

## THE NPT IS BEGINNING TO LOOK SHAKY

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'Developments in space and cyber domains are blurring the line between conventional and nuclear weapons, leading to nuclear entanglement and rendering command and control systems vulnerable' | Photo Credit: Getty Images/iStockphoto

The [Tenth Review Conference of the Parties](#) to the [Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons \(NPT\)](#) concluded last week in New York. Marking 52 years of a treaty that every speaker described as the 'cornerstone of the global nuclear order' — it was originally planned for its [50th year](#) for 2020, but the conference was delayed due to COVID-19 — it should have been a celebratory occasion, yet, the mood was sombre. And after four weeks of debate and discussion, the delegates failed to agree on a final document.

To manage the disappointment, some staunch believers claimed that the success should not be defined in terms of a consensus outcome! It is true that since 1970, when the NPT entered into force, only four of the 10 review conferences (in 1980, 1990, 2000 and 2010) have concluded with a consensus document, the review years were: 1975, 1980, 1985, 1990, 1995, 2000, 2005, 2010, 2015, 2022. Ironically, even the critical 1995 Review Conference that decided to extend the NPT into perpetuity, broke down weeks later over the review process.

However, there was one key difference in 2022. In the past, the divergences were over Iran, Israel, West Asia or between the nuclear haves and nuclear have-nots. The three depositary states (the United States, the United Kingdom and the U.S.S.R./Russia) were always on the same page. The difference in 2022 was that it pitched Russia against the West; it was the inability to find language to address the nuclear safety crisis at the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant in Ukraine, under Russian occupation since March, that ultimately led to the failure.

The NPT was negotiated during the 1960s to reconcile three competing objectives — controlling the further spread of nuclear weapons beyond the P-5 countries (the U.S., the U.S.S.R., the U.K, France and China) that had already tested; committing to negotiating reductions of nuclear arsenals leading to their elimination; and sharing benefits of peaceful applications of nuclear science and technology. The first was strongly supported by the nuclear-haves; the latter two were demands made by the nuclear have-nots.

Over the years, the non-proliferation objective has been achieved in large measure. Despite apprehensions that by the 1980s, there would be close to 25 nuclear powers, in the last 50 years, only four more countries have gone on to test and develop nuclear arsenals — India, Israel, North Korea and Pakistan (South Africa developed nuclear weapons but the apartheid regime destroyed them and joined NPT in 1991 before relinquishing power to majority rule). After the end of the Cold War and the break-up of the U.S.S.R. in 1991, non-proliferation remained a shared priority for the major powers and the International Atomic Energy Agency, set up originally to promote international co-operation became better known as the non-proliferation watchdog.

Progress on the other two aspects took a back seat; no meaningful discussions or negotiations on nuclear disarmament have ever taken place in the NPT framework. In fact, in the early 1980s, there was a growth in nuclear arsenals. Arms control talks between the U.S. and the U.S.S.R./Russia did take place and the two countries did succeed in bringing down their collective arsenals from a high of nearly 65,000 in the early 1980s to less than 12,000 warheads.

But this process too has ground to a halt.

The first signal was the U.S. withdrawal from the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty in 2002 on the grounds that it unduly constrained its missile defence activities. Limits imposed by the ABM Treaty had been a critical element in creating mutual vulnerability as a means of underwriting deterrence stability. It was a unipolar world with the U.S. as the dominant power. Russia gradually responded by embarking on its nuclear modernisation.

In 2019, the U.S. notified Russia of its decision to quit the 1987 Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty that had obliged both countries to get rid of all ground-launched missiles with a range of 500-5,500 km. The U.S. blamed Russia for cheating on its obligations and pointed out that China's missile developments created new security threats that needed to be addressed. The U.S. was now facing two strategic rivals.

The only surviving arms control treaty between Russia and the U.S. is the New START Treaty that imposes a ceiling on operational strategic nuclear weapons of 700 launchers and 1,550 warheads each. It expires in 2026 and there are no signs of any follow-on discussions.

Attempts by the Donald Trump administration to invite China to join in the arms control process were rejected. Given growing tensions in the Taiwan Strait, any prospects for such talks have only receded.

All that the five nuclear-weapon-states party to the NPT could manage at the conference was a reiteration of the 1985 Reagan-Gorbachev declaration that 'a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought'. The statement remains valid but clearly sounded hollow in the face of growing strategic rivalry between China, Russia and the U.S., rising nuclear rhetoric, and modernisation plans for nuclear arsenals being pursued.

While the Joe Biden administration's Nuclear Posture Review is awaited, the U.S.'s 30-year nuclear modernisation programme, intended to provide 'credible deterrence against regional aggression' is already underway. This has been used to justify developing and deploying more usable low-yield nuclear weapons.

Russia (and China too) is developing hypersonic delivery systems that evade missile defences as well as larger missiles that do not need to travel over the Arctic. Also on the cards are nuclear torpedoes and new cruise missiles. Last year, satellite imagery over China revealed that at least three new missile storage sites are being developed. Analysts suggest that China may be on track to expand its arsenal from current levels of approximately 350 warheads to over 1,000 by 2030. Such a dramatic expansion raises questions about whether this marks a shift in the Chinese nuclear doctrine that has relied on a credible minimum deterrent and a no-first-use policy for the last six decades.

Developments in space and cyber domains are blurring the line between conventional and nuclear weapons, leading to nuclear entanglement and rendering command and control systems vulnerable. This, in turn, compresses decision-making time and creates incentives for early use, raising nuclear risk.

At the conference, France, the U.K. and the U.S. wanted to draw a distinction between "irresponsible" nuclear threats of an offensive nature and "responsible" nuclear threats for defensive purposes but Russia (and China) stymied western efforts. When the nuclear haves-nots suggested a universal condemnation of all threats of nuclear use, all five nuclear-haves joined together to resist such moves. This reflects an emerging divide.

Frustrated by the absence of progress on nuclear disarmament, the nuclear have-nots successfully negotiated a Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW, also called Ban Treaty) in 2017 that entered into force in January 2021. All 86 signatories are nuclear have-nots and parties to the NPT. The TPNW creates a new legal instrument and at their meeting in June in Vienna, the TPNW states committed to pushing for 'stigmatising and de-legitimising' nuclear weapons, condemning all nuclear threats and 'building a robust global peremptory norm against them'. Expectedly, the nuclear-haves and their allies ignored the Vienna meeting but will find it increasingly difficult to overlook this political reality as more and more NPT colleagues call their bluff.

The Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) was concluded in 1996 but has yet to formally enter into force because two major powers, the U.S. and China, have yet to ratify it. While it is true that they do observe a moratorium on nuclear testing, modernisation plans could soon run up against the CTBT.

Nobody wants a breakdown of the NPT but sustaining it requires facing up to today's political realities. The rivalries in a multipolar nuclear world create new challenges, different from what the world faced in a bipolar era of the 1960s when the NPT was concluded. Without addressing the new challenges, the NPT will weaken and with it, the taboo against nuclear weapons that has held since 1945.

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