

Deliver or Collapse: Five Critical Challenges for an NPT under Strain

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After decades of lamenting the shortcomings of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), the international community must now confront the realistic prospect of its collapse.

As the 2025 session of the Preparatory Committee (PrepCom) for the 2026 NPT Review Conference convenes in New York, the nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation regime has reached a critical crossroads. The credibility of the NPT is under unprecedented scrutiny.

Longstanding challenges — the modernization of nuclear arsenals, the lack of progress on negative security assurances, divisive debates over nuclear sharing, and persistent non-compliance with disarmament obligations — have become more entrenched, exposing the fragility of a regime long considered the cornerstone of the international security architecture.

The effect is a moment of astounding vulnerability, marked by a rapidly shifting security environment, growing distrust between nuclear-weapon states (NWS) and non-nuclear-weapon states (NNWS), the reemergence of nuclear brinkmanship, and the erosion of arms control agreements.

Some of these challenges are time-sensitive, posing an immediate risk to the NPT regime. Left unaddressed, they could not only hasten the erosion of the regime but fundamentally destabilize the global non-proliferation landscape. Failure to act could accelerate a retreat from multilateralism, embolden new proliferation, and leave future generations with a far more dangerous world.

To ensure that the 2026 Review Conference does not repeat the failures of its predecessors, attendees at the PrepCom must commit to confronting these challenges head-on and to achieving credible, measurable progress.

1 The Risk of a Third Consecutive Failed Review Conference

The NPT is facing the most profound crisis of legitimacy since it entered into force in 1970. Two consecutive Review Conferences (in 2015 and 2022) ended without agreement on an outcome document. With persistent disagreements still unresolved, particularly regarding disarmament obligations under Article VI, the risk of a third consecutive failure looms large.

These failures are clearly symptoms of deep-rooted structural dysfunction. NWS and their military allies have prioritized the protection of narrow national interests over the pursuit

of shared security objectives. Rather than seeking genuine compromise, these states have taken up increasingly rigid positions. For example, they continue to block the establishment of clear benchmarks, targets, and timelines for nuclear disarmament. This erosion of good-faith progress has politically weakened the treaty and spread disillusionment among non-nuclear-weapon states.

In the eyes of a growing number of NNWS, the glaring gap between the obligations set out under Article VI and the actions or inactions of nuclear-weapon states is simply untenable. Decades after the treaty's entry into force, NWS continue to modernize and expand their nuclear arsenals, rather than take action to eliminate them.

The credibility of the NPT's core bargain (that NNWS will refrain from developing nuclear weapons in exchange for disarmament by NWS) is now seriously questioned. For many, indeed, the bargain appears broken.

Without concrete commitments and verifiable steps, the NPT will continue to erode. A credible roadmap to disarmament must be developed, with specific, measurable benchmarks and timelines. The PrepCom must not be another procedural formality, but a forum in which these steps are meaningfully discussed and committed to, so that they can be integrated into a forward-looking action plan at the 2026 Review Conference.

Without such action, the NPT risks not only political irrelevance but functional collapse at a time when global nuclear risks are growing.

2 Difficulties in Achieving a New Iran Nuclear Deal and a Mideast Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone

The unresolved tensions surrounding Iran's nuclear program continue to jeopardize the stability of the broader non-proliferation regime. Since the U.S. withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA or Iran nuclear deal) in 2018 and the subsequent reimposition of U.S. sanctions, Iran has taken incremental steps away from its JCPOA commitments, including the expansion of enrichment activities and the limiting of access by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).

Of course, the sequence of events must be recognized: Iran's departure from the agreement occurred only after the United States unilaterally abandoned its obligations, despite verified compliance by Iran at the time.

Ongoing diplomatic talks between Iran and the United States, mediated by Oman, represent one of the final opportunities to reconstruct a credible agreement and, with luck, avert a major regional conflict. However, the current political landscape is even more volatile than in 2015. Iran's nuclear program is more advanced, its leadership more hardline, and mutual trust more fragile.

Meanwhile, the United States — once again led by Donald Trump, whose first administration walked away from the original JCPOA — is sending conflicting messages about its ob-

jectives. Sometimes the demand is for full dismantlement of Iran's nuclear infrastructure. At other times, the administration proposes a return to capped enrichment with verification. Such ambiguity, when combined with past breaches of faith, reinforces Iranian skepticism about the reliability of U.S. commitments.

Should current tensions escalate further and diplomatic efforts fail, an Iranian withdrawal from the NPT is a real possibility. Such a move would nullify decades of regional non-proliferation efforts to achieve a Mideast Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone and could establish a dangerous precedent for other states contemplating similar action. It would also severely weaken the NPT's credibility as a framework for preventing the proliferation of nuclear weapons. The PrepCom must reaffirm the primacy of diplomacy over coercion.

Reviving the JCPOA framework or developing a comparable arrangement is essential to prevent Iran's nuclear program from advancing unchecked. This means restoring a balanced incentive structure: verifiable nuclear constraints in exchange for meaningful sanctions relief. Attempts to expand negotiations to encompass unrelated issues — such as Iran's missile program, regional policies, or regime change — risk turning a solvable non-proliferation challenge into an intractable political standoff.

Furthermore, the global non-proliferation regime hinges on the fair and consistent application of norms. Selective enforcement, in which some states are shielded from scrutiny while others face relentless pressure, undermines the legitimacy of the entire system. Right now, Iran's nuclear activities are intensely monitored, while Israel's nuclear arsenal, developed outside the NPT framework, remains largely unaddressed. This double standard erodes trust and complicates efforts to secure compliance.

The PrepCom must clearly indicate that viable alternatives to escalation exist and that principled compromise remains possible. Trust-building measures such as reaffirming the central role of the IAEA, ensuring the continuity of obligations by states beyond national electoral cycles, and strengthening multilateral diplomacy will be indispensable. Without a renewed diplomatic push, the risk of Iran's withdrawal from the NPT, the proliferation of nuclear weapons in the Middle East, and broader NPT erosion will only grow.

3 How an Unstable Security Environment Could Incentivize Proliferation

The international security landscape is becoming increasingly unpredictable. Geopolitical polarization, armed conflict, and shifting alliances are straining longstanding security guarantees. The return of Donald Trump to the U.S. presidency raises new questions about the reliability of the United States as a security partner and, more broadly, the future of arms control diplomacy. Growing uncertainty about traditional security umbrellas is already creating conditions that could incentivize both vertical and horizontal nuclear proliferation.

This dynamic is notable in recent discussions across Europe. Germany is one state that is openly debating the possibility of a "Eurobomb" — a joint European nuclear capability — as insurance against threatened U.S. abandonment. Although such proposals remain political-

ly controversial and technically complex, the fact that serious discussion is taking place in a country long associated with nuclear restraint signals a dangerous shift in global attitudes. Some voices argue for new nuclear-sharing arrangements under NATO or for national capabilities that could act independently if the alliance falters.

Such developments illustrate a broader point: in an unstable security environment, even states that have long championed non-proliferation may reconsider their options if they believe that their fundamental security interests are at risk. The mere perception that security guarantees are no longer dependable can create political space for arguments in favour of nuclear armament, even in traditionally non-nuclear-weapon states.

The risk is not limited to Europe. In the Middle East and Northeast Asia, changes in alliance structures, deteriorating arms-control agreements, and escalating tensions could spur similar proliferation pressures. If confidence in the international security architecture collapses, the NPT could topple, leading to the proliferation of nuclear-armed states.

The PrepCom must confront these dangers directly. States Parties must reaffirm the NPT's central prohibition of the spread of nuclear weapons and push back firmly against notions that nuclear sovereignty is a legitimate response to insecurity. It must be stressed that nuclear weapons do not provide true security; rather, they create catastrophic risks that no region or alliance can fully control, once unleashed.

It is also important that the PrepCom emphasize that the answer to growing insecurity lies not in the pursuit of new nuclear capabilities, but in the strengthening of diplomacy, the renewal of collective security mechanisms, and a recommitment to disarmament and multilateralism. Failure to address the underlying drivers of proliferation pressure could inaugurate a new and far more dangerous phase of nuclear instability, one in which the norms underpinning the NPT are not gradually eroded but rapidly abandoned.

4 The Danger of Renewed Nuclear Testing

For more than two decades, the global moratorium on nuclear testing has functioned as an informal but powerful norm, significantly curbing the development of new types of nuclear weapons. Today there are signs that this era could be ending. Discussions in certain nuclear-armed states about the possibility of resuming testing are raising alarm bells and threatening to undo the work of decades.

Explanations that renewed nuclear testing is necessary to verify the reliability of aging arsenals and to develop next-generation nuclear capabilities are gaining traction in some political circles. In reality, resuming full-scale explosive tests would undermine global security.

A move by one nuclear-armed state to resume nuclear testing would almost certainly prompt reciprocal actions by other NWS, setting off a dangerous chain reaction. A new era of testing would not be confined to a few actors but would almost certainly spread rapidly, encouraging races to modernize, the development of new weapon types, and the erosion of existing arms-control frameworks.

The global security environment is already fragile; the reintroduction of nuclear testing would intensify mistrust, escalate competition, and increase the risk of miscalculation. Such an outcome would also deal a catastrophic blow to the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT) which, while not in force, has established a strong normative standard. Ultimately, testing would fundamentally weaken the broader disarmament and non-proliferation architecture.

The PrepCom must reassert, unequivocally, the importance of maintaining the moratorium on nuclear testing. All states, particularly nuclear-weapon states, must be urged to reaffirm their commitment to this norm, increase transparency around modernization programs, and ratify the CTBT without delay. Preventing the resumption of testing is critical to preserving international stability at a time when it is most under threat.

5 The Contentious Relationship between the NPT and the TPNW

The Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW), which entered into force in 2021, embodies the growing frustration of many states with the lack of progress on nuclear disarmament. It provides a legal and normative framework for the complete elimination of nuclear weapons, reinforcing humanitarian imperatives and the disarmament goals enshrined in the NPT itself.

Despite such apparent complementarity, the relationship between the two treaties remains contentious. While some states accept the two treaties as complementary pillars of disarmament, others see the TPNW as an adversary to the NPT, arguing that the new treaty undermines the NPT's authority or creates parallel legal obligations. Such divergent views could create lasting institutional and political divides that weaken both regimes at a time when nuclear dangers are escalating.

The Third Meeting of States Parties to the TPNW, held in March 2025, failed to build upon the clearest strength of the Second Meeting: the forceful and unprecedented indictment of the non-compliance of NWS with their Article VI obligations under the NPT. This assertive posture had underscored the TPNW's role as an essential catalyst for nuclear disarmament and a necessary complement to the NPT. TPNW States Parties would do well to explicitly revive and follow through this indictment.

Efforts to reduce friction between the two treaties are needed now. The world must accept the two as compatible and mutually reinforcing instruments in pursuit of the objective of a world without nuclear weapons.

A broader truth must also be emphasized: progress on nuclear disarmament can occur within the framework of the NPT or the TPNW, through overlapping efforts, or outside either. In fact, bilateral or ad hoc negotiations, regional arrangements, and even informal understandings between NWS may be more likely avenues for advancement on disarmament.

It would be a grave mistake to recognize or validate progress on disarmament only when

it happens within the context of a specific treaty. The ultimate and only valid concern is to achieve tangible, verifiable progress toward the elimination of nuclear weapons. A rigid, zero-sum view of treaty frameworks will only delay urgently needed action.

A Turning Point for the NPT

The NPT is under unprecedented strain, challenged internally by the persistent failure of nuclear-weapon states to meet disarmament obligations, and externally by shifting geopolitical dynamics that threaten to dismantle longstanding norms. And so the 2025 NPT PrepCom takes on more significance.

The five flashpoints identified above represent immediate, concrete threats to the viability of the non-proliferation and disarmament regime. If left unaddressed, they could accelerate a dangerous spiral of instability, distrust, and proliferation that would be far harder to reverse in the future.

To preserve the NPT's relevance and effectiveness, States Parties must respond with urgency and effectiveness. Concrete, measurable steps must be taken to restore faith in the treaty's core bargain and to demonstrate that collective restraint remains possible even in an era of heightened insecurity.

NWS must make greater progress in fulfilling their obligations. NNWS must press for accountability while retaining realism. And all stakeholders must resist the temptation to view progress in disarmament as legitimate only when it occurs within familiar institutional frameworks.

The credibility of the NPT and the broader cause of global nuclear abolition depends on the ability of states to adapt to new realities without compromising fundamental principles. Lesser actions will further alienate key constituencies, embolden nuclear-armed actors, and weaken one of the last remaining pillars of international peace and security.

The PrepCom offers the opportunity to signal that the international community remains committed not only to preserving the NPT, but to reinvigorating its role as a living framework for progress. Whether that opportunity is seized — or squandered — will help determine the future of the global nuclear order for decades to come.



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