



ASIA-PACIFIC LEADERSHIP NETWORK

THE NPT'S OWNERSHIP CRISIS: WHAT THE REVCON BATTLES REVEAL

Manpreet Sethi, APLN Senior Research Adviser, and **Hree P. Samudra**, APLN Policy Fellow

28 May 2026

Geopolitical realities were always going to make the eleventh Review Conference (RevCon) of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) a difficult undertaking. Anticipating roadblocks at every level, Conference Chair, Ambassador Do Hung Viet had started his endeavours towards building bridges from the time he was appointed in the role. But despite all his efforts, this RevCon, like the two previous ones, concluded without a consensus final outcome document. The justification for this failure was quickly pinned on the lack of agreement on a single paragraph naming Iran which had split the room. But, when asked at the closing press conference whether Iran or anyone else had blocked consensus, [Ambassador Viet](#) was unambiguous. "No one blocked consensus because I understood that there was no consensus, and I decided not to put the draft outcome document for a decision to be made."

Indeed, the blame for the not entirely unexpected result of the RevCon does not lie with one state. The NPT member states collectively failed to pull their weight. The rifts among them emanate from structural problems inherent to the Treaty and have been worsening for decades. The current state of geopolitics has only exacerbated these divisions. In the past, differences could be papered over when the five nuclear weapon states put up a united front and pulled their allies and partners along. That is no longer the case. At the latest RevCon, all sides were pulling in different directions, as was clearly evident from the changes that crept into the iterations of the outcome document each week.

How the Language Moved

The four drafts circulated between 28 April and 22 May reveal how far the conference was willing to move on language that has anchored the Treaty for over five decades. Two shifts deserve special attention since they attempted to create a new organising logic.

The first concerned the language around nuclear use. In 2010, NPT states parties had expressed concern at the catastrophic humanitarian consequences of 'any use of nuclear weapons', language that tracked the unbroken tradition of non-use that has held since 1945. At the 11th RevCon, what started out as 'any use' had changed by the third draft to "the use". And, the fourth draft, circulated in the early hours of 22 May, moved it to "nuclear war". The attempt was to dilute "any use", meaning all instances of use, to

“nuclear war”, thereby shifting from the absolute inadmissibility of nuclear use to a nuclear exchange between strategic adversaries. By implication, some use of nuclear weapons became implicitly acceptable as long as it was not nuclear war.

In its closing statement, Mexico described this development as an attempt to "trivialise the use of nuclear weapons". It reminded the Conference that the historical record of catastrophic humanitarian consequences stems from the use of just two such devices, as well as from thousands of nuclear tests, not from a nuclear war. Indeed, for a treaty that has foregrounded concern for humanitarian consequences by upholding that *any* nuclear detonation is catastrophic in itself, the change of language was drastic.

The second point of contention in terms of language was around the issue of risk reduction. Early drafts framed nuclear risk reduction as a measure that would eventually lead to elimination of nuclear weapons. The final draft recast this as “strategic risk reduction”. The New Agenda Coalition opposed the recasting as a "speculative approach" that "opened the door for more conditionalities at the will of nuclear-weapon states". It warned that the fulfillment of disarmament obligation "should not be conditioned by a security context, nor can we wait for a speculative state of so-called strategic stability to progress." The tussle was between the nuclear weapon possessors who favoured strategic risk reduction and the NNWS who felt that prioritizing strategic stability was being used to create a comfort zone from where they would not move towards total elimination of nuclear weapons.

This sentiment was heightened by the refusal of the NWS to even reaffirm past commitments to disarm, such as the unequivocal undertaking to eliminate nuclear arsenals given in 2000. A reference to this appeared only as a recalled commitment, qualified by the phrase "in accordance with Article VI." Progress thereby became tethered to a tempo the possessors themselves would define. "Urge" gave way to "call on" in language on Article VI implementation, and Moscow even reformulated "total elimination" to "ultimate and complete elimination". Taken together, while commitments to elimination of nuclear weapons remained, timelines were made elastic, implementation was made conditional, and pace remained self-negotiable.

The Significant Omissions

Also evident across the four drafts were the many issues that went missing over iterations. The first related to nuclear sharing and extended deterrence. By the third revision, this had already been reduced to a non-committal acknowledgment of "existing and evolving" arrangements. By the fourth draft, it was deleted entirely. The omission was perhaps unsurprising given that, less than two months before the RevCon opened, France's President had announced an expanded "forward deterrence" architecture extending nuclear cooperation to eight European partners.

The paragraph on the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) followed a similar trajectory. Although Australia, Canada, the Republic of Korea, and Japan pushed to retain

language calling on Pyongyang to abandon its nuclear weapons, [Russia objected on the grounds that "this issue is closed,"](#) with Iran in support. By the 22 May final draft, references to the DPRK's nuclear and ballistic missile programmes had been deleted entirely. This came in the same weeks that the EU formally voiced concern over Russia's "disturbing shift of position on the DPRK's denuclearisation since 2024," and as Pyongyang's UN Ambassador used the RevCon itself to declare that the DPRK's "status as a nuclear-armed nation will remain unchanged by external rhetoric or unilateral aspirations."

Curiously, the paragraph on the IAEA Director General's [Seven Indispensable Pillars](#) for nuclear safety during armed conflict, and the Five Concrete Principles for Zaporizhzhia, also disappeared. The Conference thus failed to mention an urgent contemporary development of normalising attacks against peaceful nuclear facilities, whether in Ukraine or against multiple nuclear facilities in West Asia. In fact, some of these attacks took place even as the RevCon was in session.

Meanwhile, proposals that human beings must retain control over nuclear command, control, and communications initially enjoyed unusually broad support, with the Non-Aligned Movement, Indonesia, Mexico, Switzerland, and the Republic of Korea among those endorsing some version of the language. Cambodia emphasised that the decision to use a nuclear weapon cannot be delegated to an automated system. Russia objected, characterising the reference as unnecessary, and the text was dropped. What is striking is not the deletion itself but its timing. Mexico's First Committee resolution the previous autumn had already pressed the nuclear-armed states to maintain human control over NC3. Their refusal to accept even a softer formulation months later signals that the nuclear-armed states intend to keep the question of human responsibility for nuclear use open as a bargaining chip for future negotiations.

A Regime Without Ownership

All NPT watchers have lamented the inability of the RevCon to get a final consensus document. But that is not the most disappointing aspect of the meeting. More worrisome are some of the broader messages that countries came away with. The NWS showed no willingness to change their deterrence doctrines, and continue to perceive a need to [modernise or expand their arsenals](#), with China alone adding roughly a hundred new warheads a year since 2023. They also did nothing to downgrade nuclear weapons as instruments of coercion. It is telling that the RevCon convened less than three months after [New START expired](#) on 5 February, leaving no binding limits on the US and Russian strategic arsenals for the first time in over fifty years. And even as the conference was in session, the Russians were [conducting nuclear exercises](#) practicing the delivery of nuclear munitions with Belarus and [testing a Sarmat ICBM](#), while the US was [making repeated references](#) to restarting attacks on Iran and tested a Minuteman ICBM of its own.

In the face of these developments, the dilution of language around commitment to non-use of nuclear weapons was more than a minor drafting issue. NWS have made it clear that they do not wish to be constrained by a norm against use. And ironically, they wish to link their Article VI obligations to a security environment they themselves create. This seriously militates against the bargain the NPT was built to sustain and will erode its foundations.

Good-faith supporters of the NPT now face five years of work to envision the future of the Treaty. The absence of a consensus document is the smaller problem. The larger one is the growing imbalance in the bargain the NPT was built upon. Non-proliferation cannot hold without disarmament, and the expansion of civilian nuclear energy to meet climate goals will only widen proliferation possibilities since the technology is inherently dual-use. The growing acceptance of use of force by nuclear-armed states against non-nuclear ones will force the latter to revisit their security calculations. These trends will not resolve themselves.

A treaty of the NPT's scope and membership could not be rebuilt in today's geopolitical environment, which is precisely why the present one must be preserved. Given that the depositary states appear to have abdicated ownership of the Treaty's central tenets, middle power, non-nuclear-weapon states will have to step into that role, strengthening its foundations by rectifying the structural defects. Re-balancing of obligations across the three pillars can help resolve many issues.

*Dr **Manpreet Sethi** is Senior Research Adviser at the Asia-Pacific Leadership Network and Distinguished Fellow at the Centre for Air Power Studies, New Delhi. She is a member of the Science and Security Board of the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists.*

***Hree P. Samudra** is a Policy Fellow at the Asia-Pacific Leadership Network and Global Project and Regional Engagement Lead at the CTBTO Youth Group.*

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

This commentary is also published on the [APLN website](#).

ABOUT APLN

The **Asia-Pacific Leadership Network (APLN)** is a Seoul-based organisation and network of political, military, 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 weapons 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.



@APLNofficial



@APLNofficial



apl.n.network



aplnofficial