

Disarmament while the chance remains

By Mustafa Kibaroglu, February 22, 2017

Here's the question I can't help but ask as I read through this roundtable, including some readers' responses to it: What's so wrong with discussing a nuclear weapon ban treaty?

This seemingly simple question can be understood in at least two ways. First, it's a reaction to certain critics of the ban treaty initiative who believe that the initiative has little chance of forcing disarmament and therefore is a futile waste of time.

Well, when you get right down to it, does anyone use his or her time in the most effective way possible, at all times, throughout life? Probably not! So how come engaging in intellectual discussion about a nuclear weapon ban treaty is an especially egregious waste of time?

Imagine for a second, even if you find it difficult, a world from which nuclear weapons have vanished. Imagine a world in which no country can bully its neighbors with nuclear threats; no nation can act with impunity simply because it possesses a nuclear arsenal; and no terrorist organization can acquire sophisticated nuclear weapons or the material necessary to build a crude nuclear device. Would such a world be a better place to live? Probably so!

So what's wrong with dreaming of a world without nuclear weapons and their associated dangers? Nothing is wrong with it! It doesn't cost anyone anything.

Even if others characterize it as a waste of precious time, I'm willing to invest some of my own time in this "futile" exercise of pursuing disarmament. Throughout history, many "futile" exercises have ultimately achieved their objectives. My roundtable colleague Joellen Pretorius has provided the excellent example of the 19th-century campaign to abolish slavery. In those days, ending human bondage seemed no less hopeless a cause than nuclear disarmament seems in the 21st century!

Now for the second reason that I ask what's so wrong with discussing a nuclear weapon ban treaty—it's a way of pointing out that critiques of the ban treaty initiative often encompass issues bearing little

relation to the treaty itself. One such critique involves the ban treaty's purported negative implications for existing arms control and disarmament arrangements.

When the UN First Committee voted in October to convene negotiations this year on a "legally binding instrument to prohibit nuclear weapons, leading towards their total elimination," it interfered in no way with the implementation of existing arms control and disarmament structures. If a ban treaty is indeed negotiated and approved, it will mean only that the time for negotiating a ban treaty was ripe—not that the treaty would be imposed on parties to existing treaties by aliens from outer space! Criticizing the ban treaty over the harm it would allegedly cause to existing arms control and disarmament structures only demonstrates how hard it is to find convincing arguments against the treaty initiative.

Even worse weapons? In her third essay, my colleague Polina Sinovets argued that "If humanity gets rid of the Bomb, it ... may not be a good thing." She believes that "The world could return ... to the old, familiar search for an 'ultimate weapon.'" According to Sinovets, because nuclear disarmament could lead to the emergence of even worse weapons, it's better to be satisfied with the weapons we already have.

I disagree. A graph showing advancements in military technology through human history might show a slowly ascending curve—until the advent of nuclear weapons, at which time the curve would begin to exhibit a steep slope. Therefore one should expect worse weapons to come—unless a ban treaty can halt the production, stockpiling, and use of nuclear weapons, and unless the global community demonstrates the resolve to stop the rapid development of military technologies.

Now is the time to show that resolve. The nuclear taboo has held since 1945, but if it's ever transgressed, humanity's ability to even contemplate issues such as disarmament will be very deeply compromised.