

## **Far From a Done Deal: Europe and the Nuclear Ban Treaty**

**Article by Olamide Samuel**

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In a rare moment in foreign policy, nuclear politics was thrown into the limelight as the nuclear ban treaty entered into force in January 2021, signalling renewed momentum for non-proliferation and disarmament. Although the number of nuclear weapons is at the lowest it has been in the last 50 years, stockpiles globally are beginning to grow once more and European countries mostly ignored the multilateral effort to ban the bomb. For Green parties, building momentum for disarmament from the treaty depends on formulating new answers to the sources of insecurity and instability Europe faces.

As the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons begins to entrench a global norm against nuclear weapons, the fast-rising Green movement in Europe will imminently arrive at a crossroads where their guiding principles of environmental responsibility, extending justice, inclusive democracy and non-violence, will stand in stark contrast with the foreign policy ramifications of their projected electoral gains. One area where this contrast would be most pronounced would be the issue of nuclear weapons.

The prospect of a world free of nuclear weapons has been one of humanity's long-standing preoccupations since the dawn of the atomic age. Looking back at the very first United Nations General Assembly resolution in 1946, which called for the "control of atomic energy to the extent necessary to ensure its use only for peaceful purposes" further requiring "the elimination from national armaments of atomic weapons", two things are clear. First, that this aspiration embodies the anxieties of an overwhelming majority of states that would rather see one of humanity's most phenomenal discoveries, reserved for peaceful scientific exploration. Second, that the espousal of this aspiration within the United Nations system, points to our collective faith in the prospects of achieving nuclear disarmament through multilateral frameworks.

### **An exhausted bargain**

The Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), which came into force in 1970, has since been the cornerstone of the global non-proliferation and disarmament order. Five nuclear weapons states – the United States, the United Kingdom, France, China, and Russia – have temporarily retained the rights to possess nuclear weapons, while other non-nuclear weapons states have more or less refrained from acquiring them. This arrangement was reached to ensure that non-nuclear weapons states could access nuclear technologies for peaceful uses, whilst according to Article VI of the treaty, nuclear weapons states remained legally obliged "to pursue negotiations in good faith on effective measures relating to cessation of the nuclear arms race" and to nuclear (general and complete)

disarmament.

*Nuclear weapons in Europe merely reflect the entrenchment of long-standing great power political rivalry.*

This arrangement under the non-proliferation treaty has mostly been a successful endeavour if one takes a purely quantitative approach. True to the promise of eliminating atomic weapons from national armaments, the number of nuclear weapons has steadily declined, and at roughly 13,500, are at the lowest they have ever been in the past 50 years. Only four states (India, Pakistan, Israel, and North Korea) went on to acquire nuclear weapons outside the non-proliferation treaty regime, and we have not witnessed the use of nuclear weapons in conflict since Hiroshima and Nagasaki. However, the perennial, attendant horrors of nuclear weapons use, testing, uranium extraction, have illustrated the considerable breadth of issues not directly governed by the NPT. The persistent failure of nuclear weapons states to specify how they would achieve verifiable, enforceable, and irreversible nuclear disarmament has also been a source of sustained anxiety, which has reaffirmed suspicions that nuclear weapon states will never honour their disarmament obligations couched in the non-proliferation treaty's "grand bargain". Even the staunchest disarmament advocates have had their optimism blunted by nuclear weapons states' vast investments into nuclear weapons modernisation programmes, persistent arms racing, and geopolitical rivalries in a steadily deteriorating security environment.

At the state level, nuclear politics appears to be the antithesis of green democratic principles that value open, sustainable, just, and feminist ordering of society. The opposite of open, because the securitisation of nuclear weapons policy has occurred to such an extent that it has been far removed from the functioning of "ordinary" politics and sequestered into realms cloaked in opacity and secrecy. The opposite of sustainable, because the foundational logic of deterrence has never evolved beyond crisis containment; it is persistently bogged down in the ad-hoc closing of pathways towards nuclear use, instead of evolving towards more structural and long-term approaches to nuclear risk reduction. The opposite of just, because the nuclear enterprise fails to acknowledge the negative and lasting impact of uranium mining and nuclear testing on individuals and societies (particularly in the global south) which were subjected to them. The opposite of feminist as it is a hypermasculine sphere of politics that has been particularly allergic to the equitable representation of interests across genders.

## **Disarmament so green**

Yet, true to the ideals of green politics, the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (nuclear ban treaty), championed by advocates for social and remedial justice, is founded on core humanitarian principles. The treaty proposes the implementation of positive obligations and is determined to entrench and strengthen the norm against nuclear weapons and the associated enterprise. Reflecting the overwhelming support from grassroots campaigning, the proponents of the nuclear ban treaty leveraged the organisation of active and diverse communities around the world to push for states' explicit

recognition of the humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons, and challenge the morality of their retention and potential use.

Of particular interest was the 2010 NPT review conference, where state parties expressed “deep concern at the catastrophic humanitarian consequences of any use of nuclear weapons.” In many ways, this recognition was the catalyst for the International Committee of the Red Cross’s subsequent calls to adopt a legally binding agreement that would prohibit and eliminate nuclear weapons. Grassroot organisers coalesced around the humanitarian initiative, which the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear weapons (ICAN) spearheaded through several UNGA resolutions and humanitarian conferences from 2012 to 2015. These efforts culminated in UNGA Resolution L.41 and a United Nations conference to negotiate a legally binding instrument to prohibit nuclear weapons. The nuclear ban treaty was the result of the United Nations conference.

It was adopted on 7 July 2017 and entered into force on 21 January 2021. Signatories to the nuclear ban treaty are prohibited from participating in any nuclear weapons activities including the development, testing, production, acquisition, possession, stockpiling, using, or threatening to use nuclear weapons. The treaty goes further to outlaw the placement of nuclear weapons on the territories of signatories and obliges them to offer adequate assistance to individuals affected by the use or testing of nuclear weapons. A strong connection to environmentalism can be found in the nuclear ban treaty’s charge to signatories to take “necessary and appropriate measures of environmental remediation of areas so contaminated” due to the testing and use of nuclear weapons and nuclear explosive devices.

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The connections between the nuclear ban treaty and green politics go beyond implications of ideological synergy. In fact, European Greens council resolutions highlight the long-standing support for a nuclear ban, a rejection of nuclear weapons as instruments of national coercion, a rejection of nuclear sharing in Europe and NATO’s strategic concept, active support for the conferences on the humanitarian impact of nuclear weapons. Greens facilitated a Europe-wide alignment campaign for all governments to sign and ratify the nuclear ban, including for municipal and regional governments to align to the treaty.

On the other hand, the nuclear ban treaty has been persistently opposed by all nuclear armed states and their security alliances. Most recently, NATO in December 2020 claimed that the ban treaty will “not result in the elimination of a single nuclear weapon.” Members of the alliance have either expressed opposition to the treaty or distanced themselves from it, favouring the step-by-step approach instead. Nonetheless, the nuclear ban treaty serves as the legal expression of the many – that nuclear weapons and the reliance on deterrence are incompatible with, and ethically unacceptable in societies that value ecological and political sustainability.

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### **READ & ORDER**

In recent years, Greens have witnessed a significant surge in Europe, where they are part of governing coalitions in Austria, Belgium, Finland, Ireland, Luxembourg, and Sweden. And in these countries, there is a case to be made for the correlation between the Greens' increased political influence, and the potency of support for the ban treaty. For example, Austria and Ireland are already signatories to the ban.

In Germany, Green politics was accelerated due to the gains made by the peace movement against the bomb. And more recently, the Greens' projected electoral gains (where they are already well represented in governing coalitions in 11 of 16 German states), might also strengthen the prospect of more conspicuous translation of their ideals into policy. Considerable success in Germany, would also usher in a new political era for Europe. The Greens are now increasingly perceived as more "pragmatist" and "centrist" - and their gradual socialisation into decision making roles on the continent draw them ever closer to the concerns of foreign policy. A time is soon coming where the Greens will no longer be protesting outsiders on hard foreign policy questions concerning security and nuclear policy - one where Green support for nuclear disarmament will have to produce concrete practices that will contend with and supersede more established practices of strategic balancing founded on the logic of nuclear deterrence. The expectation is that they practice what they preach, once elected in considerable numbers.

### **In the driver's seat**

In this new era of increased decision making responsibilities, and amid rallying calls for a more "democratic" Europe, it will be crucial that the Greens continue to move in lockstep with their grassroots supporters to correct what has been perceived as a longstanding "democratic deficit" [read more in our [series](#) on the future of Europe] that undermine "*Schicksalsgemeinschaft*" (community of fate) at the European level, on a host of pertinent issues. One can reasonably expect that the Greens would continue to champion "freedom through self-determination" as per the [guiding principles](#) adopted in 2006. But bringing in the nuclear dimension, how then might a Green-led Europe assuage the legitimate security concerns of eastern and central European countries in light of Russia's strategic interests which are at odds with individual and collective political autonomy, whilst responding to the [overwhelming majorities](#) in Western European countries where the Greens are stronger in support of signing the nuclear ban treaty (with majorities of 64 per cent in Belgium, 68 per cent in Germany, 70 per cent in Italy, 62 per cent in the Netherlands)?

How might they navigate questions of legitimacy and accountability, when the EU's 2016 [parliamentary resolution](#) calling for EU member states to "support the convening" and "participate substantively" in the negotiation of the nuclear ban treaty, went largely ignored by EU member states' missions at the United Nations? Given the [increased nuclearisation](#) and force projection of the alliance, seen in the warhead cap increase programmes in the [United Kingdom](#) and the [United States](#), how might continued NATO contributions of 2 per cent of GDP be balanced with "climate-compatible" defence, which stymies the chances of reaching targets of less than 2 degrees Celsius of warming?

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The difficulties posed by these questions are but a few of the conundrums that will have to be navigated in practice, at some point in the near future. These questions also illuminate a considerable paradox. On the one hand, the Greens have retained their pacifist, anti-war stance on the issue of nuclear disarmament because it enjoys robust political support in local politics. It is a simple and unambiguous solution to the problem of nuclear weapons which have caused genuine and widespread anxiety. The idea that the abandonment of these violent, immoral, and uncivilised weapons of mass destruction is the only prerequisite to lasting peace, is an idea that transcends the circuitous issues of strategic balancing and military hedging – issues that have only stood in the way of the wishes of the many. It is an idea that appeals to the saner, fairer, more altruistic portions of human reasoning. On the other hand, implementation of nuclear disarmament in practice raises uncomfortable questions that might steer green politics away from the idea that the weapons in and of themselves are the principal sources of insecurity and instability. The fact is, nuclear weapons in Europe merely reflect the entrenchment of long-standing great power political rivalry. Looking at the European strategic landscape, proposals for immediate (unilateral or multilateral) disarmament will have to be accompanied by sustainable solutions to the existing political and territorial disputes (and conventional capabilities) that have been ordered around a reliance on nuclear weapons for far too long. These existing disputes and capabilities can no longer be discounted as residual sources of tensions in a disarmed system, given that they may very well provide incentives for rearmament if left to spiral out of control.

Dealing with this paradox in a more democratic Europe would require the collective definition and sharing of the problem within a continental *demos*. It would require systematic engagement with the 27 *demoi*, but also with the United States, Russia, and other interests that contour the European security landscape. It would require the choreographed ordering of confidence-building and demobilisation efforts, in a manner that will not dangerously expose Europe to opportunistic cheating. And yet, it would also require the maintenance of perceptions that real progress (not systematic lip-service) towards disarmament is being made, as this expectedly time-intensive process is underway. But all these must be achieved, and its momentum sustained, even as the intelligibility of the process becomes so increasingly detailed and sophisticated that it fails to register in public political debate, as the idealistic lustre becomes corrupted by “step-by-step” stakeholder engagements, and as the marginal electoral benefits from the nuclear disarmament issue becomes less of a motivational factor. And it is at that point, much like today, that independent advocates for disarmament will have to serve as interlocutors between the grassroots and high politics, to preserve the momentum, intelligibility, and legitimacy of the disarmament enterprise.

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