



Death by a Thousand Red Lines

The Colossal Failure of the 10th NPT Review Conference

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The official record will show that Russia tanked the long-delayed and much-anticipated 10th Review Conference of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), that it was the sole NPT state party to block consensus on the outcome document, and that the disagreement was ultimately over references in the text relevant to the ongoing conflict in Ukraine. This is all accurate—but only part of the story.

The profound rifts that divided NPT states parties from the beginning and prevented even modest progress ran much deeper than the predictably contentious Ukrainian conflict. Well before the Russian delegation took the floor during the last session to indicate that it would not endorse the text of the final document, it was abundantly clear that the conference would not meet even modest expectations. Its main accomplishment: the further weakening of the NPT's credibility as a framework for nuclear abolition.

Unmet expectations

Faced with a convoluted and fragile international security environment, the world needed this Review Conference, already delayed for two years, to make progress. To many states and civil society, progress primarily meant that nuclear-weapon states (NWS) that were party to the treaty (China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, the United States) should commit to implementing concrete disarmament measures and reporting regularly on progress made. Nuclear-armed states, however, had a different purpose.

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As they had at previous NPT Review Conferences and Preparatory Committees, NWS attempted to justify the indefinite retention of their arsenals while still professing support for the goal of a world without nuclear weapons. They highlighted the centrality of nuclear deterrence in their security policies, spoke at length of the impossibility of committing to any type of nuclear disarmament schedule, and explained how international security conditions hindered implementation of their disarmament obligations. Seventy-seven years after Hiroshima and Nagasaki, more than 50 years after the entry into force of the NPT, and decades after the end of the Cold War, they continued to insist that undertaking disarmament measures was premature. With each statement, they lost credibility.

A cloud of discontent and frustration descended upon the conference as it neared its end. Earlier, several non-nuclear-weapon states (NNWS) had protested that their proposals were largely ignored in successive drafts of the outcome document, while most concerns of NWS were accommodated. As states stepped forward to announce their intention to support the outcome document, most also lamented its lack of ambition, expressed disappointment at the weakness of the commitments, and acknowledged that they were signing on mainly to preserve the NPT regime.

Consensus on Ukraine elusive

The ongoing conflict in Ukraine dogged attempts to reach consensus. Most pertinent was the situation at the Zaporizhzya nuclear power plant, the object of active military activity and the subject of conflicting accounts – most of which placed primary or full responsibility on Russia.

Ukraine, with support from many delegations, wanted a clear acknowledgement that Russia was the chief instigator of this nuclear safety and security crisis. However, everyone was certain that Russia would oppose any direct reference to its alleged responsibility, and no such reference appeared in the outcome document.

According to one account, Russia ultimately objected to a reference in the final draft to

Ukraine's "internationally recognized borders," found in a single paragraph on restoring the safety and security of the nuclear facilities in question. But these "internationally recognized borders" were non-negotiable for Ukraine, which would have predictably blocked consensus if the reference had been deleted. In the end, the words remained in the draft and Russia blocked consensus, with Russian delegates arguing that the crisis involving Ukraine's nuclear facilities had become a hostage to politics.

Russia's response raises a valid question: Does commenting on Ukraine's borders – rather than strictly on the need for safety and security at nuclear facilities – fall within the mandate and scope of the NPT? Few issues are as inherently political as national borders and territorial integrity, both at the heart of the ongoing conflict in Ukraine.

Red lines for all NWS

Russia blocked consensus because the text crossed one of its "red lines." All other nuclear-armed states party to the NPT were ready to do the same if one of their red lines were crossed. This they made clear, repeatedly, at the Plenary, Main Committees, and Subsidiary Bodies. Somehow, they were more successful than Russia in keeping anything they couldn't live with out of the draft outcome document.

China was ready to block consensus if a moratorium on the production of fissile materials were included in the draft. France had references to no-first-use removed. The United Kingdom ensured that no commitment to offer unconditional negative security assurances to NNWS was in the final document. AUKUS partners Australia (although not a NWS), the United Kingdom, and the United States had to be on board with any wording on naval nuclear propulsion.

Iran and other Middle Eastern states wanted Israel included in the outcome document's section on the pursuit of a nuclear-weapons-free zone in the Middle East, but this was certain to be rejected by the United States, and so no mention of Israel appeared in that section. The urgency that states parties from the region wanted the text to express to achieve the objectives originally set out in a 1995 UN resolution did not appear either. Iran led a group that expressed strong concerns about not being included in consultations that resulted in the wording on this issue.

Nuclear-armed states rejected any references in the outcome document to "benchmarks," "targets," or "timelines" for the implementation of concrete disarmament measures, and the few that were present were winnowed out over time. For example, an affirmation of the importance of concrete steps to reduce the alert status of nuclear weapons was removed from an early draft.

Several NWS pointed to the misalignment of their current nuclear weapons policies with the proposed disarmament measures as a reason to weaken the language in the outcome document. They clearly missed the point: other states wanted to correct this misalignment to make progress toward nuclear disarmament, not to preserve the status quo.

In retrospect, it seems obvious that the plethora of "red lines" set out by NWS and their allies made tangible progress on nuclear disarmament commitments unlikely at best. Even if Russia had not blocked consensus, the final document would have been devoid of any

serious commitment to change the policies that most other NPT states parties were clamouring to see changed.

NNWS in a nuclear alliance

Russia and China joined a group of non-nuclear-armed states, including several members of the Non-Aligned Movement, in seeking a reference in the outcome document to the role of NNWS in nuclear military alliances and their responsibility to report on steps taken to reduce the salience of nuclear weapons in their security doctrines. South Africa and others pushed for such an acknowledgement, one that accurately and objectively reflected reality and was relevant to treaty implementation.

NPT States Parties that are also members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) rejected any reference to commitments that it should assume. They also claimed that any reference to a NNWS subgroup would create a new category of states within the NPT that had not been agreed upon.

Yet NATO is itself a military alliance with an overt policy of nuclear deterrence and members that are both NNWS and NWS. Some NNWS European members host nuclear weapons owned by the United States on their territories. And all NATO members are States Parties to the NPT.

These complex relationships raise important questions about whether NATO members are complying with their obligations under the NPT. In Article 1 of the treaty, each state party of the NPT with nuclear weapons “undertakes not to transfer to any recipient whatsoever nuclear weapons.” Article 2 requires “each non-nuclear weapon State Party to the Treaty” not to receive them.

Yet NATO members consider nuclear weapons a supreme guarantee that protects their vital security interests. At the same time, they do not want anyone else to embrace the same rationale. They consider the pursuit and possession of nuclear weapons by unfriendly states a grave threat to international peace and security, and demand immediate, consistent compliance with non-proliferation obligations. But they appear willing to accept the nuclear weapons programs of their allies, even outside the NPT framework.

It is far from clear how such policies can lead to nuclear disarmament.

Familiar attacks on the TPNW

As predicted, nuclear-armed States Parties to the NPT dismissed and rejected the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW). They pointed out that it had not eliminated a single nuclear weapon and categorized it as a divisive instrument. Even before the TPNW's adoption and subsequent entry into force, NWS had alleged that the TPNW in fact undermined the NPT and was incompatible with it.

But NWS have a peculiar view of what is and is not compatible with the NPT, the object and purpose of which are clear: the elimination of all nuclear weapons. Consider these current realities: the existence of the TPNW, nuclear sharing within NATO, and nuclear cooperation

with a nuclear-armed state outside the NPT framework (e.g., the United States with India). The TPNW, with its goal of nuclear abolition, is deemed incompatible with the NPT. At the same time, nuclear sharing, which most NPT states parties believe runs counter to the Treaty's provisions on nuclear transfers, is deemed compatible. So is nuclear cooperation with states outside the NPT, even though the letter, spirit, and intent of the NPT restrict nuclear cooperation to states parties.

Supporters of the TPNW have countered that this new treaty is not only compatible with the NPT but constitutes a rare instance of its implementation. The NPT does not implicitly or explicitly dictate that nuclear disarmament efforts must be undertaken under its direct auspices. For example, initiatives like the New START strategic arms control framework between the United States and the Russian Federation are not directly within the NPT framework but are nonetheless broadly welcomed as complementary to the NPT.

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The TPNW has replaced tired arguments over the purported value of nuclear weapons possession with a renewed emphasis on the humanitarian imperative for nuclear disarmament. From this perspective, the catastrophic humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons use outweigh any alleged benefits.

TPNW supporters at the Review Conference called for the outcome document to include a reference to the "complementarity" of the NPT and the TPNW. Of course, such a reference would have killed any chance for consensus and never appeared in any draft.

The final draft of the outcome document did acknowledge the existence of the TPNW, its entry into force, and the first Meeting of States Parties to the TPNW. A previous draft had indicated that the Meeting of States Parties of the TPNW had produced an outcome document and an action plan, but this factual reference was dropped. France and some other countries opposed any reference at all to the TPNW, but not to the point of breaking consensus.

Positive advances

The absence of an outcome document does not mean that the NPT Review Conference had no value of any kind. The mere fact that it was finally held and well attended is a positive measure of the ongoing commitment of states parties to the treaty and the objectives it embodies.

Each Review Conference presents a unique view of the thorny challenges facing the global nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation regime at that point in time. Positions are put on the table, clarified, and tested. Gaps between rhetoric and action are highlighted. Frus-

trations are aired, and the effectiveness of pressure revealed. In addition, important issues are discussed, if not advanced or resolved.

The 2022 conference displayed a renewed emphasis on gender and the important role that women can and must play in nuclear abolition at every level of disarmament discussions. Champions including Canada, Sweden, and Ireland received widespread support for their new focus on the gender dimensions of the effects of nuclear weapons testing and use.

Nuclear risk reduction – concrete measures taken to minimize the possibility of an accidental or deliberate nuclear detonation – was prominently featured. Calls abounded for each NWS to commit to not being the first to introduce nuclear weapons into a conflict (no first use or NFU). While the one NFU reference in the final draft of the outcome document was promptly dropped, the positive response to this measure in sessions ensures that it will be taken up in relevant forums in the future.

Negative security assurances by NWS, which would guarantee that they would not use nuclear weapons against NNWS under any circumstances, were clearly wanted by many NNWS at the conference. However, NWS consistently resisted calls for blanket unconditionality. The United Kingdom, for instance, indicated that the proposed framing of unconditional negative security assurances simply did not align with its nuclear deterrence policy.

While the increased salience of these issues was generally seen as positive, several states made it clear that the welcome attention to such issues as negative security assurances and nuclear risk reduction should not be seen as a prerequisite or substitute for actual disarmament measures. Members of the Non-Aligned Movement were particularly vocal about this point. With demand for concrete disarmament measures growing, the absence of such measures from the outcome document constituted a fundamental shortcoming.

The future of the NPT

The 11th Review Conference is scheduled for 2026, and so the NPT will survive for at least another cycle. Most stakeholders seem to agree that the NPT remains the centrepiece of the global nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation regime, despite multiple shortcomings.

Evidently it is in the best interests of NWS to maintain a forum in which, thus far, they have been able to shape the official narrative in their favour. Not surprisingly, their common refrain is that the world is better off with the NPT than without it. This might be true. But the crucial question for a growing number of stakeholders is this: Does this regime present a credible path to the actual abolition of nuclear weapons?

The conference laid bare the utter lack of appetite by nuclear-weapon states for any concrete commitments that would challenge their nuclear weapons doctrines in any meaningful way. Equally clear was the widespread frustration of a growing number of states with the formidable resistance to credible progress on nuclear disarmament by the NWS camp.

Throughout the conference, the United States emphasized the need to focus on what all states held in common, not on the differences that steadily grew in prominence and scope. But how does this argument encourage the type of progress that the international com-

munity is clamouring for, and the nuclear abolition enterprise badly requires? It is precisely in the differences that progress needs to be made. While both NWS and NNWS voice their support for a world without nuclear weapons, they seem to have little else in common.

Perhaps the key difference lies in each group's fundamental understanding of the role and impact of nuclear weapons. While NWS and their allies continue to frame nuclear weapons as a supreme security guarantee, the rest of the international community considers them the primary threat to international security and stability. These mutually exclusive formulations help to explain the basic tensions that led to the failure of the 10th NPT Review Conference.

The fundamental point of division at the conference was never the Ukraine conflict. Rather, the essential divide was that NNWS wanted to chart a credible path to nuclear disarmament with concrete commitments and good-faith implementation, while NWS wanted to maintain the status quo. And the NWS won. For now.



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