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## The Role of the NPT in Preserving Nuclear Dynamics During a Power Transition

Ms Saltanat Abdugaze

PhD Researcher in Political Science, Claremont Graduate University



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## What Determines the Success of the 11<sup>th</sup> NPT Session?

April 27, 2026, marked the opening of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) Review Conference. The headquarters of the United Nations (UN) Organisation in New York is hosting the 11th Review Conference of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty between April 27 and May 22, 2026.

As the final day of the 11th NPT Review Conference approaches, a question weighs increasingly heavily on the global community: *"Will the eleventh NPT Review Conference conclude successfully or not?"*

The "success" of the NPT Review Conference hinges on the final document—specifically, on whether the participants can reach a specific consensus. Throughout the history of the NPT, dating back to 1975, there have been successful years when participants achieved a shared consensus.<sup>1</sup> The NPT Review Conference was last truly productive in 2010, when it agreed upon a 64-point Action Plan. Since 2010, however, members of the NPT conference have struggled to reach a consensus. Nevertheless, for many years, diplomats have maintained a sense of optimism. As one diplomat noted during the 2025 NPT Preparatory Committee meeting: "Even without consensus, the NPT is successful, because its fundamental regulations remain in force and continue to function."

In 2025, this author attended the NPT PrepCom conference and communicated with several diplomats, who have a quite long history in participating in NPT conferences. In that year, the majority of them were expecting a positive outcome of the NPT Review Conference 2026. One of them set a clear position that they will work to get the final agreement in the 2026 NPT Review Conference, because in recent years, consensus documents have not been achieved, highlighting the importance of achieving consensus in 2026.

The following question arises: *do the participants strive for consensus for the sake of consensus, or do they bear in mind the importance of the balanced advancement of the three main pillars (nuclear disarmament, non-proliferation, and the peaceful use of nuclear energy)?*

On May 13, 2026, the President of the 11<sup>th</sup> NPT Review Conference, Ambassador Do Hung Viet,<sup>2</sup> shared a [Draft Outcome Document](#) with member states. According to this document, the Conference President's team is attempting to strike a balance among the three main pillars of the NPT; however, this effort appears uneven.

A very large portion of the text is dedicated to the subject of safeguards and compliance—specifically, issues concerning Iran, export controls, naval nuclear propulsion, and undeclared nuclear activities. The topic of nuclear non-proliferation occupies the central functional core of the NPT regime. Another major section of the document addresses the peaceful uses of nuclear energy. This section is highly detailed and covers topics such as technical cooperation, nuclear medicine, agriculture, and development aid.

However, the issue of nuclear disarmament has effectively shifted toward "crisis management." A careful reading of the section pertaining to Article VI and nuclear disarmament reveals that the document offers no concrete mechanisms for eliminating or reducing nuclear arsenals. According to the text, this section focuses on transparency, the importance of dialogue among nuclear-weapon states, nuclear war risk reduction, and moratoriums. Thus, the primary focus of this section is on "how to avoid" a catastrophic nuclear war, rather than "how and when to initiate" nuclear disarmament—as if everyone has resigned themselves to justifying the expansion of nuclear arsenals and has forgotten the original agreements.

It is worth noting that NPT participants are attempting to negotiate with nuclear-weapon states—and to urge them to commit to more concrete steps regarding nuclear disarmament—during a period that is far from a cooperative era for the international community. The current state of the international cooperative spirit is, to some extent, understandable when viewed through the prism of power transition theory, which helps explain how shifts in the global order influence nuclear strategy.

### **Power Transition and NPT's Outcome**

The complexity of the current period is well explained by power transition theory, which explains the hierarchical structure of the international community, where peace can be maintained when a dominant power (or hegemon) is unchallenged.<sup>3</sup> International stability can be achieved when there's a satisfied superpower that is clearly ahead and sets the rules and norms with its allies. Meanwhile, these allies are interested in reinforcing the order as norm-makers, helping to stabilise the system and to contain rising potential challengers. A rising hegemon, dissatisfied with the current systemic conditions, can shake the system to establish a new rule that will serve its interests. In this case, the power transition period will move from a cooperative to an uncooperative era until the system is stabilised.

However, today we can see that even an incumbent hegemon can shake up the established international system if conditions do not serve the superpower's interests. The United States (US) President Donald Trump has decided to review all trade and economic relations with all countries,

examining the "advantage" of all, making no exception even for his close allies in the European Union (EU).<sup>4</sup> The change in US policy has puzzled the EU countries and forced them to seek a new hegemon to whom they can entrust their security. France, concerned about EU security, has volunteered to become this new regional hegemon. Against the backdrop of the shift in US policy toward Europe, French President Emmanuel Macron declared that the US had become "unpredictable" and expressed the need to expand France's nuclear arsenal and develop a strategy to ensure Europe's self-sufficiency in defence.<sup>5</sup> Given this trend, any mutual agreement on nuclear disarmament within the NPT is far in 2026.

### **Reading Between the Lines About Nuclear Armament**

The concept of Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD) is frequently employed in the rhetoric of nuclear states; it is predicated on the idea that if one nuclear power were to launch a nuclear strike against another, the retaliatory strike would be so devastating that both sides would be annihilated.

However, shifting our focus from rhetoric to the observed actions of nuclear superpowers makes it evident that—even if they profess to believe in MAD—their actions suggest otherwise. The rivalry among nuclear superpowers—manifested in the expansion of nuclear arsenals, the stockpiling of highly enriched uranium (HEU), the modernisation of missile defence systems, and the development of new technologies—indicates that they rely instead on the concept of establishing military preponderance as a means of ensuring security.

The lack of trust among nuclear states regarding the MAD concept stems from the perception that it is inherently unsafe. Rather than focusing on the possibility of stabilising the strategic balance and identifying a mutually acceptable threshold—a benchmark currently lacking—we observe that these nuclear nations place their faith in achieving global preponderance, and will invariably strive to prevail, despite already possessing nuclear arsenals far exceeding what is required to obliterate the entire planet.

It is worth noting that, as we observe modernisation, the integration of new technologies, and the growth of nuclear arsenals, we see that—on the one hand—these states strive to avoid nuclear war at the global level; however, it is also possible that they are preparing for a potential scenario of a local, limited nuclear conflict as a precaution. The probability of this occurring is especially high in the Middle East, where the situation involving Iran could play a key role. To avert any conceivable nuclear war scenarios, the parties to the NPT must redouble their efforts to address the critical issues surrounding nuclear disarmament.

## What the NPT Signals—and Recommendations on Nuclear Disarmament.

According to the author of the article [“Into the Final Week: Can the NPT States Come Together on a Final Document?”](#),<sup>6</sup> one can observe the diplomatic efforts undertaken by NPT participants to achieve some progress on the issue of nuclear disarmament. For instance, the article highlights an attempt by the Conference President's team to reflect the concerns of many states regarding the urgent necessity for the Nuclear P5 to fulfil their obligations. In the section of the paper pertaining to Article VI (paragraphs 45–73), phrasing such as "as soon as" or "urgently" was introduced, calling upon nuclear states to take action to meet their disarmament commitments. This proposal from the Conference President's team met with objections from the nuclear states, including Russia and France. Their justification for these objections was that nuclear disarmament itself cannot be isolated from the realities of international security outside of the NPT.

The international community has currently entered a period of power transition and resides in a non-cooperative era. Consequently, despite the diplomatic efforts of non-nuclear countries regarding disarmament, it is to be expected that nuclear states will base their actions on international security realities external to the NPT framework and will be less cooperative regarding nuclear disarmament.

Thus, outcomes within the NPT can serve as a signal indicating the presence—or absence—of a cooperative spirit outside the NPT framework. This may imply that if NPT participants reach a certain consensus, it signals that all members of the international community—including the current hegemon and its allies, as well as the rising hegemon—are, to varying degrees, satisfied with the current state of the international system.

However, whether the NPT participants themselves are content to serve merely as a barometer of cooperation within the international community is a matter for them to decide. Nuclear states may continue to justify the development and modernisation of their nuclear arsenals—a course of action fraught with the risk of triggering a "small," regional, and supposedly "controlled" nuclear war. Should the participants opt for a passive stance, this could increase the likelihood of a regional "nuclear" conflict.

NPT participants should revise their strategies regarding nuclear disarmament. It is essential to recall the original agreements: the nuclear non-proliferation regime itself is founded upon a political consensus among states to refrain from developing and disseminating nuclear technologies—in exchange for nuclear-armed states fulfilling their obligations regarding nuclear disarmament. It is imperative to demand the establishment of a threshold for nuclear arsenals in order to foster stability within the framework of the international deterrence concept.

In this scenario, the NPT has the potential to evolve—moving beyond its current function as a mere external indicator of the international community's level of cooperation—to become a stabilising force for the entire global community.

## Notes:

<sup>1</sup> “Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT),” United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs (UNODA), [https://disarmament.unoda.org/en/our-work/weapons-mass-destruction/nuclear-weapons/treaty-non-proliferation-nuclear-weapons?utm\\_source=chatgpt.com](https://disarmament.unoda.org/en/our-work/weapons-mass-destruction/nuclear-weapons/treaty-non-proliferation-nuclear-weapons?utm_source=chatgpt.com). Accessed on May 18, 2026.

<sup>2</sup> [United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs – 2026 NPT Review Conference page](https://meetings.unoda.org/npt-revcon/treaty-on-the-non-proliferation-of-nuclear-weapons-eleventh-review-conference-2026?utm_source=chatgpt.com), “Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons – Eleventh Review Conference, 2026,” United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs, [https://meetings.unoda.org/npt-revcon/treaty-on-the-non-proliferation-of-nuclear-weapons-eleventh-review-conference-2026?utm\\_source=chatgpt.com](https://meetings.unoda.org/npt-revcon/treaty-on-the-non-proliferation-of-nuclear-weapons-eleventh-review-conference-2026?utm_source=chatgpt.com). Accessed on May 18, 2026.

<sup>3</sup> A. F. K. Organski and Jacek Kugler, *The War Ledger* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

<sup>4</sup> Lori Ann LaRocco, “Trump Says EU Must Make Trade Deal or Face Tariffs,” *CNBC*, May 08, 2026, <https://www.cnn.com/2026/05/08/trump-tariffs-trade-eu-europe-deal.html>. Accessed on May 18, 2026.

<sup>5</sup> Jon Henley, “France to Increase Nuclear Arsenal and European Weapons Cooperation, Macron Says,” *The Guardian* March 02, 2026, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2026/mar/02/france-increase-nuclear-arsenal-european-weapons-cooperation-macron-says>. Accessed on May 18, 2026.

<sup>6</sup> Libby Flatoff and Daryl G. Kimball, “Into the Final Week: Can the NPT States Come Together on a Final Document?” Arms Control Association, May 16, 2026, <https://www.armscontrol.org/blog/2026-05-16/final-week-can-npt-states-come-together-final-document>. Accessed on May 18, 2026.