

The TPNW: Russia's Perspectives

Vladimir Baranovsky

Russia's assessment of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) seems *grosso modo* similar to the approaches of other opponents to this endeavour. Moscow is by no means a leader in forging the common front against the nuclear ban; however, to a certain extent, Russia puts forward its arguments even more consistently.

Thus, it tends to substantiate them with some basic requirements with respect to the international system (the current one or the one in the making) – and in doing so, to raise the quality of its opposition to the TPNW and to make this opposition more fundamental than if it resulted only from the situational conjuncture. This vision is often formulated as the official policy stand; but Moscow could also refrain from proclaiming its negativity publicly and express it in a 'hidden' way, outside the official framework.

Altogether, Russia's arguments, directly or indirectly raised against the TPNW, could be categorised within four clusters¹.

Russia's Negativity

Firstly, the issue is presented as *a matter of principles*. It is stressed that the very idea of the TPNW should be assessed against the background of two major requirements: the total

¹ https://www.mid.ru/web/guest/meropriyatiya_s_uchastiem_ministra/-/asset_publisher/xK1BhB2bUjd3/content/id/2913751; https://www.mid.ru/web/guest/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/ckNon-kJE02Bw/content/id/4411063; <https://www.rbc.ru/rbcfreenews/5aad4e799a79479fd56b6a6e>; <https://www.pircenter.org/media//content/files/14/15838241570.pdf>

elimination of nuclear weapons, and general and complete disarmament. The TPNW, according to Russia, points to this link only formally and superficially – which is absolutely insufficient. In the absence of these conditions, to ban nuclear weapons is simply unrealistic. “No state considering possession of nuclear arsenal as a guarantee of its statehood and national security would ever agree to make such a step”² (Nikita Danyuk, Deputy Director of the Institute for Strategic Studies and Forecasts, RUDN University).

At this ‘conceptual’ level, another substantive objection points to the fact that the nuclear ban, as it is promoted nowadays, does not take into account the principle of equal and indivisible security of all states. In particular, one should not disregard the security of states possessing nuclear weapons. This is, for instance, envisaged by the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), whereas it is bypassed in the TPNW. The latter, according to such logic, becomes discriminatory towards states relying on nuclear weapons for their security.

In a broader sense, according to critics, the TPNW could undermine the very idea of nuclear non-proliferation. The latter requires, *inter alia*, the concerted actions of those who possess nuclear weapons or rely on the nuclear umbrella, and those who do not. If they operate as opponents and not as cooperative partners, the non-proliferation of nuclear weapons becomes a dead letter, a pure slogan without any chance of implementation. The TPNW would devalue and undermine the fundamental principle of integrity of the international community, deepening the divide on the issue of nuclear weapons. Strategically, this would not only call into question the perspectives of the non-proliferation process, but also destabilise the future of the international system at large.

Also, when addressing the problem of elimination of nuclear weapons, Russia believes it is necessary to consider all other major factors affecting strategic stability. Because the latter could be defined, understood and interpreted within a very large spectrum, this reference to strategic stability allows unlimited space for criticism towards the nuclear ban. According to Russia’s Foreign Ministry, factors to be considered include *inter alia* non-nuclear strategic weapons, US’ plans to develop outer space weapons, global ABM system, and non-entrance into force of the CTB Treaty. The TPNW fails to take these factors into account³.

Secondly, the TPNW is believed to be ***a challenge to Russia’s specificity as an international actor***. The nuclear ban would appear in sharp contradiction with a number of essential characteristics that Moscow believes existentially important for the country’s place in the international arena.

Thus, although Moscow officially endorses the nuclear-free world idea, politically and psychologically nuclear weapons play a significant (if not irreplaceable) role in forging the great power status of Russia. Some key parameters in this regard, such as permanent membership of the Security Council and the ability to compete for global leadership, are

² <https://radiosputnik.ria.ru/20180119/1512909733.html>

³ <https://www.rbc.ru/rbcfreenews/5aad4e799a79479fd56b6a6e>; https://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/3126872

believed to be credible only to the extent that they are supported and promoted by the possession of nuclear weapons.

The latter is believed to be a key factor of military security. Nuclear weapons are its core component – in so far as Russia is a country with vast territory, direct neighbourhood to China which is a growing world giant and relative weakness in conventional forces. Whether the nuclear factor could be a full-size reliable compensation for conventional deficiencies remains an unanswered question. But the opposite theoretical model of a large-scale conflict—a purely conventional one without a nuclear component—is hardly considered as deserving serious attention.

The compensatory role of the nuclear factor could be interpreted in a broader sense as well. On the one hand, in spite of Russia's considerable potential in science, technologies, resources and human capital, the country's various weaknesses remain numerous and significant, whereas nuclear weapons appear as a great equaliser with respect to those who are stronger. On the other hand, it is also an important psychological factor in Russia's on-going search for self-identification.

Thirdly, *the prevailing trends in the nuclear weapons area* are considered to have a different vector in comparison to the TPNW. The latter, if viewed from this perspective, appears to be born of the normative and ethical desiderata, a kind of wishful thinking rather than the result of objective social, political and technical developments.

Nuclear policies of states possessing nuclear weapons are different. But they all proceed from the considerable role of the nuclear factor, both security-wise and politically. Within this group of states, the attitude towards the nuclear weapon could be defined, in most cases, by ascending rather than descending line. This concerns both doctrines and military build-up, as well as nuclear-related rhetoric and declaratory policy.

The changing emphases with respect to some specific aspects of nuclear-weapons thinking and planning seem especially remarkable. In particular, this concerns, for instance, the first use, escalation/de-escalation dynamics, the conventional/nuclear threshold in case of conflict. Some approaches which were officially or tacitly accepted and observed in the past have been rejected or reconsidered. Sometimes, the decades of debates on nuclear arms control seem to be consigned to oblivion.

Paradoxically, the TPNW could be assessed sceptically even within the logic of nuclear arms control. According to some proponents of this logic, in practical terms, it is important to focus upon minimising the instability factors of nuclear deterrence, rather than upon the illusory task of creating a nuclear-free world. On the contrary, it is argued that while moving to the latter (in particular, via the TPNW), problems could appear because of the destabilising consequences of minimal deterrence. Indeed, in the 1980s, this issue was debated within the arms control community, but remained inconclusive. However, nowadays, analysing the relationship between the total nuclear ban and minimal deterrence may mean multiplying two uncertainties by each other rather than getting an analytically and politically relevant result.

Fourthly, among opponents of the TPNW, there are also those analysts and politicians who do not reject the idea of a total nuclear ban in principle or because it is at odds with what they consider to be Russia's political interest. Rather, the negative reaction of many of them proceeds from numerous *concrete setbacks* for the project as it was conceived and implemented.

In particular, the TPNW is regarded as differing significantly from most other serious arms control treaties. It covers almost all aspects of an eventual nuclear ban, but disregards numerous details that deserve serious attention due to their importance and sensitivity for participants. The TPNW pretends to be a document addressing the most devastating weapons of mass destruction – those that have been at the centre of debates, analytical battles and negotiations for decades. Meanwhile, the text of the treaty is surprisingly short. In comparison to practically all other documents of this kind (with very few exceptions), it looks more like an explanatory note than an international treaty on arms control. Both at first glance and after thorough reading, it seems insufficiently substantive and deprived of analytical depth. It clearly lacks the description of how to begin moving to a world without nuclear weapons, and what means and mechanisms would guarantee the full mutual elimination of nuclear arsenals.

In particular, the treaty actually passes over the problem of verification. Critics stress that the latter is of key importance for any arms control endeavour and has always been one of the central elements in both the negotiation and the process of implementation of treaties. Also, the TPNW does not say what should be done in case of non-compliance. Meanwhile, it is well known that the decline of arms control in recent years was, to a very significant degree, the result of contradictions on precisely these two fields: verification and non-compliance.

There is also a problem of reversibility of the ban, if and when a participating state would decide to withdraw from the treaty⁴. In this regard, Russia's grievances refer to the US' practice of withdrawing from the arms control agreements that used to be considered cornerstones of international stability – such as the ABM and the INF treaties. Two other cases could be mentioned in this regard as well: the participation/non-participation of North Korea in the Non-Proliferation Treaty and Iran's eventual withdrawal from it.

Finally, traditional arms control assumes that a treaty has to be the result of serious negotiations which seek to find a broadly acceptable balance between various approaches. This was not so in the case of the TPNW, according to its critics. Indeed, many countries did not take part in discussions and may find it impossible to sign the document which has been prepared without their involvement. Russia shares this argument in its criticism towards the TPNW.

⁴ http://www.mid.ru/web/guest/general_assembly/-/asset_publisher/lrzZMhfoyRUj/content/id/2887054

Broader Optic

The above description shows Russia's obvious negativity regarding the TPNW. This is undoubtedly the predominant feature of the country's position nowadays. However, in the longer term, it is worth looking at this problem through a more multifaceted optic. The sources of variability in Russia's attitude towards a total nuclear ban do exist.

Within each of the four 'anti-nuclear ban' clusters, as outlined above, one could also find some counterbalancing arguments – if not in favour of the TPNW, then at least allowing for a more compromise-oriented attitude. For instance, coming back to principles, it is recognised (although not very energetically) that the initiative for a total nuclear ban proceeds from good intentions and deserves positive assessment. And when entering this path, analysts could easily come to alternative conclusions.

In particular, this concerns the rhetoric on general and complete disarmament. Actually, referring to it was probably not the best idea of those who aimed at discrediting the total nuclear ban. Without discussing here how convincing the arguments on general and complete disarmament are, it seems obvious that what was perhaps relevant in the 1950s-1960s is not so any longer, looking both outdated and deprived of concrete substance that would allow operation and implementation. Not surprisingly, direct appeals to this logic as an anti-TPNW argument, without bringing the desired results, could become counterproductive.

Also, attitudes towards the nuclear ban as undermining the goal of nuclear disarmament become less relevant if one puts aside the immediate political considerations and keeps in mind a longer timeframe. Independent analysts, while reproducing the official criticism with respect to the 'fast track' way towards a nuclear weapons-free world, at the same time may consider the TPNW not only compatible with the officially shared goal of nuclear disarmament but even opening the most direct vector thereto.

Within more balanced assessments of the total nuclear ban, the positive context of analysis could have an even broader character, referring to the problem of prohibiting the weapons of mass destruction in general: "The TPNW is a concrete specific step forward to denuclearise the world on the global scale, and to add nuclear arms to two other international treaties on elimination of the WMD, namely conventions banning biological and bacteriological weapons and chemical weapons which entered into force respectively in 1975 and 1997"⁵ (Vladimir Kolzin, an expert of the Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO-University)).

There are no signs of intensive intellectual debate on the total nuclear ban in the Russian expert community. But the reluctance both to raise the issue and to formulate attitudes thereto is not necessarily explained by the lack of interest towards denuclearisation or scepticism with respect to its practical implementation. There could be another plausible explanation – namely, that the TPNW was overtaken by the prevailing negative dynamics in

⁵ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S18aijIjNRNM&feature=emb_logo

Russia's relations with the West, as well as by what is considered the most acute aspects of degradation in international arms control. Also, the reverse side of the lack of debate is the lack of excessive criticism towards the Treaty on a nuclear ban.

Some Russian experts pay attention to a number of positive changes that were introduced into the treaty in the process of its elaboration. "The authors of the TPNW were able to abandon the assessment of nuclear weapon as contradicting to the international law, as well to specify formal procedures for the future signatories, including in regard to the interaction with the IAEA"⁶ (Dmitry Stefanovich, Center for International Security of the IMEMO RAS).

Such observations seem meaningful – they do not only point to the minimisation of the potential contradiction between the NPT and the TPNW, but also assume the possibility of including the latter into a future innovative arms control architecture.

It is true that in order to present a more adequate picture of nuclear-weapons related discussions in the country, one has also to point to a noisy campaign aimed at reconsidering in a radical way traditional arms control and pro-denuclearisation attitudes thereto. According to this line of thinking, nuclear weapons should be assessed as a great stabiliser of the international system. This extremist approach stops short of proclaiming a crusade against eventual denuclearisation: "It is certainly bad when nuclear weapons stockpiles grow, but it is even worse to have this factor of deterrence disappeared"⁷ (Sergey Karaganov, Dean of the Faculty of World Economy and International Affairs, National Research University Higher School of Economics). Rejection of the TPNW stems directly from this kind of logic. That's why it is noteworthy that the latter has not been endorsed by the official policy line and in fact remains an exotic intellectual exercise rather than a serious factor of domestic debates on nuclear issues in Russia.

The overall political context could also work in different ways. Commentators operating within the official policy would undoubtedly have been able to promote the arguments of the latter more energetically. Their lack of enthusiasm in doing so is probably explained by the fact that drawing such a line around an 'anti-western' pillar is in fact impossible. In a sense, a more supportive attitude towards the TPNW could be a politically motivated line of a broader allies/clients-oriented strategy aimed at forging alternative non-western coalitions/patterns.

But not only opportunistic and situational motives could push in this direction. Of key importance is the fact that nuclear arms control remains on Russia's agenda. Some experts, when looking into the future, believe that sooner or later Russia will become more receptive to total nuclear ban arguments – because the deterrence logic will be assessed as increasingly outdated and requiring a valuable substitute⁸.

⁶ https://russiancouncil.ru/analytics-and-comments/analytics/zapret-yadernogo-oruzhiya-i-mezhdunarodnaya-bezopasnost/?sphrase_id=64759952

⁷ <https://russiancouncil.ru/analytics-and-comments/comments/bog-dal-yadernoe-oruzhie-cheloveku-kak-faktor-sderzhivaniya-mirovykh-voyn/>

⁸ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S18aijJNRNM&feature=emb_logo

Notwithstanding all Moscow's irritation with respect to pro-nuclear ban enthusiasts, Russia seems to be anxious that the TPNW could become a divisive factor in the non-proliferation efforts and, in particular, in the context of the forthcoming NPT Review conference⁹. This concern paves the way for attempts to reduce contradictions and to find common approaches. Joint/common positions could be required within other patterns as well – such as, for instance, relations between Russia and Kazakhstan (with the latter supporting the TPNW while being at the same time the closest ally of Russia).

When discussing the TPNW, Russian experts usually stress that it is necessary not to keep the conceptual and political discussions within the narrow limits of the total nuclear ban problem. It is also expedient to focus upon other important and practically achievable goals – such as the post-New START developments, the entry into force of the CTBT, the search for a substitute for the INF treaty, the (re)launching of conventional arms control and CSBMs in various regional patterns, the inclusion of 'unofficial' nuclear-weapon states into the multilateral cooperative patterns, and so on¹⁰. Strengthening international security in these sensitive areas requires broader approaches.

Options

By and large, Russia seems to have chosen a low-profile attitude towards the TPNW. Its approach could be summed up in the following way: 'We do not like the treaty, but it has been signed, passed ratification (even if at the lowest possible level) and become a fact of life. It is expedient to have this phase behind us and to have the whole issue, if not forgotten as soon as possible, then at least deprived of its problem-generating potential'. Such is the logic which apparently looks predominant (although not often proclaimed by Moscow publicly). Thus, the overall Russian attitude towards a nuclear ban in its current incarnation, even if not tending to present this project overdramatically, seems to be rather sceptical.

With the entry into force of the TPNW in January 2021, the overall context around the total nuclear ban is not changing in a radical way. But the changes do appear – even if only in the form of some minimalist political, ethical and normative messages *urbi et orbi*. Russia may disregard them and continue its current line – or, alternatively, alter it by choosing among a number of available options. They seem to vary within the following spectrum.

(i) *To sign the TPNW and to become its full-fledged participant.* This option is only a theoretical one; its implementation would require considerable (and perhaps radical) alteration within the triad 'Russia – international system – nuclear weapons' (affecting at least two of its three elements, if not all of them).

(ii) *To support the TPNW politically and in the media without signing it.* This could be accompanied by a statement on partial or conditional involvement in the project. Russia could explain, in the former case, what provisions of the treaty it is ready to observe. In the

⁹ https://russiancouncil.ru/analytics-and-comments/analytics/dukh-dnyao-ili-let-us-be-realis-tic/?sphrase_id=64514882

¹⁰ https://russiancouncil.ru/analytics-and-comments/analytics/zapret-yadernogo-oruzhiya-i-mezhdunarodnaya-bezopasnost/?sphrase_id=64759952

latter one, Russia would outline the amendments it considers desirable or what changes in the international circumstances it is awaiting in order to consider formally joining the TPNW. The plausibility of this scenario seems questionable since its premises are rather artificial and unrealistic.

(iii) *To oppose the TPNW actively and energetically.* This option seems next to impossible. It would require the readiness of Moscow to operate as the leader of the anti-nonproliferation trend, as well as Russia's self-identification on the side of the old-type international establishment and against the 'new wave' – something which clearly goes against recent trends in the international system and the country's policy therein.

(iv) *To combine the non-acceptance of the TPNW with refraining from vocal and strident opposition thereto;* on the contrary, to promote dialogue between the opponents and supporters of this document to make them more receptive and tolerant towards each other's arguments.

(v) *To promote constructive engagement with TPNW parties and advocates* with the aim of achieving common approaches to the nuclear ban and/or other nuclear weapons-related issues.

Russia's political developments, both domestically and in relation to the outside world, generate prerequisites for all presented options/scenarios. The first three could result in more or less radical approaches (pro- or anti-TPNW). Whether Moscow is willing (or able) to add radical innovations to its already radicalised foreign policy remains an open question. The last two options would hopefully make the negative implications of debates around the total nuclear ban less salient or even allow for Russia's constructive role in the overall nuclear weapons related area.

The Author

Professor Vladimir Baranovsky is a Board Member of the Moscow-based think tank, Primakov National Research Institute of World Economy and International Relations (IMEMO), Russian Academy of Sciences. He is also Professor at Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO-University) and a member of the Toda International Research Advisory Council.

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Toda Peace Institute
Samon Eleven Bldg. 5th Floor
3-1 Samon-cho, Shinjuku-ku, Tokyo 160-0017, Japan
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