



Russia Blocks Consensus Outcome of the NPT Review Conference

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On 26 August, Russia blocked the adoption of the final document of the Tenth Review Conference of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). It opposed the proposed provisions regarding the threats to the security and safety of Ukrainian nuclear installations, in particular the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant. Russia's decision has weakened the international non-proliferation regime. The course of the conference also showed increased divisions between nuclear states and their allies, and supporters of swift and complete nuclear disarmament.

Adopted in 1968, the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) forms the backbone of the global regime aimed to curb the spread of nuclear weapons. The Tenth NPT Review Conference was originally scheduled to take place in spring 2020 but was postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The previous review conference ended in 2015 without the adoption of a final document containing a plan to pursue the NPT goals in the areas of disarmament, non-proliferation and the peaceful uses of nuclear energy, which increased the importance of this year's meeting. Along with [existing challenges for the functioning of the regime](#), new ones have been added, in particular those related to the Russian aggression against Ukraine.

Main Points of Contention at the Conference. The impact of the Russian aggression on the NPT regime became the subject of statements and activities for a number of delegations. Three aspects stood out. First, Russia's breach of its guarantees under the 1994 Budapest Memorandum to respect Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity in return for Ukraine giving up inherited Soviet nuclear weapons. Second, [the nuclear rhetoric of the Russian authorities](#) and the placement of its nuclear forces in February into a "special mode of combat service" status, indicating that Russia has been using nuclear weapons as a cover for its aggression. The third element was the [threat to the Ukrainian nuclear installations](#), in particular the

nuclear power plant in Zaporizhzhia, caused by the Russian actions. Ukraine and the countries supporting it, including Poland, wanted to have these threats reflected as directly as possible in the final document, which was opposed by Russia.

Another subject of discussion and controversy was the issue of disarmament obligations under the NPT. As with previous review conferences, a group of non-nuclear-weapon states, supported by a number of NGOs, called for more decisive action on this issue, criticising also the very concept of nuclear deterrence. An additional factor binding this group together was the [entry into force of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons](#) (TPNW) in January 2021. The TPNW is based on the assumption that any use of nuclear weapons, including in self-defence, would be contrary to international law. In the last week of the conference, 145 countries signed up to a declaration highlighting the catastrophic humanitarian consequences of any use of nuclear weapons and calling for their complete elimination.

NPT nuclear-weapon states (the U.S., Russia, China, the UK, France) and states covered by nuclear extended-deterrence guarantees, including NATO countries, did not question the need for disarmament measures. However, they pointed out that disarmament cannot be considered in isolation from the current state of the security environment. In the face of

increased threats, significant reductions in arsenals or the role of nuclear weapons could not be expected. On the TPNW, they highlighted that it is binding only on its signatories and does not establish a global legal prohibition on the possession or use of nuclear weapons. A number of countries in this group pointed to the risk-reduction proposals, for example, lowering the level of readiness of nuclear weapons or strengthening crisis communication between nuclear states, characterising them as the most pragmatic approach in the current situation.

Other Topics of Discussion. There was also criticism, including coming from Russia and China, regarding NATO's approach to nuclear deterrence, in particular the deployment of U.S. nuclear bombs in NATO countries and maintaining the ability to carry them by aircraft from non-nuclear weapon states (nuclear sharing). China argued that the United States could introduce such a system for its allies in Asia. The allegations, which also appeared at previous conferences, concern the alleged non-compliance of nuclear sharing with non-proliferation obligations. In response, NATO countries clarified that the nuclear-sharing system was created before the NPT entered into force and that non-nuclear countries do not exercise control over the U.S. nuclear warheads in peacetime, therefore this does not violate the treaty.

China and the countries supporting it also raised the issue of the U.S.-UK-Australia [AUKUS agreement](#), under which Australia will acquire nuclear-powered submarines. According to China, this could lead to Australia obtaining the materials and knowledge to produce nuclear weapons. The AUKUS countries rejected these claims, pointing out that such a possibility would be excluded because of planned technical solutions, and that the entire process of acquiring and operating submarines would be under the control of the International Atomic Energy Agency.

Contrary to the previous meeting in 2015, issues related to the situation in the Middle East, including the Iranian nuclear programme, were relatively less important.

Towards the Final Document. In the last week of the conference, an attempt was made to agree a final document, which was to be adopted unanimously. Support for its final draft was expressed by all countries participating in the conference except for Russia, which accused its opponents of politicising the work on the document in connection with the proposed language regarding the situation in Ukraine. The draft did not directly identify Russia as an aggressor but expressed grave concern about the military activities in the vicinity of nuclear installations in the warzone and the loss of control over them by the Ukrainian authorities, and it declared support for the IAEA's efforts to verify the situation on the ground. Russia suggested that other countries were also dissatisfied with the project and therefore could have blocked it. However, statements by the representatives of the states that spoke in the debate on

26 August indicated that other states were ready to support the compromise draft, and thus, the responsibility for the conference's failure lies with Russia.

Conclusions. Considering the international situation and the two main axes of the dispute—the assessment of nuclear threats related to Russia's actions in Ukraine and the issue of nuclear disarmament—even before the meeting, the chances of adopting a final document were assessed as low. The conduct of the substantive discussion ("review") of the operation of the treaty and the fact that the participants attempted to prepare a final document, reaching compromises on most issues, can be considered a success. The draft final document did not contain any significant new commitments or recommendations. Its adoption would have, however, sent a signal that members still agree on the importance of the NPT, despite disputes.

The course of the meeting shows, however, that beyond the immediate challenge of the war in Ukraine, the fundamental rift between nuclear states and their allies and supporters of rapid nuclear disarmament is deepening. In the coming years, the NPT nuclear-weapon states will either maintain their nuclear potential or expand it (in the case of China, significantly). This will reinforce the conviction of the most disarmament-minded members of the NPT that it is necessary to strengthen the political pressure on nuclear weapon possessors and their allies. This may translate into increased efforts to persuade the populations and leadership of some countries under extended nuclear-deterrence guarantees (especially U.S. allies) to reject them. Still, taking into account the importance of nuclear weapons in the allied defence strategy towards Russia, from the point of view of Poland and other NATO countries, undermining nuclear deterrence would be detrimental to their security. This position will be the subject of intense criticism from TPNW supporters. A demonstrative exit from the NPT of one or more countries is improbable but cannot be ruled out, as they may, for example, argue that due to their membership in the TPNW, their obligations in the area of non-proliferation and disarmament are stronger than the NPT standards.

The most important current challenges for the NPT regime remain the security situation of Ukrainian nuclear installations and the repercussions of Russian aggression. More broadly, arms-control developments will play a role. During the next review cycle (until 2026), the state of the NPT could be positively affected by the agreement of a new treaty on the reduction of nuclear forces by the U.S. and Russia, or by China's decision to enter into nuclear arms control talks. Both currently seem unlikely. The weakening of the NPT regime and the likely related crisis of the system of verification of non-proliferation obligations will open up the possibility of more states obtaining nuclear weapons, which would have a negative impact on global security.