

Talking Point Builder for Campaigners

Nuclear Ban Treaty

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How to use this document

What is a Talking Point Builder?

This document is a tool for your team to build nuclear ban treaty talking points that are relevant for your domestic political situation, frame the treaty to your best advantage, and respond to common criticisms and arguments against it. The wide range of audiences, in both participant and nonparticipant countries, and the need to reach persuadable people, requires us to tailor our approach so that we can reach the most people the most effectively.

Respectful Persuasion

Being an effective communicator is not about changing what we believe depending on our audience; that would be disrespectful. Rather, we show respect to our audience by understanding why they hold their views and addressing those views honestly. Your audience will trust you if they feel you share some values. People do not listen, and are not persuaded, by those they do not trust on some level.

Step 1: Empathize with your audience's fears and pick a responsive starting point

It is essential to understand what your target audience cares about before you begin building talking points. You may find that you need different talking points for persuadable and supportive audiences or different segments of your domestic political spectrum. It is essential to credibly address the fears of your audience — that is how you build trust.

Your starting point in any discussion should directly address the primary worry your audience has about the nuclear ban treaty. It may very well be that your audience does not view the treaty from the same perspective as you do! You may not share them, but their feelings are valid and important to them.

This tool provides three entry points for audiences: Those worried about security, prestige, and humanitarianism.

- **Security:** People who believe nuclear weapons provide security and do not wish to lose that safety.
- **Prestige:** People who feel nuclear weapons are a symbol of national power and influence and do not want to lose prestige.
- **Humanitarian:** People who's first thought about nuclear weapons is their negative humanitarian impact.

Each potential talking point is prefixed with a letter and a number — S for security messages, P for prestige messages, H for humanitarian messages, and R for real impact information on the treaty.

Step 2: Lead them to your goal and build your case

Pick a supportive point that is related to your opening. For example, an audience worried about security (S1) may like the idea of their country being an international leader in a different, non-military manner, instead (P2). Another audience may be worried about their country's reputation (P1), so you can make your second point about the importance of upholding international humanitarian law (H1) to build up their reputation.

Step 3: Head off criticisms

The “Real Impact” section of the document is good tool for heading off the criticisms you expect from a skeptical audience on the impact of the treaty. Those are a good place to end, as they are practical and can disarm opponents.

EXAMPLE: EMPATHIZING WITH AN AUDIENCE

This *imagined example* shows how to step back and put ourselves in the shoes of people who are skeptical and don’t seem to share our values on an issue as important as nuclear weapons.

These questions are a useful tool for us if we are having trouble understanding an audience.

If I asked, how would they say nuclear weapons make them feel? *“Nuclear weapons make my audience feel safer and comfortable. This is something they grew up with and they feel that, no matter what else happens, they’re safe because no one can really attack their country. It’s a guarantee — a security blanket.”*

What does that feeling tell me about the values they hold? *“They care about their safety and surely the safety of their family and friends. They value the predictability of not having to worry about real existential security threats and go on with their lives. Since they grew up with these weapons existing, there’s probably some nostalgia there, too. This gives me common ground there to build on.”*

If I felt that way about nuclear weapons, what would someone need to say to gain my trust? *“They would have to show that they care about safety and security, too, and not be dismissive of my worries. Talking about family is probably helpful. They want to avoid uncertainty and the fear that comes with it. I probably shouldn’t argue about the past, but focus on today.”*

Holding this kind of preparatory dialogue —in your own head or with coworkers — will make it easier to reach skeptical audiences and choose the message which address their concerns. What should be clear as you think about audience feelings is that the facts of the treaty or your own expertise won’t matter if your audience doesn’t think you are trustworthy.

Security Concern Messages

Many people believe nuclear weapons are inhumane but worry their removal will lessen their security in some way or increase their own personal risk. These audiences are the most challenging because their opposition is driven by the basic human need for physical safety.

Nuclear weapons are outdated and don't keep us safe today

GUIDANCE

This message is essential for people worried that the loss of nuclear weapons by their country or an ally would decrease their own personal safety. For many people, banning nuclear weapons is perceived as a threat — the removal of protection — and unless we can address that fear, we won't be able to persuade them. People will always view personal safety concerns as more important than almost anything else.

Who? Non-participant countries which rely heavily on nuclear weapons as part of their security doctrine. That particularly includes America, Japan, and NATO states which were formerly part of the Soviet Union.

Do: Use words like “outdated,” and “1940s technology.” Suggest that nuclear weapons don't address today's threats like climate change, terrorism, or cybersecurity.

Don't: Expect to change minds quickly or drastically — people's opinions change over time. For example, don't engage in debates about the past, for example over nuclear weapons' usefulness in the Cold War or their contribution to the end of World War II. Rather, focus on today's security threats.

S1: Nuclear weapons are part of the past; they do not keep us safe today, and pose a growing danger.

Nuclear weapons are 1940s technology, invented for a different time with different threats. The world has changed and moved on. They do not provide safety in the 21st century.

- **21st century threats can't be solved with nuclear weapons.** — non-state actors, climate change, migration, gray wars, failed states, terrorism, cybersecurity, religious extremism, etc. — can simply not be addressed with nuclear weapons. These weapons do not match the threats we face today.
 - *“A nuclear weapon can't take out a terrorist hiding in a cave in Afghanistan or a sleeper cell in London.”*
 - *“We can't nuke climate change. Cybersecurity won't be solved with 1940s technology.”*
 - *“Modern warfare is about satellite guided precision, not taking out whole cities.”*
- **In fact, they pose a growing danger to us.** The risk of nuclear weapons use is higher today than ever before. The spread of these weapons to more countries and the danger of loose nuclear material being stolen only increases the chance of intentional or accidental nuclear detonation.

Nuclear weapons are a threat to everyone

GUIDANCE

Not everyone understands that every state, even those without nuclear weapons or under nuclear protection, have a security interest in banning nuclear weapons. For nuclear-armed states, it is important to make this point so they don't feel as if they are being "ganged up on" by other countries. For non-nuclear states, this message is helpful for explaining why people should care from a personal safety perspective.

Who? Any country, either to justify why other countries care to a nuclear-armed state audience, or to define the threat in personal terms to a non-nuclear audience.

Do: Ask people to imagine how a nuclear exchange between two example countries would impact their lives personally — "If India and Pakistan had a nuclear war, the nuclear fallout could impact food production all around the world and significantly impact global economy."

S2: Every country, not just nuclear-armed countries, has a stake in preventing nuclear weapons use.

The existence of nuclear weapons is a security threat for every country because the humanitarian and environmental impact of a nuclear war or explosion will not be limited to the warring parties or a single country.

- **Entire regions or continents would be impacted by radioactive fallout.** Nuclear fallout has worldwide impact, spreading dangerous radioactive material across continents and oceans. The health and environmental impact beyond the immediately effected area, even from a single detonation, would be significant.
- **A risk to the interconnected global economy.** The economic cost of nuclear detonation would be massive, well beyond the immediate loss of lives and industry. The impact on investment and trade could well push countries into recession and millions of people into poverty.
- **Humanitarian response is impossible.** No state or international organization has the capacity to effectively respond to the civilian victims of a nuclear weapons detonation.

Prestige Messages

GUIDANCE

There are countries where nuclear weapons are viewed as a symbol of power and status on the international stage. And for countries whose relative power has decreased in recent decades, nuclear weapons may be the most tangible link to a more influential past. For these audiences, nuclear weapons themselves aren't as much the issue as they are a proxy for larger questions about loss of national prestige and feelings of identity.

For people worried about prestige, it is important to demonstrate how banning nuclear weapons helps them achieve their goal. This is important because narratives of national security and leadership always place the home country in the hero role. We can flip fears about prestige upside down and position keeping nuclear weapons as a prestige loser.

Do: Use words like “undermine our leadership” and “make us look bad in the eyes of history” or even “today these things make us look silly.” Say that supporting the ban treaty will increase national prestige and leadership.

Don't: Beware of drawing moral equivalence between pariah states like North Korea and a country such as “having these make us no better than North Korea.” Instead, suggest that it is North Korea's threat to kill millions of civilians with nuclear weapons that is unacceptable, and that is not behavior a state like France should be engaged in. If we argue that France's ownership of nuclear weapons makes them like North Korea, then people will take it as an insult. Rather, we are making the point that France is different from North Korea and therefore these weapons should not be an option.

Nuclear weapons make us look bad to the rest of the world

GUIDANCE

Rather than accept the premise that nuclear weapons make a country strong and respected, we want to say that relying on them undermines prestige and harms a country's international reputation.

This message is an implicit criticism of the nuclear powers and can be a tool for domestic political leaders to distance themselves from either the major nuclear armed states.

Who: Smaller nuclear states and nuclear umbrella states. Those with a strong humanitarian, natural disaster response, or international development funding record.

Do: Make it about strength and leadership and reputation. Contrast the human rights values a country promotes with the humanitarian impact of nuclear weapons.

Don't: Make it about the hypocrisy of having nuclear weapons while saying others (Iran, North Korea, etc.) can not have them — that implies moral equivalence which will turn off most audiences. Rather, we want to suggest that a nuclear armed state should behave differently — be better — than North Korea. North Korea threatens millions with death by nuclear missile and that is not behavior that other countries should be close to engaging in themselves.

P1: Nuclear weapons harm our standing in the world.

It undermines our leadership and reputation to rely on weapons that are designed to kill civilians while promoting human rights.

- If we really believe that using these weapons would be unacceptable, the nuclear weapons ban is a way to live up to our values.
- It makes us look like hypocrites to support human rights while still actively planning and preparing to use weapons designed to kill civilians.
- Our moral leadership is what has made us a respected country that others listen to.

The ban is an opportunity for international & moral leadership

GUIDANCE

Some countries want to be able to demonstrate international leadership, maybe because they are a smaller regional power that wishes to be noticed, or because they focus on a humanitarian rather than military leadership style. Others may want to find a way to contrast themselves with more influential countries and make a claim to the moral high ground, or even create a contrast with their own internal histories.

P2: Being part of the effort to ban nuclear weapons shows international leadership.

This is a chance for us to step up and be leaders on an important issue.

P3: Times are changing and we can help lead that change.

Bombing cities and killing civilians used to be accepted, but it isn't any more. We want to be on the right side of history.

Delegitimizing nuclear weapons will deter their spread

GUIDANCE

Prestige language can be used to counter opponents who want to focus on rogue states' pursuit of the technology or other proliferation issues. Some countries' leaders use the idea of joining the "nuclear club" to demonstrate to domestic constituencies that they are strong leaders bringing international prestige or, in the case of North Korea, defending against an evil international system. Others have seen nuclear weapons as a way into the "big boys" club of "important" countries.

P4: Pariah states want nuclear weapons because they're considered prestigious

Pariah states pursue nuclear weapons because they are symbols of national prestige, knowing full well that could never actually use them without risking the destruction their own country.

- If nuclear weapons are taboo, like chemical weapons, countries like North Korea are less likely to want them for domestic political security.

P5: Rising powers won't pursue nuclear weapons if it harms their international reputation.

Countries with growing influence will avoid nuclear development if it endangers their growth and leadership on the world stage.

P6: The problem with North Korea is that they threaten millions of civilians with nuclear attack.

This is behavior that no country should ever be able to engage in.

- We're talking about them because we think there's a chance they would actually do it.
- Our country should be different (or better) than that brutal regime.
- We shouldn't have the ability to threaten millions of civilians, either.

Humanitarian Messages

GUIDANCE

Even if your audience is primarily focused on humanitarian issues, it is important to equip them with messages that are persuasive to other groups.

Do: Make it clear that nuclear weapons are not theoretical, but real live weapons intended to kill civilians by the million.

Don't: Alienate audiences by blaming them or their country for past human rights violations. Putting people who like their country on the defensive will make it very difficult to persuade them.

Humanitarian law

H1: The human cost of nuclear weapons is morally unacceptable.

There is a consensus that the indiscriminate mass killing of civilians is unacceptable. It is not possible to use nuclear weapons consistent with the laws of war.

- **Clear violation of the laws of war (IHL).** It is not possible to use nuclear weapons in a way that distinguishes between civilians and combatants. Long ago we decided that killing noncombatant men, women, and children was no longer acceptable.
- **Nuclear weapons are a gap in international law.** We have banned chemical and biological weapons because they are horrible and indiscriminate. We have banned cluster munition and land mines for much the same reason. But we have yet to make the same statement about nuclear weapons, the most indiscriminate and destructive of all.

Real weapons and an urgent threat

GUIDANCE

One of the challenges of the public debate of nuclear weapons, especially in nuclear-armed states, is that they are discussed as political tools, rather than real weapons that could be used. Wrapped up in theories of deterrence, their use is “unthinkable.” And since the end of the Cold War, people have stopped thinking of nuclear weapons as an urgent problem. Yet every day militaries plan and train for their use.

Who: Nuclear-armed and nuclear umbrella state audiences.

Do: Remind people of the hair-trigger that nuclear weapons are on — “launch on warning.”

H2: Nuclear weapons aren't “unthinkable,” we plan and prepare to use them every day.

We don't like to think about nuclear weapons because they are so destructive. But we can't forget that they are real weapons that are intended to kill entire cities of people.

- **It's not acceptable to kill civilians.** We all believe it is unacceptable to intentionally kill thousands of civilians.

- **These weapons can't be targeted or limited.** There's no acceptable way to use a nuclear weapon.
- **"Unthinkable" isn't enough — we need "impossible."** Because they are designed to kill innocent people and there is no way to limit them, it's time to make it illegal to have them.

Moral Progress

GUIDANCE

Banning nuclear weapons represents an important moral progress. Many people have trouble getting their head around the idea that this is possible — people tend to accept the current state of affairs as permanent. Putting the nuclear weapons ban in the context of other historical changes in moral attitudes on controversial issues can open minds to the possibility of banning these weapons as well.

H3: Times have changed and today these weapons are no longer acceptable.

There are so many areas where we've moved on from things we thought — for generations — were acceptable, but today they aren't.

- **Lots of horrible things used to be considered acceptable.** We used to believe in kings and now we have democracies. We used to hold slaves and now slavery is considered unacceptable. We used to believe being gay was evil and now more and more countries recognize same-sex marriage. We used to accept carpet bombing of entire cities, but today we don't. Times change.
- **We used to believe killing civilians was OK. Today, we don't.** The nuclear weapons ban is about standing up for that progress.

Real Impact of the Treaty

GUIDANCE

Historical comparisons are our best tool for showing impact. This gives people concrete examples rather than theoretical language about “international norms.” There are good examples both of treaties which ban certain weapons and times when treaties have had an effect even without major power signatories.

Treaties work

R1: We’ve done this before. This is not the first time we have banned whole classes of weapons because they are inhumane.

Other weapons of mass destruction have previously been banned — biological weapons in 1972 and chemical weapons in 1993. More recently, the international community has banned other indiscriminate weapons: land mines in 1997 and cluster munitions in 2008.

R2: Previous bans have worked.

Most countries have given up these banned weapons. Those who have used them have come under intense international pressure and criticism for doing so.

The impact will be real

R3: Countries that don’t join still change.

States that are not signatories to the other weapons prohibitions treaties often act within their rules. A ban treaty will strengthen the norm against possession and use and can also impact behavior of states not parties to the treaties.

- For example, the US follows the landmines ban and the Law of the Sea convention, even though they haven’t signed them.
- Banning “assistance” for nuclear weapons would make it difficult to finance business which produce components.

R4: Opponents strong opposition has tipped their hand.

Even without the participation of nuclear -armed states, the ban treaty will have a powerful impact on the decisions of many countries. The ban treaty will delegitimize the possession of these weapons, discourage their spread, and reinforce norms against nuclear weapons. Ban opponents have fought it vigorously because they know it will have real impact.

R5: The Ban Treaty will strengthen the nonproliferation regime.

Existing nonproliferation treaties, such as the NPT, require eventual complete nuclear disarmament. The ban treaty provides a method for countries to meet that obligation. There is no conflict between the NPR and the nuclear ban treaty.

R6: Ban first, then eliminate.

The nuclear ban treaty does not enforce immediate disarmament of all nuclear weapons — it could never do that. And nuclear-armed countries will have time to join the treaty and dismantle their programs in the future.

Example Talking Point Sets

Building points from this document is as simple as responding to your audience's top concerns and leading them to your goals.

NATO country, skeptical audience:

- S1, *Outdated weapons don't match today's threats and create new dangers*
- P1, *Harm our reputation & undermine our values*
- H1, *Humanitarian Law*
- R1 + R2, *Bans have worked; We've done this before*

NATO country, friendly audience:

- H2, *Real weapons and urgent threat*
- P1, *Harms our reputation*
- R1, R4, R2, *Impact will be real*

American or UK skeptical audience:

- S1, *Outdated weapons don't match today's threats and create new dangers*
- H2, *Real weapons designed to kill innocent people*
- P2, *Opportunity for international leadership*
- R1 + R2, *Bans have worked; We've done this before*

American or UK liberal audience:

- S2, *A threat to everyone*
- P1, *Harm our reputation*
- H3, *Moral progress*
- R1 + R2, *Bans have worked; We've done this before*

Smaller country without a large international presence

- S2, *A threat to everyone*
- P3, *Opportunity for leadership*
- P4 or P5, *Delegitimizing nuclear weapons deters their spread (to our neighborhood)*

Criticism Pivots & Responses

For each common objection, there are good responses and additional points to raise. Each criticism has a way to reframe the discussion and then additional points to add if there is time in the discussion.

“Without the nuclear armed countries, this won’t make any difference. It’s just theater.”

- **Reframe:** S2, “Everyone has a stake in nuclear weapons use.”
- **Continue:** R4, R2, R3, about the real impact of a ban treaty.

“With countries like North Korea making nuclear weapons, it’s not safe to ban them.”

- **Respond:** “America, South Korea, or Japan are free to respond to North Korean aggression no matter the treaty.”
- **Reframe:** P6, “No country should be able threaten millions of civilians with nuclear attack. We should be different than them.” Followed by P4, “Rogue regimes pursuit of prestige.”
- **Continue:** R6, Ban first, then eliminate.

“This is just a ploy to harm NATO” or “this will undermine NATO” or “this will empower Russia.”

- **Respond:** Of course you can join the nuclear ban and still be a NATO country. NATO members can choose not to engage in nuclear weapons planning and assistance like France does today.
- **Pivot:** S1, P1, or H1 depending on audience.

“This will undermine the Non-Proliferation Treaty.”

- **Reframe:** R5, We are strengthening the nonproliferation treaty by giving states a method to meet their obligations.
- **Continue:** R6, Ban then eliminate

“This is just small countries needling bigger, more powerful countries.”

- **Reframe:** S2, “Everyone has a stake in nuclear weapons use.”
- **Continue:** H1, R5