

Earlier this week in Oslo, the 2017 Nobel Peace Prize was officially [given](#) to the [International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons](#) (ICAN), a global campaign that was launched in Melbourne in 2007.

ICAN lobbied to establish a special [UN working group](#) on nuclear disarmament, campaigned for the UN General Assembly's December 2016 [resolution](#) to launch negotiations on a prohibition treaty, and was an active presence at the UN conference that negotiated the treaty.

Read more: [How Melbourne activists launched a campaign for nuclear disarmament and won a Nobel prize](#)

Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull failed to congratulate the Australian faces of ICAN, adding to the growing body of evidence of his flawed political judgement.

There were no political downsides to phoning ICAN, noting the difference of opinion on the timing and means to effective nuclear disarmament, but warmly congratulating ICAN for the global recognition of its noble efforts to promote nuclear peace.

Out of step with the global nuclear order

The global nuclear order has been regulated and nuclear policy directions set by the [Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty](#) (NPT) since 1968.

The 2015 [Iran nuclear deal](#) and North Korea's unchecked nuclear and missile delivery [advances](#)

show the benefits and limitations of the NPT respectively.

The transparency, verification and consequences regime mothballed [Iran's bomb-making program](#) by enforcing its NPT non-proliferation obligations. These will remain legally binding even after the deal expires in 2030.

By contrast, the crisis over North Korea's nuclear program has intensified within the NPT framework. Heightened geopolitical tensions in Europe, the Middle East and south and east Asia have further stoked nuclear fears. Meanwhile the NPT-recognised five [nuclear weapon states](#) have no plan to abolish their nuclear arsenals.

Frustrated by the stubborn resistance of the nuclear weapon states to honour their NPT commitment to nuclear disarmament and alarmed by rising nuclear threats, on July 7 this year, 122 countries adopted a UN treaty to [stigmatise and ban the bomb](#).

The nine nuclear powers and all the NATO and Pacific allies who shelter under US extended nuclear deterrence dismissed the treaty as impractical, ineffective and dangerous.

Critics allege the treaty is a distraction that ignores international security realities, will damage the NPT, and could generate fresh pressures to weaponisation in some umbrella nations. Nuclear deterrence has kept the peace in Europe and the Pacific for seven decades.

They will argue that the ban treaty undermines strategic stability, jeopardises nuclear peace, and makes the world more unpredictable. It ignores the critical limitations of international institutions for overseeing and guaranteeing abolition and has polarised the international community.

Australia still under the US nuclear umbrella

The ban treaty is not compatible with nuclear sharing by NATO allies whereby nuclear weapons

are stationed on their territory, nor with Australia's policy of relying on US nuclear weapons for national security and nuclear-related co-operation with the US through the shared [Pine Gap](#) asset.

In a period of power transition in which China's geopolitical footprint is [growing](#) while the US strategic footprint recedes, reliance on the security and political roles of US nuclear weapons by Australia, Japan and South Korea has increased, not diminished.

The most strident criticisms of the diplomatic insurgency have come from France, UK and US, while Australia has been among “[the most outspoken of the non-nuclear states](#)”.

Read more: [Australia's stance on nuclear deterrence leaves it on the wrong side of history](#)

Australia's preferred approach does not challenge the social purposes and value of nuclear weapons nor question the legality and legitimacy of these weapons and the logic and practice of nuclear deterrence. It leaves nuclear agency entirely in the hands of the possessor states, accepting that they can safely manage nuclear risks by appropriate adjustments to warhead numbers, nuclear doctrines and force postures.

To critics, the nuclear powers are not so much possessor as possessed countries. Within the security paradigm, nuclear weapons are national assets for the possessor countries individually. In the ban treaty's humanitarian reframing, they are a collective international hazard.

The known humanitarian consequences of any future use makes the very possibility of nuclear war unacceptable. Dispossession of nuclear weapons removes that future possibility. Stigmatisation and prohibition are normative steps on the path to nuclear disarmament.

The nuclear weapons states have instrumentalised the NPT to legitimise their own indefinite possession of nuclear weapons while enforcing non-proliferation on anyone else pushing to join their exclusive club. For them, the problem is who has the bomb.

But increasingly, the bomb itself is the problem.

A circuit breaker

The ban treaty is a circuit-breaker in the search for a dependable, rules-based security order outside the limits of what the nuclear-armed countries are prepared to accept.

The step-by-step approach adopts a transactional strategy to move incrementally without disturbing the existing security order. The ban treaty's transformative approach transcends the limitations imposed by national and international security arguments.

For Australia, nuclear disarmament is of lower priority than bolstering and indefinitely sustaining the legitimacy and credibility of nuclear deterrence. In its view, the ban treaty will neither promote nuclear disarmament nor strengthen national security.

Read more: [*Three good reasons to worry about Trump having the nuclear codes*](#)

Australia's instinct is to support incremental, verifiable and enforceable agreements and commitments. There is no detailed framework for actual elimination, verification and enforcement.

The [Foreign Policy White Paper](#) repeats the familiar mantra that a complex security environment requires a patient and pragmatic approach. It simply ignores the adoption of the ban treaty, pretending it does not exist.

Australia should join global efforts to ban the bomb

The [UN Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons](#) is a good faith effort by 122 countries to act on their NPT responsibility to take effective measures on nuclear disarmament.

A constructive approach would be for Australia to lead a collaborative effort with like-minded countries like Canada, Japan and Norway to explore strategic stability at low numbers of nuclear weapons and the conditions for serious and practical steps towards nuclear disarmament.

Instead, Australia has chosen to join the nattering nabobs of negativism.

Ramesh Thakur does not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organisation that would benefit from this article, and has disclosed no relevant affiliations beyond their academic appointment.

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