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**From Tlatelolco to the UN Nuclear Weapon Ban Treaty<sup>1</sup>**

**Jorge Alberto López Lechuga<sup>2</sup>**

On February 2, the Government of the U.S. published the [2018 Nuclear Posture Review \(NPR\)](#), which includes the strategy to increase the role of nuclear weapons in national security. The NPR considers the need to double the military budget from 3% to 6.4% in order to modernize the U.S. arsenal. This would mean an investment of 1 trillion USD over the next 30 years. It also states that expanding “flexible U.S. nuclear options now, to include low-yield options, is important for the preservation of credible deterrence against regional aggression”, a strategy that will raise “the nuclear threshold”.

The NPR mentions that including low-yield nuclear weapons will increase the capacity to respond to a possible attack – even a non-nuclear one – and that it “will help ensure that potential adversaries perceive no possible advantage in limited nuclear escalation, making nuclear employment less likely.”

The problem is that, as long as the reliance on low-yielded weapons increases, their impact will be perceived as more “tolerable” and the likelihood of using nuclear weapons will increase. Even so, those low-yield nuclear weapons are much more powerful than the ones used in 1945.

The NPR mentions “global threat conditions have worsened markedly since the most recent 2010 NPR”. It adds that there now exists an “unprecedented” range and a “mix of threats”, including: “major conventional, chemical, biological, nuclear, space, and cyber-threats, and violent non-state actors”. According to the document, these developments “have produced increased uncertainty and risk”, which is the reason why the U.S. must shape its policy and strategy, and initiate the “sustainment” and replacement of its nuclear forces.

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<sup>1</sup> Article published on 17 February 2018 at InDepthNews, available at [goo.gl/TbnfKN](http://goo.gl/TbnfKN).

<sup>2</sup> Jorge Alberto López Lechuga is Research and Communication Officer in the Agency for the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons in Latin America and the Caribbean (OPANAL). The views expressed in this article do not necessarily reflect those of OPANAL and its Member States.

It is not difficult to imagine a world without “uncertainties”, but it is impossible to achieve it. In fact, to attain a world without uncertainties is less realistic than a world without nuclear weapons.

If those “unprecedented” threats exist today, 21<sup>st</sup> century threats, it might be worse to face them relying on strategies of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, specifically a strategy that endangers humankind. If we live in a world with more threats and uncertainties, nuclear weapons should not be in it. The mere existence of these weapons, no matter who possesses them, is a threat to everyone, even to nuclear weapon possessors.

Among the hypotheses of using nuclear weapons, the countries that possess them usually mention the need to use them if the existence of the State is at stake, generally in the face of possible nuclear attacks. The NPR includes more scenarios, which would make the use of nuclear weapons more permissible.

Of course, the problem is not limited to the U.S. arsenal. There are 8 additional countries with nuclear weapons and since the American arsenal is probably the most powerful, there is no guarantee that these countries will not be encouraged to increase their “nuclear options” in response to the 2018 NPR.

The idea that a world without nuclear weapons is desirable but unrealistic at this moment is still upon us. However, some countries think differently.

On February 14, 1967, 51 years ago, the Latin American and Caribbean countries opposed to this notion and, by means of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons in Latin America and the Caribbean ([Treaty of Tlatelolco](#)), established a legally binding prohibition of nuclear weapons in their region. [February 14, 2018 marked the 51st anniversary of the opening for signature of the Treaty of Tlatelolco.]

The model established by Tlatelolco (Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone) was so successful that it was subsequently adopted by other four regions: South Pacific ([Treaty of Rarotonga](#)); Southeast Asia ([Treaty of Bangkok](#)); Africa ([Treaty of Pelindaba](#)); Central Asia ([Treaty on a Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone in Central Asia](#)); and Mongolia (the country’s self-declared nuclear-weapon-free status has been recognized internationally through the adoption of UN General Assembly [resolution 55/33S](#)). Nowadays, there are 114 States parties and signatories to treaties establishing nuclear-weapon-free zones.

On July 17, 2017, at the United Nations, 122 countries adopted the [Treaty on The Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons](#), opened to all States for signature. The so-called “Ban Treaty” prohibits, *inter alia*, to “Develop, test, produce, manufacture, otherwise acquire, possess or stockpile nuclear weapons or other nuclear explosive devices”. Moreover, it also prohibits the “Use or threaten to use nuclear weapons or other nuclear explosive devices”.

The Treaty will enter into force when 50 countries ratify it. Since the opening for signature of the Treaty on September 20, 2017, five States have ratified the instrument. This might be seen as negative, but let’s remember that 122 countries, 63% of the UN membership, voted in favour of its adoption. Thus, we could say a majority of countries think that a nuclear-weapons-free world must be push forward.

It is no surprise that the nuclear weapon possessors and their allies oppose the Ban Treaty. They claim that the instrument will not be effective without the participation of countries with nuclear weapons. One wonder: if they believe that, then, why do they oppose the Treaty so feverishly? Perhaps they acknowledge that the Treaty will contribute to the stigmatization of their main instrument of power.

The NPR states that the Ban Treaty “is fueled by wholly unrealistic expectations of the elimination of nuclear arsenals without the prerequisite transformation of the international security environment”. The fact that it is even mentioned in the NPR acknowledges its relevance.

The supporters of the Ban Treaty do not agree with the idea that the elimination of nuclear arsenals needs a “prerequisite transformation of the international security environment”. On the contrary, they think that the elimination of nuclear weapons would be a positive “transformation” of international security.

It is clear that the Ban Treaty will not immediately guarantee the elimination of nuclear weapons; however, it is not realistic to try to achieve a world without nuclear weapons before the legal establishment of their prohibition. An international norm on the prohibition of nuclear weapons is a necessary step “leading towards their total elimination”.

To ban nuclear weapons is needed in order to delegitimize them. This was the case with biological and chemical weapons. No country that supports the Treaty says that the instrument is an end in itself; it is a step further, not the final stage.

We should consider one lesson from the Treaty of Tlatelolco in the words of Alfonso García Robles (1982 Nobel Peace Prize Laureate), its head negotiator: “The system adopted in the Latin American instrument proves that, although no state can obligate another to join such a zone, neither can one prevent others wishing to do so from adhering to a regime of total absence of nuclear weapons within their own territories.”

No country can prevent another to make the decision, in the free exercise of its sovereign right, to reject a security system that puts humankind at risk. Tlatelolco was the first successful step on that road, the Ban Treaty is an additional one.