

# UN “Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons” Agreed To By 122 Countries



By Toby Walsh | [Phys.org](https://www.phys.org)

On July 7th, 122 countries voted in favour of the “[Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons](#)”.

Nuclear weapons were the only weapons of mass destruction without a treaty banning them, despite the fact that they are potentially the most potent of all weapons. [Biological weapons were banned in 1975](#) and [chemical weapons in 1992](#).

This new treaty sets the international norm that nuclear weapons are no longer morally acceptable. This is the first step along the road to their eventual elimination from our planet, although the issue of North Korea’s nuclear ambitions remains unresolved.

Earlier this year, thousands of scientists including 30 Nobel Prize winners signed an open letter calling for nuclear weapons to be banned. I was one of the signees, and am pleased to see an outcome linked to this call so swiftly and resolutely answered.

More broadly, the nuclear weapon treaty offers hope for formal negotiations about lethal autonomous weapons (otherwise known as killer robots) due to start in the UN in November. Nineteen countries have [already called for a pre-emptive ban on such weapons](#), fearing they will be the next [weapon](#) of mass destruction that man will invent.

An arms race is underway to develop autonomous weapons, in every theatre of war. In the air, for instance, BAE Systems is prototyping their [Taranis drone](#). On the sea, the US Navy has launched their first autonomous ship, the [Sea Hunter](#). And under the sea, Boeing has a working version of a 15 metre long [Echo Voyager autonomous submarine](#).

### **New treaty, new hope**

The nuclear weapons [treaty](#) is an important step towards delegitimising nuclear weapons, and puts strong moral pressure on the nuclear [states](#) like the US, the UK and Russia to reduce and eventually to eliminate such weapons from their arsenals. The treaty also obliges states to support victims of the use and testing of nuclear weapons, and to address environmental damage caused by [nuclear weapons](#).

It has to be noted that the talks at the UN and subsequent vote on the treaty were boycotted by *all* the nuclear states, as well as by a number of other countries. Australia has played a leading role in the nuclear non-proliferation treaty and other disarmament talks. Disappointingly Australia was one of these countries boycotting last week's talks. In contrast, [New Zealand](#) played a leading role with their ambassador being one of the Vice-Presidents of the talks.

Whilst 122 countries voted for the treaty, one country (the Netherlands) voted against, and one (Singapore) abstained from the vote.

The treaty will open for signature by states at the United Nations in New York on September 20, 2017. It will then come into force once 50 states have signed.

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