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The 2026 Review Conference on the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons Faces More Challenges Than Ever Before

Marianne Hanson



ASIA-PACIFIC LEADERSHIP NETWORK

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Marianne Hanson is Honorary Associate Professor of International Relations at the University of Queensland, Australia, where she teaches and researches in the field of international security, focusing on arms control, disarmament, international organisations and international law. Prior to joining the University of Queensland, she was Stipendiary Lecturer in Politics at Magdalen College, Oxford University. Dr Hanson gained her MPhil and Doctoral degrees at Oxford University. She is an Australian member of the Asia-Pacific Leadership Network.



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Please direct inquiries to:

Asia-Pacific Leadership Network
APLN Secretariat
4th floor, 116, Pirundae-ro
Jongno-gu, Seoul, ROK, 03035
Tel. +82-2-2135-2170
Fax. +82-70-4015-0708
Email. apln@apln.network

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Marianne Hanson

Honorary Associate Professor of International Relations at the University of Queensland, Australia.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The 11th Review Conference of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), taking place at the United Nations from 27 April to 22 May 2026, faces the most formidable set of challenges in the treaty's 56-year history. While the NPT has long been strained by structural inequalities and the failure of nuclear weapon states to fulfil their disarmament obligations under Article VI, a series of recent developments have compounded these long-standing difficulties to a degree that is qualitatively new.

Nuclear weapon states are modernising and, in some cases, expanding their arsenals. Key arms control agreements, including New START, have lapsed with no successors in place. Nuclear sharing arrangements are proliferating across Europe. Threats to resume nuclear testing have resurfaced. And the US-Israeli military campaign against Iran - an NPT member state attacked by a non-signatory and a nuclear weapon state - has struck at the foundations of all three NPT pillars: non-proliferation, disarmament, and the peaceful use of nuclear energy.

These and other developments have deepened the sense of grievance among non-nuclear weapon states, particularly in the Global South, and eroded the credibility of the treaty's grand bargain. Middle powers that once bridged the gap between nuclear and non-nuclear states are increasingly aligned with nuclear-allied positions, limiting their capacity to mediate. The prospect of a consensus outcome document is remote.

Looking ahead, the NPT faces several possible trajectories: incremental reform that preserves the treaty in weakened form; withdrawal by disillusioned states, whether nuclear or non-nuclear; deeper fragmentation and new proliferation pressures; or growing momentum behind the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons as an alternative pathway. The responsibility for preventing further deterioration lies primarily with the nuclear weapon states. Without a credible recommitment to disarmament and a restoration of trust and reciprocity, the NPT risks becoming not merely dysfunctional but irrelevant.

I. INTRODUCTION

The 11th Review Conference (RevCon) on the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) is taking place at the United Nations between 27 April and 22 May this year. The treaty, which entered into force in 1970, is widely regarded as the cornerstone of nuclear non-proliferation and (until recently) disarmament efforts. Overall, it has been remarkably successful. It survived the Cold War and the post-Cold War era and has 191 states parties (including the five NPT nuclear weapon states, the United States, Russia, Britain, France and China), with only four states (Israel, India, Pakistan and North Korea) remaining outside the treaty.

But it is a highly fragile agreement, at risk of fraying because of its inherent inequalities, the unprecedented disruption of established nuclear norms that we are seeing today, in Europe, the Middle East and elsewhere, and the growing sense of grievance felt by non-nuclear weapon states (NNWS) - especially those in the Global South - against the nuclear weapon states (NWS) whose leaders are seen to be in abrogation of their treaty responsibilities.

While this will not be the first Review Conference to have taken place amid disagreement and risk to the treaty, the 2026 RevCon is facing unparalleled challenges and deep obstacles. Unless addressed successfully and in good faith - and this report suggests that the responsibility to do this now lies primarily with the nuclear weapon states - these challenges and obstacles may well prove too great for the NPT system to continue in any significantly useful way. If this were to occur, it would reflect a substantial blow to global security and would signal to states, organisations and individuals who have worked for decades to achieve a world free of nuclear weapons that their task is becoming not only increasingly important, but also progressively harder.

These negotiations come at a crucial point in nuclear politics. The way this meeting unfolds in the coming weeks is likely to shape views on the NPT's utility. Although it has achieved near-universality, been largely successful in many of its aims, and served a critical global purpose since it entered into force in 1970, current circumstances threaten all these achievements.

II. THE NPT: HOW DID WE GET TO WHERE WE ARE TODAY?

Negotiated in the 1960s, with the support of both non-nuclear and nuclear weapon states (the latter being the United States (US), the United Kingdom (UK), and the Soviet Union), the NPT recognised the urgent need to halt the further

spread of nuclear weapons by preventing any more states from acquiring them.¹ This clearly suited the strategic aims of the NWS, but undeniably, non-nuclear states would also benefit from limiting the spread of nuclear weapons to other states.

But in order for Washington, London and Moscow to persuade non-nuclear states to sign the treaty and promise that they will never acquire nuclear weapons, the NWS had to agree to the inclusion of Article VI, which stipulated that the nuclear weapon states (which also included France and China) were obliged to ‘pursue negotiations on effective measures relating to cessation of the nuclear arms race at an early date and to nuclear disarmament’. Effectively, this was a promise by the nuclear states that, in exchange for the forbearance of the non-nuclear states, they would eventually move to disarmament. The non-nuclear states would also be given the inalienable right to develop nuclear energy for peaceful purposes. This is often referred to as the ‘grand bargain’ underpinning the NPT.

To support the goal of non-proliferation, the treaty established a safeguards system under the responsibility of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). These safeguards are a means of verifying compliance with the NPT and preventing the diversion of fissile material for weapons use through IAEA inspections.

In its early days, the NPT could be seen as a collaborative effort involving both nuclear and non-nuclear states to address the fear of horizontal proliferation of nuclear weapons, i.e., the acquisition of nuclear weapons by states other than those which had already tested a nuclear weapon before January 1967. And while the NPT’s creation was driven primarily by the US, the UK, and the Soviet Union, non-nuclear weapon states also played an important part (Davenport 2019).

By the late 1960s, preventing or limiting proliferation was accepted as a global public good worth pursuing, because nuclear weapons posed a danger not just to individual states, but to the entire globe. The NPT can thus be seen as an important collective agreement designed to address a common threat. Non-proliferation was a key aim, but a recognition of the hugely destructive nature of these weapons was also evident and resulted in the NNWS obtaining the Article VI promise by the nuclear states to move to disarmament. At this early stage in the

1 On the origins of the NPT, see Shaker, Mohamed I Shaker, 1980, *The nuclear non-proliferation treaty: Origin and implementation*, Oceana Publications., E. M. Chossudovsky, 1990, ‘The origins of the treaty on the nonproliferation of nuclear weapons: Ireland’s initiative in the United Nations (1958–1961)’, *Irish Studies International Affairs*, 3(2), D. Bourantonis, 1997, ‘The negotiation of the Non-Proliferation Treaty, 1965–1968: A note’, *The International History Review*, 19(2), K. Davenport, 2019, Davenport, K. (2019). Recognizing the threat: Origins of the NPT negotiations. Morgan and Claypool Publishers, and R. Popp, L. Horowitz, and A. Wenger, 2017. *Negotiating the nuclear non-proliferation treaty: Origins of the nuclear order*. Routledge.

NPT's history, therefore, all parties held some position of power and entitlement within this "grand bargain".²

Problems in the NPT's grand bargain became evident soon after its creation: not only did the nuclear weapon states quickly and dramatically increase the number of nuclear weapons they held in 1970 (vertical proliferation), but it appeared that they also had little intention of keeping their Article VI promise to the non-nuclear states.

The post-Cold War era: From indefinite extension to indefinite postponement

The end of the Cold War presented a window of opportunity for nuclear states to eliminate their arsenals in a phased, monitored, and mutual manner and several organisations and commissions recommended just this. Those who advocated seizing the moment to move to a world free of nuclear weapons included several prominent military and political leaders, including those from the nuclear weapon states. Nevertheless, the necessary steps were not taken.

1995 was a crucial year: Twenty-five years after it entered into force, a decision needed to be made on whether to terminate the NPT, extend it for a further finite period, or extend it indefinitely. The non-nuclear states were keen to hold the NWS more strictly to account regarding their disarmament commitments. The result, however, was the deepening entrenchment of the unequal nature of the NPT. Pressured into agreeing to an indefinite extension without a vote, some non-nuclear states have since come to regret their acquiescence in what was obviously a victory for the interests of nuclear states. The NWS secured an indefinite extension of the treaty with only a few concessions, reaffirming Article VI and making further promises to disarm, accepting conditions of a 'strengthened review process', and giving a commitment to hold a conference to discuss the creation of a zone free of nuclear and other weapons of mass destruction in the region of the Middle East. The strengthened review process was to encourage and monitor further reductions in nuclear arsenals, while the Middle East resolution reflected a long-standing regional concern with Israel's nuclear weapons arsenal.

² A number of broad groupings can be identified within the NPT: the five NWS (the US, Russia, UK, France and China), and the NNWS (the remaining 186 member states). But among the latter are important sub-groups: several NNWS are members of NATO and thus fall directly under the US nuclear umbrella (reliant on US nuclear deterrence to deter threats), as do Japan, South Korea, and (in a self-anointed way) Australia. While many of these states have been strong supporters of disarmament, their allegiance is invariably towards the US; a further grouping is the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), the largest political group within the NPT process comprising 120 states drawn from the Global South who challenge western dominance within the NPT; a more recent grouping is the New Agenda Coalition, founded in 1998 by Brazil, Egypt, Ireland, Mexico, New Zealand, South Africa, Sweden, and Slovenia (the latter two states, now members of NATO, have left the Coalition). This group is geographically diverse and sought to bridge the divide between the nuclear and non-nuclear weapon states in the NPT.

Even though, by 1995, there had been a significant drop in the number of US and Russian nuclear weapons, negotiated under the START process (Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty), non-nuclear states were clear that indefinite extension of the NPT should not become a carte blanche for the nuclear powers to retain their monopoly forever: the Conference President warned that the permanence of the treaty should not mean a permanence of what was being called ‘nuclear apartheid’. It is important to keep these developments at this key 1995 meeting in mind as we assess the unfolding of the 2026 Review Conference.

Yet the Review Conferences after 1995 saw growing discontent among non-nuclear states, who argued that the NWS were not doing enough to fulfil their Article VI commitments. At their insistence, new mechanisms were adopted to reduce nuclear dangers and move toward full disarmament: the ‘Thirteen Steps’ program in 2000, and the ‘64 Point Action Plan’ in 2010. These reflected a growing sense of grievance among NNWS that they would be forced to live with a now-indefinitely extended NPT, which had no way of pressuring the nuclear states to keep their side of the bargain.

By the 2015 RevCon, it was clear that an impasse had been reached and that any progress was dependent on the will of the nuclear weapon states. Neither did the subsequent 2022 Review Conference bring any real progress. Malaysia observed that ‘the treaty’s review process was being held ‘politically hostage’ by a few states, while the majority - the NNWS - were forced to endure additional non-proliferation burdens. The Cuban delegation noted that ‘the long-standing demand of the NAM (Non-Aligned States Parties) for the full, effective and non-discriminatory implementation of all provisions of the Treaty had been ignored.’ And with Russia’s invasion of Ukraine as the meeting’s backdrop, the relationships between the nuclear weapon states themselves were becoming more fractious, as noted by the New Agenda Coalition.

The most recent Preparatory Committee (PrepCom) meetings similarly do not bode well for a successful 2026 RevCon. The 2023 meeting was marked by a refusal to reference even the Chair’s summary and recommendations in the procedural report. Iran, together with Russia and Syria, blocked the report, claiming a deep bias against Iran and in favour of Western states. The 2024 PrepCom fared slightly better, but by 2025, the meeting was not able to even adopt recommendations for the current Review Conference. As one observer has noted, the NPT, as it exists, ‘is in grave danger of becoming altogether dysfunctional in terms of its core task to “consider principles, objectives, and full implementation of the Treaty”. This is particularly alarming.’³

3 Michael Biontino, 2025. *Preparing for the 2026 Review Conference: Pragmatic steps toward an improved NPT Review Cycle*, ELN Commentary, 5 July. <https://europeanleadershipnetwork.org/commentary/preparing-for-the-2026-review-conference-pragmatic-steps-toward-an-improved-npt-review-cycle/>



The Preparatory Committee for the 2026 Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons review conference opened its third meeting at the U.N. headquarters in New York on April 28, 2025. Running through May 9, the meeting was the final preparatory session before the 2026 review conference. (Photo by Kyodo News via Getty Images)

Importantly, one result of the failed 2015 RevCon was the move by many non-nuclear states to create the 2017 United Nations Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW). This had its genesis in a series of meetings beginning in 2013 that examined the humanitarian implications of nuclear weapons. If the NPT was not going to achieve disarmament, as seemed evident by the 2015 RevCon, and if the nuclear weapon states were not receptive to the security concerns of other states, many NNWS felt that a new treaty and a new forum were needed. This did not mean that non-nuclear states were abandoning the NPT; the creation of the TPNW was seen as complementary to the NPT, a concrete measure aimed at moving towards the goal of full nuclear disarmament. But the NPT was always going to be dominated by the nuclear weapon states, and non-nuclear states grew more resentful of the double standards inherent in the treaty. Remarkably, the NPT has stayed intact since it entered into force in 1970 (with only one state, North Korea, leaving it and developing nuclear weapons). Nonetheless, once they were able to extend the NPT indefinitely in 1995, the nuclear weapon states have continued to use the treaty to their own advantage, and with little cost to themselves. The steps needed to reduce nuclear dangers remain untaken, and enhanced measures for moving towards disarmament have achieved very little. By the turn of the century, any sense of collective power or common endeavour felt in 1968 had almost evaporated. Today, fifty-six years after the NPT entered into force, the world continues to face very real nuclear dangers.

Where are we now?

Given the inauspicious lack of progress, it is fair to question what might be possible at the 2026 Conference. The RevCon is expected to review all three pillars of the NPT – nuclear non-proliferation, disarmament, and the peaceful use of nuclear energy - but in reality, the focus is likely to remain firmly on the inherent inequalities of the treaty, the conflicting views between nuclear weapon and non-nuclear weapon states parties, and the lack of disarmament. And while this Conference, like previous RevCons, will be affected by several long-standing difficulties, it is a series of more recent developments which threaten proceedings the most and which will make this arguably the most contentious of reviews to date.

What is different today is a sense that the rule-book has been thrown out of the window, that nuclear weapon states, far from implementing Article VI, have blatantly discarded previous promises, have adopted positions enhancing the role of nuclear weapons, and given up any pretence of respecting the security concerns and rights of the non-nuclear states. The following section canvasses the long-standing problems that have plagued the treaty before outlining recent developments, all of which suggest that the treaty is facing a qualitatively new set of challenges that go well beyond the usual RevCon difficulties.

III. PROBLEMS IN SUSTAINING THE NUCLEAR NON-PROLIFERATION TREATY

Long-standing difficulties

A number of long-standing, interconnected and structurally inherent problems have meant that the NPT was never going to be an easy agreement to review. This is exacerbated by the fact that the different categories of states parties to the treaty hold significantly different objectives. For non-nuclear states, it is the fulfilment of the disarmament obligation and clear signs of progress towards this commitment that is important. For the NPT's nuclear weapon states, however, it is maintenance of the status quo and the freezing of the current nuclear order, which is paramount.

Difficulty 1: The perception that nuclear weapon states are refusing to fulfil their obligations enshrined in Article VI of the NPT, and to implement seriously the various risk-reduction measures agreed at Review Conferences after 1995

A key issue is the growing sense of grievance felt by most non-nuclear weapon states parties, especially after the 1995 Conference renewed the treaty indefinitely. In 1968, the NPT necessarily created a different and privileged status for the nuclear states. Two categories of membership resulted in the nuclear

'haves' and all others, the nuclear 'have-nots'. Even as it was formed, its parties knew that this structure was unequal, but the promise of shared responsibilities and mutual but different obligations was sufficient for the vast majority of non-nuclear states eventually to sign the treaty. The reality, however, was that from its inception, the treaty was flawed by a relatively thin veneer of collaboration and partnership. The immediate objective of curbing proliferation was set to proceed, but misgivings about the promises made by the nuclear states began to grow even in the early days of the treaty. Arguably, non-nuclear states had never viewed the unequal nature of the treaty as existing unconditionally. Especially for states from the Non-Aligned Movement, their participation and ongoing compliance with the NPT was contingent on the nuclear weapon states fulfilling their bargain by moving to disarmament. As the Japanese representative to the early negotiations observed, the divisions inherent in the NPT were to be redundant "when all nuclear weapons are eliminated from the national arsenals of all states" (as cited in Shaker, 1980, p. 199).

Difficulty 2: The selective 'management' of the NPT regime by the nuclear weapon states

Non-nuclear states have been disturbed by the way that non-proliferation has been policed in highly selective ways. As Richard Falk (2017) has argued, particularly after the ending of the Cold War, the NPT was 'appropriated' by the nuclear states - especially the US and UK - to pursue a policy of geopolitical 'management' of the non-proliferation regime. This management went beyond any duties or entitlements accorded to them under the NPT. From the 1990s, military action against certain states was being framed as a justified intervention against 'rogue states' harbouring intentions to develop weapons of mass destruction. The most obvious case of this was the lead-up to the Iraq war in 2002 and 2003, but as Sauer (2004) documents, the notion of intervening militarily in cases of suspected non-compliance with the NPT began well before the US and UK, together with their coalition of the willing, took on a role of 'defenders of non-proliferation' in Iraq in 2003.

Other examples of a proposed military response to suspected WMD proliferators included US threats against North Korea and its longstanding policy toward Iran. Effectively, some NWS within the NPT have used their assumed authority to regulate and enforce their own interpretation of the NPT. At the same time, actual proliferators have been accorded different treatment. Israel's nuclear arsenal has not been condemned. And while there was initial outrage at the testing of nuclear weapons by India and Pakistan in 1998, this soon evolved into an acceptance of their nuclear status, compounded when Washington agreed in 2005 to engage in nuclear cooperation with India, a move which runs counter to the NPT itself.⁴

4 Marianne Hanson, 2022. Power to the have-nots? The NPT and the limits of a treaty hijacked by a "power-over" model, *Contemporary Security Policy*, 43:1

When military action has been taken ostensibly to enforce the non-proliferation requirements of the NPT by the same states which continue to reject its disarmament obligations and which accept proliferation by certain others, it is not surprising that NNWS perceive a double-standard at play. As Doyle has argued⁵, the nuclear states have “injured the NPT regime more severely” than have weaker states like Iran, and have “even subverted it” by behaving as the exclusive “guardians” of the regime.⁶ Yet despite these issues, and at least until now, non-nuclear states (with the exception of North Korea) have chosen to remain in the NPT.

Difficulty 3: The lack of universality of the NPT

As noted, while the NPT has been largely successful in limiting proliferation, the fact that a handful of states remain outside the treaty remains a problem. India, Pakistan and Israel have never signed the treaty, and North Korea, once a state party to the NPT, withdrew its membership in 2003 and proceeded to develop its own nuclear weapons arsenal. (An additional state, South Sudan, has not yet joined the treaty, although this is likely to be because of domestic instabilities rather than a geopolitical calculation.) This lack of universality is especially important when we consider the current bombing of Iranian nuclear facilities by Israel, which refuses to confirm its nuclear status, sign the NPT or allow inspections of its nuclear arsenal. The NPT is one of the most widely signed pieces of international law, and its near-universality has been a prominent element in its favour. But this particular lack of universality is deeply problematic for many NNWS.

Difficulty 4: The suspicion surrounding the intentions of some NPT states parties, especially Iran

Iran has most prominently been seen as violating IAEA standards, enriching uranium to high levels (beyond those required for its nuclear energy program), and has not always provided sufficient information of its nuclear activities to IAEA inspectors. Iran’s program has justifiably warranted international concern, and there is no doubt that it has stretched the bounds of its compliance with the NPT. Nonetheless, Iran has not developed a nuclear weapon, and is according even to US calculations, a considerable way off being able to do so, should it decide to proceed. Other states, including Syria, Iraq, and Libya were also under scrutiny for suspected proliferation. Again, the case of Iran is instructive in understanding the difficulties of the current RevCon.

⁵ Thomas Doyle. 2009. “The moral implications of the subversion of the nonproliferation treaty regime”, *Ethics and Global Politics*, 2(2)

⁶ Thomas Doyle. 2009. *Ibid.*

Difficulty 5: The acrimonious nature of most Review Conferences and the concomitant inability to achieve a consensus outcome on paths forward

As noted above, the history of the Review Conference process has been uneven at best, and often acrimonious and unproductive. The five-yearly exercise and its PrepComs have always been subject to the geopolitical tensions of the day. For example, in 2005, under President George W Bush, very little was achieved against the backdrop of a United States determined not to be constrained by international law and norms. By contrast, under President Obama, the 2010 Review Conference was far more successful, with an accepted final document and a new 64-point action plan covering all three pillars of the NPT. Effectively, non-nuclear states are hostage to the vagaries of great-power politics, and all review processes are reflective of this dilemma.

Difficulty 6: The refusal of NPT NWS to sign and ratify the protocols of Nuclear Free Zones

The creation of nuclear weapon free (and nuclear free) zones in large parts of the world reflects the success of non-nuclear states' attempts to limit regional nuclear dangers. But the nuclear weapon states have a poor record when it comes to ratification of the various protocols associated with each of these regional arrangements. With the exception of the Treaty of Tlatelolco, every other nuclear free zone agreement is awaiting one or more of the nuclear weapon states to ratify its associated protocols. No nuclear weapon state has ratified the Bangkok or Semipalatinsk Treaties. The United States is seen as particularly unwilling; it has not signed protocols of the Rarotonga, Bangkok, Semipalatinsk, or Pelindaba Treaties. The effect of these refusals is to reinforce the relatively powerless nature of non-nuclear weapon states, especially those in the Global South.

Newer developments that exacerbate the existing long-standing difficulties

While most five-yearly cycles preceding Review Conferences are beset with geopolitical tensions, the 2026 event is being held against an unparalleled backdrop of profound conflicts, decisions made by nuclear weapon states which violate the spirit of the disarmament project, and a broad narrative which reasserts the ongoing and deliberate nuclear weapon states' dominance over the global nuclear order.

The increasing modernisation of nuclear arsenals by all the NWS

Since the last Review Conference, the world has seen an accelerated program of modernisation of nuclear arsenals by all the nuclear weapon states. While modernisation began around 2010, its pace and intensity have become more notable in the last few years. Modernisation involves the replacement or improvement of warheads and missile delivery systems, the enhancement of the lethality of existing and new warheads, and programs which allow for more

'useable' weaponry.⁷ This modernisation has occurred even as the actual number of warheads has dropped from its Cold War highs. Current stockpiles are at their lowest in decades, at roughly 12,400 nuclear weapons. Yet the combined destructive power of this remaining arsenal is equivalent to 146,500 Hiroshima-sized bombs⁸, meaning that one Hiroshima-sized bomb could be dropped every day for the next 369 years (or one every hour for the next 15 years). As Kristensen et al observe, all the NWS seem committed to retaining their arsenals indefinitely.⁹ And for the first time in decades, the number of warheads is actually set to increase, as several states expand their nuclear capabilities. Hans Kristensen notes that 'we see a clear trend of growing nuclear arsenals.'¹⁰ Again, this suggests to the world that the nuclear weapon states are not serious about fulfilling their Article VI obligations.

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The expansion of nuclear capabilities: rapid Chinese increases, British and French proposals

Closely related to the modernisation processes is the alarming increase in the number of weapons being developed or proposed by particular nuclear weapon states. Most notable is the case of China. Since 2023, Beijing has added approximately 100 new nuclear weapons a year to its arsenal and currently holds over 600 nuclear weapons. It is projected to hold over 1,500 warheads by 2035.¹¹

7 Hans M. Kristensen, Matt Korda, Eliana Johns, and Mackenzie Knight, 'World Nuclear Forces', *SIPRI Yearbook 2025: Armaments, Disarmament and International Security* (Stockholm: SIPRI, June 2025), pp. 271–370. Available at: <https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/SIPRIYB25c06.pdf>

8 Therese Nordhus Lien, 2026. 'Press release 25 March 2026: World Divided over Nuclear Weapons as Arsenals Grow and Ban Treaty Gains Ground', *Nuclear Weapons Ban Monitor*, <https://banmonitor.org/news/press-release-25-march-2026-world-divided-over-nuclear-weapons-as-arsenals-grow-and-ban-treaty-gains-ground>

9 Hans Kristensen et al, 2025. 'Status of world nuclear forces', *Federation of American Scientists*, <https://fas.org/initiative/status-world-nuclear-forces/>

10 Hans Kristensen, 2025. 'Nuclear risks grow as new arms race looms', *SIPRI Yearbook*, <https://www.sipri.org/media/press-release/2025/nuclear-risks-grow-new-arms-race-looms-new-sipri-yearbook-out-now>

11 *SIPRI Yearbook*, 2025. 'Nuclear risks grow as new arms race looms', <https://www.sipri.org/media/press-release/2025/nuclear-risks-grow-new-arms-race-looms-new-sipri-yearbook-out-now>

The United Kingdom and France have also pledged to increase their arsenals. The UK announced in 2021 that it would increase its arsenal by around 40 percent; in the same move, it also appeared to lower the threshold for using nuclear weapons and rejected the (previously favoured) idea of transparency in nuclear policies. And in March 2026, France announced plans to increase its arsenal. President Macron seemed to point to France's nuclear capability as the answer to any threat that France might face, proudly declaring that 'just one of our submarines, like the one behind me, carries firepower equivalent to the sum of all bombs that fell on Europe during the Second World War. That's close to a thousand times the power of the first nuclear bombs.'¹²

These numerical increases will be significant; equally troubling is that these states are openly talking about retaining nuclear weapons indefinitely and reifying them as the panacea to current security challenges.

Importantly, what is missing in these declarations is any intent to pursue disarmament, to engage in active diplomacy with perceived adversaries or a willingness to create confidence-building measures, all practices that were employed to good effect even at the height of the Cold War. Unlike that era, diplomacy and dialogue seem deeply unfashionable today, as these and other nuclear weapon states fall back on placing their nuclear capabilities at the centre of their security doctrines, in contrast to a key measure called for at previous RevCons, namely the need to reduce the salience of nuclear weapons in the doctrines of nuclear weapon states.

The increase of nuclear sharing arrangements; increased risks of a direct Russia-NATO war

Nuclear sharing arrangements are technically not permitted within the NPT, and the US practice of stationing nuclear weapons in several NATO states in Europe has long been a concern. The US has also reversed its previous withdrawal of nuclear weapons from British soil, with American nuclear weapons now believed to be based once again in England.¹³ Additionally, at NATO's summit in June 2025, the UK prime minister revealed plans to purchase US warplanes designed to carry the US B61 nuclear bomb. If this occurs, it will amount to a significant expansion of the UK's nuclear programme, taking it beyond its submarine-based weapons to include air-dropped weapons for the first time in more than two decades.¹⁴

12 'Nuclear deterrence – Speech by M. Emmanuel Macron, President of the Republic Ile Longue, 2 March 2026', <https://uk.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/president-delivers-speech-frances-nuclear-deterrence>

13 *Scientists for Global Responsibility*, 2025. 'US nuclear weapons return to the UK ready for the RAF'

14 Lena Kroepke and Shizuka Kuramitsu, 2025. 'UK to Purchase F-35As and Join NATO Nuclear Mission', *Arms Control Association*. July/August. <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2025-07/news/uk-purchase-f-35as-and-join-nato-nuclear-mission>



UNITED KINGDOM

UNITED STATES

Prime Minister Keir Starmer and US President Donald Trump at the NATO Summit at The Hague in June 2025. Picture by Simon Dawson / No 10 Downing Street

France – now the only state in the European Union to hold nuclear weapons – has also proposed engaging in sharing activities with other European states. Poland has indicated that it is willing to host NATO nuclear weapons, as has the most recent NATO member, Sweden (but only during times of war).

It is worth remembering that NATO was not originally designated as a nuclear alliance, only overtly adopting this moniker in its 2010 Strategic Concept. Since then, NATO has reinforced this view of its nature, as nuclear weapons become more central in its doctrine and as its nuclear nature becomes ever more entrenched. Russia, for its part, proceeded in 2023 to move nuclear weapons to Belarus, a move that has raised concerns about nuclear sharing against the background of the war in Ukraine.

The risks of a direct Russia-NATO war have risen significantly in recent months. In April 2026, amidst claims that the Baltic states – all NATO members – were allowing Ukrainian drones to pass through their airspace, President Putin issued warnings of Russian retaliation, suggesting that NATO states are in 'direct complicity' in the attacks against Russia.¹⁵ While this episode centres on the use

15 *Euro News*, 2026. 'Moscow threatens Baltic states, claiming they help Ukraine strike Russia', 7 April. <https://www.euronews.com/2026/04/07/moscow-threatens-baltic-states-claiming-they-help-ukraine-strike-russi>

of conventional weapons, reckless behaviour by Russia or by any NATO member state only adds to the perception that we are closer to a major war, with its possibility of escalation to nuclear use, than we have been since 1945.

By contrast, opponents of nuclear arsenals have deplored such developments and the increasing rhetoric of using nuclear weapons. Melissa Parke, of the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN), notes that ‘in these uncertain times, some argue that nuclear weapons are the answer to Europe’s security’. Far better, she suggests, is to seek security not ‘in the shadow of mushroom clouds but by those who believe in dialogue, diplomacy and disarmament.’

A growth in the use of nuclear threats by some nuclear weapon states

The making of nuclear threats has been most evident in Russia since its invasion of Ukraine in 2022. On several occasions, President Putin has referred to the use of massive force, ‘unlike anything seen before’, as a way of driving coercive policies against Kyiv. In addition, Israel, a non-NPT state, has also voiced that it might consider using nuclear weapons, with Amichai Eliyahu, a far-right minister in Netanyahu’s government, alluding to using nuclear weapons in Gaza.¹⁶ And in 2024, Avigdor Lieberman, a former defence and foreign minister, threatened to ‘use all the means at our disposal’ to prevent an Iranian nuclear weapon, suggesting that only a nuclear weapons attack would fulfil Israeli objectives in Iran.¹⁷ As with the above issues, the use of threats to launch nuclear weapons suggests not a move towards a nuclear weapon free world, but rather the entrenchment of these weapons as an alleged guarantee of security. Such assertions are not lost on non-nuclear states, which have confirmed their promise within the NPT never to develop nuclear weapons, but who increasingly distrust NWS’ promises to disarm.

The risks of new nuclear proliferation

Recent years have seen East Asian states Japan and South Korea becoming more vocal about the possibility of acquiring nuclear weapons. A loss of faith in the US nuclear umbrella – exacerbated by President Trump’s erratic decisions – and perceptions of a weakening non-proliferation environment have brought to the fore considerations of proliferation, which until recently were much more deeply buried. Concerns about the relatively rapid expansion of Chinese nuclear capabilities have been a key driver in these debates.¹⁸ And while China has

16 Michael Bachner, 2023. ‘Far-right Minister says nuking Gaza an option, PM suspends him from Cabinet meetings’, *The Times of Israel*, 5 November. <https://www.timesofisrael.com/far-right-minister-says-nuking-gaza-an-option-pm-suspends-him-from-cabinet-meetings/>

17 *Middle East Eye*, 2024. 7 October. https://www.threads.com/@middleeasteye/post/C8_ykL5NPF?hl=en

18 Joel Pettersson-Ivrea, 2025. ‘Strategic Stability and Nuclear Salience: Japan, South Korea, and Extended Deterrence in the Third Nuclear Age’, *Asia-Pacific Leadership Network*, 21 April. <https://www.apln.network/projects/nuclear-order-in-east-asia/strategic-stability-and-nuclear-salience-japan-south-korea-and-extended-deterrence-in-the-third-nuclear-age>

traditionally been seen as one of the more ‘responsible’ nuclear weapon states (it has been willing to provide no-first-use commitments, and until recently has been content with a relatively small nuclear arsenal), its rapid warhead expansion during the current NPT review cycle places unprecedented pressure on these US allies. North Korea, for its part, continues expanding its capabilities, possesses intercontinental ballistic missiles and is also developing a submarine-launched ballistic missile.

Threats to test nuclear weapons

In 2025, President Trump announced that he was instructing the Department of Defense to resume nuclear testing on ‘an equal basis’ with other states, namely China and Russia. Neither China nor Russia are testing nuclear weapons, although they, like the US, continue to test missiles which are capable of delivering nuclear weapons. Unsurprisingly, Russia has noted that it will take reciprocal measures if the US were to resume nuclear testing. Such statements clearly violate the norm against testing nuclear weapons. None of the NPT nuclear weapon states has tested in the last 30 years, and careless statements like this only serve to dismay the global communities which have worked hard to ban nuclear testing.

The Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) has not entered into force because a number of states, the US included, have not ratified it. To make matters worse, Russia withdrew its ratification of the CTBT in November 2023. As the New Agenda Coalition Working Paper notes, any retreat from the long-standing moratorium on testing would jeopardise disarmament efforts and would be disastrous for international peace and security.¹⁹

Attacks on nuclear facilities risk catastrophic contamination

In 2022, Russia captured the Ukrainian nuclear facility in Zaporizhzhia, prompting fears of a radioactive disaster. The Board of the IAEA has called on Russia to withdraw from the region, deploring ‘the Russian Federation’s persistent violent actions against nuclear facilities in Ukraine’. Russia and Ukraine have accused each other of shelling this facility. In August 2025, Ukraine launched a drone attack on Russian nuclear facilities, sparking a huge blaze at the major Ust-Luga fuel export terminal.²⁰

The nuclear power plant in Bushehr, Iran, has been attacked four times in 2026, as part of the Israel-US strikes against that country. The IAEA has warned of the

19 New Agenda Coalition Working Paper, 2026. *Review Conference of the Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons*, 18 March. <https://reachingcriticalwill.org/images/documents/Disarmament-fora/npt/revcon2026/documents/WP17.pdf>

20 [Guy Faulconbridge](#) and [Lidia Kelly](#), 2025. ‘Ukraine drone hits Russian nuclear plant, sparks huge fire at Novatek’s Ust-Luga terminal’, *Reuters*, August 24. <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/ukraine-drone-hits-russian-nuclear-plant-sparks-huge-fire-novateks-ust-luga-2025-08-24/>

potentially catastrophic consequences of this action, but unlike the condemnation of Russian actions against Zaporizhzhia, Western states have said very little against these attacks.²¹

Such activities carry high risks of a catastrophic radioactive accident and indicate little regard for the consequences. Targeting such facilities also violates Article 56 (Protocol I) of the Geneva Conventions.

The growing dangers posed by disruptive technologies, including artificial intelligence

The rapid development of disruptive technologies has profoundly raised the risks already posed by nuclear weapons. As analysts note,²² very few states, from either the Global North or the South, have been willing to discuss concrete proposals to address these risks. Relatively little has been done to raise awareness or implement preventive measures for the impact that disruptive technologies might have on all three pillars of the NPT. The prevailing environment, where a number of nuclear accidents and near-misses have already occurred, is rendered significantly more dangerous today with the rapid advances in technology that can be used for malign purposes. The security and safety of nuclear materials and technology, and the dangers posed by hackers, artificial intelligence, and simple miscalculation in increasingly complex technical environments, have not been sufficiently addressed.

The exception granted to Australia to acquire highly-enriched nuclear material for use in powering AUKUS submarines

The agreement concluded by Australia, Britain, and the United States to forge the AUKUS Pact carries several proliferation risks. This is the first time that a non-nuclear weapon state has been permitted to receive highly-enriched, weapons-grade material for the propulsion of submarines. Despite assurances from the IAEA, this material cannot be guaranteed to be protected by safeguards while submarines are at sea. Although accessing the material from its sealed container would be difficult, it is not impossible. Australia might have no intention of converting this material towards a nuclear weapon, but the precedent set encourages other states to ask for similar treatment. It also complicates efforts to minimise the spread of fissile material, for which a treaty has long been sought. Equally important to the proliferation implications of AUKUS is the fact that two nuclear weapon states, the US and UK, are providing preferential treatment to one

21 *Al Jazeera*, 2026. 'Why an attack on Bushehr nuclear plant would be catastrophic for the Gulf', 6 April. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2026/4/5/why-an-attack-on-bushehr-nuclear-plant-would-be-catastrophic-for-the-gulf>

22 William Potter and Sarah Bidgood, 2025. 'Waiting for Godot at the 2026 NPT Review Conference', *Arms Control Today*, September. <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2025-09/features/waiting-godot-2026-npt-review-conference>

of their Anglosphere allies. The perception of inequalities inherent in the NPT is only reinforced by such a transaction, in which non-nuclear states, especially those in the Global South, witness nuclear deals being made which would likely be denied to other, non-Western states.²³ AUKUS has already led other states, namely South Korea, Japan and Iran, in seeking exemptions for their programmes.

The jettisoning of key arms control agreements between the United States and Russia

The last few years have seen an alarming trend whereby every bilateral arms control agreement between the two largest nuclear weapon states has been discarded. The New START agreement²⁴ expired on 5 February this year; other treaties similarly discarded include the Open Skies Treaty, the Intermediate Nuclear Forces Treaty, as well as the Conventional Forces in Europe treaty, which have been in place in Europe for decades.

With the end of New START, there is now no restriction at all on nuclear weapon numbers or deployment between Washington and Moscow. This also means that the transparency, inspection and confidence-building regime associated with the treaty no longer applies. Mutual inspections, regular meetings and dialogues intended to develop trust between adversaries had lapsed with the onset of the war in Ukraine, but many still held out hope that a last-minute salvaging of New START could occur and that, in time, these important processes could be resurrected. The message the world absorbed was that the two nuclear superpowers cared little for the rest of the world and were willing to move to an environment where previously strong restraining measures would now be discarded.

The ongoing military attacks on Iran by the United States and Israel

Perhaps most contentious of all, and the factor that will colour proceedings in New York, is the set of military attacks against Iran by the US and Israel in July 2025, and again from February this year. This is likely to be as heavy a blow to the nuclear non-proliferation regime, and to cause as much acrimonious debate, as anything else has ever done. These attacks, conducted while Iran was in active negotiations with the United States, demonstrate the resurgence of a view that nuclear weapons can indeed be held, but only by those with the 'right hands', reinforcing the inequality and hierarchy present in the current global nuclear

23 Marianne Hanson, 2025. 'AUKUS and Australian entanglement in US war plans', in *Search for Security: AUKUS and the new militarism*, eds. Mark Beeson, Kanishka Jayasuria and Sian Troath, Melbourne University Press.

24 The New START treaty, from 2010, was crucial for reducing the number of warheads and delivery systems able to be deployed by the US and Russia. At the time of its expiry, it had limited both states to a maximum of 1,550 deployed strategic nuclear warheads and 700 delivery systems. New START had been seen as the principal mechanism by which the US and Russia – which still hold almost 90% of all nuclear weapons on the planet – could work towards further reductions.

order. The US – a state perceived by many NNWS as being in violation of its NPT obligations under Article VI – together with Israel, which has never signed the NPT and which holds around 90 nuclear weapons itself, has employed military action, ostensibly for the purpose of ensuring that Iran never develops a nuclear weapon. The attacks were compounded by President Trump’s statement that ‘a whole civilisation will die tonight.’ Such rhetoric transcended even Trump’s previous brutal and cruel utterances, suggesting that he would use nuclear weapons to wipe out civilians and an entire culture.

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Putting to one side the perfidy of such a statement, in any case, attacks like this are not permitted under international law (even if Iran was developing a nuclear weapon, which US agencies conclude was not the case; in 2025, the US Intelligence Community assessed that Iran is not building a nuclear weapon and that its leader had not reauthorized the nuclear weapons program he suspended in 2003.²⁵) The armed attacks followed from Trump’s 2018 jettisoning of the 2015 JCPOA (the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, or the ‘Iran deal’), which had been painstakingly negotiated by the permanent members of the UN Security Council together with Germany and the European Union, and which had been widely assessed as working well when Trump discarded it. After the 2025 bombing of Iranian facilities by the US, the Iranian government announced the official termination of the agreement.

In sum, the attacks on Iran weaken all three pillars of the NPT: the double standards of nuclear weapon states who claim to be acting in the interests of non-proliferation are more evident than ever before; the US and Israel have shown that they are not committed to disarmament; and Iran’s right to peaceful uses of nuclear technology appear to have been erased completely by Trump’s blunt directive, that ‘there will be no enrichment of uranium’. Any categorical ban on enrichment is likely to alarm states that signed the NPT on the basis of their

²⁵ *Annual threat assessment of the US Intelligence Community*, 2025, March. [efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/ATA-2025-Unclassified-Report.pdf](https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/ATA-2025-Unclassified-Report.pdf)

access to enrichment for peaceful purposes. In sum, and as George Perkovich has observed, the war on Iran, ‘raises doubts that the NPT’ can continue to be ‘a central pillar of international security.’²⁶

IV. WHAT MIGHT THESE DEVELOPMENTS MEAN FOR THE NPT REVIEW CONFERENCE IN 2026?

All of the factors noted above add to a perception that, for the nuclear weapon states, international law is something that can be discarded or applied selectively. While the rules-based international order was very much the creation of Western states in the mid-1940s, these states have defied the very rules and norms that they have sought to consolidate over time.

The nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty is a key part of this rules-based order, but the inconsistent way in which the nuclear weapon states (the US, Britain and France, as well as Russia and China) uphold this treaty does not bode well for its continuation. For many non-nuclear states, especially those within the Non-Aligned Movement, there seems to be little left of international law. The ongoing genocide in Gaza, together with the impunity of states like the US and Israel,²⁷ and accusations of indifference or complicity by other Western states, do little to engender a sense that the powerful states in the world are interested in a fair and equitable international order.

Briefing papers and reports submitted by the New Agenda Coalition, the Non-Aligned Movement, and (the non-state organisation) Reaching Critical Will all warn that unless profound changes are put in place, the NPT regime is facing a dire future.²⁸ Areas that need urgent attention fall broadly into the following categories:

- Addressing urgently the risks of nuclear war, including the impact that doctrines and actions noted above have had in increasing these risks.
- Increasing the accountability of nuclear weapon states as they fail to implement their disarmament obligations and the risk reduction measures outlined in previous Review Conferences.

26 George Perkovich, 2026. “How the Iran War Undermines the Nuclear Nonproliferation Regime”, Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, April. <https://thebulletin.org/2026/04/how-the-iran-war-undermines-the-nuclear-nonproliferation-regime/>

27 International Court of Justice, 2024. “Application of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide in the Gaza Strip (South Africa v. Israel): Order of 26 January 2024”, <https://www.icj-cij.org/case/192>.

28 New Agenda Coalition, 2026. “Working Paper: Recommendations to Strengthen the NPT”, NPT Review Conference, 18 March, <https://reachingcriticalwill.org/images/documents/Disarmament-fora/npt/revcon2026/documents/WP17.pdf>; and Ray Acheson et al., Reaching Critical Will, 2026. “NPT Review Conference 2026 Resources”, <https://www.reachingcriticalwill.org/disarmament-fora/npt/2026-revcon>.

- Reducing the reliance on nuclear deterrence, which is seen as increasing, rather than preventing, the risks of nuclear war.
- Overcoming the structural constraints of the review process. The outcomes of NPT meetings and processes have remained largely unchanged - and unproductive - for over fifty years. Substantive decisions have to be taken by consensus, allowing the nuclear weapon states a veto on stronger measures for disarmament. While it is unlikely that these impediments can be overcome in 2026, if the NPT is to survive, it must find ways of overcoming these restrictions.

None of these requirements are new; in the current RevCon they simply loom larger than they ever did previously.

The NPT has served the world well in limiting the proliferation of nuclear weapons to other states. But while the majority of its signatories saw it as a potentially transformative mechanism which would help move the world towards the eventual elimination of all nuclear weapons, the issues outlined above suggest that the nuclear weapon states within the NPT regard the treaty primarily as a vehicle to entrench their own positions, and as a means of extinguishing any nuclear weapon aspirations shown by other states. They reinforce a view that the NWS see themselves as 'responsible' nuclear weapon states who rely on these weapons for their own security needs, but who see such weapons as dangerous and unacceptable in the hands of others. This is a deeply unhealthy foundation for the 2026 Review Conference. It does not bode well for any satisfactory outcome; instead, it is likely to damage the review process. It might even prompt some states – both non-nuclear and nuclear – to withdraw from the treaty altogether.

Where to from here?

We will not know the Conference's outcomes immediately, and its longer-term effects are harder still to predict, but discussions in New York are bound to be marked by the following factors:

- Non-Aligned Movement states are likely to drive the narrative of grievance. While the NAM is not a monolithic entity, it will be the main body pushing for implementation of Article VI, for a Middle East zone free of weapons of mass destruction (regardless of how unachievable such demands currently are), and for general accountability from the NWS. The current turmoil in the Middle East – especially the implication that only some states will be permitted to have nuclear weapons - only adds to this sense of grievance.
- While 'middle powers' have previously been seen as having significant influence during (and in-between) NPT proceedings, this factor will have diminished considerably. Once seen as active in bridging the gap between nuclear and non-nuclear states, middle powers will not be as instrumental in supporting the integrity of the NPT as they once were. It is less likely today that

those states allied with the US but which were predisposed to disarmament – including Australia, Canada, Norway, Sweden, and Japan – will be able to build bridges between the NWS and NNWS or to have the credibility amongst Global South states that they once did. They have supported important reports on the elimination of nuclear weapons, but recent indications are that they will ally with the United States unwaveringly. Ray Acheson has claimed that the notion of middle powers is now a ‘fiction’²⁹ and that their support, implicit or otherwise, for US and Israeli actions means we can no longer count on them to uphold the voices of states from the Global South. Australia, Germany, and Canada, for instance (as well as Britain and France) gave early support for the US and Israeli attacks on Iran in 2026, and although that support has been modified in recent weeks, its initial appearance can only have reinforced the unequal nature and implementation of the NPT.

- Similarly, there is little likelihood that the Global South can enable effective change at the RevCon. Singh has suggested that states from the Global South can ‘fill the void left by a lack of leadership and consensus in the nuclear order’. She proposes practices of ‘innovative coalition-building’ via the NAM and the BRICS states, which can help to break the deadlock between nuclear and non-nuclear states.³⁰ But while their potential economic strength might count for something, it will likely be too late to affect the calculations of the nuclear weapon states. The hierarchical structures inherent in the NPT were able in the past to be modified somewhat by states from the Global South enacting nuclear-free zones and pushing for various multilateral arms control measures.³¹ But it seems unlikely that such groupings can continue to do much more against states determined to keep their privileged role in the nuclear hierarchy.
- It is also unlikely that smaller coalitions of states such as the New Agenda Coalition, the Non-Proliferation and Disarmament Initiative (formed in 2010), and the 2019 ‘Stockholm Initiative for Nuclear Disarmament’, will be able to achieve anything of substance in 2026. While there is undoubtedly much goodwill among many of the states involved in these processes, the enduring dynamic of an entrenched NPT hierarchy will prevail. In the same way that Sweden and Slovenia, members of the New Agenda Coalition, have withdrawn their NAC participation and focused more closely on NATO considerations, the essential inequality and power dynamics of the NPT limit the aspirations

29 Ray Acheson, 2026. *New world order, same as the old*, WILPF, 10 February. <https://www.wilpf.org/new-world-order-same-as-the-old/#:~:text=The%20E%80%9Cmiddle%20powers%E2%80%9D%20need%20to,of%20themselves%20as%20middle%20powers>

30 Shivani Singh. ‘The global South in a changing nuclear order’, *The Loop*, nd. <https://theloop.ecpr.eu/global-south-in-a-changing-nuclear-order-between-catalysing-peace-and-quiet-acquiescence/>

31 Leonardo Bandarra, 2025. ‘Re-ordering from the periphery: hierarchy complexes and agency in the global nuclear order’, *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 38(3). <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09557571.2025.2461630>

of such groups. At best, they are likely to focus on calling for the ‘step-by-step’ process of reducing nuclear dangers to be fulfilled, but even here, it is up to the nuclear weapons states to implement these measures, something that they have refused to do to date.

Given these circumstances, what possible trajectories might the NPT now take? Manuel Herrera posits a number of possible ways in which the NPT might develop over the next ten to twenty years. These scenarios range from ‘incremental reform within the existing framework to deeper fragmentation, new proliferation pressures, or even the consolidation of a multipolar nuclear order’.³² There is also the possibility that the NPT will not exist in any meaningful form after the 2026 review.

The mid-and long-term outcomes cannot be predicted accurately, but will include the following possibilities:

1. The 2026 RevCon might be able to achieve minor incremental reforms, which will enable the treaty to continue, and allow for the can of its essential difficulties to be ‘kicked further down the road’. The next review cycle and 12th Review Conference will be held, but is likely to be little more than a costly diplomatic exercise.
2. Some states may choose to withdraw from the treaty altogether, reflecting either a disappointment with the NWS’ refusal to fulfil Article VI, or decisions by some NWS no longer to bother to engage in ongoing meetings. Where previously the nuclear weapon states have gone to pains to reassert their commitment to the treaty and their sincerity about Article VI (such as their collective statement ahead of the 10th RevCon that ‘a nuclear war can never be won and must never be fought’), some of the NWS, particularly the US under President Trump, might simply refuse to repeat the charade and proceed to declare a unilateral withdrawal.
3. This in turn would reflect a deepened and dangerous consolidation of the existing nuclear order. Jettisoning any pretence of working for a nuclear-free world can only increase global instability and the likelihood that we will be living under the danger of nuclear catastrophe indefinitely. As one observer has noted, ‘nuclear weapons risk becoming normalised as instruments of statecraft -widespread and ungoverned. This is not deterrence, it is anarchy.’³³

32 Manuel Herrera, 2025. ‘What future for the NPT? Scenarios for the treaty going forward’, *Journal for Peace and Nuclear Disarmament*, November. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/25751654.2026.2639044#d1e269>

33 Daniel Ajudeonu, 2026. Nigeria Leadership Team Member and Africa Project Lead, International student/Young Pugwash, *European Leadership Network, Reflections, 2026 NPT Review Conference*. <https://europeanleadershipnetwork.org/commentary/network-reflections-the-2026-npt-review-conference/>

4. Non-nuclear weapon states that might withdraw, on the basis that the NWS are no longer acting in good faith, might choose to develop their own nuclear arsenals. Again, this would represent a major blow to international security and stability, bringing with it increased nuclear dangers. It would reflect deep fragmentation and a highly uncertain nuclear future. It is also uncertain how far existing nuclear weapon states will go to prevent further proliferation by states they deem not responsible enough to possess nuclear weapons.
5. Non-nuclear states are likely to support the TPNW even more strongly than they do today. The TPNW currently has 99 signatories, and this number will grow in coming years. Global South states feature heavily in the TPNW, and this in turn might limit its impact. But there are also some signs that public opinion in NATO and/or US allied states will push incoming governments into signing the TPNW. The Australian government, for instance, has committed to joining the TPNW, although since entering into government, the Labor Party has dragged its feet on fulfilling this promise. Public support for nuclear disarmament is relatively high in countries like Australia, Norway, the Netherlands, Germany, and Belgium, and time may see these states distance themselves somewhat from US nuclear policies. Several studies have shown that NATO membership can continue even if some states sought to sign the TPNW.³⁴

CONCLUSION

The circumstances outlined in Section III of this paper suggested a range of qualitatively new and profound challenges to the global project on non-proliferation and disarmament, and indeed to the integrity of the NPT. Unless substantial and sincere reforms are undertaken by the nuclear weapon states, it is unlikely that the NPT's 'business as usual' model can continue without deepening animosity.

If the NPT is to survive in a healthy form, it will require the restoration of trust and reciprocity between all member states. Without a clear and genuine commitment to Article VI, and a revocation of the many doctrinal and material amendments they have made to their nuclear weapon programs over the past few years, the nuclear weapon states cannot realistically expect non-nuclear states to participate in a treaty whose main parties increasingly ignore their security concerns.

34 See for example, various reports of the Clingendael Institute, <https://spectator.clingendael.org/nl/publicatie/eu-must-step-nuclear-non-proliferation>, and the Harvard Human Rights Clinic reports on the TPNW, <https://icanw.org.au/wp-content/uploads/Labor-policy-briefing-paper-summary-Sept-2022-final.pdf>

Unless the legitimacy of the NPT can be restored – and it is ultimately up to the nuclear weapon states to do this – the process is likely to deteriorate further. A joint statement committing the nuclear states to all of the NPT's provisions could go some way towards restoring legitimacy and trust, although its sincerity would have to be proven by timely actions commensurate with Article VI and the numerous risk-reduction measures called for over several decades.

Non-nuclear states are no longer likely to accept promises from nuclear states that they will disarm 'when the conditions are right'. This has been the implicit excuse offered by the latter group for over fifty years. The problem today is that not only are the conditions 'not right', but the nuclear weapon states are actively creating an environment where the time and conditions will never 'be right'. The cumulative impact of the changes that have taken place over the last few years – many of them unanticipated or previously unthinkable – together with the resurgence of claims that nuclear weapons remain at the core of security doctrines for the nuclear states, who are the self-appointed 'responsible' states permitted to have these weapons - represent the most substantial set-back to the nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament regimes since the inception of the NPT fifty-six years ago.

The problem today is that not only are the conditions 'not right', but the nuclear weapon states are actively creating an environment where the time and conditions will never 'be right'

Without a clear turning away from this path now, the 2026 Review Conference is likely to be another spectacle of acrimonious diplomacy which simply reinforces power dynamics in the nuclear order. But if so, this will be not just 'a ritual of repetition'³⁵ as we have seen at past Review Conferences, but potentially the rupture of what has been one of the most noble of human endeavours – attempts to prevent nuclear catastrophe on our planet.

35 Potter and Bidgood, *op.cit.*

About APLN

The Asia-Pacific Leadership Network (APLN) is a Seoul-based organisation and network of political, military, and diplomatic leaders and experts from across the Asia-Pacific region working to address global security challenges, with a particular focus on reducing and eliminating nuclear weapons risks.

The mission of APLN is to inform and stimulate debate, influence action, and propose policy recommendations designed to address regional security threats, with an emphasis on nuclear and other WMD (weapon of mass destruction) threats, and to do everything possible to achieve a world in which nuclear weapons and other WMDs are contained, diminished, and eventually eliminated.



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