Outcome Pending Negotiations

The 2026 Non-Proliferation Treaty Review Conference as a Narrative Battleground

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Abstract

The NPT Review Conference in May 2026 promises to be a battle between competing narratives about the evolution of the global nuclear order. This CSDS In-Depth Paper provides observers and governments in Europe and beyond with the necessary context to interpret the forthcoming diplomatic face-off. Russia and China will likely blame NATO Allies for the state of the world and the lack of nuclear disarmament. They will also aggressively promote the idea that NATO's nuclear sharing arrangements and extended nuclear deterrence are supposedly at odds with the NPT. Such arguments contrast with the historical track record and their own behaviour, however. Russia's attempts at nuclear intimidation during the war against Ukraine and the rapid expansion of the Chinese nuclear arsenal represent the fundamental drivers fuelling nuclear instability. Against the background of this war of words, the prospects for a negotiated outcome document that fulfils high expectations about disarmament are dim. Yet the NPT regime remains a global norm that is worth defending. A minimal agenda for maintaining the NPT can be built around constraining proliferation, promoting access to peaceful uses of nuclear energy, boosting transparency and risk reduction and engaging in frank and open dialogue. Recognising the enduring accomplishments of the NPT, governments in Europe and beyond would do well to invest in the strategic literacy of their own publics, engage all their diplomatic partners and not leave the narrative battlespace open for exploitation.

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Introduction

When delegates gather for the forthcoming Review Conference of the Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) from 27 April to 22 May 2026, much diplomatic acrimony can be expected. Not unlike many other multilateral formats, the NPT Review Conference has transformed from a venue for international cooperation into a discursive battleground in which different parties promote radically competing narratives about the evolution of the global nuclear order. The stakes involved in this information competition are high, for this debate is closely intertwined with the perceived legitimacy of NATO's deterrence posture that constitutes the foundation for Euro-Atlantic security and the gold standard for extended nuclear deterrence in the Indo-Pacific region. Whilst the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China have an interest in undermining the global nuclear order to expand their own regional influence, critical observers would do well to note the fallacies in these diplomatic debates.

The NPT was itself born in 1968 as a grand bargain negotiated in the context of the Cold War.[1] The Treaty recognised the five permanent members of the UN Security Council as nuclear-weapon states. Together, they promised not to assist non-nuclear-weapon states with the acquisition of nuclear weapons (Article I) and to negotiate in good faith on nuclear disarmament (Article VI). In exchange, the non-nuclear-weapon states promised not to obtain nuclear weapons (Article II) but retained the right to use nuclear energy for peaceful purposes under International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) safeguards (Article III).[2] As the NPT acquired nearly universal adherence – a handful of exceptions notwithstanding – the treaty has been described by NATO allies and other state parties as the cornerstone of the nuclear non-proliferation regime and global disarmament architecture.[3] During the Review Conference of 1995, the NPT was indefinitely extended, with the review cycle repeating itself every five years.[4]

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[1] Popp, R. "The long road to the NPT: from superpower collusion to global compromise", in Popp, R., Horovitz, L. and Wenger, A. *Negotiating the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty* (Routledge, 2016).
[2] UNODA "Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons". See: https://treaties.unoda.org/t/npt.
[3] NATO "Vilnius Summit Communiqué: Issued by NATO Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Vilnius 11 July 2023", §52, 11 July 2023. See: https://www.nato.int/en/about-us/official-texts-and-resources/official-texts/2023/07/11/vilnius-summit-communique.
[4] Onderco, M. and Nuti, L. "Extending the NPT? A Critical Oral History of the 1995 Review and Extension Conference". *Wilson Center*, 2020. See: https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/extending-npt-critical-oral-history-1995-review-and-extension-conference.

Whilst the NPT was conceived as a means for multilateral arms control and for international cooperation in the management of nuclear technologies, the balancing act at the core of this grand bargain has, over time, given way to competing arguments over its partial implementation. Such discursive competition is part and parcel of diplomatic practice. These narratives allow governments to give meaning to policy decisions and further their own goals. They can nurture alternative depictions of reality to convince target audiences why specific proposals should be adopted. The rise of social media has turbocharged the quest for legitimacy – especially in free and democratic societies in which public sentiment influences the political agenda. It has also increased pressure on the integrity of the information space, opening ever-new possibilities for disinformation operations and the manipulation of truth.

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> Not unlike many other multilateral formats, the NPT Review Conference has transformed from a venue for international cooperation into a discursive battleground

Widely broadcast international events such as the NPT Review Conference provide a perfect stage for intensifying narrative competition. The near universal adherence to the NPT implies that 191 governments will have the opportunity to shape the information space with narrative arguments legitimising their stance on the existing nuclear order and promote their view for the evolution thereof. In the best case, a positive narrative can accompany the agreement of a carefully negotiated outcome document that reflects the minimally shared views of all state parties. Yet to the extent that cooperation gives way to competition, the NPT review format becomes a discursive battleground in which accusations of a lack of good faith will be traded back and forth. Military operations against Iran illustrate the fact that nuclear developments are intimately related to the fraying of the international order. The discursive contestation thereof cannot but intensify as a result.

Against this background, Russia and China will seek to shape the information space in a way that furthers their agenda – notably by fuelling polarisation in Western audiences and promoting anti-Western sentiments in the wider world. Based on earlier NPT Review Conferences and Preparatory Committees, one can confidently predict the narrative arguments that will be wielded to such a purpose. Russia and China will likely blame NATO Allies for the state of the world and the lack of nuclear disarmament. They will also characterise NATO's nuclear sharing arrangements and extended nuclear deterrence as being supposedly at odds with the NPT. In turn, NATO Allies will emphasise their compliance with and commitment to the NPT, their willingness to engage in transparency and confidence-building measures, and their openness to continue discussions on further arms control efforts in good faith.

> A failure by NATO Allies to adequately parry and pre-empt accusations of double standards, non-compliance and non-cooperation risks resulting in further alienation of third countries

The stakes of this narrative battleground are high. A failure by NATO Allies to adequately parry and pre-empt accusations of double standards, non-compliance and non-cooperation risks resulting in further alienation of third countries. A successful domination of the information space by Russia and China would further strengthen their attempts to transform the existing nuclear order to their advantage. Furthermore, an NPT Review Conference, which is narratively framed as a failure, may well erode the confidence that countries put in international treaties, arms control, disarmament and non-proliferation.

This CSDS In-Depth Paper provides interested observers and governments in Europe and beyond with context to interpret the forthcoming battle of narratives that can be expected in May 2026. It advances three interlinked arguments that cut across the trading of diplomatic barbs. Firstly, the NPT as a policy regime retains value irrespective of whether outcome documents

can be agreed upon in a multilateral format. It is hard to see how additional nuclear arsenals will bring greater security or stability. Yet such a development becomes more plausible to envisage in a deteriorating security environment that is no longer organised around the NPT. Secondly, Russia's attempts at nuclear intimidation and the rapid expansion of the Chinese nuclear arsenal represent the fundamental drivers fuelling nuclear instability. Not only do these two factors constitute profound changes to the nuclear order of the past, but they also shape the decision calculus that all other states in the international system must now make. Thirdly, the continued viability of the NPT regime hinges on the greater recognition of the interests of the non-nuclear-weapon states. After all, if progress on disarmament in line with Article VI remains out of reach, the voice of the nuclear have-nots must at least gain in legitimacy to offset the resulting loss of equilibrium.

Chapter One
The Continuing Value of the NPT Regime

While the NPT regime may be insufficient to meet high expectations pertaining to nuclear disarmament, it constitutes a powerful safeguard for constraining nuclear proliferation and all associated risks. It also provides an enduring forum for dialogue on nuclear issues amongst non-likeminded countries. Expectation management is therefore critically important for countering the narrative that the NPT regime is somehow failing. A minimal agenda built around the value of constraining proliferation, promoting access to peaceful uses of nuclear energy and engaging in frank and open dialogue can help maintain broad support for the NPT. In other words, whilst the production of a consensus outcome document constitutes a legitimate goal, the absence thereof does not equal failure. As narrative competition helps shed light on the underlying political disagreements, the analysis here is helpful in identifying new avenues to pursue.

The NPT was negotiated and entered into force during the Cold War. At its inception, it was primarily designed – as its name suggests – to halt the further spread of nuclear weapons to additional countries. In the post-Cold War period, the relaxation of international tensions made the indefinite extension of the NPT in 1995 possible. The key question that is now slowly emerging is whether the NPT regime will survive the dawn of a new nuclear age.

Over the past decade, multiple nuclear events occurred that have reversed the arms control, non-proliferation and disarmament optimism of the early post-Cold War era. In the context of Moscow's war of aggression against Ukraine, Russian officials have repeatedly employed threatening nuclear rhetoric for deterrence as well as coercive purposes.[5] Precisely when Russian forces were heading towards Kyiv in February 2022, Vladimir Putin felt compelled to remind the world that 'today's Russia remains one of the most powerful nuclear states. Moreover, it has a certain advantage in several cutting-edge weapons.'[6]

[5] Cf. Williams, H., "Why Russia Keeps Rattling the Nuclear Saber", *CSIS Commentary*, 20 May 2024. See: https://www.csis.org/analysis/why-russia-keeps-rattling-nuclear-saber.
[6] 'Address by the President of the Russian Federation', Moscow: The Kremlin, 24 February 2022. See: http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67843.

Next to the repeated use of nuclear threats, Russia started to forward-deploy nuclear weapons to Belarus,[7] suspended its participation in the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START),[8] de-ratified the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) in October 2023[9] and commenced the development of a nuclear-armed Anti-Satellite Weapon (ASAT).[10] In October 2025, Russia tested two novel nuclear weapon delivery systems, namely the nuclear-powered and nuclear-armed ground-launched cruise missile *Burevestnik* (or SSC-X-9 Skyfall) and the nuclear-powered and nuclear-armed unmanned underwater vehicle (UUV) *Poseidon* (or Kanyon).[11]

Besides Russia, other countries have fuelled the shift towards a new nuclear age. The People's Republic of China (PRC) has been rapidly expanding its nuclear weapons arsenal since the end of the previous decade. Next to this numerical expansion, the PRC is modernising and introducing new nuclear weapon systems. These developments signal a break with Beijing's traditional minimal deterrence approach and an increased reliance on nuclear weapons. PRC officials describe the latter as "strategic counterbalancing".[12] In addition, North Korea and Iran have continued developing their nuclear and ballistic missile programmes. After breaking with their earlier NPT commitments, both countries increased their military, technological and diplomatic cooperation with Russia.[13] Concern over the Iranian nuclear programme constituted one of the primary reasons that the US President invoked to justify his decision to take direct military action against the Iranian regime.

As a result, the new nuclear age is characterised by a renewal of intensely competitive great power dynamics. This features 'complex multipolar nuclear

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[7] Rosa-Hernandez, G. I, Eveleth, D. and Schwartz, P. "When Nuclear Weapons Return to Belarus: Evolving Concepts in Russian Escalation Strategy", *CNA*, October 2025. See: https://www.cna.org/reports/2025/10/When-Nuclear-Weapons-Return-to-Belarus.pdf.
[8] Meier, O. "Europe and the end of New START", *ELN Commentary*, 8 October 2025. See: https://europeanleadershipnetwork.org/commentary/europe-and-the-end-of-new-start/.
[9] Grand, C. "Another blow to arms control: Russia's 'de-ratification' of the nuclear test ban treaty", *ECFR Policy Alert*, 2 November 2023. See: https://ecfr.eu/article/another-blow-to-arms-control-russias-de-ratification-of-the-nuclear-test-ban-treaty/.
[10] Schneider, J. and Süß, J. "Russian Nuclear Weapons in Space? Potential Destructive Consequences in Space, Escalation on Earth, and Damage to Arms Control", *SWP Comment*, 2, May 2025. See: https://www.swp-berlin.org/publications/products/comments/2025C21_RussianNuclearWeaponsSpace.pdf.
[11] Gwadera, Z. "Russia's *Burevestnik* and *Poseidon* tests", *IISS Missile Dialogue Initiative*, 20 November 2025. See: https://www.iiss.org/online-analysis/missile-dialogue-initiative/2025/11/russias-burevestnik-and-poseidon-tests/.
[12] Zhao, T. "The Real Motives for China's Nuclear Expansion: Beijing Seeks Geopolitical Leverage More Than Military Advantage", *Foreign Affairs*, 3 May 2024. See: https://www.foreignaffairs.com/china/real-motives-chinas-nuclear-expansion.
[13] Chevreuil, A., Allard, L. and Lokker, N. "Friends with Benefits: How Russia's Opportunistic Partnerships Stymie Nonproliferation Efforts", CSIS Commentary, 27 February 2025. See: https://www.csis.org/analysis/friends-benefits-how-russias-opportunistic-partnerships-stymie-nonproliferation-efforts.

deterrence dynamics, newly arrived and increasingly sophisticated actors like North Korea, and the anxieties introduced by the still-uncertain effects of a range of emerging technologies'.[14] The emergence of a third nuclear age has not only been identified by scholars, policymakers have also described similar dynamics, such as former Acting Assistant Secretary of Defense for Space Policy Vipin Narang: 'we now find ourselves in nothing short of a new nuclear age, an unprecedented mix of multiple revisionist nuclear challengers who are uninterested in arms control or risk reduction efforts'.[15]

> "Frank and open dialogue can be helpful in terms of maintaining the NPT and the nuclear order it has made possible

Against this background, it is no surprise that the NPT regime is under severe pressure. David Cooper, for instance, argues that 'legacy non-proliferation and disarmament instruments that were designed for post-Cold War conditions are ill-equipped to tame the complex action-reaction dynamics of a multipolar nuclear arms race centring on China, Russia and the United States'.[16] Ensuring a long shelf life for international agreements in an ever-evolving security environment has traditionally been a challenge for the ADN (Arms Control, Disarmament and Non-Proliferation) architecture. This begs the question of how the NPT regime can be adapted to accomplish its core goal of avoiding a new wave of horizontal proliferation.

The forthcoming NPT Review Conference provides an opportunity to take stock of the progress made in the implementation of the NPT and its three pillars. In the present context, the chances of reaching an agreement on an ambitious outcome document are low. The last two Review Conferences have already failed to produce an agreed outcome document. A repetition thereof

[14] Panda, A., *The New Nuclear Age: At the Precipice of Armageddon*, (Polity, 2025): 2.
[15] CSIS "Nuclear Threats and the Role of Allies: A Conversation with Acting Assistant Secretary Vipin Narang", 1 August 2024. See: https://www.csis.org/analysis/nuclear-threats-and-role-allies-conversation-acting-assistant-secretary-vipin-narang.
[16] David, A. C. *Arms Control for the Third Nuclear Age: Between Disarmament and Armageddon*, (Georgetown University Press, 2021): 1.

risks cementing the impression that the NPT regime is crumbling. Yet the true benchmark for the success of the NPT is not the production of diplomatic statements, but the effective curtailing of increasing proliferation pressures. The added value of the Review Conference format resides in getting not-likeminded countries together, communicating with one another, understanding the respective positions, and potentially finding some common ground. Even organised disagreement can constitute a small win in improving diplomatic contacts and rebuilding confidence.

A critical distinction exists between the NPT regime as a policy norm and the process of negotiating an outcome document by consensus amongst the state parties. Whilst the absence of an outcome document stating the continued value of the non-proliferation norm may be the product of intergovernmental disagreement, the larger issue at stake today is that the non-proliferation norm is itself being questioned by non-nuclear states concerned about their fundamental security interests no longer being met. In particular, the criticism voiced by China and Russia about NATO's nuclear sharing arrangements and extended nuclear deterrence more generally may end up fuelling the emergence of additional arsenals close to their borders. Whilst the emergence of additional centres of nuclear decision-making may help strengthen deterrence, this would inevitably create new escalation risks and nuclear safety concerns. Constraining such proliferation risks was a large part of the historical purpose of the NPT.

To the extent that all state parties continue to recognise the value of the nuclear non-proliferation norm, their statements can emphasise promoting access to peaceful uses of nuclear energy. In line with the rapid emergence of artificial intelligence-driven technologies, demand for electricity is growing at an exponential rate. The International Energy Agency assesses that worldwide electricity demand is set to increase at an average annual rate of 3,6%, outpacing both economic growth and demands for other sources of energy.[17] Whilst this trend is overwhelmingly driven by emerging economies, it is also noticeable in advanced economies due to the burgeoning need for data centres and electricity-intensive advanced manufacturing. Nuclear electricity generation is already at record highs, and demand is set to increase further in the years ahead. This effectively means that the NPT regime retains ample value as a mechanism to enable the continued and increasingly widespread use of civilian nuclear technologies.

Finally, frank and open dialogue can be helpful in terms of maintaining the NPT and the nuclear order it has made possible. Because the NPT was a grand bargain to begin with – struck amongst adversaries and partners alike – it is reasonable to assume that a recalibration of such a bargain is not

[17] International Energy Agency, "Electricity 2026: Analysis and forecast to 2030", Paris: IEA, 6 February 2026. See: https://www.iea.org/news/global-electricity-demand-is-set-to-grow-strongly-to-2030-underscoring-need-for-investments-in-grids-and-flexibility.

impossible despite growing tensions. Whilst many state parties may continue to mistrust each other's aims and intentions, it is the honest expression of disagreements that can enable the search for common ground under changing circumstances. In today's environment of eroding norms and intensifying competition, NPT states parties could agree to disagree on some issues and yet still identify ways to reduce nuclear risks, to avoid the unravelling of the norm, to increase transparency and accountability under the NPT and to potentially revise the review format itself. In sum, there are ample reasons to recognise the value of the NPT as a norm, even as the prospects for major Review Conference outcomes are dim in terms of progress on disarmament. Organised disagreement can facilitate more stable international relations. Such frank diplomacy begins with a careful assessment of the sources of nuclear instability.

Chapter Two
Analysing the Drivers of Nuclear Instability

In recent years, the Russian Federation has engaged in extensive nuclear coercion to enable and support its goal of territorial conquests in Ukraine. In addition, the People's Republic of China has been rapidly expanding the size and composition of its nuclear arsenal in pursuit of aims that remain opaque. These twin developments constitute the material gamechangers in terms of breaking down nuclear stability. Beijing's unwillingness to engage in substantive arms control talks is arguably as problematic as its nuclear build-up itself. Particularly troubling is the willingness of Russia and China, as permanent UN Security Council members, to try and shield the behaviour of each other and of their respective partners – notably Iran and the DPRK – that have abandoned their earlier commitments under the NPT. Large questions therefore loom over the future of the global nuclear order. Rather than revisit issues that have been well-trodden at the NPT negotiating table, careful analysis is needed of what has been changing and what reactions these changes can be expected to trigger unless the trends in Russian and Chinese behaviour are verifiably reversed.

Firstly, the Russian Federation possesses the largest arsenal of nuclear weapons in the world today. Experts estimate that its inventory includes some 2800 strategic weapons, either deployed on intercontinental-range ballistic missiles, submarines or bombers, or held in reserve. In addition, it features some 1500 non-strategic weapons, deployed on various short to intermediate range systems, or held in reserve.[18] The Russian Federation has been modernising this existing arsenal as well as testing various new experimental systems. Some of these novel systems, such as the *Poseidon* nuclear-powered underwater vehicle or the *Burevestnik* nuclear-powered cruise missile, feature an undisputably strategic signature due to their unlimited range. Taken together, these weapons serve multiple functions. From a military perspective, Russian strategy relies heavily on its nuclear capabilities as a defensive shield under which it can employ its conventional force at will. From a diplomatic perspective, Russia's self-perception as a nuclear superpower is a central component of its claim to great power status. Recognition as a nuclear peer to the US allows Moscow to claim influence in a way that its conventional army or economic situation would not warrant otherwise. In other words, its nuclear shadow enables Moscow to claim a top seat at the negotiation table.

[18] Kristensen, H.M., Korda, M., Johns, E. and Knight, M. "Russian Nuclear Weapons", *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 81(3) (2025): 208-237.

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> The Russian Federation has been engaging in ever more explicit nuclear signalling

In parallel to the modernisation and diversification of its arsenal, the Russian Federation has expanded the scope of its nuclear doctrine. In its 2020 statement, Russian nuclear deterrence policy envisaged four scenarios in which nuclear weapons might be used. This included as a response to attacks against Russia with conventional weapons, ‘when the very existence of the state is in jeopardy’.[19] Yet the 2024 version of the same document outlined five scenarios that were significantly broader in scope.[20] Not only was the Republic of Belarus explicitly included in the geographical scope of the Russian nuclear umbrella, but the document also rephrased the nuclear threshold as ‘a critical threat to their sovereignty and (or) territorial integrity’. Furthermore, it added the potential of nuclear employment in response to nuclear use against its military forces ‘located outside its territory’, and in response to a massive air and space attack crossing the state border of the Russian Federation. These changes showcase in what ways the Russian Federation has sought to explicitly lower the threshold for nuclear use in recent years. This process of doctrinal change accompanied the abandonment of its own arms control commitments, with the demise of the INF Treaty and the New START as a result. Russia’s decision to revoke its Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT) ratification in 2023 is another case in point.

Finally, the Russian Federation has been engaging in ever more explicit nuclear signalling. The most dramatic example thereof concerns the repeated combat employment of the dual-capable *Oreshnik* intermediate-range ballistic missile on Ukrainian targets. The demonstration test of the *Burevestnik* unlimited-range cruise missiles and the public celebration thereof constitute another case in point.[21] In parallel, the 2024 Treaty on Security Guarantees between Russia and Belarus was pointedly reinforced at

[19] “Basic Principles of State Policy of the Russian Federation on Nuclear Deterrence”, Moscow: Executive Order of the President 355, 2 June 2020.
[20] “Fundamentals of State Policy of the Russian Federation on Nuclear Deterrence”, Moscow: Executive Order of the President 991, 19 November 2024.
[21] President of Russia Vladimir Putin, “Presenting awards to developers of the Burevestnik cruise missile and the Poseidon unmanned submersible”, Moscow: The Kremlin, 5 November 2025. See: http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/78394.

the end of 2025 by the forward deployment of *Oreshnik* missile systems on Belarusian territory, as confirmed by President Alexander Lukashenko.[22] In doing so, the Russian leadership showcases its desire to impose its ability to manage nuclear escalation dynamics below the level of an all-out strategic exchange. This presumably serves the strategic purpose of intimidating its neighbouring states and extracting a maximum of concessions from the US in the negotiations over the future of Ukraine.

Secondly, the PRC's rapid expansion of its nuclear forces since the end of the 2010s is radically altering the global nuclear balance. The consequences thereof are hard to overstate. Most notably, the emergence of nuclear tripolarity leads to the so-called two-nuclear-peer challenge for the United States, as it will need to deter Russia and China simultaneously.[23] At the same time, the PRC has begun to diplomatically challenge NATO by undermining the legitimacy of extended nuclear deterrence and the nuclear sharing arrangements during the latest NPT Review Conferences and Preparatory Committees. It is therefore imperative to carefully assess China's own nuclear behaviour.

Whilst Beijing likes to portray itself as a responsible nuclear power, the PRC's words and actions are increasingly contradicting each other. In the decades before 2010, the PRC had an arsenal of fewer than 200 warheads, showcasing a mastery of nuclear technology and an ideologically restrained view of the value of nuclear weapons.[24] Yet this number gradually increased to around 300 warheads in 2020. In five years, the numbers doubled again to around 600 nuclear warheads.[25] In 2021, open-source analysts showcased that the PRC was building new missile silo fields for nuclear intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs).[26] At the end of 2025, the US Department of Defense stated that the PRC's rate of nuclear warhead production slowed down somewhat, but continued to be 'on track' to reach over 1000 warheads in

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[22] Address by President Alexander Lukashenko at the Second Session of the 7th All-Belarusian People's Assembly, Minsk, 18 December 2025. See: https://president.gov.by/ru/events/vtoroe-zasedanie-vii-vsebelorusskogo-narodnogo-sobrania; Cf also TASS, "Oreshnik system in Belarus is just first stage of its deployment on EU border — expert", 25 December 2025. See: https://tass.com/defense/2064475.

[23] Verstraete, W. "The Disorderly Advent of the Tripolar Nuclear Order", *Journal of Policy & Strategy*, 5(2) (2025): 91-99. See: https://nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/Analysis-Verstraete-5.2.pdf.

[24] Cf. Lewis, J. *Paper Tigers: China's Nuclear Posture*, London: International Institute for Strategic Studies (Adelphi Paper 446), 2014.

[25] Kristensen, H. M., Korda, M., Johns, E. and Knight, M. "Chinese Nuclear Weapons", *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 81(2) (2025): 136. See: https://doi.org/10.1080/00963402.2025.2467011.

[26] Korda, M. and Kristensen, H. "China Is Building a Second Nuclear Missile Silo Field", *Federation of American Scientists*, 26 July 2021. See: https://fas.org/publication/china-is-building-a-second-nuclear-missile-silo-field/; Bugos, S. and Masterson, J. "New Chinese Missile Silo Fields Discovered", *Arms Control Association*, September 2021. See: https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2021-09/news/new-chinese-missile-silo-fields-discovered.

2030.[27] Based on satellite imagery of the Pingtong and Zitong complexes, open-source reporting indicates that the PRC is expanding its nuclear warhead manufacturing capacity, suggesting ongoing preparations for an 'all-out arms race'.[28]

> "Beijing is fielding and developing new systems to strengthen both its theatre and strategic nuclear capabilities

Next to this impressive numerical growth, Beijing is fielding and developing new systems to strengthen both its theatre and strategic nuclear capabilities. The PRC is probably developing a low-yield nuclear warhead for the dual-capable DF-26 intermediate-range ballistic missile that is particularly suitable for theatre nuclear operations, for instance.[29] In addition, the PRC is developing a 'Fractional Orbital Bombardment System' – defined as 'a nuclear-weapons delivery system that places warheads into low-earth orbit prior to de-orbiting them on to their targets'.[30]

After showcasing their completed nuclear triad during the Victory Parade of 3 September 2025, the PRC White Paper of 27 November 2025 acknowledges the ongoing modernisation and buildup. This modernisation is presented as necessary 'to safeguard China's own strategic security and overall global strategic stability'.[31] Concerning the expansion, the PRC argues that 'in

[27] US Department of Defense "Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the Peoples Republic of China 2025", 2025: 28. See: https://media.defense.gov/2025/Dec/23/2003849070/-1/-1/1/ANNUAL-REPORT-TO-CONGRESS-MILITARY-AND-SECURITY-DEVELOPMENTS-INVOLVING-THE-PEOPLES-REPUBLIC-OF-CHINA-2025.PDF.
[28] See Cadell, C., Shepherd, C. and Valiño, Á. "China expands nuclear warhead manufacturing capacity, research finds", *The Washington Post*, 28 December 2025. See: https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2025/12/28/china-nuclear-warhead-expansion/.
[29] See Hiim H. S. and Tunsjø, Ø. "The U.S.-China Stability-Instability Paradox: Limited War in East Asia", *International Security*, 50(1) (2025): 173. See: https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC.a.8.
[30] Wright, T. "Is China gliding toward a FOBS capability?", *IISS Online Analysis*, 22 October 2021. See: https://www.iiss.org/online-analysis/online-analysis/2021/10/is-china-gliding-toward-a-fobs-capability/.
[31] The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, "China's Arms Control, Disarmament, and Nonproliferation in the New Era", 27 November 2025. See: https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zy/wjzc/202511/t20251127_11761656.html.

building a lean and effective nuclear force system, China is improving its capabilities in strategic early warning, command and control, missile penetration and rapid response, as well as its survivability, in order to ensure the safety, security, reliability and effectiveness of its nuclear weapons and deter other countries from using or threatening to use nuclear weapons against China'. The days of relying on a minimal deterrence posture are therefore over. While the White Paper attempts to justify the PRC's nuclear breakout, it continues to be opaque about the exact scope and rationale of the expansion, leading to intense discussion amongst analysts.[32]

While the PRC continues to claim that it adheres to a no-first-use policy, many analysts have pointed out that its growing arsenal suggests otherwise. The expansion of its nuclear capabilities is set to enable a launch-on-warning or Launch-Under-Attack posture.[33] In addition, commercial geospatial data of the PRC's Lop Nur Nuclear Test Site showed preparations for nuclear testing in violation of the CTBT, which is signed but not ratified by the PRC.[34] On 6 February 2026, US Under Secretary of State for Arms Control and International Security, Thomas G. DiNanno, revealed at the Conference on Disarmament that the PRC has in fact already conducted an underground yield-producing nuclear test on June 22 of 2020.[35] On 23 February 2026, US Assistant Secretary of State for the Bureau of Arms Control and Nonproliferation, Dr Christopher Yeaw, shared seismic data indicating the 'probable' nuclear explosion to substantiate this revelation.[36]

Thirdly, the intensifying cooperation between the PRC and Russia on the one hand and North Korea and Iran on the other is fuelling new proliferation risks. Russia, as an NPT nuclear-weapon state, increasingly supports North

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[32] Cf. Tong Zhao, "The Real Motives for China's Nuclear Expansion", *Foreign Affairs*, 3 May 2024. See: https://www.foreignaffairs.com/china/real-motives-chinas-nuclear-expansion.
[33] See Logan, D. C. and Saunders, P. C. "Discerning the Drivers of China's Nuclear Force Development: Models, Indicators, and Data*", China Strategic Perspectives*, 18, July 2023: 1. See: https://digitalcommons.ndu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1000&context=china-strategic-perspectives; Riqiang, W. "Keeping Pace with the Times: China's Arms Control Tradition, New Challenges, and Nuclear Learning", *International Security*, 50(1) (2025): 98. See: https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC.a.6; Sheridan, M. "Inside China's dangerous nuclear game", Engelsberg Ideas, 6 August 2025. See: https://engelsbergideas.com/notebook/inside-chinas-dangerous-nuclear-game/; Zhao, T., "Is China Changing Its Nuclear Launch Strategy?", *Foreign Policy*, 5 August 2025. See: https://foreignpolicy.com/2025/08/05/china-nuclear-weapons-launch-policy-strategy/.
[34] Babiarz, R. and Wang J., "Nuclear-test preparation at the Lop Nur nuclear test site, 2020–24", *The Nonproliferation Review*, 31(1-3) (2025): 51-71. See: https://doi.org/10.1080/10736700.2025.2497201.
[35] US Department of State, "Statement to the Conference on Disarmament", 6 February 2026. See: https://www.state.gov/releases/under-secretary-for-arms-control-and-international-security-affairs/2026/02/statement-to-the-conference-on-disarmament/.
[36] US Mission to International Organizations in Geneva, "Statement by U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for the Bureau of Arms Control and Nonproliferation", 23 February 2026. See: https://geneva.usmission.gov/2026/02/23/statement-by-u-s-assistant-secretary-of-state-for-the-bureau-of-arms-control-and-nonproliferation/.

Korea's *de facto* nuclear status diplomatically. The Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov has called the denuclearisation of the Korean peninsula a 'closed issue'.[37] Russia may also be supporting North Korea's ballistic missile programmes in exchange for its support on the battlefield in Ukraine.[38] Similarly, Russia has deepened its missile, space and nuclear technological cooperation with Iran, a non-nuclear-weapon state that does not comply with its NPT and IAEA commitments.[39] In turn, the PRC is deliberately turning a blind eye towards Russia's nuclear coercion in Ukraine and the expansion of the DPRK's nuclear arsenal. Through the weakening of Western-led sanction regimes and the exporting of dual-use goods, the PRC is in effect supporting the transgressions of its partners.

In light of the above, Russian and Chinese claims that extended nuclear deterrence and nuclear sharing between the US and its allies would somehow not comply with the provisions of the NPT ring hollow. Historically, these practices came into being before the NPT came into being. They were duly considered when the treaty was negotiated, and they constituted a critical mechanism for stemming proliferation in the first place. Yet in recent years, such hollow criticism has intensified.[40] The statements by Chinese officials at previous Preparatory Committees constitute evidence thereof.[41] A recent report by the China Arms Control and Disarmament Association and China Institute of Nuclear Industry Strategy doubles down on these fallacious claims.[42] When contrasted with China's own nuclear build-up and Russia's deployment of nuclear weapons to Belarus, it becomes readily apparent that such criticism serves as a smokescreen designed to tilt the discursive battlespace in their own favour and undermine the foundations that underpin the security of their geographical neighbours.

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[37] Reuters, "Russia's Lavrov says North Korea's nuclear status is a 'closed issue'", 26 September 2024. See: https://www.reuters.com/world/russias-lavrov-says-north-koreas-nuclear-status-is-closed-issue-2024-09-26/.

[38] Chevreuil, A., Allard, L., and Lokker, N. "Friends with Benefits: How Russia's Opportunistic Partnerships Stymie Nonproliferation Efforts", *CSIS Commentary*, 27 February 2025. See: https://www.csis.org/analysis/friends-benefits-how-russias-opportunistic-partnerships-stymie-nonproliferation-efforts.

[39] *Ibid*.

[40] Cf Alberque, W. "China's Underwhelming Effort to Undermine NATO's Nuclear Deterrent", *Pacific Forum Issues & Insights*, 25(4) (2025): 1. See: https://pacforum.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/II-Volume-25-WP4.pdf.

[41] See the "Statement by the Chinese Delegation on the Issue of Negative Security Assurances at the Third Session of the Preparatory Committee for the 2026 NPT Review Conference", May 2025, https://docs-library.unoda.org/Treaty_on_the_Non-Proliferation_of_Nuclear_Weapons_-Preparatory_Committee_for_the_Eleventh_Review_Conference_(2025)/China__-_Cluster_I_specific_issues_on_NSA_(eng).pdf.

[42] China Arms Control and Disarmament Association and China Institute of Nuclear Industry Strategy "Analysis of the Incompatibility of NATO's Nuclear Sharing Arrangements with the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons", July 2024. See: https://www.cinis.com.cn/zhzlghyjzy/yjbg/1446912/202407291451473835 9.pdf.

The question that looms large over the future nuclear order is what reactions these developments will provoke. What is clear is that the earlier reductions in the arsenals of France, the UK and the US have run their course. As US Under Secretary DiNanno made clear at the recent Conference on Disarmament, the expiration of New START implies that the US can now take steps to strengthen deterrence on behalf of itself and its allies in a way that is commensurate with the success (or not) of multilateral strategic stability discussions. Furthermore, ample evidence has emerged that any weakening of US extended nuclear deterrence commitments is reigniting proliferation debates amongst US allies.[43] In other words, unless the Russian Federation and the PRC reverse the course they have embarked upon, the world is likely to see an unstable nuclear disorder emerge in which multiple nuclear-weapon states attempt to offset the competitive gains made by each other. This would be arguably a future in which non-nuclear-weapon states have the most to lose.

[43] See the European Nuclear Study Group. "Mind the Deterrence Gap: Assessing Europe's Nuclear Options", Munich: Munich Security Conference, February 2026. See:https://securityconference.org/assets/02_Dokumente/01_Publikationen/2026/ENSG/Mind_the_Deterrence_Gap%E2%80%93Report_of_the_ENSG.pdf.

Chapter Three
Recognising the Interests of Non-Nuclear-Weapon States

Faced with the reversal of the past reductions in the size of nuclear arsenals, many non-nuclear-weapon state parties to the NPT are increasingly unsettled by the growing imbalance in terms of the behavioural constraints for nuclear powers vs the have-nots. Why would the non-nuclear-weapon states continue to accept a regime when the nuclear powers do not hold up their end of the bargain? The polarised debate surrounding the Treaty Prohibiting Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) shows that frustration about the lack of disarmament progress is running high. For the NPT regime to endure in the future, such tensions can only be contained and mitigated by recognising the interests of the non-nuclear-weapon states more fully than before. These are not limited to their enduring interest in the peaceful use of nuclear energy but also include risk reduction measures that tangibly improve their security and other ways to increase their stake in the existing NPT regime. The deepening of science and technology cooperation as well as the boosting of their diplomatic voice are examples thereof.

Due to their frustration with the lack of disarmament progress, several non-nuclear-weapon states have rushed ahead and negotiated in 2017 the TPNW. This development ran counter to the more consensual and gradual approach of the NPT. Moreover, the TPNW meeting of the states parties 'increasingly serves as a forum of states ostensibly seeking to delegitimise the very practice of nuclear deterrence'.[44] In turn, this alienated nuclear-weapon states and their allies that rely on extended nuclear deterrence commitments for security purposes. The adoption of the TPNW has correspondingly led to the polarisation of views on nuclear disarmament and the legitimacy of nuclear deterrence at a time when the stability of the global nuclear order is under severe strain. Yet such polarisation has failed to produce any tangible security outcome in terms of bringing about either disarmament or risk reduction – unlike the historical track record of the NPT. As many non-nuclear-weapon states have begun to recognise the dangers of nuclear-backed aggression and coercion, the appeal of the TPNW has dwindled.

In contrast, the NPT regime can still rely on its achievement of making the peaceful use of nuclear energy widely available. The third pillar of the Treaty enables nuclear energy generation as well as leveraging nuclear physics in

[44] Futter, A., Castelli, L., Olamide, S., Silvestri, F., and Zala, B. *The Global Third Nuclear Age: Clashing Visions for a New Era in International Politics* (Routledge, 2025): 5.

science and technology research. Indeed, Article 4.2 of the NPT specifically references furthering the development of the applications of nuclear energy for peaceful purposes, 'especially in the territories of non-nuclear-weapon States Party to the Treaty, with due consideration for the needs of the developing areas of the world'. Through its Technical Cooperation Programme, the IAEA takes up a key position in fostering international cooperation in the peaceful uses of energy. This programme allows the organisation to transfer nuclear technology to help states address their development priorities. These include health and nutrition, food and agriculture, water and the environment, industrial applications and nuclear knowledge development. In 2024, the programme delivered support to 151 countries and territories through around 1,400 projects.[45]

> Peaceful uses initiatives provide excellent opportunities for non-nuclear-weapon states to engage and cooperate constructively in the framework of the NPT

Peaceful uses initiatives provide excellent opportunities for non-nuclear-weapon states to engage and cooperate constructively in the framework of the NPT. Euratom, for example, has concluded bilateral nuclear cooperation agreements with Argentina, Kazakhstan, Ukraine and Uzbekistan.[46] The US has over 25,000 agreements with almost 50 countries in 2025.[47] Especially in the current context, these initiatives offer ways for countries to bridge the divides between North and South, and between non-nuclear and nuclear states. Yet even the peaceful use of nuclear energy poses challenges to constructive cooperation amongst NPT States Parties, as competing views

[45] International Atomic Energy Agency, "Technical Cooperation Report for 2024", 3 August 2025. See: https://www.iaea.org/sites/default/files/gc/gc69-inf6.pdf.
[46] Maletta, G., Bromley, M. and Brockmann, K. "Non-Proliferation, Nuclear Technology and Peaceful Uses: Examining the Role and Impact of Export Controls", *Non-Proliferation and Disarmament Papers*, 2025.
[47] *Ibid.*

on export controls have emerged. This suggests that future access to technology for peaceful use may well be leveraged for political ends.

To retain its relevance for the future, the forthcoming NPT Review Conference debate could help consolidate these past achievements and explore ways to recognise the enduring interests of the non-nuclear-weapon states more fully. Guaranteed access to nuclear energy and other nuclear technologies stands out as an important minimal criterion for ensuring continued support to the NPT regime. As electricity demand grows, the wide distribution of small modular reactor technology will prove critical for powering future economic development.

In addition, the Review Conference debate can highlight that the intensifying competition amongst the nuclear powers also increases risks to non-nuclear-weapon states. This begs the question what risk reduction measures can be proposed to mitigate this growing sense of insecurity. The level of transparency that nuclear-weapon states are willing to accept with respect to the management of their nuclear arsenal constitutes an important benchmark of their good faith towards non-nuclear-weapon states. As Russia's past transgressions make the restoration of such trust particularly challenging, non-nuclear-weapon states need to look to the remaining four nuclear powers for setting new standards in this regard. This could, for instance, relate to "hotline" crisis communication systems and notification mechanisms and the responsible use of AI technologies in support of nuclear command and control. To the extent that novel risk reduction measures remain out of reach, the commitment of non-nuclear-weapon states not to pursue or enhance nuclear protection can also be expected to erode.

Furthermore, international cooperation in science and technology can be leveraged as a mechanism to reward exemplary behaviour under the verification activities of the IAEA. Doubling down on additional protocols can enable intensified cooperation in a broader range of scientific endeavours, such as space and biotechnology research. In turn, the absence of additional protocols and the refusal to accept strong safeguards can be leveraged as reasons to limit future cooperation in science and technology. As such, non-nuclear-weapon states can aspire to shape their own future: transparency and exemplary behaviour should generate real rewards, whereas opaque behaviour should invite consequences. This could go hand in hand with the proposals for enhanced transparency and accountability recently put forward by the European Union.[48]

[48] See EU Working Paper, "A path towards enhanced transparency and accountability within the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons review process", New York: Preparatory Committee for the 2026 Review Conference of the Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, 19 February 2025, https://docs.un.org/en/NPT/CONF.2026/PC.III/WP.1.

Perhaps most fundamentally, the diplomatic voice of non-nuclear-weapon states needs to be amplified as a mechanism to offset the diminishing prospects for nuclear disarmament. As they inevitably end up holding the short end of the straw – due to the asymmetry in obligations that the NPT creates between nuclear haves and have-nots – the legitimacy of the NPT regime can only be protected by enhancing their role as arbiter of the NPT review process. To the extent that the review conference descends into a battle of competing narratives, it is the degree of unity within the group of non-nuclear-weapon states that determines whether such a strong diplomatic voice can emerge. Intense diplomatic consultation amongst the non-nuclear-weapon states is therefore essential.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Considering the strategic trends that are already underway, including the polarisation of views on various NPT issues, the prospects for a breakthrough in terms of disarmament are dim. Consensus on any negotiated outcome document may remain out of reach. Yet when all non-nuclear-weapon states work constructively together to build a common agenda, a minimal agreement can be envisaged that stresses the value of upholding non-proliferation as a norm, the need to strengthen transparency and risk-reduction measures, the promotion of access to the peaceful uses of nuclear energy and technology, and the necessity of engaging in honest dialogue despite political differences. To promote the emergence of such an agreement – both despite and thanks to the discursive contestation that is omnipresent – governments in Europe and beyond need to vigorously engage with the forthcoming Review Conference and whatever outcomes it generates. To do so, at least five categories of policy recommendations stand out.

1. Nurturing strategic literacy

As all governments and their respective home audiences are coming to terms with the dawn of a new nuclear era, intellectual investment to understand and make sense of the contemporary security environment is paramount. Whilst the arms control and disarmament conversations of the past decades were strongly guided by normative ideals, a return to a more strategic approach is now called for. This relates not only to the need to understand the behaviour of the nuclear-weapon states, but more importantly to the need to navigate the world that their choices generate for all non-nuclear-weapon states. Especially but not exclusively in Europe, this requires rebuilding the intellectual muscle to engage in hard-nosed strategic analysis, to re-familiarise all parts of government with deterrence debates and to revive the function of arms control as an instrument of security policy (as opposed to disarmament activism). This necessitates intensifying efforts to coordinate policies across different parts of government, to invest in strategic education and communication at all levels and to establish new research programmes on deterrence and arms control debates tailored to the demands of the new era. This includes the proverbial arming up of academia and civil society for facing the next generation of arms control challenges.

2. Doubling down on diplomatic engagement and risk reduction

Despite the inauspicious prospects for a major success at the NPT Review Conference, the possibility of major failure and the disintegration of the wider NPT regime is real. To avert this outcome, diplomatic engagement towards all parties is called for. Like-minded countries have ample measures they can take to continue moving the NPT forward towards a modest definition of success. They should continue to promote a positive agenda, including by strongly promoting risk reduction measures, transparency and verification mechanisms. Continuing pressure to implement the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty and the Fissile Material Cut-Off Treaty are part and parcel of these efforts. Moreover, European countries should pay special attention to continued outreach to third countries, including in the southern hemisphere. The NPT Review Conference provides an excellent opportunity where like-minded countries can seek to institutionalise these measures and mechanisms in the review cycles. Furthermore, non-nuclear-weapon states can continue to provide national reports on the implementation of NPT commitments at the Review Conferences, communicate openly about their peaceful uses initiatives and share information on their export control regimes. They can continue to support verification mechanisms, including through the IAEA or multilateral working groups on verification innovation.

3. Defending truthful positions in the information space

Both strategic literacy and honest diplomatic engagement must be grounded in historical facts. For instance, to counter the PRC's fallacious critiques of extended nuclear deterrence and the NATO nuclear sharing arrangements, representatives of the NATO alliance and individual nuclear sharing allies such as Germany, Italy, Belgium and the Netherlands have already emphasised that the nuclear sharing arrangements were and continue to be fully compatible with the NPT during the previous 2022 Review Conference. The Belgian representative stated, for instance, that 'NATO's nuclear sharing agreements respect the provisions of the NPT. They did so 50 years ago, and they continue to do so. Any accusation to the contrary only serves to distract from the real issues'.[49] Historical research has demonstrated ample support for the statements from NATO and the allies concerning the compatibility of the nuclear sharing arrangements and the treaty.[50] As the contemporary

[49] Belgium Main Committee II Statement – Nuclear Non-Proliferation: Tenth Review Conference of the Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) New York, 8 August 2022, https://unoda-documents-library.s3.amazonaws.com/Treaty_on_the_Non-Proliferation_of_Nuclear_Weapons_-_Tenth_Review_Conference_(2022)/Statement_by_Belgium_1.pdf.

[50] See Alberque, W. "The NPT and the Origins of NATO's Nuclear Sharing Arrangements", *Proliferation Papers*, 57, 2017,

information domain is haunted by constant information overload and truth decay, the very notion of truth may well be under permanent siege. Yet truth nonetheless provides the strongest possible foundation for diplomatic conviction: it is a powerful force that can animate diplomacy and strategy beyond the narrow self-interest of nations or their leaders. In turn, this also implies that governments would be wise to refrain from information manipulation, as the discovery thereof will inevitably undermine trust, credibility and ultimately diplomatic effectiveness.

4. Reinforcing cohesion amongst the NATO allies and Indo-Pacific partners

All NATO allies – both nuclear and non-nuclear-weapon states – should coordinate their positions to amplify the effectiveness of a unified message. Precisely because the 32 allies have their own distinctive views and traditions on arms control matters, having all of them deliver similar statements would send a strong signal to the other NPT states parties. In a transparent but unapologetic manner, NATO allies can explain the defensive rationale of NATO's nuclear strategy to the other NPT states parties. This can showcase the historical track record of NATO allies reducing the numbers of sub-strategic nuclear weapons – going all the way back to the 1979 Dual-Track and 1983 Montebello Decisions – when conditions such as reciprocity and verifiability warranted such agreements. Yet under present circumstances – in which Russia's nuclear shadow looms large over NATO's collective defence preparations – very different decisions may be needed.

NATO's coordinated position must signal that it remains open to engaging in the next era of arms control, involving both Russia and China. Yet it must also be ready to take the decisions that are necessary to ensure that its deterrence posture remains fit for purpose well into the future. As long as new multilateral arms control agreements remain out of reach, this will require scaling up NATO's deterrence posture in a way that ensures alliance security remains indivisible, but that simultaneously honours the NPT commitments that nations have taken upon themselves – including NATO's non-nuclear-weapons states not gaining peacetime control of nuclear weapons. Close coordination with the Indo-Pacific partners of NATO is essential, for these nations face many similar challenges. The fundamental security interests of NATO allies and the Indo-Pacific Partners are deeply intertwined due to their mutual reliance on US strategic forces.

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https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/migrated_files/documents/atoms/files/alberque_npt_origins_nato_nuclear_2017.pdf; Khalessi, D. "Strategic Ambiguity: Nuclear Sharing and the Secret Strategy for Drafting Articles I and II of the Nonproliferation Treaty", *The Nonproliferation Review*, 22 (3-4) (2015): 421-439, http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10736700.2016.1155865.

5. Searching for common ground with non-like-minded parties

Notwithstanding the need for robust intra-alliance discussions, it bears emphasis that diplomacy is not something to be practised merely amongst friends. Instead, it is a critical mechanism for allowing non-like-minded countries and even outright adversaries to co-exist in relative peace and stability. For such circumstances to emerge, even outright rivals must remain open to considering the material interests they have in common. The 2022 Joint Statement of the five Nuclear Weapon States on preventing nuclear war stands out as a suitable illustration thereof:[51]

> 'We affirm that a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought. As nuclear use would have far-reaching consequences, we also affirm that nuclear weapons—for as long as they continue to exist—should serve defensive purposes, deter aggression, and prevent war.'

The truth of this statement remains obvious, even if Russia's war against Ukraine has demonstrated an interpretation of 'defensive purposes' that is so geographically expansive as to rob the word of its meaning. Yet this nonetheless offers a useful reminder that nuclear rivals can see eye to eye and commit to mutually advantageous outcomes. If a world without nuclear weapons is to ever come about, it will require the active commitment of all the protagonists involved – that is to say, in the framework of the NPT.

[51] Joint Statement of the Leaders of the Five Nuclear-Weapon States "On Preventing Nuclear War and Avoiding Arms Races", 3 January 2022, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/61d308ffe90e071971e25654/Joint_Statement_Of_the_Leaders_of_the_Five_Nuclear-Weapon_States_On_Preventing_Nuclear_War_and_Avoiding_Arms_Races.pdf.

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