

Event Report

The New Nuclear Normal? Preserving Security in an Insecure World By Aidann Gia Bacolodan

Strategic instability and disregard for international norms are generating new nuclear risks, even as the majority of the world's countries reject nuclear weapons, according to a panel hosted by Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) at the United Nations, 4 March 2025.

The event, organized in partnership with the Arms Control Association and the International Disarmament Institute at Pace University, coincided with the Third Meeting of States Parties to the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) and discussed navigating a world with nuclear weapons and the threat they pose.

The event brought together parliamentarians, diplomats, representatives from international organizations, and members of civil society. Matthias Jobelius, director of FES New York, opened the session.

Daryl Kimball, executive director of the Arms Control Association, moderated the discussion, which featured Ambassador Alexander Kmentt of Austria's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Senator Marilou McPhedran of Canada. Dr. Emily Welty, co-director of the International Disarmament Institute, concluded the session with a summary and closing remarks.

Speakers acknowledged decades of efforts by scientists, government officials, and civil society in reducing nuclear arsenals, culminating in the adoption of the TPNW. However, many noted that progress has stalled over the last decade. Concerns were raised about how the new U.S. administration could impact disarmament efforts.

A key issue was the growing reliance on nuclear weapons in Europe and the lack of discussion on replacing the expiring Russia-U.S. arms control agreement. Shifting security dynamics in Europe and Asia have led some states to believe expanding their nuclear stockpiles will enhance security.

Several participants argued that framing the TPNW as a humanitarian instrument may undermine its influence. Because many states justify nuclear weapons as a security necessity, they argued the treaty must address deterrence and security concerns directly. The TPNW is, for them, an expression of their states' legitimate security interests. Speakers highlighted emerging risks, including cyber vulnerabilities and advanced technologies that complicate nuclear security.

The discussion explored nuclear deterrence, with one speaker emphasizing that deterrence is not a tangible system but a psychological concept. It relies on a sequence of decisions made under the right conditions, sustained largely by luck. The absence of nuclear war, participants noted, should

not be seen as proof of deterrence's success. There is no guarantee it will continue to work. Overconfidence in the concept could lead to catastrophic miscalculations.

The meeting underscored the need for nuclear-armed states to engage in substantive dialogue. Some argued that states refusing to participate are also failing to observe, reinforcing entrenched beliefs about deterrence. Without broader engagement, the barriers to disarmament will remain deeply divided.

Moving forward, speakers called for greater involvement from parliamentarians, students, and civil society. A section of the discussion focused on the role of young advocates, particularly high school students. Participants stressed that nuclear disarmament education should avoid fear-based tactics, which have proven ineffective. Teaching future diplomats and lawmakers about nuclear abolition now, they argued, is crucial. Indigenous youth were recognized for leading movements against nuclear weapons, particularly in communities disproportionately affected by nuclear waste disposal.

The conversation shifted to the broader need for disarmament. One argument framed nuclear weapons as the most severe climate crisis threat. Participants underscored the shared risks, emphasizing that nuclear devastation would not be contained to any single nation. Calls were made for transparency, trust-building, and multinational engagement beyond those already involved in these discussions.

Speakers stressed the importance of shifting public discourse. They urged stronger rejection of nuclear testing, an end to sanitized language, and the use of explicit terms when discussing the impact of these weapons. The conversation acknowledged that banning nuclear weapons in the nine nuclear states would not happen overnight. However, participants argued that eliminating abstract rhetoric and recognizing the catastrophic human cost—genocide and mass civilian casualties—would be a step forward.

The meeting concluded with a call to expand global engagement. While those in the room were familiar with these arguments, the challenge remains in reaching the wider public. The collective goal, speakers agreed, is to protect humanity and the planet from a shared existential threat.