The first is that public opinion supports building a nuclear weapons-free world. Opinion surveys—ranging from polls in [21 nations worldwide](#) during 2008 to recent polls in [Europe](#), [Japan](#), the [United States](#), and [Australia](#) (that is, in both nuclear weapons states and nuclear weapons-free states)—have shown that large majorities (or, much less frequently, large pluralities) of people in all the nations surveyed favor the abolition of nuclear weapons by international agreement. Although the public has not been effectively mobilized for decades against nuclear catastrophe, the potential for popular mobilization is clearly substantial. Moreover, given the efficacy in the past of popular resistance to nuclear weapons and nuclear war, there are certainly possibilities for harnessing this public sentiment for future political action.



Click on the image above to see the full text of Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons

Furthermore, most government leaders of the [non-nuclear powers](#), which constitute a large majority of the world’s nations, have become fed up with the refusal of the nuclear powers to divest themselves of their nuclear weapons. And this has finally led them, in an alliance with peace and nuclear disarmament organizations, to craft and bring to fruition the UN Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW). Admittedly, non-nuclear nations under the “nuclear umbrella” of a nuclear power, such as Germany and Japan, have not—at least so far—broken ranks with their nuclear patron. But it remains possible that one or more NATO members, embarrassed by being out of step with most of the world’s nations and with their own publics, will decide to ratify the TPNW, which could open the floodgates to similar action by others.

Finally, there are some government officials in the nuclear weapons states who possess an

understanding of nuclear dangers, a receptivity to popular pressure, and a sensitivity to the views of other nations. Therefore, even if they are not ready at this time to publicly support the TPNW, they do seem willing to press forward with nuclear arms control and disarmament policies.

The prospects for changes in nuclear policy seem particularly promising in the Biden administration. As a [long-time supporter of nuclear arms control](#) and disarmament agreements—as well as a [sharp critic](#) of the Trump administration’s nuclear policies during the 2020 presidential campaign—the new U.S. president will probably advance measures dealing with nuclear issues that differ significantly from those of his predecessor. Although his ability to secure U.S. ratification of new treaties will be severely limited by Senate Republicans, [he can](#) (and there are indications that he probably will) use executive action to re-sign the Open Skies Treaty, block the U.S. production and deployment of particularly destabilizing nuclear weapons, and [reduce the budget](#) for nuclear “modernization.” He might even declare a [no first use policy](#) and unilaterally reduce the U.S. nuclear arsenal.

Indeed, the Biden administration has already begun taking action. In an apparent first installment on the new president’s nuclear arms control and disarmament agenda, Biden informed Putin within a week of taking office that he was willing to [extend the New START Treaty](#) for five years. Putin, delighted, immediately accepted, and the [Russian parliament voted unanimously](#) to approve the treaty extension. As the original New START Treaty enables a U.S. president to extend it without U.S. Senate ratification, this previously stalled nuclear weapons issue was resolved in record time. Moreover, when Biden declared his willingness to extend the treaty, he called for further negotiations with Russia to reduce

the nuclear arsenals of the two nations. In addition, Biden administration officials are [ready to restore U.S. participation](#) in the 2015 Iran nuclear agreement, pending only a renewal of Iranian compliance with it.

[Key players on Biden’s national security team](#), in fact, seem ready to promote a major overhaul of U.S. nuclear policy. Given their antinuclear sentiments and history, predicts Joseph Cirincione, until recently the president of the peace-oriented Ploughshares Foundation, “this is going to be quite a show.” Bonnie Jenkins, nominated as undersecretary of state for arms control and international security, recently publicly argued for a no first use policy. Sasha Baker (the former national security adviser to Senator Elizabeth Warren, a leading proponent of nuclear weapons reductions), has become head of strategic planning for the National Security Council (NSC). According to Darryl Kimball, executive director of the Arms Control Association, “she is probably the person who’s going to rewrite the national security strategy.”

Several important players in shaping nuclear weapons policy for the Biden administration come from the Center for Arms Control and Non-Proliferation, the research arm of the Council for a Livable World, which has long been devoted to opposing nuclear weapons and working for their elimination. They include Alexandra Bell (the Center’s policy director, who has been appointed deputy assistant secretary of state in the Bureau of Arms Control, Verification and Compliance), Leonor Tomero (a former director of the think tank), who will oversee nuclear and missile defense programs for the undersecretary of defense for policy), and Mallory Stewart (a member of the Center’s board, who is the new senior director for arms control, disarmament and nonproliferation on the National Security

Council. John Tierney, the Center’s executive director, called their new influence over U.S. policy “a tremendous win for . . . every person on the planet who believes a world free from nuclear threats is possible.”

But will conflict among the nuclear powers over other issues derail these opportunities for rolling back the nuclear menace? That’s certainly possible. During the final year of the Trump administration, U.S.-China relations sharply deteriorated—so much so that the two nations, possessing the world’s most powerful economies and military forces, seemed on the road to war. Their conflict grew particularly intense in connection with control over islands in the [South China Sea](#), with both nations deploying warships and brandishing nuclear weapons. Trade wars, arguments over the status of Taiwan, China’s crackdown on its Uighur minority and on democracy protests in Hong Kong, and Trump’s scapegoating of China for the Covid-19 pandemic also [fueled the crisis](#). In July 2020, [U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo](#) threw down the gauntlet, issuing an inflammatory, public denunciation of China’s policies and proclaiming that “the free world will triumph over this new tyranny.”

This geopolitical conflict between the two nuclear-armed nations might well persist during the Biden administration. China’s president, [Xi Jinping](#), resisting compromise with nations criticizing China’s behavior, has insisted upon his nation taking a more assertive course in world affairs. Nor do Biden’s top foreign and military policy advisers seem likely to accept it. Addressing a Senate committee on January 19, 2021, [Antony Blinken](#), nominated as Biden’s secretary of state, said that China posed the most serious challenge to the United States of any nation and stated his agreement with Trump’s tough approach toward China. Eight days later, in his first press conference

after taking office, [Blinken](#) tactfully pointed to potential “cooperative” areas of the U.S.-China relationship, but nonetheless maintained that, “increasingly, that relationship has some adversarial aspects to it.” [Jake Sullivan](#), Biden’s new national security advisor, warned in May 2020 that China was “pursuing global dominance,” while [General Lloyd Austin](#), Biden’s secretary of defense, told the Senate Armed Services Committee that he would “further focus the Department on China,” including “investing to maintain our technological advantage and developing new concepts and capabilities to counter China across the spectrum of conflict.”

Consequently, unless these kinds of international conflicts among the nuclear powers can be resolved, the prospects for substantial nuclear disarmament will remain limited and nuclear war will remain an option.

Of course, even if all the Biden arms control and disarmament programs—in process, promised, or hoped for—are implemented, they would not be sufficient to end the existential danger of nuclear war. Supporting the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons remains conspicuously absent from the Biden administration’s agenda, as it is from the agendas of all the other nuclear powers. Nor, even if the treaty were acceptable to the administration, does Biden have the ability to push it through the U.S. Senate, where it would require a two-thirds vote for ratification. But implementation of the administration’s more limited arms control and disarmament measures would provide an important step toward terminating the nuclear powers’ disgraceful evasion of their responsibility to safeguard human survival.

Lawrence Wittner is Professor of History Emeritus at SUNY/Albany and the author of the award-winning scholarly trilogy, *The Struggle Against the Bomb* and its abbreviated version, *Confronting the Bomb* — both published by Stanford University Press.