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THE NPT IN THE THIRD NUCLEAR AGE: CRISIS, CONTEST, AND THE SEARCH FOR RELEVANCE

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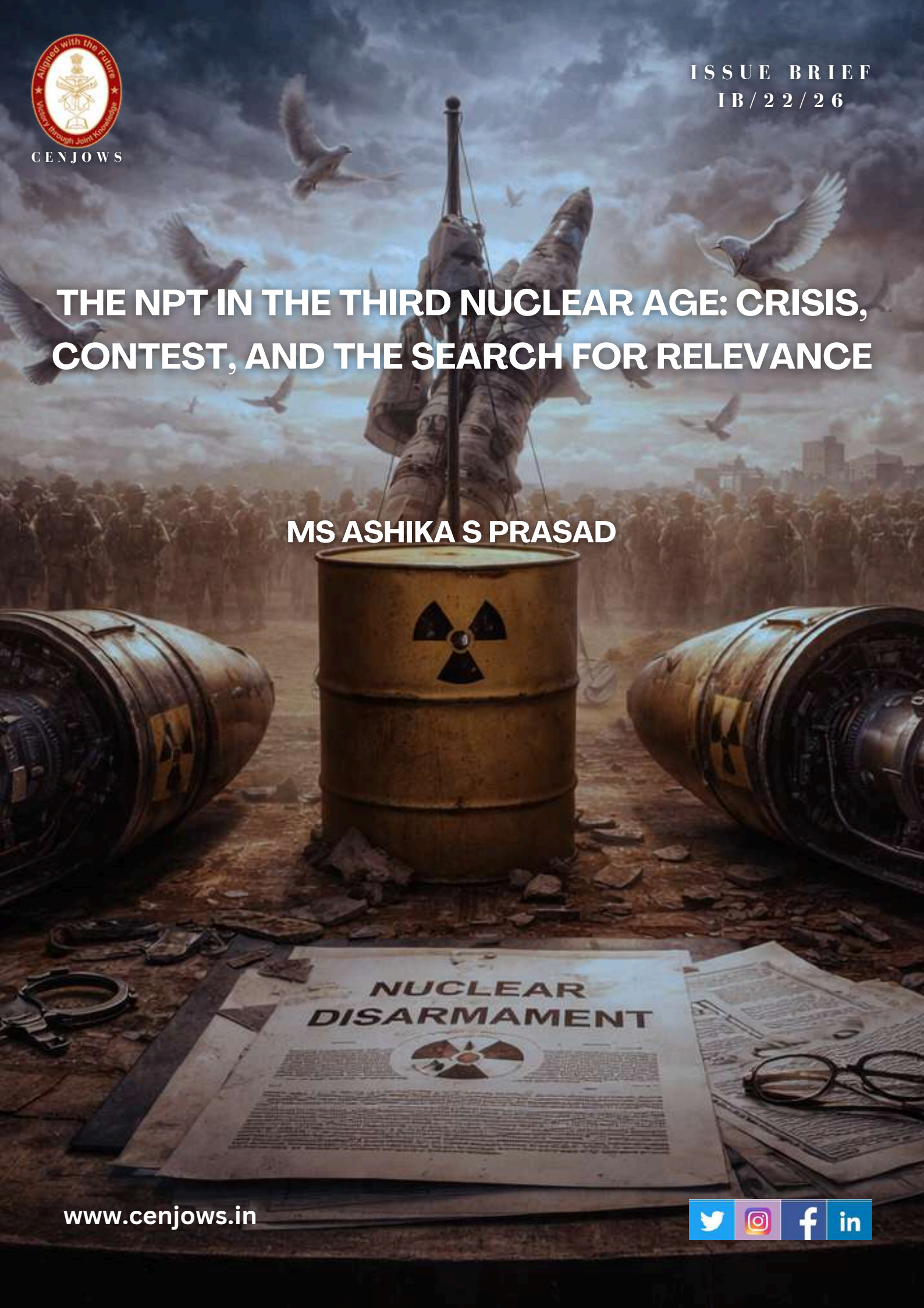

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The NPT in the Third Nuclear Age: Crisis, Contest, and the Search for Relevance

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Introduction

For over five decades, the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) for nuclear weapons has stood as the cornerstone of global nuclear order, built upon a carefully constructed but increasingly fragile compromise between nuclear-weapon states (NWS) and non-nuclear-weapon states (NNWS). At the heart of this arrangement was a fundamental exchange: non-nuclear-weapon states agreed to renounce pursuing nuclear arms, and in return, they secured two pivotal promises from the five officially recognised nuclear-weapon states, China, France, Russia, the UK, and the US. These were, first, a genuine commitment to move towards disarmament under Article VI, and, second, an affirmation of their right to harness nuclear energy for peaceful purposes under Article IV.[1] Yet, as the international landscape shifts into what analysts now call the 'Third Nuclear Age',[2] the NPT finds itself grappling with an identity crisis driven by rapid technological shifts, weakening traditional diplomatic norms, and a steady decline in the treaty's institutional strengths.

What we are witnessing today is not simply an indication of worsening relations among major powers. Rather, it reflects deeper structural flaws within the treaty's review architecture and a growing divergence in how states understand and prioritise nuclear threats. The failure of the 2022 Review Conference to produce a consensus outcome[3], followed by a particularly strained preparatory committee meeting in 2025, underscores a troubling reality: the very model of consensus decision-making, once valued for its inclusivity, has become a tool for strategic obstruction.

The NPT is routinely described as being in 'crisis', though there is less agreement on what kind of crisis. Is this a crisis of effectiveness, of legitimacy, or of broader political relevance? Some observers continue to point to its enduring strengths: near-universal membership, a remarkably limited number of nuclear-armed states, and a robust system of safeguards and verification. Others, however, contend that the prolonged stagnation of disarmament efforts, the resurgence of great-power competition, and the normative challenge posed by the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) have together eroded the treaty's moral authority and political weight.

History and Normative Architecture

The NPT's normative architecture has long been understood through the metaphor of three interconnected pillars: non-proliferation, peaceful uses, and disarmament.[4] At its core, the treaty establishes a set of asymmetrical obligations through Articles I and II: nuclear-weapon states pledge not to transfer nuclear weapons or assist others in acquiring them, while non-nuclear-weapon states commit themselves to neither seeking nor manufacturing such arms. This foundational bargain is underpinned by Article III, which requires non-nuclear-weapon states to accept International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) safeguards designed to verify that nuclear materials intended for peaceful purposes are not diverted towards weapons programmes.[5]

The promise of peaceful nuclear cooperation finds its expression in Article IV, which affirms the 'inalienable right' of all parties to develop nuclear energy for peaceful ends, a right to be exercised 'without discrimination' and in keeping with non-proliferation commitments, while also obliging states to facilitate the exchange of equipment,

materials, and scientific knowledge.[6] Alongside this sits Article VI, which commits signatories to pursue negotiations in good faith to halt the nuclear arms race and achieve nuclear disarmament, within the broader aspiration of general and complete disarmament under effective international control.[7] Taken together, these provisions reveal the NPT to be more than a straightforward non-proliferation contract; it is, in essence, a political bargain rooted in reciprocity, whose moral and political authority centres on satisfactory performance across all three dimensions.[8]

Institutional arrangements give this framework practical effect. IAEA safeguards agreements and, for many states, the Additional Protocol provide the technical equipment for verification.[9] Export control regimes and supplier guidelines shape the conditions under which nuclear technology is transferred. And the five-yearly review conference cycle serves as the principal forum for collective deliberation, accountability, and agenda-setting. The historical record of these conferences is instructive: consensus outcomes have been intermittent, with points of breakdown typically clustering around disputes over Article VI implementation, nuclear testing, negative security assurances, and the long-standing goal of a Middle East zone free of weapons of mass destruction.[10] The NPT's relevance, over time, has derived not simply from its legal force but from its role as a coordinating focal point, enabling a workable distinction between legitimate peaceful activity and prohibited pathways to nuclear weapons, while anchoring the shared expectation that the number of nuclear-armed states should not increase.[11]

Yet a persistent legitimacy challenge is embedded in the treaty's very structure. By defining nuclear-weapon state status in terms of possession and testing prior to 1 January 1967, the NPT institutionalises a formal distinction between two classes of parties.[12] This creates a normatively awkward arrangement: a treaty universalist in aspiration yet exceptionalist in its recognition of privilege, giving rise to an enduring tension between the non-proliferation order it upholds and the geopolitical reality of entrenched nuclear advantage.[13]

The Paralysis of the Review Process and Visible Symptoms of Crisis

The Collapse of the 2015 and 2022 Review Conferences

The most visible evidence of the NPT's crisis is the deterioration of its review cycle. The 2015 Review Conference dispersed without a final document, undone by irreconcilable differences over convening a conference on a Middle East Weapons of Mass Destruction-free zone, combined with bitter disputes over how to assess disarmament progress. When state parties finally gathered in 2022 for the pandemic-delayed Tenth Review Conference, history repeated itself. Russia vetoed a consensus over language addressing the safety of Ukraine's Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant, an issue that turned a technical discussion into a flashpoint reflecting how geopolitical conflict now infiltrates and paralyses multilateral processes.[14]

These consecutive failures stand in stark contrast to the relative optimism of 2010, when states parties adopted an ambitious 64-point action plan covering all three pillars, complete with practical disarmament steps and renewed commitments on the Middle East. But the implementation of that plan has been meagre, and the inability to replicate even the appearance of consensus in 2015 and 2022 has reinforced narratives of a review process that is increasingly stalled, perhaps even hollowed out.[15]

The 2022 outcome highlighted a growing rift in how the world views the NPT. For many activists and civil society groups, the deadlock was no surprise; it simply proved their long-held belief that nuclear powers have no real plans to honour their disarmament promises under Article VI. This sceptical view aligns with the blunt conclusion of former IAEA chief Mohamed ElBaradei, who argued that none of the nine nuclear-armed states actually intend to disarm.[16]

On the other hand, some scholars and policy experts see a glimmer of hope. They argue that because negotiators nearly reached a final agreement, the treaty’s institutional core remains strong. From this perspective, the NPT remains a durable framework, even as it is currently being pushed to its limits by intense geopolitical friction.[17]

The Erosion of Consensus and the Fragmentation of Agendas

Beneath these high-profile failures lie deeper fractures over what the NPT should prioritise and how its provisions should be interpreted. Non-nuclear-weapon states and TPNW supporters increasingly press for concrete disarmament timelines, a de-emphasis of nuclear deterrence, and explicit recognition of the humanitarian and environmental consequences of nuclear activities.[18] Nuclear-weapon states and their allies, by contrast, tend to focus their energies on non-proliferation compliance, verification mechanisms, and the language of strategic stability. The question of whether the treaty on the prohibition of nuclear weapons complements or undercuts the NPT has become another axis of polarisation, with each side accusing the other of undermining the treaty's integrity.[19]

There is also a procedural side to this crisis. The ‘consensus rule’, originally intended to ensure everyone has a seat at the table, has ironically made the Review Conference a target for political hostage-taking. We saw this clearly in 2022 when Russia blocked a document that most other nations supported, simply because it contained language critical of its actions in Ukraine. It shows how the treaty can be derailed by issues that have very little to do with its actual core mission.[20]

The result is a frustrating drain on global diplomacy. Countries pour immense time and energy into a process where the outcome is never certain, and where any real progress is often dragged down to the ‘lowest common denominator’ just to get everyone to agree.

Yet, there is a silver lining in this friction. The very fact that nations argue so passionately over disarmament wording suggests that they still view the NPT as a vital arena. They haven't walked away from it. From a relevance perspective, the issue isn't that the treaty is disappearing; it’s that it suffers from a ‘dysfunctional centrality.’ It remains the world’s main stage for nuclear diplomacy, even if the performances there are increasingly defined by stalemate and finger-pointing.

Structural Drivers of Declining Relevance

Great-Power Rivalry and the Modernisation of Arsenals

A first driver of the NPT's perceived irrelevance lies in the widening gap between the treaty's commitments and the actual strategic behaviour of the major nuclear powers. All five recognised nuclear-weapon states are engaged in modernising or even expanding aspects of their arsenals, often lowering the perceived threshold for use through the development of new delivery systems, dual-capable missiles, or so-called tactical capabilities. The collapse or steady erosion of key arms-control agreements, the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, much of the conventional arms-control architecture in Europe, and growing uncertainty around the future of new Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START), have reinforced the sense that nuclear restraint is in retreat.[21]

Tannenwald captures this dynamic in her description of a broader ‘great unravelling’ of the nuclear normative order, in which long-standing norms of non-use, arms control, and disarmament are increasingly contested, even as non-proliferation retains nominal strength.[22] For many non-nuclear-weapon states, the contrast between rhetorical reaffirmations of Article VI and concrete investments in long-term modernisation programmes raises fundamental questions: Does the NPT still meaningfully constrain the behaviour of nuclear-armed states? Does it provide an effective framework for moving towards disarmament?[23]

In geopolitical terms, the resurgence of rivalry among the United States, Russia, and China has undermined the cooperative security logic that once enabled arms-control progress. The war in Ukraine has added a particularly destabilising element, with Russia issuing repeated nuclear threats and stationing weapons in Belarus, while Western states have simultaneously reinforced their reliance on extended deterrence and nuclear-sharing arrangements. These dynamics unfold largely outside the formal NPT processes, reinforcing the impression that the treaty is no longer the primary arena for managing nuclear risks.[24]

Persistent Non-Compliance and Unresolved Proliferation Crises

A second driver concerns the NPT's mixed record in addressing non-compliance and managing states that either pursue nuclear weapons or remain outside the treaty's framework altogether. North Korea's withdrawal from the NPT in 2003 and its subsequent development of a substantial nuclear arsenal constitute the regime's most glaring failure. Despite sustained efforts to use the Security Council to sanction and pressure Pyongyang, its programme has not been reversed, and there is no realistic prospect of its rejoining the NPT as a non-nuclear-weapon state in the foreseeable future.[25]

The Iranian case illustrates both the strengths and vulnerabilities of the existing regime. The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, concluded in 2015 between Iran and the P5+1, created an unprecedentedly intrusive system of verification and restraint built on IAEA safeguards, temporarily extending breakout timelines and enhancing transparency.[26] However, the United States' unilateral withdrawal in 2018 and Iran's subsequent expansion of its enrichment activities have eroded these gains, while ongoing disputes over safeguards access have strained the relationship between Tehran and the IAEA.[27] Although the NPT framework remains a legal reference point, key decisions on sanctions, incentives, and security guarantees are increasingly made in ad hoc formats, again suggesting that the treaty is not the central locus for crisis management.

Also, the fact that India, Pakistan, and Israel remain outside the NPT yet enjoy varying degrees of de facto acceptance into the global nuclear order raises uncomfortable questions about the regime's normative consistency. These cases do not represent NPT non-compliance in a strict sense, but they contribute to a perception among many non-nuclear-weapon states that the treaty is ill-equipped to handle outliers and may, in practice, entrench a discriminatory status quo.

Humanitarian Politics and the TPNW

The most significant challenge to the NPT’s authority today is the rise of a competing ‘humanitarian’ movement, which led to the creation of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW). Since 2010, a diverse group of non-nuclear nations and activists has successfully changed the conversation. Instead of talking about ‘strategic

stability,' they talk about the catastrophic human cost, specifically how nuclear testing and use have disproportionately harmed Indigenous communities, women, and marginalised groups.[28]

This wasn't just a change in vocabulary; it was a shift in power. For decades, nuclear politics was defined by a 'protector-protected' hierarchy. Scholars like Pantoliano argue that the TPNW gave a voice to smaller nations that were previously sidelined.[29] The TPNW and the NPT are now in a direct tug-of-war over legitimacy. While the TPNW acknowledges the NPT as a 'cornerstone,' it also demands a total ban and reparations for victims, something the NPT has never fully addressed. Predictably, nuclear-armed states and their allies have pushed back, calling the TPNW 'unrealistic' and a threat to the existing security order.[30]

The 'Failed Promise' and the Rise of Competing Forums

Recent scholarship in international relations suggests that constant friction within an institution can be a double-edged sword, at once reinforcing and eroding its authority. Nina Tannenwald, for instance, characterises the NPT as a 'failed promise' within the broader liberal order, tracing a clear shift in how dissatisfied nations behave.[31] Initially, these non-nuclear states tried to work within the system, pushing for stronger safeguards and clearer disarmament goals. However, after decades of circular debates and broken commitments, their strategy shifted toward 'liberal counter-institutionalisation' through the TPNW.[32] This move represents a more radical attempt to achieve equality by stripping nuclear weapons of their remaining international legitimacy.

This shift has created a self-undermining loop for the traditional nuclear regime. When nuclear-armed states resist meaningful disarmament while simultaneously using the NPT to discipline others, they inadvertently damage the treaty's moral foundation. While most countries are not yet ready to abandon the NPT entirely, they are increasingly looking to the TPNW, the UN General Assembly, or regional forums to voice their most ambitious diplomatic goals. By seeking out these alternative spaces, they are essentially signalling that the NPT is no longer the primary venue for genuine progress.

Furthermore, modern humanitarian and feminist critiques have exposed significant 'blind spots' in the NPT's original 1960s design. The treaty largely ignored the socioeconomic, gendered, and colonial legacies of nuclear harm, issues that are central to the lived experience of many affected communities.[33] For these groups, the TPNW's focus on victim assistance and environmental remediation feels far more responsive than the abstract, high-level political posturing seen at NPT review conferences. As a result, the centre of gravity for nuclear justice is drifting away from the NPT, weakening its once-unquestioned status as the heart of global nuclear governance.[34]

Prospects for Renewing Relevance

Strategic Re-Centring Around Nuclear War Prevention

One promising avenue for renewal involves refocusing the NPT on what Baldus, Müller, and Wunderlich identify as its fundamental purpose: preventing nuclear war.[35] Rather than measuring success primarily through reductions in the size of the arsenal or the number of treaties concluded, they propose elevating a shared 'maxim of nuclear war prevention' to guide interpretation and action across all three pillars. This would mean placing greater emphasis on practical risk-reduction measures, crisis-management mechanisms, and doctrinal shifts toward de-escalation.[36]

Such an approach could help rebuild common ground between nuclear-weapon states and their non-nuclear counterparts by concentrating on immediate, concrete steps that are less politically charged than long-term abolition yet still moves in a disarmament-consistent direction. Possible measures include adopting or strengthening negative security assurances, enhancing transparency around doctrines and postures, and developing reliable communication channels to manage escalation risks. This framing also brings emerging challenges, such as hypersonic weapons and cyber interference with nuclear command-and-control, more squarely into NPT discussions, rather than leaving them to ad hoc forums at the margins.[37]

However, strategic re-centring can only restore relevance if it is accompanied by visible restraint from nuclear-weapon states regarding their modernisation programmes and the roles they assign to nuclear weapons in their security doctrines.

Without such signals, calls for risk reduction are perceived not as stepping stones toward disarmament, but as efforts to make the nuclear status quo more comfortable and durable.

Depolarising Intra-Regime Divisions

A second avenue concerns the deep polarisation between TPNW supporters and opponents, a divide that now cuts through almost every NPT discussion. Some analysts and practitioners have begun exploring practical ways to reduce hostility and create space for coexistence. This might, for example, involve crafting Review Conference language that acknowledges the humanitarian impacts of nuclear weapons and notes the TPNW's existence without endorsing it. Another possibility is to identify overlapping agendas, victim assistance, environmental remediation, and transparency regarding past testing, which could be advanced constructively in both forums.[38]

Track-two dialogues and inclusive expert processes that bring together TPNW advocates, NPT officials, military planners, and representatives of affected communities could also foster mutual understanding and reduce the caricatures that now dominate exchanges on both sides. For the NPT, engaging more seriously with humanitarian arguments would signal responsiveness to Global South and civil-society concerns, thereby bolstering its legitimacy and, by extension, its relevance.[39]

Institutional and Procedural Reforms

Several proposals target the NPT's institutional functioning, which has changed remarkably little since the treaty's entry into force. Suggestions include establishing a small standing secretariat to provide continuity and institutional memory between review cycles, creating intersessional working groups to follow up on implementation of Review Conference outcomes, and revisiting the strict consensus rule for at least some categories of procedural decisions. Enhanced transparency in national reporting and peer-review mechanisms has also been proposed to improve accountability.

Such reforms would not, by themselves, resolve the underlying power asymmetries and inequalities that structure the nuclear order. But they could reduce the frequency of high-profile deadlocks and allow for more incremental progress in the years

between review conferences. Over time, a more predictable and responsive review process might help rebuild the perception that the NPT remains a meaningful vehicle for addressing nuclear challenges, rather than a once-every-five-years diplomatic drama whose outcomes rarely survive contact with geopolitical reality.

Bridging to Broader Security Agendas

Finally, there is growing recognition that the NPT cannot be insulated from the wider security environment. The regime's future relevance will depend in part on how nuclear issues intersect with other global agendas, among them great-power competition, regional conflicts, climate change, and technological disruption. Initiatives that link nuclear risk reduction to crisis diplomacy in regions such as Eastern Europe and East Asia, or that integrate nuclear-related climate and environmental concerns into broader sustainability frameworks, may help situate the NPT within a wider governance ecosystem rather than treating it as a siloed treaty.[40]

Civil-society actors and epistemic communities will play important roles in this regard. The work of Acheson,[41] Kmentt,[42] and others has shown how activist networks and middle-power diplomats reshaped the nuclear debate through the humanitarian initiative, demonstrating that norm entrepreneurship can occur both inside and outside formal NPT channels. Whether similar coalitions can re-engage the NPT, rather than bypass it entirely, will be a key determinant of its longer-term relevance.

2026 Review Conference

The Preparatory Committee confirmed that the Review Conference will convene in New York from 27 April to 22 May 2026.[43] The preparatory process itself already reflects the strains that have come to characterise the NPT more broadly. The chair of the third preparatory session acknowledged that achieving consensus on recommendations is ‘traditionally challenging,’ and noted that, given the absence of consensus, he had decided to convey recommendations as a working paper under his own authority. He explicitly observed that the president of the review conference may need to pursue further engagements, particularly on contentious regional issues.[44] This is a procedural signal of fragmentation: when the function of producing a ‘consensus report with recommendations’ fails at the preparatory stage, the review

conference necessarily begins with a thinner shared baseline and faces higher transaction costs in the search for agreement.[45]

Substantively, the chair's recommendations identify several ‘crisis drivers’ in unusually explicit terms. They speak of unrestrained strategic competition, deepening geopolitical tensions, heightened nuclear dangers, and the consequent erosion of the cooperation required for disarmament, non-proliferation, and peaceful uses.[46] They also urge universalisation with particular force, explicitly calling on India, Israel, and Pakistan to accede to the treaty as non-nuclear-weapon states, while noting safeguards expectations and the need to avoid actions that impair the goal of universal membership.[47] Taken together, these recommendations frame the question of relevance squarely in terms of credibility across all three pillars: the treaty's authority depends not simply on preventing new nuclear-weapon states from emerging but on sustaining a balanced bargain that is widely seen as both effective and fair.[48]

Key state statements issued during the final year of preparation reveal just how contested the baseline for the 2026 conference has become. The United States' 2025 statement describes heightened nuclear risks and emphasises proliferation challenges while also criticising China's ‘opaque’ build-up and Russia's behaviour and advocating reforms to the review process, including time limits and interactive national reporting.[49] Russia's 2025 statement, by contrast, emphasises the need to preserve the ‘calibrated balance’ among the three pillars and warns that tilting this balance harms the NPT's objectives, while attributing the erosion of the arms-control architecture to Western pursuit of dominance and the breakdown of established treaty frameworks.[50] Australia's statement frames the NPT as indispensable while also stressing the importance of unity, transparency, and addressing the challenges posed by Iran and North Korea, and explicitly situates its AUKUS engagement within an approach it presents as consistent with high non-proliferation standards.[51]

The implication for the 2026 Review Conference is straightforward. The NPT's relevance problem is now tightly coupled to its process legitimacy. If the conference cannot produce a shared articulation of obligations and expectations, however modest, the treaty will remain legally central but risk becoming politically peripheral. It would continue to be invoked as the ‘cornerstone’ of the non-proliferation regime in

rhetorical terms, while practical nuclear governance increasingly shifts toward ad hoc coalitions, alliance frameworks, and parallel treaty communities.[52]

India and NPT

India's relationship with the NPT is marked by a familiar contradiction: it remains outside the treaty, yet is repeatedly drawn into the regime's political manoeuvring and decision-making processes. In other words, while India is not bound by the treaty's obligations, it cannot ignore the diplomatic leverage, negotiations, and strategic bargaining among member states that shape global non-proliferation norms and directly impact India's nuclear interests. New Delhi's core argument is straightforward and has barely shifted over decades: India is not a party because it regards the NPT as discriminatory, but it also insists that it remains committed to the complete elimination of nuclear weapons through a global, non-discriminatory, and verifiable framework.[53] In UN disarmament forums, India pairs this critique with a bid for credibility: it describes itself as a 'responsible' nuclear-weapon state, anchored in credible minimum deterrence and a posture of no-first-use and non-use against non-nuclear-weapon states.[54] The same logic shapes its distance from newer humanitarian disarmament initiatives: India has rejected the TPNW while reiterating its preference for step-by-step disarmament and negotiations toward a comprehensive Nuclear Weapons Convention.[55]

Seen in this light, the 'India problem' at review conferences is not merely about universalisation; it is about legitimacy. India's critique, well documented in the historical scholarships on how the NPT bargain hardened unequal nuclear status, forces the 2026 review process to confront a basic question: whether the treaty sustains political authority when major nuclear stakeholders remain outside, yet continue to contest (and sometimes reinforce) the norms that the NPT claims to embody.

Conclusion

The NPT currently finds itself in a state of limbo; it isn't exactly collapsing, but it isn't secure either. While it remains a vital framework for preventing the spread of nuclear weapons, its political and moral authority is being pulled in several directions at once. The combination of renewed great-power rivalries, massive arsenal modernisation,

and unresolved proliferation crises has strained its ability to act as the world's primary forum for managing risk. At the same time, humanitarian and feminist critiques, now anchored in the TPNW, are directly challenging the NPT's acceptance of a 'two-tier' world where some states are legally allowed to hold nuclear weapons while others are not.

Whether this friction leads to a total crisis of relevance depends entirely on how the international community reacts. If nuclear-armed states continue to treat the treaty as a disciplinary tool for others while ignoring their own promises to disarm, the NPT risks shrinking into a narrow, technical instrument with little political weight. In this scenario, disarmament advocates may eventually move their energy entirely to the TPNW. However, if leaders can realign the treaty with today's security realities, address demands for equity, and build bridges to newer movements, the NPT could actually renew its central role in global governance.

Ultimately, we are witnessing a critical juncture rather than an inevitable decline. The NPT's future relevance depends on its capacity to adapt its original 'grand bargain' to a much more complex world, one defined by deeper geopolitical divisions, a more assertive Global South, and a broader understanding of what nuclear justice actually looks like.

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