



EUROPE MUST STAND UP FOR ITS CORE SECURITY INTERESTS

by Leo Hoffmann-Axthelm

Amid escalating nuclear rhetoric, the Iran Deal and the INF-Treaty have collapsed – and the New START treaty is set to expire next year. The current US policy on nuclear weapons is a provocation to EU security interests: it is time for multilateral approaches to disarmament and arms control.

How to reduce the numbers of nuclear weapons and the role they play in security doctrines? First step: make them illegal. @leo_axt from @nuclearban



The EU is routinely hailed as a civilian superpower and has brandished its credentials as a fellow Nobel Peace Prize laureate by enabling the 2015 deal on Iran's nuclear programme. But as one arms control agreement after the other collapses, it is time for Europe to more clearly analyse its strategic security interests, and to fight for multilateral approaches when it comes to nuclear disarmament.

Recent developments

The US decision to violate the Iran Deal has led to a worrying escalation. While President Trump based his decision on false claims, some in his administration are laying the groundwork for another intractable war in the Middle East. Quite apart from the human calamity this would bring, it would also be a disaster for the EU, whose

nationalist politicians would gleefully exploit the unprecedented inflow of refugees and decades of instability.

Also in 2018, Trump published his Nuclear Posture Review, which dropped the pretence of nuclear disarmament, committed to producing new mini-nukes which would be easier to use, and expanded the scenarios in which the use of nuclear weapons is foreseen – vastly increasing the likelihood they will be used.

Finally, the INF-Treaty will expire in August, making it legal once more for Russia and the US to station intermediate-range nuclear missiles, which only pose a threat to Europe (they cannot cross the Atlantic).

Along with the hostile rhetoric between Russia, China, North Korea, and the US, this all marks a major escalation of nuclear tensions, with ramped up spending potentially leading to a new arms race.

Europe struggling to find an answer

How effective has Europe been in pushing back against these security threats? A major charm offensive on the Iran Deal before Trump's unilateral decision to withdraw from the accord yielded nothing. Much talk on global zero was rebuked with the Nuclear Posture Review. And no strategy exists on how to replace the INF-Treaty – in fact, European calls to renew the New START (stipulating a reduction of 50% of the number of strategic nuclear missile launchers), the last remaining arms control agreement between the US and Russia set to expire in 2021, have fallen on deaf ears.

At the same time, the US requires Europe's solidarity when it comes to defending its weapons of mass destruction in diplomatic forums. In a leaked paper, the US mission

to NATO demanded that all European allies should boycott the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, explaining that such a treaty would call into question the legitimacy of relying on the threat of using nuclear weapons for our security. This effectively means the US opposes a prohibition of nuclear weapons, because it would be effective.

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States like Germany, Belgium, the Netherlands and Italy are set to spend hundreds of millions upgrading their warplanes so as to continue hosting newly modernised US nuclear weapons on their territory, claiming this gives them a “seat at the table” when the US sets nuclear policy for NATO. Far from granting any influence on nuclear policy, these weapons make us one of the first targets for complete obliteration if US-Russian tensions escalate.

The weapons are the problem

Europe must urgently change strategy. Not because of Trump – his tweets threatening to kill millions of innocent civilians may be more bombastic but are actually a fair description of the concept of nuclear deterrence. Trump is not the problem – the weapons are. It's naïve to believe humans can handle nuclear weapons without them ever being used, whether by one of hundreds of serious accidents, or by design.

Luckily, 122 states have already taken action – and in 2017 adopted a new Treaty prohibiting nuclear weapons under international law. Currently, foreign ministries are coming up with excuses not to sign the treaty. But as studies from the Harvard International Human Rights Clinic and numerous other institutes have shown, there are no legal obstacles to NATO members signing a ban on nuclear weapons, and plenty of precedents within NATO for states opting out from some policies, such as extended nuclear deterrence. Signing this treaty is the most visible and effective tool for European states to make it clear that we will never accept nuclear weapons being used in our name, and to ensure we will cease to be a target.

Overcoming resistance within the EU

MPs can hold their government to account when foreign ministers claim to pursue a nuclear weapon-free world, but in fact actively oppose and boycott their prohibition. When the UN Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) was negotiated in 2017, on the initiative of countries like Austria, Ireland, Mexico and South Africa, the EU institutions were deadlocked by French and UK vetoes. But the European Parliament mustered a broad majority from all party groups except the far-right, calling on all EU

states to support the ban treaty, a position it has reiterated since.

The fact that only six out of 28 EU members participated in those negotiations was a blow to the credibility of the EU as a champion of human rights and multilateral approaches. It has become undeniable that the issue of nuclear weapons cannot be left to the nuclear-armed.

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If we want to reduce the numbers and role nuclear weapons play in security doctrines, the first step is to agree to make them illegal. Only then can we hope to gather the political will required to overcome the many obstacles on the way towards global zero.



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NUCLEAR ARMS: SAVING THE INTERNATIONAL RULES-BASED SYSTEM



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SAVING NUCLEAR DISARMAMENT IN THE TIME SYSTEM OF TRUMP



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