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THE NUCLEAR NON-PROLIFERATION TREATY CANNOT LIVE ON OLD MERITS

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The first Preparatory Committee (PrepCom) meeting of the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty's (NPT) 2026 Review Conference is currently underway in Vienna. The NPT, which entered into force in 1970, is one of the most successful and useful treaties in the world, with 190 states signing up to its provisions. This first PrepCom in the NPT review cycle is an important exercise in gaining the best possible outcome for the 2026 Review Conference. The NPT was designed to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons, deemed to be highly dangerous and destabilising to international security.

In 1970, five states already had nuclear weapons: the United States, Soviet Union (succeeded by Russia), Britain, France, and China. Their goal within the NPT was to limit the proliferation of nuclear weapons to other states. As part of this bargain, they pledged to eliminate their nuclear arsenals. However, approximately 12,500 nuclear weapons still exist today, with around 90% of these held by Russia and the United States. This failure to disarm has led to disappointment and even anger among most of the 185 non-nuclear weapon states. They claim that while they have upheld their end of the bargain, the nuclear weapon states have not.

The last NPT Review Conference, held in 2022, was marred by acrimony and was unable to produce a consensus outcome. Since then, the situation has deteriorated even further: great power relations have worsened, the Ukraine war rages on, threats to nuclear power plants persist, and arms control arrangements have all but disappeared.

In March, Russia announced its suspension of participation in the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty, the sole remaining nuclear arms agreement between itself and the United States, ostensibly due to its verification inspectors being denied access to US installations as part of sanctions against Russia over the Ukraine war.

The practice of nuclear sharing has also raised concerns. In a blow to non-proliferation efforts, Moscow has transferred nuclear weapons to its strategic ally Belarus, arguing that the United States has stationed nuclear weapons in Belgium, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, and Turkey as part of NATO's nuclear sharing policy for decades.

Meanwhile, all the nuclear weapons states continue to modernise and, in some cases, expand their existing nuclear arsenals, in violation of their promises under the NPT to disarm. Missile proliferation and launches are also of deep concern, with North Korea persistently stoking tensions in Northeast Asia with its belligerent rhetoric and aggressive missile program.

The discussions in Vienna are designed to minimise the risks of nuclear war and accidents in the short term, and to establish a set of expectations for a smooth Review Conference in 2026. Diplomats have focused on a series of urgent tasks. These include rendering the threat to use nuclear weapons inadmissible, reaffirming commitments to risk-reduction measures, and preventing the use of artificial intelligence in nuclear decision-making.

The opening statements of some states have reminded the world of the dangers of growing arms races, especially in the Asia-Pacific region, where AUKUS, the proposed nuclear-powered submarine arrangement between Australia, the UK, and the United States, has heightened fears of strategic instability. For South Pacific states especially, any threat of nuclear use or accident is unacceptable.

Civil society members attending in Vienna have stressed the need to remember the catastrophic humanitarian consequences of any nuclear weapons use. They urge that the PrepCom should reaffirm the need for all states to comply with international humanitarian law at all times. Together with many states, they draw attention to the 2017 UN Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) and note that it is in the interest of the very survival of humanity that nuclear weapons are never used again, under any circumstances.

While not explicitly focused on the TPNW, the current PrepCom meeting and the NPT conferences more generally will have to come to terms with the fact that the TPNW is here to stay and is gaining acceptance. This treaty, while rejected for now by the nuclear weapon states and their allies, is seen by many non-nuclear weapon states as the only silver lining in what is a dismal and dangerous state of nuclear affairs today.

TPNW proponents emphasise the need not only to move toward the complete elimination of nuclear weapons but also the urgency of providing victim assistance to those who suffered in the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings, and to ensure that environmental remediation is conducted in the areas where thousands of nuclear weapons tests occurred after the 1940s.

The current talks in Vienna are unlikely to bring about substantial change or any real optimism in what is a relentlessly depressing state of affairs. We are witnessing nuclear

dangers grow every month, and none of the nuclear weapon states are taking seriously their obligations to make the world a less dangerous place. This is unacceptable. The war in Ukraine and other developments must not be used as excuses to continue with belligerent nuclear policies and to withdraw from arms control and confidence-building measures. If anything, the existing situation makes it even more important to see progress towards reductions in arsenals and a genuine commitment to avoid nuclear dangers.

The NPT has been largely successful, with 185 states vowing never to develop nuclear weapons. Only four states – Israel, India, Pakistan, and North Korea – have proceeded to develop nuclear weapons outside that treaty. However, unless the PrepCom and the 2026 Review Conference can show some signs of improvement and real commitment from the nuclear weapon states, the NPT is at risk of unravelling.

The opinions articulated above represent the views of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Asia-Pacific Leadership Network or any of its members.

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ABOUT APLN

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