

# Why States Don't Sign (Yet): Treaty Politics and the Future of the Nuclear Ban

**By Morgan LaValley** | Opinion

This past February, delegates and representatives from all over the world gathered to discuss the prohibition of nuclear weapons, for good. They met in New York at the United Nations headquarters for the third Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) meeting. The TPNW has been signed by almost every state that does not have nuclear weapons, but the states that do have nuclear weapons have declined to sign. The effectiveness of the TPNW relies on those states with nuclear weapons to become signatories, as that will increase the legitimacy of prohibiting nuclear weapons. This article argues that while full ratification may not be feasible in the short term, the TPNW remains vital in shaping global nuclear norms.

The TPNW is a treaty developed by non-nuclear states as a form of defense against the nuclear states, which refuse to disarm. The Nuclear Proliferation Treaty (NPT) was established and signed by all nuclear-weapon states. Many states without nuclear weapons feel that the NPT is not enough, which is why those states without nuclear weapons developed the TPNW in hopes of eventually outlawing those weapons.

As Charli Carpenter points out, since the development of the TPNW, tensions and “brinkmanship” have been growing exponentially between countries with nuclear arsenals. These conflicts have brought new life into the argument against nuclear weapons, as many believe a ban on nuclear weapons would be beneficial for international security.

The success of this treaty is not solely reliant on the ratification by nuclear states, but on the dissemination of the norm against nuclear weapon usage. Norms can generate enough resistance to eventually push for global shifts. As Tannenwald explained, the Geneva Convention and its ratification were brought about by a civil group, the ICRC, not a state. The

norm generated enough support for universal ratification, which could be the case for the TPNW.<sup>1 2</sup>

As the world faces international conflict, it is important to have a strong stance on nuclear weapons to avoid humanitarian disasters. We have seen the damage created by the use of such weapons, and we know the only way to truly avoid another catastrophe is to ban their usage. This begs the question as to why states that have nuclear weapons and pose the highest risk for international conflict refuse to sign the treaty.

Morrow argues that regime type and enforceability are the greatest factors in treaty signatories. He states that democracies in general are more likely to sign treaties, but only when those treaties are enforceable and can ensure reciprocity from other states. A powerful democracy will not sign a treaty that is not enforceable and that cannot ensure cooperation from a non-signatory state. While democracies may be more likely to sign or push for universal treaties, they are more likely to violate norms when there is no law behind them. Hence why the TPNW is so important.<sup>3</sup>

When there are strong movements behind new treaties or norm developments, they often become institutionalized through framing. Schneiker's critique of norm saboteurs and entrepreneurs shows that by framing an issue through a moral obligation or humanitarian lens, you can often influence states to comply with societal views. As we continue to see violent conflict on the international stage, we may see a rise in public discontent that nuclear weapons are even available during such an unstable time.<sup>4 5</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Matthew Evangelista and Nina Tannenwald, "Assessing the Effects and Effectiveness of the Geneva Conventions," essay, in *Do the Geneva Conventions Matter?* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017), 1–34. [https://umass-my.sharepoint.com/personal/charli\\_umass\\_edu/Documents/CLASSES/RULES%20OF%20WAR%20CLASS/Sharepoint%20Readings%20for%20Rules%20of%20](https://umass-my.sharepoint.com/personal/charli_umass_edu/Documents/CLASSES/RULES%20OF%20WAR%20CLASS/Sharepoint%20Readings%20for%20Rules%20of%20)

<sup>2</sup> Carpenter, Charli. 2025. "The Nuclear Weapons Ban Treaty Matters Now More than Ever." *World Politics Review*. February 26, 2025. <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/nuclear-weapons-ban-treaty-tpnw/>.

<sup>3</sup> MORROW, JAMES D. "When Do States Follow the Laws of War?" *American Political Science Review* 101, no. 3 (2007): 559–72. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S000305540707027X>.

<sup>4</sup> Schneiker, Andrea. Norm Sabotage: Conceptual Reflection on a Phenomenon That Challenges Well-Established Norms, *International Studies Perspectives*, Volume 22, Issue 1, February 2021, Pages 106–123, <https://doi.org/10.1093/isp/ekaa003>

<sup>5</sup> Vaughn P. Shannon, "Norms Are What States Make of Them: The Political Psychology of Norm Violation," *International Studies Quarterly* 44, no. 2 (June 2000): 293–316, <https://doi.org/10.1111/0020-8833.00159>.

By rooting the issue in humanitarian concerns, the TPNW can generate a broader appeal. As Tannenwald and Evangelista explain, historically, norms that focus on environmental, civilian, and fiscal costs tend to generate more standing amongst the public. Especially in democratic countries where public opinion is central in government.<sup>6</sup>

The road to an international community that is nuclear-free is not simple or quick. Norms can alter the face of the legal landscape, and even when powerful states resist, norms can persevere. While the current norm against nuclear weapons may not be enough, I believe that by pushing for the universal ratification of the TPNW, we can strengthen the norm enough to stand against future nuclear conflict.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> Matthew Evangelista and Nina Tannenwald, "Assessing the Effects and Effectiveness of the Geneva Conventions," essay, in *Do the Geneva Conventions Matter?* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017), 1–34. [https://umass-my.sharepoint.com/personal/charli\\_umass\\_edu/Documents/CLASSES/RULES%20OF%20WAR%20CLASS/Sharepoint%20Readings%20for%20Rules%20of%20](https://umass-my.sharepoint.com/personal/charli_umass_edu/Documents/CLASSES/RULES%20OF%20WAR%20CLASS/Sharepoint%20Readings%20for%20Rules%20of%20)

<sup>7</sup> Poast, Paul. 2024. "A World Free of Nuclear Weapons Is More Aspirational than Realistic." *World Politics Review*. October 18, 2024. <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/nuclear-weapons-nobel-peace-prize/>.