

# Beatrice Fihn explains why nuclear weapons are a scam

By [Elisabeth Eaves](#), July 5, 2018

The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists



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A year ago, a majority of the world's countries—122 of them—voted to enact a treaty with the highly ambitious goal of abolishing nuclear weapons entirely. To the treaty's critics, it wasn't so much ambitious as foolish, counterproductive, or irrelevant. But proponents and critics alike can at least agree that it was unprecedented. While the community of nations had banned other weapons designed to mass-murder civilians with little controversy—with the Biological Weapons Convention in 1975 and the Chemical Weapons Convention in 1997—until 2017, would-be nuke-launchers were free of such inconveniences. Yes, Russia and the United States had downsized their stockpiles under bilateral deals, and there existed an agreement that supposedly committed nuclear and non-nuclear states alike to work toward disarmament, the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, which entered into force in 1970. But by last year, Moscow and Washington were expensively updating their atomic arsenals, and no one seemed to be treating that disarmament clause very seriously.

The global movement for an outright ban on nuclear weapons coalesced around [2010](#) with rumblings from parties typically voiceless in nuclear negotiations: Survivors of nuclear weapons and testing, plus civilians from all over who observed that any nuclear conflagration would kill and injure millions of people who had nothing to do with whatever sparked it. Which struck them as unfair, and worth fixing. But these rumblings might not have fused into the powerful movement they became without the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN), the consortium of organizations that led the drive to create the new ban treaty. And ICAN wouldn't be the same without Beatrice Fihn, the

[https://thebulletin.org/2018/07/beatrice-fihn-explains-why-nuclear-weapons-are-a-scam/?utm\\_source=iContact&utm\\_medium=Bulletin%20newsletter&utm\\_campaign=July6](https://thebulletin.org/2018/07/beatrice-fihn-explains-why-nuclear-weapons-are-a-scam/?utm_source=iContact&utm_medium=Bulletin%20newsletter&utm_campaign=July6)

35-year-old Swede who has led the organization since 2013, and accepted last year's Nobel Peace Prize on its behalf. Fihn played an important role in rallying those 122 countries, even as the United States, Britain, and other nuclear-armed governments pressured allies and small nations to vote "no."

On a recent Monday night, Fihn spoke to the *Bulletin* by telephone from Geneva after putting her children to bed. It had been a period of whiplash for anyone following nuclear affairs. The United States had just pulled out of the Iran nuclear deal █████, even though Iran was complying with its terms. And after trading nuclear threats, the leaders of the United States and North Korea were about to meet for a summit in Singapore. Not that things were exactly boring before that, what with North Korea's nuclear and missile tests and other countries' nuclear-weapons modernization programs. "It's been crazy the last two years," Fihn said.

She is the first to acknowledge that the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (the TPNW, or simply the "ban treaty") has now entered a more plodding phase. After all the high-profile excitement of UN negotiations, the diplomats went home and national governments set about signing and ratifying the treaty. It cannot enter into force until 50 nations have ratified; so far 59 have signed and only 10 have ratified. She is not discouraged—"parliaments don't work that fast," she says—and fully expects entry into force by September, 2019.

In this interview, Fihn shares her thoughts on why the United States really pulled out of the Iran deal, how Trump and Kim have shifted global attitudes to nuclear weapons, the responsibilities of "umbrella states" who accept Washington's nuclear protection, and the ultimate impact she expects the new ban treaty to have. We need to solve the nuclear weapon problem, she believes, because we have even "bigger things" coming up: fully autonomous weapons and artificial intelligence.

**BAS:** It's been a year since a majority of the world's nations, voting at the United Nations in July 2017, adopted the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons. What do you consider the major achievements since then?

**BF:** We really managed to get the treaty on people's radar. The Nobel Prize helped a lot with that, but also just the fact that we concluded the treaty, it opened for signature, and states are now starting to ratify the treaty. It's not as attention-grabbing as negotiations were, when we were at the UN, everyone was gathered in the same room negotiating a treaty and it was really exciting. Now it is much more about the bureaucratic pushing through of national legislation. So it's less visible, in a way, but it's extremely essential work that is going to be really necessary for stigmatizing nuclear weapons and making this treaty a normative instrument.

At the same time, there have been so many developments in nuclear weapons this last year. I think everyone working on the issue is exhausted. Not just because of the treaty, but also because of the nuclear-armed states and their behavior. Nuclear tests by North Korea, missile tests, modernization programs, crazy statements, threats to use nuclear weapons, an opening to negotiations with North Korea, shutting down the Iran deal. It's been crazy the last two years in terms of nuclear-weapons policy.

**BAS:** The treaty can't go into legal effect until you have 50 ratifications and it currently has only 10. Do you see this as discouraging?

**BF:** No, not at all. It's faster than any other nuclear weapons treaty so far. It took the [Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty](#) more than a year before it got the second ratification. It's faster than the NPT, it's faster than the Chemical Weapons Convention. It's completely on pace in terms of other treaties.

This is national legislation work. I mean, parliaments don't work that fast. Ask the United States how fast it ratifies treaties. We're pretty confident that it will enter into force within two years of when it opened for signature in September 2017.

**BAS:** Wow, okay. If and when it eventually enters into force, will the ban treaty give the non-nuclear states political leverage over nuclear-armed countries? Like, could they enact sanctions against nuclear weapon states or companies that trade in nuclear weapons?

**BF:** I think there is not going to be a drastic change once it enters into force. The countries that are party to the treaty are of course prohibited from having, using, and developing nuclear weapons, and also from assisting, encouraging, and inducing those acts. Which means to us that you cannot participate in military exercises that involve planning or preparing to use nuclear weapons.

But we are also working on things like getting banks to stop funding nuclear-weapon-producing companies. Stop lending them money, stop investing in them. So that we remove the resources these companies would need to continue. Make it a burden, at least.

It's not going to be a drastic change. Normative change rarely goes fast in that way. It's slow progress, it's trying to make it as uncomfortable and difficult as possible for countries to continue to have nuclear weapons unchallenged.

**BAS:** But the actual leverage that nations or the UN will have when the treaty enters into force—what will that leverage be? Are you saying it won't be that different from the leverage we have now? Or will there be specific sanctions?

**BF:** In tactical in terms, I doubt anyone will sanction the United States. But ratifying countries are prohibited from participating in any part of the production of nuclear weapons.

**BAS:** So if a country signed the treaty and had been manufacturing a component of some kind, they would have to stop doing that?

**BF:** Yes, if it's a component of nuclear weapons only. A component that is dual-use would be different.

**BAS:** Some skeptics have suggested that the new ban treaty will undermine the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty somehow. But how do you see the relationship between those two treaties?

**BF:** It's completely ridiculous to say that it undermines the NPT. Usually this comes from the countries that *are* undermining the NPT. The nuclear-armed states are not implementing any of the outcome documents of the NPT, they are not fulfilling their [Article VI](#) obligations. Rather, they are modernizing and upgrading their nuclear arsenals and threatening to use nuclear weapons. Yet somehow countries that are saying they never want to have or use nuclear weapons are undermining a treaty that is supposed to prevent proliferation? It just doesn't make any sense. We have to call those countries out. The ban treaty is in line with the NPT, if you believe that the NPT should lead to disarmament.

Many of the countries that have been the strongest supporters of the NPT from the beginning have been leading and developing the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons. It is a requirement—a legal requirement under the NPT's Article 6—for all states to pursue in good faith most multilateral nuclear disarmament negotiations. The 122 countries that adopted the ban treaty took that seriously. They are implementing the NPT. It is the countries refusing to implement the NPT that are the problem.

**BAS:** We know why the nuclear-armed states are not signing and ratifying the treaty. To what do you attribute other countries not signing on?

**BF:** There are some countries that still accept nuclear weapons and want nuclear weapons to be around—the NATO states, the nuclear-umbrella states. They still believe that threatening to use weapons of mass destruction on civilians is a legitimate way of protecting oneself.

For some countries, though, the issue is simply that there was quite a short time between treaty adoption and the signing ceremony. What we heard from a lot of smaller states, particularly in Africa, is that they just did not have time to put it through their internal mechanisms. And as soon as the signing ceremony was over they sort of put it on a shelf. We're hoping to boost the signature and ratifications quite significantly this year. We've been working with campaigners around the world to get more countries to sign.

Then, of course, there's pressure. We know there is still a lot of pressure from the nuclear-armed states on smaller countries. Which for us is really a sign that the nuclear-armed states recognize the impact of the treaty. Why would the United States spend time and resources on preventing a small Pacific island country from joining? Because they know that it matters. We saw this through the whole process. The nuclear-armed states coordinated amongst themselves and worked very intentionally to try to stop small countries from voting "yes." They did that because they understand that the majority matters. When countries unify, the pressure [to disarm] increases.

**BAS:** We know the nuclear-armed countries aren't going to sign the ban treaty.

**BF:** Yet.

**BAS:** Yet. But given that it could take a while, what is the best-case scenario you hope to see unfold in the next one to five years?

**BF:** More and more states join this treaty, and the space for maneuvering, bragging, and thinking that nuclear weapons are great and powerful decreases. Slowly we chip away at the legitimacy of these weapons.

Nobody brags about chemical weapons or biological weapons. Yet somehow the world has fallen into a trap where we've just accepted *these* weapons. We're trying to undo 70 years of indoctrination that said nuclear weapons are special, magical, stability-creating, powerful. That the powerful few have them and that's fine. It's going to take a long time to undo that kind of brain washing on the global stage, but this treaty is a way to start.

**BAS:** What do you make of the US decision to withdraw from the Iran nuclear deal even though Iran was complying with it?

**BF:** It's just disastrous, and really there is no logic to it. Well, there is a logic to it in a way. I don't want to come across as some sort of conspiracy theorist, but the logic seems to be that if you want to go to war with Iran, it would be good to not have inspectors in there.

The Iran nuclear agreement was great. It was a remarkable achievement, a huge victory for diplomacy, but somehow the narrative changed afterwards to, "we should have gotten more."

It's just life that you don't get everything you want. It's a negotiation, right? There is give and take, and somehow that has been portrayed as a bad thing. You could do a lot of interesting gender analysis, I think, about the reasoning. About this idea that somehow compromising so that both sides get something is negative. That you have to dominate and crush the opponent in order to feel satisfied with the outcome. That is an extremely dangerous attitude to have. The idea that one side should have gotten everything and the other side should have gotten nothing—that is not how negotiations work.

It is insanity to rip this up. There is no logic. We don't have to engage in conversations about the arguments because the arguments are just made up. There is no truth to any of the criticism.

**BAS:** You said some people may think it would be a good idea not to have inspectors in Iran. Can you elaborate?

**BF:** A lot of people talk about the parallels to Iraq, of course, and one of the problems for the US administration then was the presence of IAEA inspectors. If you have an administration that is intent on lying and making up information, it's probably better not to have an internationally recognized authority that gives another story.

For now [both Iran and the United States] say they want the inspectors to remain, but the United States did pull out of the deal. It feels like they want to provoke Iran into removing the inspectors, then go to war. I'm afraid that having a functioning deal under which an international authority says Iran isn't developing nuclear weapons is a blockage to war. Or it's going to make it more awkward to argue that you have to go to war.

The arguments about how the deal isn't good enough just don't hold up. The fact that they're trying to bring up human rights issues on Iran at the same time as they're talking about making a deal with North Korea—where are the human rights concerns there? I'm not saying that you should take in human rights in the North Korea negotiations, but the inconsistency makes it feel like the arguments are completely made up.

**BAS:** Speaking of North Korea, a lot of people are nervous about its nuclear arsenal. What is the best way to handle it?

**BF:** To me, North Korea makes the problem with nuclear weapons so clear. They make you feel really secure and stable when you have them yourself, but as soon as someone else gets them you suddenly say, 'oh no, they're really dangerous.' And who gets to decide who is a responsible nuclear-armed state and who isn't? If nuclear weapons are so great and provide stability and security in the world, then why has this felt like we're going towards war in that region? Why aren't we welcoming North Korea's nuclear weapon if nuclear weapons are so great?

I think it was great that the United States accepted a summit with North Korea. We are very supportive of diplomacy and negotiations. But, when people were speculating that North Korea might just give up its nuclear weapons, it was obvious that it wasn't thought through. The United States is modernizing and increasing its arsenal, threatening to use these nuclear weapons, placing more emphasis on how nuclear weapons make you powerful. Did we really expect North Korea to just give them up because the US president met with Kim Jong-un? There are no quick fixes.

**BAS:** You've said that having nuclear weapons should incur many more negative consequences than it currently does. What should those consequences be?

**BF:** Pressure, stigma, loss of reputation, and public pressure domestically.

**BAS:** Do you think, in a strange sort of way, that having a US president who is impulsive and makes nuclear threats has actually strengthened the case for the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons?

**BF:** I think so. I would still prefer another type of president for the sake of our safety. But obviously it has put the focus on these insane policies. Many of the things he says have been US policy forever. "We can totally destroy your whole country, we will totally destroy you, my button is bigger than yours, I can wipe out all your cities, I have many more weapons than you." I mean, this has been nuclear weapons policy forever. He just says it out loud, and that makes people really, really uncomfortable. People have realized that he can authorize nuclear weapons use. When you see his impulsive behavior, that's quite worrying.

If we get through this presidency without nuclear war, that would be great. And maybe under another president, it will drop out of our attention again. But I still think people have now woken up a little bit. Very few people believe that one person should control all of these weapons.

**BAS:** This year you visited Nagasaki and Hiroshima for the first time. What was that like?

**BF:** Extremely powerful. We've built the campaign around the humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons, and obviously survivors are influential agents of the campaign. Meaning that I have spent a lot of time thinking about what happened there and reading and listening to the stories. I've heard many, many different survivors. But it was quite special to be there myself. And to see what happened. To stand there and think, someone dropped a bomb here.

But also, I think it's really important to see that the cities are thriving today. They are beautiful cities, doing well. We have a tendency to almost think that once a nuclear weapon is used, it's game over. That the whole planet will cease to exist. But there are going to be survivors. The cities are going to remain, there is just going to be a lot of suffering. When you listen to different survivor stories from Hiroshima and Nagasaki, it's always that that stands out. You know, some kind of small detail about the practicalities of what to do afterwards. They tell stories about how to queue up to dispose of bodies. Or trying to get water, or trying to find their parents. That's what people are going to have to do. There are not going to be any bandages because the hospital has been destroyed. Maybe there are not going to be any doctors. But I think it's really important to remember that there will be survivors. It's not going to end the whole world. You probably won't be dead, you'll probably have to deal with it afterwards.

**BAS:** There is a lot of discussion these days about how to regulate or ban some emerging technological threats, like autonomous weapons or artificial intelligence. From your experience at ICAN, can you draw lessons that would be useful for these movements?

**BF:** Absolutely. Developments in artificial intelligence that have an impact on warfare—this is a huge issue that needs our attention, urgently. In a way, I think we have to solve the nuclear weapon problem because we have bigger things coming up. Things that will change very drastically how our world operates.

I have had some conversations with governments—some of the umbrella states, the non-nuclear weapon states in NATO—and I feel they are living in a past time where they're clinging on to this 1945 technology. Yes, nuclear weapons are being modernized, but the core remains the same. They are about wiping out entire cities. It is not a modern weapon, it is not where warfare is developing. They're pretty unusable unless you want to mass-murder civilians, which is really not where the military is heading.

When you combine fully autonomous weapons with nuclear capabilities, it's quite terrifying. If we're going to automate military systems—there have been so many near misses, or false information, the [alarm in Hawaii](#) for example just recently—if you start automating responses to that kind of thing, including with nuclear weapons systems, you could start a nuclear war.

I think it's extremely urgent that we deal with fully autonomous weapons now, in a preventative state, rather than waiting for countries to develop them, because it gets a whole lot harder once they develop them.

**BAS:** You said, “we have bigger things coming up.” What are a few of those bigger things?

**BF:** I'm thinking of fully autonomous weapons and artificial intelligence. That kind of cyber warfare. The military is changing, technology is changing, the world is going to change, and I think that we should not look back to 1945 to model our defense systems. In many ways, nuclear weapons give us a completely false sense of security. We've been tricked to think these weapons somehow will provide us protection. What if it's all a lie?

Look, for example, at how Russia has acted in recent years. First with the election in the United States, then with the [Salisbury attack](#) in the UK. The new types of warfare are not going to look like the old ones. Russia managed to get completely in the head of the United States with a few Facebook accounts. Not with nuclear weapons.

Nuclear weapons are a scam. They make us feel secure when we're completely vulnerable to all the other things, make us invest in big radioactive bombs that can blow up whole cities instead of looking at what we actually need to protect our societies today.

**BAS:** Anything you want to add?

**BF:** This treaty has already caused a lot of difficult conversations, particularly in NATO alliance and umbrella states, about their roles and responsibility for nuclear weapons. One of the strengths of the treaty is that it has called out countries that are complicit in nuclear proliferation. Certain non-nuclear weapon states, like Norway and Germany, always portray themselves as kind of humanitarian superpowers, but when it comes down to it, they are prepared to be part of using weapons of mass destruction to slaughter hundreds of thousands of civilians. The treaty puts them in a tricky position. It's easy to look at North Korea and say, “bad, they are bad,” but you have to look at yourself as well, what you're participating in, what you're accepting, what you're allowing to happen in your name.

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**Keywords:** [Beatrice Fihn](#), [ICAN](#), [International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons](#), [Nobel Peace Prize](#)

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