

# Nuclear disarmament: How Africa can play a role in securing a nuclear-weapons-free world

October 22 2021, by Joellen Pretorius

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Why should African states and people be concerned about nuclear

disarmament? After all, there are no nuclear weapons on the continent. South Africa, the only African nation to have had nuclear weapons, gave them up [in 1989](#), and Libya stopped its nuclear weapons program [in 2003](#).

Today, all African states bar South Sudan are members of the [Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons](#). And enough support for the Pelindaba Treaty, an agreement among African states that prohibits the acquisition, stockpiling, testing and other activities that promote [nuclear weapons](#) or assist in their production, has turned the continent into a [Nuclear Weapons Free Zone](#).

Nuclear weapons may seem to be an issue far removed from Africa's immediate security concerns, which is rather centered on small arms, intra-state conflict and human security issues. Nevertheless, nuclear disarmament should still be high on the priority list of African states' foreign policy pursuits.

Nuclear weapons matter to every country in the world because they pose a threat on three grounds. Firstly, nations that have them are disregarding arms control agreements. Secondly, they are pursuing technologies that have increased the risk of nuclear war in an era of increasing geopolitical tension—particularly between [China, the US and Russia](#). Thirdly, nuclear war poses an existential threat to everyone.

African countries have a role to play in promoting a total ban on nuclear weapons. They can throw their diplomatic weight behind the calls to eliminate them and use the power of their numbers to strengthen the pressure on nuclear-armed states to disarm.

## **The danger nuclear weapons pose**

Nuclear weapons were a main component of the [Cold War](#), an

ideological conflict that raged from the 1950s to 1990 between the Western and Eastern blocs of states. It was led by the US and the Soviet Union, respectively. Even then a clear understanding took root that nuclear war could not be won and [must never be fought](#). The scale of destruction and contamination that would follow a nuclear detonation would make an adequate response to the crisis that followed [impossible](#).

A limited exchange of 100 nuclear bombs of the kind in the arsenals of the world's nuclear armed states—the United States, Russia, France, the United Kingdom, China, Pakistan, India, North Korea and Israel—would cause millions of deaths in the targeted areas. The fires that result from it could cause a nuclear winter that would block out the sun and [cause all humans to go extinct](#).

Yet, close to 4,000 nuclear weapons are deployed around the world, on alert and [ready to be used](#).

To avoid nuclear war, some strategists propose the [doctrine of nuclear deterrence](#). This holds that the only use for nuclear weapons is to deter a nuclear weapons attack from an adversary by assuring a retaliatory attack. Such mutually assured destruction, they argue, will deter states from actually using the bomb on each other.

But the concept has many flaws, including assuming that all nuclear-armed states and individual decision-makers sign up to its logic, and that they have perfect information about the nuclear decisions of adversaries. It also wrongfully assumes that accidents, misunderstandings or sheer madness would not set off a nuclear exchange.

The historical record of near-misses and accidents bears out the [problems of reliance on deterrence](#).

To respond to these flaws during the Cold War, states pursued arms

control agreements and confidence building arrangements. Today [these measures are in tatters](#).

## **Arms control and half measures**

Arms control refers to restrictions that states agree to place on the development, testing, possession, deployment and use of certain weapons. The 1970 [Non-Proliferation Treaty](#) restricts the spread of nuclear weapons to more than the five states that had tested them by 1967—the US, Russia, the UK, France and China. This, in exchange for a commitment towards nuclear disarmament negotiations and the cessation of the nuclear arms race.

At its peak in 1986 the arms race resulted in there being more than 60,000 nuclear weapons in the world far more destructive than the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombs, mostly in [the arsenals of the US and the Soviet Union](#) (today's Russia).

The resultant treaties between these two states reduced nuclear weapons, but were only half measures in two respects. Firstly, they were premised on a step-by-step reduction approach, rather than a one-off ban approach.

Secondly, the US and Russia also assumed that nuclear dominance would remain their prerogative. Today many of these treaties have been terminated, and reductions have slowed to a trickle, with more than 13,000 nuclear warheads still in existence. Moreover, new technologies and geopolitical tensions beyond the two Cold War superpowers, for example between China, the US and Russia on the one hand, and India, China, and Pakistan on the other, are [fuelling a new arms race](#).

## **Disruptive technologies and new nuclear arms races**

One of the premises of deterrence is that nuclear armed states must be vulnerable to attack. But anti-ballistic missile defense systems, such as the the Aegis system, deployed by the US and Japan, [counter this vulnerability](#). If states think that their retaliatory strikes might be intercepted by missile defense systems, they hedge by acquiring more nuclear weapons to deter their adversaries' first strike.

States are also developing [hypersonic missiles](#) that can outsmart defense systems by flying fast and low. And they are maneuverable. These characteristics increase uncertainty among decision-makers in a deterrence relationship, thereby increasing the potential for accidental nuclear launches.

Most nuclear weapons states are increasing or modernizing their arsenals in [breach of disarmament norms and obligations](#) in the Non Proliferation Treaty.

The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists included these concerns when it adjusted its [Doomsday clock](#)—to show how much closer humanity is to destroying the world with its own technologies [than at any time in its history](#). Scientists and analysts in this field are thus warning politicians and the public that urgent action is needed to avoid nuclear war.

## **What can Africans do?**

One silver lining in recent years was the negotiation of a treaty that bans nuclear weapons once and for all—[the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons](#). The so-called "Ban Treaty" resulted from the humanitarian initiative, a concerted effort by activist states and civil society to highlight the [humanitarian consequences of using nuclear weapons](#). The treaty entered into force in January 2021, a major diplomatic achievement that reflects global public opinion in favor of the abolition of nuclear weapons.

However, the nuclear-armed states and some of their allies boycotted the process, and have actively [tried to undermine the treaty](#). Because they haven't joined the treaty, it is not legally binding on them. Yet, increasingly, people in these states have put pressure on their governments to at least [acknowledge the benefits of such a ban](#).

African states and civil society played an important role in the [Ban Treaty process](#), but need to keep the momentum by asserting Africa's role on this issue. They can do so by prioritizing nuclear disarmament in their foreign policy, creating awareness among Africans that nuclear disarmament is a worthy cause.

They should also encourage more states to join the [treaty](#), especially African states—[only nine are members](#). With every state that joins, the value of the Ban Treaty grows. African states and people can also participate in transnational networks to stigmatize nuclear weapons, with a view to extending the Ban Treaty's legal reach to [include nuclear armed states](#).

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