

Topic Brief

Resolved: European members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization should ratify the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons.

BACKGROUND

Topic Overview:

Debates over war and military doctrine often feel distant from students' everyday lives because, in addition to the thought of nuclear war being horrifying, such debates often seem to be built on abstract theories, decades-old assumptions, and strategic models shaped by Cold War logic. The language can feel outdated or flawed, making it hard to see how these frameworks connect to everyday life.

Debating about Europe and the TPNW has the potential to be a huge improvement on previous military topics. The treaty itself (the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons) took shape as a global grassroots social movement. Its origin was the Humanitarian Initiative of the early 2010s, when states and civil-society groups highlighted the catastrophic human and environmental effects of nuclear use. Its drafting and messaging was shaped by survivors' testimony and grassroots activism led by the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons, which pushed the issue onto the UN agenda.

In 2017, 122 states adopted the treaty after formal negotiations, creating the first *comprehensive* ban on nuclear weapons. It entered into force in 2021 after reaching 50 ratifications. Since then, state parties have held regular meetings to build verification frameworks, victim-assistance obligations, and long-term disarmament norms—and nuclear-armed states like the U.S., Britain, and France have vehemently opposed the treaty.

NATO TPNW | Topic Brief

The debate over whether NATO countries should ratify the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons reflects two fundamentally different worldviews about security, legitimacy, and long-term risk. Supporters emphasize humanitarian principles and democratic alignment: nuclear weapons are inherently catastrophic, and European publics overwhelmingly oppose them. For these states, ratification strengthens international law, reinforces global non-proliferation norms, and reduces long-term systemic risks by stigmatizing nuclear modernization.

Opponents adopt a strategic-realist perspective, arguing that NATO's security depends on credible nuclear deterrence and integrated nuclear planning that the TPNW directly contradicts. They warn that ratification could disrupt defense cooperation, send confusing signals to adversaries, and undermine scientific, industrial, and humanitarian partnerships with nuclear-armed allies.

At its core, the debate pits a normative, humanitarian vision of security against a pragmatic, capability-driven model focused on maintaining deterrence and operational coherence within NATO. It also pits two core philosophical assumptions against each other: TPNW advocates believe nuclear weapons are *immoral*, while proponents of nuclear deterrence view it as a *necessary evil* in a world filled with bad actors and global security threats.

Debaters can effectively research this topic by searching:

- Policy journals on proliferation and arms control.
- Think tanks like Carnegie, Chatham House, Brookings, and others.
- Grassroots anti-nuclear campaigns' home pages and articles.
- OpEds and position papers written by expert advocates on both sides of the TPNW debate, often appearing in major media outlets like the New York Times or Washington Post.
- Critical literature: philosophy and critical theory journals that critique militarism, foreign policy assumptions, or the rhetoric of nuclearism.

We began by pointing out that nuclear weapons debates are often cold, distant, and unpleasant. Students should also know there are critical, alternative frameworks that challenge those old assumptions, as well as fresh contemporary thinking both in favor of and against retaining a nuclear deterrent. This topic presents the opportunity to debate both within and outside of traditional military and foreign policy paradigms.

AFFIRMATIVE/PRO ARGUMENTS

Links to articles for many of these arguments can be found in our [PRO and CON slide deck](#).

- **Nuclear Proliferation:** Ratifying the TPNW will strengthen global nonproliferation norms, meaning states will begin to dismantle their nuclear weapons if they have them, and won't acquire new ones. This will make the world safe from nuclear war.
- **International Humanitarian Law:** The very existence of nuclear weapons constitutes a violation of international human rights and the laws of armed conflict, in the opinion of many legal and political scholars. Ratification strengthens international law and norms, which in turn decreases overall conflict in the world and encourages cooperation.
- **Alliance Security and Stability:** NATO faces internal tensions now as well as pressure from the European public, who overwhelmingly support nuclear disarmament. Ratification of the TPNW strengthens European and NATO legitimacy and ensures a transition to conventional (non-nuclear) deterrence.
- **Diplomacy:** Ratification demonstrates a good model of global governance, increasing diplomatic leverage to negotiate on issues like arms control, climate crisis response, and humanitarian issues. European leadership on climate is key to many global solutions.

NEGATIVE/CON ARGUMENTS

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- **Deterrence:** Nuclear weapons deter adversaries, especially Russia. Moscow will increase its aggression and expansionism in response to any decrease in NATO's nuclear commitments. War will result, drawing in the U.S. because of NATO's collective defense commitments.
- **NATO Destabilization/Breakup:** NATO is kept together by its shared defense commitments and a consensus against the TPNW is part of that. A fractured NATO alliance would be a disaster for European security, invite Russian adventurism, undermine responses to cyberterrorism, and hurt climate and energy transitions.
- **Arms Control:** The Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (the NPT) controls current global cooperation on nuclear weapons. It limits further proliferation. The TPNW is not only ineffective in actually dismantling existing nuclear weapons, but also upsets the management provided by the NPT. This hurts existing arms control agreements and nuclear security, including prevention of theft of nuclear materials.
- **Peaceful Use:** European states rely on nuclear weapons states also providing technology for nuclear energy. Fewer nuclear weapons states means less energy tech, slowing down the development of a key alternative to fossil fuel use, undermining efforts to mitigate climate change and produce clean energy.

DEFINITIONS

Resolutional Definitions

- **European members of NATO:** “European” is defined by [Merriam-Webster](#) as “of, relating to, or characteristic of Europe or its people.” Out of NATO's 32 member states, 30 are located in Europe. These include the European founding nations (such as the United Kingdom, France, and Belgium) and late-stage additions like Finland (joined 2023) and Sweden (joined 2024).
- **NATO:** According to [Dictionary.com](#), the North Atlantic Treaty Organization is “a political and military alliance established in 1949 in Washington, D.C., by 12 countries in Europe and North America for the purpose of collective defense against aggression, now comprising 32 member nations: Albania, Belgium, Bulgaria, Canada, Croatia, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Montenegro, the Netherlands, North Macedonia, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Turkey, the United Kingdom, and the United States.”
- **Ratify:** According to the [Legal Information Institute](#): “To ratify means to approve or enact a legally binding act that would not otherwise be binding in the absence of such approval.”
- **TPNW:** The [Nuclear Threat Initiative](#) notes: “The Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) bans the use, possession, testing, and transfer of nuclear weapons under international law.”

Additional Definitions

- **Conventional weapons:** According to [Grokopedia](#), military armaments whose destructive force comes from kinetic, explosive, or incendiary energy, explicitly excluding nuclear, biological, chemical, or radiological weapons.
- **Weapons of mass destruction (WMD):** From [Britannica](#): Weapons with the capacity to inflict death and destruction on such a massive scale and so indiscriminately that its very presence in the hands of a hostile power can be considered a grievous threat. Modern weapons of mass destruction are either nuclear, biological, or chemical weapons.
- **Second-strike capability:** According to [Global Power Desk](#): The ability of a nuclear-armed state to absorb a nuclear attack and still retaliate, considered essential for stable deterrence because it prevents an adversary from believing a disarming first strike is possible.
- **Nuclear deterrence:** [Global Power Desk](#) says it’s “a strategic doctrine in which a state uses the credible threat of devastating nuclear retaliation to dissuade an adversary from attacking, by making the expected costs of aggression outweigh any possible gain.”

VIDEOS TO WATCH

- **The Concept of Nuclear Deterrence:** Contemporary dialogue involving different viewpoints about the evolution of nuclear weapon deterrence since World War II and how deterrence may evolve in the future.
- **The Insanity of Nuclear Deterrence:** TEDx talk by former New Zealand Military Commander Robert Green, who piloted a nuclear-armed aircraft. He explains why he became an opponent of nuclear weapons.
- **NATO Should Threaten Decisive Nuclear Retaliation:** Two U.S. scholars and former public officials argue that NATO should assert nuclear retaliation to deter Russia.