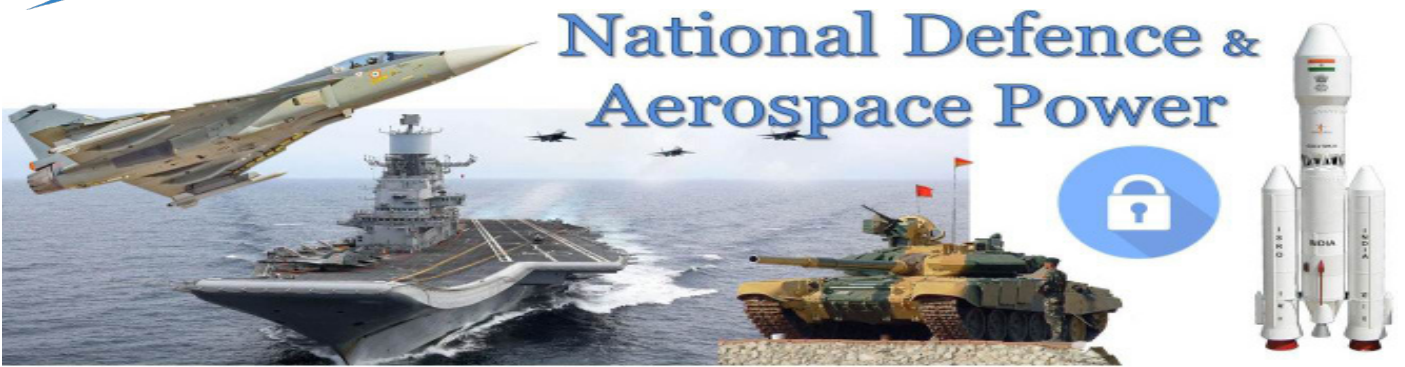




# Centre for Aerospace Power and Strategic Studies



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### FUTURE OF THE NPT: CHALLENGES AND DEBATES AT THE REVIEW CONFERENCE 2026

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#### Introduction

The eleventh Review Conference of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT RevCon) was held from April 27 to May 22, 2026. It concluded without adopting a consensus outcome document. This marked the third consecutive such failure after the 2015 and 2022 Review Conferences. The outcome reflects the growing strain on the global nuclear order at a time when international security faces multiple, interconnected crises. These include the increasing possibility of nuclear weapons use in ongoing conflicts, attacks on nuclear infrastructure, intensifying geopolitical rivalries and the destabilising impact of emerging technologies such as Artificial Intelligence (AI).

Despite the absence of consensus, Conference President Do Hung Viet emphasised that the legal obligations and commitments under the Treaty remain intact. He, nevertheless, warned that repeated failures of the RevCon process must be taken seriously if the credibility and sustainability of the NPT regime are to be preserved. Since it entered into force

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in 1970, the NPT has remained the cornerstone of the global nuclear non-proliferation regime. The Treaty is built upon what is commonly described as the “Grand Bargain,” which represents a balance of reciprocal obligations between Nuclear-Weapon States (NWS) and Non-Nuclear-Weapon States (NNWS). Under this framework, the signatory NWS were required to commit themselves to pursue negotiations in “good faith” towards nuclear disarmament and to refrain from assisting other states in acquiring nuclear weapons. In return, the signatory NNWS agreed to renounce the pursuit of nuclear weapons and accept international safeguards on its nuclear facilities. Simultaneously, the treaty also recognised the “inalienable right” of all parties to develop and use nuclear energy for peaceful purposes. Therefore, this NPT links non-proliferation with access to civilian nuclear cooperation. The durability of the NPT has largely depended upon maintaining this delicate balance between obligations and benefits.

While most NNWS have broadly adhered to their commitments by refraining from acquiring nuclear weapons, an increasing dissatisfaction has emerged regarding the failure of the NWS to fulfil their disarmament responsibilities. Over the past five decades, instead of moving steadily toward nuclear disarmament, the international nuclear non-proliferation regime has witnessed the collapse of major arms control agreements, the extensive modernisation of nuclear arsenals, a renewed emphasis on nuclear deterrence doctrines, and debates over nuclear sharing arrangements. These developments have weakened the norm of nuclear restraint and generated concerns regarding the credibility of the Treaty’s disarmament pillar.

Against this backdrop, this Issue Brief aims to highlight the key debates at the 2026 RevCon and the relevance and future of the NPT regime, as contemporary nuclear challenges have once again raised fundamental questions about the NPT’s future credibility and effectiveness.

## Key Debates at the 2026 Review Conference

The structural divide between NWS and NNWS experienced an unprecedented stall at the RevCon. The core dispute was the N5’s reaffirmation of nuclear deterrence doctrines and their continuous possession of nuclear weapons, and the collective demand by the NNWS for total disarmament under Article VI of the Treaty.<sup>1</sup> The NNWS, particularly from the aegis of the New Agenda Coalition (NAC) and the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), argued that the N5 (the United States

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of America, Russia, the United Kingdom, France, and China) have reconstituted nuclear weapons as a permanent security architecture and they have severed deterrence from its claimed transitional character.<sup>2</sup> The “nuclear sharing” agreements of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) came under close scrutiny and intensified debate. Non-nuclear states argued that the forward deployment of United States B61 tactical nuclear gravity bombs in Europe violates the spirit of Articles I and II of the NPT.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, the Western delegations asserted that these arrangements, in place before the implementation of the NPT, are fully compliant, arguing that control of these nuclear arsenals is not transferred until the outbreak of war.<sup>4</sup>

The draft outcome document saw a significant weakening of disarmament efforts and commitments. Paragraph four of the final draft merely stated that engagement could “facilitate future arms control discussions” rather than formulating an extensive, concrete and time-critical action plan like the 2010 Action Plan.<sup>5</sup> Numerous delegations have termed this shift from mandatory negotiation to voluntary “constructive dialogue” a worrying “disarmament deficit” in which the NWS have de facto eliminated their legal obligations on the grounds of subjective evaluations of the “strategic environment.”<sup>6</sup>

Second, the geopolitical ramifications of the ongoing conflict in Ukraine significantly influenced the 2026 preparatory and plenary sessions. The EU, the US and its partners repeatedly condemned Russia’s continued use of nuclear threats and its formal suspension of the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START).<sup>7</sup> This conduct was characterised as a blatant infringement of the 1994 Budapest Memorandum and a repudiation of the January 2022 N5 Joint Statement affirming that “a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought.”<sup>8</sup> The Russian delegation, on the other hand, accused Western countries of using the NPT framework to advance their strategic interests and promote specific geopolitical goals. Russia also stressed that its strategic position is consistent with the national military doctrine and is purely defensive. Deep divisions among the member states prevented the conference from adopting explicit language on the safety and security of civil nuclear facilities in conflict zones, specifically the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP), which has been targeted multiple times during the Russia-Ukraine war.<sup>9</sup> The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) sought clear recognition of its “Seven Indispensable Pillars” and “Five Concrete Principles” for nuclear safety, but disagreements over language regarding territorial sovereignty and administrative control prevented consensus among the member states.<sup>10</sup>

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Third, a diplomatic stalemate over the nuclear programme of the Islamic Republic of Iran ultimately led to the complete collapse of consensus.<sup>11</sup> Following the unilateral withdrawal of the USA from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2018, Iran gradually expanded its enrichment capabilities and used cascades of advanced IR-6 centrifuges to enrich uranium to up to 60 per cent U-235.<sup>12</sup> During the 2026 negotiations, the United States and its European allies demanded that Tehran fully resume cooperation with the IAEA in accordance with Modified Code 3.1 of the Subsidiary Arrangements, reinstate revoked IAEA inspectors, and resume surveillance. They insisted that the final outcome document must incorporate strong, conditional language.<sup>13</sup> The Iranian delegation, supported by NAM members, dismissed the inclusions as a politically motivated move and emphasised that it ignored the root cause of the crisis, namely non-compliance with Western sanctions. This controversy directly relates to the continuing mandate for a Middle East Weapons of Mass Destruction-Free Zone (MEW MDFZ), initially established in the 1995 Resolution.<sup>14</sup> The Arab States, coordinated by the League of Arab States, expressed significant dissatisfaction with the absence of progress in bringing Israel into the NPT regime as a non-nuclear-weapon State and subjecting its nuclear facilities to comprehensive IAEA safeguards.<sup>15</sup> The unresolved Iranian uranium enrichment issue and the structurally stagnant MEW MDFZ process created a combustible diplomatic atmosphere, rendering a consensus document unattainable.

Fourth, the conference concurrently reflected a global drive to expand the use of civil nuclear energy to combat climate change and ensure energy security. The “inalienable right” under Article IV to develop, research and use nuclear energy for peaceful purposes without discrimination was firmly asserted by the NNWS.<sup>16</sup> However, this “inalienable right” has placed considerable strain on the IAEA’s verification regime. The universality of the Additional Protocol (AP) was the main discussion of the conference. The NWS and developed economies stated that the existing international verification norm comprises a Comprehensive Safeguards Agreement (CSA) and an AP.<sup>17</sup> In contrast, several developing nations argued that the AP is a voluntary instrument and cautioned against attempts to make it a precondition for technology transfer or nuclear supply cooperation under the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) regulations.<sup>18</sup>

Fifth, a notable, rare instance of diplomatic alignment during the proceedings was on the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT). Despite the Russian Federation’s formal de-ratification of the treaty, the draft outcome document maintained robust language firmly supporting the international monitoring and verification system operated by the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban

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Treaty Organisation (CTBTO).<sup>19</sup> All delegations unanimously reaffirmed the prohibition on nuclear testing, stressing that the resumption of nuclear testing, subcritical or yield-producing tests, would severely undermine the global nuclear non-proliferation regime.

Sixth, tensions surrounding the trilateral AUKUS (Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States) security alliance were evident at the conference. China, in a strong diplomatic move at the UN, asserted that the transfer of Highly Enriched Uranium (HEU) to a non-nuclear weapons state (Australia) for naval nuclear propulsion established a dangerous precedent and circumvented Article 14 of the IAEA standard safeguards agreement.<sup>20</sup> Beijing articulated this arrangement of nuclear fuel sharing as an act of nuclear proliferation disguised as a non-military application, jeopardising regional strategic stability. The AUKUS partners defended the arrangement by highlighting their full transparency and constant consultations with the IAEA Secretariat to develop a reliable verification regime. They claimed that the fuel would be contained within welded power units and therefore could not be diverted for military purposes.<sup>20</sup>

Seventh, the 2026 RevCon addressed the destabilising impacts of Emerging and Disruptive Technologies (EDTs) on nuclear Command, Control and Communications (NC3) systems. Cyber capabilities, the deployment of AI in decision-making processes, hypersonic technology, and counter-space weaponry were identified as major factors leading to inadvertent escalation.<sup>22</sup> NNWS expressed concern about the integration of machine-learning algorithms into strategic early warning systems, which could reduce decision-making time and increase the risk of unauthorised or automated nuclear launches. The NNWS's attempts to impose legally binding constraints on the development of these technologies within the NPT framework were rejected by the NWS, which instead proposed voluntary risk-reduction working groups, further exacerbating the perceived governance gap within the regime.<sup>23</sup>

## Relevance and Future of the NPT Regime

Despite the third consecutive failure to agree upon a consensus outcome document, establishing a dangerous precedent of systemic paralysis, the treaty, since its creation, has served the shared international interests such as preventing nuclear proliferation, reducing nuclear risks and promoting peaceful uses of nuclear energy. The treaty's principal achievement lies in preventing the widespread spread of nuclear weapons. NPT has discouraged many countries from pursuing nuclear arsenals, thereby avoiding

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the large-scale proliferation that many experts once predicted during the Cold War.

One should reject both the overly optimistic view that the NPT is a complete success and the pessimistic claim that it has entirely failed. While disarmament progress has been limited and some states, such as India, Pakistan, Israel, North Korea, and South Sudan, remain outside or beyond the treaty framework, the NPT has nonetheless contributed significantly to global stability and international security. The consecutive failures of review conferences and growing geopolitical tensions do not necessarily indicate that the treaty itself is collapsing since the majority of states continue to support and comply with it. Despite the NPT's problematic hierarchical division between "nuclear haves" and "have-nots," countries continue to support the treaty because it serves broader collective security interests and remains the central foundation of the global non-proliferation regime.

However, the credibility of the NPT is being undermined by the expansion of nuclear weapons worldwide, along with the absence of bilateral treaties to limit them. If the international community does not soon return to an orderly, multilateral arms-control diplomacy within and beyond the United Nations (UN) framework, the world may enter an era of unconstrained nuclear competition. If this happened, the treaty's place in history would be that of a historic document without regulatory force.

## Conclusion

One reason for the failure of the NPT RevCon was that decisions were made by consensus. Global leaders cannot reach a consensus in a world where geopolitical dynamics are constantly shifting. The recent collapse of the rules-based order and the rise of populist leaders have curtailed confidence-building measures between nations. This is putting an extra burden on the existing nuclear regime. The failure of the Western alliance to honour the security guarantee for Ukraine as provided in the Budapest Memorandum, which forced Ukraine to give up its nuclear arsenal, was eventually the reason for its invasion by Russia. This creates the situation where ownership of nuclear weapons can only guarantee security from any attack or invasion. The significance and utility of the NPT have become key issues amid ongoing international conflict and the breakdown of arms control pacts.

Despite these situations, NPT can be viewed through the lens of the principle that "something is better than nothing." Despite

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its limitations and inequalities, it provides an essential international framework in which states can come together, engage in dialogue, negotiate differences, and cooperate on issues related to nuclear non-proliferation, disarmament, and the peaceful uses of nuclear energy. Even though the treaty has not fully achieved universal disarmament or prevented every case of proliferation, it has created a common platform for discussion and confidence-building among both nuclear-weapon and non-nuclear-weapon states. Without such a framework, there would be far less transparency, fewer mechanisms for accountability, and greater risks of mistrust and nuclear competition. The NPT, therefore, remains valuable not because it is perfect, but because it institutionalises communication and cooperation in an area where the consequences of failure could be catastrophic.

## Notes:

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- <sup>11</sup> Daryl Kimball, “Press Release: States Reaffirm Importance of Non-proliferation Treaty, But U.S.-Iran Dispute Blocks Consensus Outcome,” Arms Control Association, May 22, 2026, <https://www.armscontrol.org/pressroom/2026-05/press-release-states-reaffirm-importance-nonproliferation-treaty-us-iran-dispute>. Accessed on May 24, 2026.
- <sup>12</sup> “Verification and monitoring in the Islamic Republic of Iran in light of United Nations Security Council resolution 2231,” International Atomic Energy Agency, May 31, 2025, pp. 4-11, <https://www.iaea.org/sites/default/files/25/06/gov2025-24.pdf>. Accessed on May 07, 2026.
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<sup>17</sup> “Additional Protocol,” International Atomic Energy Agency, <https://www.iaea.org/topics/additional-protocol>. Accessed on May 09, 2026.

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<sup>22</sup> “Review Conference Ends without Consensus Outcome amid Rising Nuclear Risks,” United Nations, May 22, 2026, <https://press.un.org/en/2026/dc3912.doc.htm>. Accessed on May 24, 2026.

<sup>23</sup> “A path towards enhanced transparency and accountability within the review process of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear-Weapons; Working paper submitted by Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Canada, Iceland, Japan, Liechtenstein, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Norway, the Philippines, the Republic of Moldova, Ukraine and the European Union,” United Nations, February 26, 2026, <https://undocs.org/en/NPT/CONF.2026/WP.1>. Accessed on April 12, 2026.



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