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Stop the bleeding: How to protect existing NPT disarmament agreements and commitments

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This paper reflects discussions among members of the ELN's project **Protecting the Non-Proliferation Treaty**. The project seeks to preserve the multilateral nuclear non-proliferation regime and prevent further erosion of the nuclear taboo and the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT). Bringing together an intergenerational, pan-regional Network of experts, it works to identify pathways to success in the eleventh review cycle, taking a holistic approach to the NPT and its three pillars.

For more information on the project please go to www.europeanleadershipnetwork.org/protecting-the-non-proliferation-treaty.

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Executive summary

Steps to protect the Article 6 acquis on nuclear disarmament are a necessary, though probably not sufficient, condition for success of the 2026 NPT Review Conference (RevCon). Focusing on preserving New START core obligations and the norm against nuclear testing embodied in the CTBT, ranks high both on desirability and achievability. These issues are, therefore, a good place to start any effort to protect the NPT and pursue ways to strengthen the treaty.

The nuclear disarmament acquis is threatened from many directions. All nuclear weapon states are modernising their nuclear arsenals, preparing to keep them in service for several decades. Moscow backtracked from key disarmament commitments, including next steps on arms control and the CTBT. China is building up its nuclear arsenal, raising fears of an unprecedented three-way arms race between China, Russia, and the United States (US). All of these developments contravene the spirit and, in some cases, the letter of agreements and commitments made under the NPT.

There is still considerable uncertainty under what political circumstances states parties will convene for the 11th RevCon in 2026. In such a volatile environment, it is useful to consider steps that states parties may take to protect the nuclear disarmament acquis under different scenarios.

Under a dark sky, with further retrenchment on existing commitments, NPT states parties should agree on a set of baseline measures. In particular they should:

- Call on Russia and the US to commit publicly to observing New START limits on warheads and delivery vehicles, at least until they have agreed on a new arms control framework;
- Make clear statements on the importance of non-testing. This holds true particularly for those states that have political clout in China, Russia and the US or are allied with them.

Under a grey sky, where the disarmament context would be similar to today's environment, NPT members should:

- Call on all nuclear weapon states to freeze the size of their nuclear arsenals, at least until the US and Russia have agreed on a follow-on agreement to New START;
- Recommit to maintaining all existing moratoria on nuclear-weapon test explosions.

Under a blue sky, where Russia and the US may have resumed talks on an arms control framework for New START and China has signalled its willingness to be more transparent about the goals and scope of its nuclear build-up and modernisation programme, NPT members should:

- Agree to begin discussions on a roadmap for nuclear disarmament in the 12th Review Cycle, taking into account proposals and suggestions from all states;
- Call for the verifiable closure of all nuclear weapon states' test sites.

In such a volatile political environment, it is useful to consider steps that states parties may take to protect the nuclear disarmament acquis under different scenarios.

Introduction

The 2026 NPT Review Conference (RevCon) could be the first meeting of NPT states parties for over 50 years with no legally binding or informal limit on nuclear weapon states nuclear stockpiles in place. New START, the last remaining treaty putting a cap on Russian and US nuclear weapons and delivery vehicles, will expire on 4 February 2026, a few months before NPT states parties gather in New York for the RevCon.

2026 will also mark the 30th anniversary of the last nuclear weapon tests by an NPT nuclear weapon state.¹ But the taboo on nuclear testing is under acute threat.

At the same time, China is building up its nuclear arsenal, raising fears of an unprecedented three-way arms race between China, Russia, and the United States (US). In May 2024, China suspended talks with the US on nuclear risk reduction. China may have been hedging for a scenario that will come true in January 2025: The return of Donald Trump to the White House. The Biden administration had warned already in June 2024 that “absent a change in the trajectory of adversary arsenals”, the US “may reach a point in the coming years where an increase from current deployed numbers is required.”²

The nuclear disarmament acquis is threatened from other directions, too. All nuclear weapon states are modernising their nuclear arsenals, preparing to keep them in service for several decades. In 2021, the United Kingdom raised the cap of its nuclear warhead stockpile from the previously announced total of 180 to 260 weapons. Nuclear weapon states are increasing the salience of nuclear weapons despite pledges to “further diminish the role and significance of nuclear weapons in all military and security concepts, doctrines, and policies.”³ Meanwhile, many nuclear weapon states’ declared policies and postures have become more opaque, with the US release of warhead numbers ahead of the 2024 NPT Preparatory Committee (PrepCom) meeting being the positive exception to that rule.⁴

All of these developments contravene the spirit and, in some cases, the letter of agreements and commitments made under the NPT. It is, therefore, of primary importance to stop this bleeding on Article 6 commitments in order to protect the NPT, avoid new nuclear arms races, and reduce the risks of nuclear weapons use. Two issues stand out: Averting - or at least reigning in – a new quantitative nuclear arms race between China, Russia, and the US and preventing a resumption of nuclear weapon tests.

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The growing gap between disarmament commitments and nuclear weapon states actions

The 64-step Action Plan agreed upon at the 2010 NPT RevCon remains the most current and important yardstick for measuring how nuclear weapon states live up to specific disarmament commitments.

The 2010 acquis

NPT states parties failed to agree on final documents at the 2015 and 2022 Review Conferences. The 64-step Action Plan agreed upon at the 2010 NPT RevCon therefore remains the most current and important yardstick for measuring how nuclear weapon states live up to specific disarmament commitments. At the 10th RevCon in 2022, states parties appeared ready to reaffirm “the continued validity of the practical steps for achieving nuclear disarmament adopted by consensus in the Final Document of the 2000 Review Conference as well as the conclusions and recommendations for follow-on actions adopted by the 2010 Review Conference”⁵. Because Russia prevented the adoption of the draft final document, that language and other agreed sections did not become politically binding. At the same time, no NPT state party challenged that draft language and thus, the 2010 commitments remain politically binding goals.

The two largest nuclear weapon states, Russia and the US, who together hold 88% of the ca. 12,000 nuclear warheads that still exist in the world today,⁶ have repeatedly accepted that they have a special responsibility to reduce nuclear warhead numbers. They are the only nuclear weapon possessors that have ever accepted numerical limits on parts of their nuclear arsenals.

In the 2010 NPT Action Plan, Russia and the US had committed “to seek the early entry into force and full implementation of the Treaty on Measures for the Further Reduction and Limitation of Strategic Offensive Arms”, the treaty also known as New START. States parties encouraged the two largest nuclear weapons possessors “to continue discussions on follow-on measures in order to achieve deeper reductions in their nuclear arsenals.”⁷

An end to nuclear testing has been an integral part of the NPT’s agenda ever since the treaty was negotiated.⁸ In the 2010 NPT Action Plan, NPT members had committed, pending the entry into force of the 1996 Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT),

“to refrain from nuclear-weapon test explosions or any other nuclear explosions, the use of new nuclear weapons technologies and from any action that would defeat the object and purpose of that Treaty, and all existing moratoriums on nuclear-weapon test explosions should be maintained.”⁹

Mind the gap: Steps away from the 2010 commitments

New START entered into force on 5 February 2011. On 3 February 2021, Washington and Moscow agreed to extend the treaty’s original ten-year lifetime for an additional five years. But discussions on an arms control framework to follow-on from New START were short-lived. Presidents Joe Biden and Vladimir Putin had agreed at their June 2021 Geneva summit to initiate a Strategic Stability Dialogue “to restore predictability and stability to the U.S.-Russia relationship”. After a few meetings, Washington suspended the dialogue following Russia’s 24 February 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine.¹⁰

The 2010 commitment to uphold the nuclear testing moratorium stands, and states parties at the 2022 RevCon appeared ready to reaffirm the acquis on nuclear testing commitments.

Yet, at the 2022 NPT RevCon, Moscow and Washington still appeared ready, in principle, to separate a resumption of talks about a new arms control framework from the overall conflict between them. Russia argued that under “turbulent conditions, collective efforts are especially needed to create an international environment conducive to taking further steps toward nuclear disarmament.”¹¹ The US stated its “readiness to negotiate expeditiously a framework to replace New START, if Russia is prepared to operate in good faith.”¹²

The draft final document of the 2022 RevCon contained language that would have committed both countries “to the full implementation of the New START Treaty and to pursue negotiations in good faith on a successor framework to New START before its expiration in 2026, in order to achieve deeper, irreversible and verifiable reductions in their nuclear arsenals.”¹³

The 2010 commitment to uphold the nuclear testing moratorium stands, and states parties at the 2022 RevCon appeared ready to reaffirm the acquis on nuclear testing commitments. The draft final document repeated the language from the 2010 NPT Action Plan, prohibiting NPT members from taking any action that would defeat the CTBT’s “object and purpose”.¹⁴

In the final hours of the RevCon, Russia prevented the adoption of the Final Document, so the commitments contained in the draft did not become politically binding.

Damage to the disarmament acquis since the 2022 Review Conference

In the months following the RevCon, Moscow backtracked from key disarmament commitments, including next steps on arms control and the CTBT. In November 2022, Russia failed to attend a meeting of the New START Bilateral Consultative Commission (BCC) that Moscow and Washington had previously scheduled. The meeting was intended to resolve disputes over New START on-site inspections and concerns both sides had about other implementation issues. The US argued that the failure to engage with the BCC was one of several cases in which Russia was in non-compliance with the treaty.¹⁵

Russia disengaged even more. In his February 2023 address to the nation, Russian President Putin announced that Moscow would suspend its New START membership, including all transparency and verification activities. While he emphasised that Moscow would not withdraw from the treaty and continue to observe the treaty’s limits of 1,550 deployed nuclear warheads and 700 deployed delivery vehicles for each side, Putin argued that Moscow would need to have “a clear idea of what NATO countries such as France or Great Britain have at stake, and how we will account for their strategic arsenals, that is, the Alliance’s combined offensive capabilities”¹⁶ before Russia would be ready to resume a dialogue on a New Start follow-on framework.

In June 2023, the Biden administration reconfirmed its “willingness to engage in bilateral arms control discussions with Russia and with China without preconditions.”¹⁷ However, the US later also stopped all exchanges of New START-related information with

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Russia, reciprocating Moscow's steps. While the outgoing Biden administration remains willing to compartmentalise nuclear arms control from conflicts with China and Russia, it has warned that this may change if China and Russia continue their current nuclear policies.¹⁸

Meanwhile, China continues to increase the size of its nuclear arsenal. New missile fields, other nuclear activities and a lack of transparency raise suspicions that Beijing may seek the status of a nuclear peer with the US.¹⁹ There are also concerns that China may resume nuclear testing.²⁰ So far, Beijing has rejected calls to be more transparent on the goals of its nuclear build-up and modernisation programme.

In his February 2022 speech, Putin also ordered the Defence Ministry and Rosatom to "make everything ready for Russia to conduct nuclear tests." He pointed out that Russia "will not be the first to proceed with these tests" but cautioned that "if the United States goes ahead with them, we will as well."²¹

In November 2023, Putin withdrew Russia's ratification from the CTBT, downgrading Russia's status to signatory.²² Russia is one of 44 countries listed in Annex 2 of the CTBT that must ratify the accord for it to enter into force. Russia pledged at the time to maintain a testing moratorium, but Putin repeated that Russia is ready to resume testing should the US end its moratorium.

The Russian withdrawal of ratification is significant for another reason: For the first time since the CTBT was opened for signature in 1996, there has been a backward movement on entry into force.

Meanwhile, some in the US close to the incoming Trump administration have advocated such a resumption of nuclear tests.²³ Such a step can be seen as self-defeating. Russia and the US, who have conducted 715 and 1,030 tests respectively, have comparatively less to gain from an end to the nuclear test moratorium than China, which has conducted "only" 45 nuclear tests.

Failed attempts to improve transparency and accountability

States parties at the 2022 RevCon also had positive discussions on ways to improve transparency and accountability in the implementation of Article 6 commitments. While the nuclear weapon states continued to resist calls from disarmament-minded countries for specific disarmament benchmarks and timelines, they appeared ready to consider steps that enable "progress on implementation to be regularly monitored and reviewed over the course of the next Review Cycle".²⁴ In particular, the draft final document envisaged the development of standard reporting forms, and the nuclear weapon states appeared ready to report twice in every review cycle on these reports and engage with the reports in structured discussions during dedicated sessions.²⁵

These agreements also fell by the wayside when Russia objected to the adoption of the final document. But states parties separately were able to agree on a "Working Group on Further Strengthening the Review Process" (WGSRP), which was mandated to develop

recommendations for “measures that would improve the effectiveness, efficiency, transparency, accountability, coordination and continuity of the review process of the Treaty.”²⁶

Against this darkening sky for nuclear disarmament, the 2023 and 2024 PrepComs ended in disagreement. States parties were not able to adopt substantive conference reports by consensus. They also failed in the WGSRP to agree on measures to strengthen the review process ahead of the 2023 PrepCom. In discussions of the group, a broad consensus on new formats and issues to be taken up at NPT meetings of states parties emerged. But a few countries, including China, Iran, and Russia, prevented agreement on even the most modest steps to improve accountability and transparency.²⁷ China, for example, explicitly rejected a proposal to improve accountability mechanisms in the NPT. Ambassador Li Song, in the WGSRP, stated that “China will not support pushing the nuclear transparency agenda in the name of strengthening the NPT review process.” Instead, Li suggested that reporting should be “subject to voluntary consultation among the five Nuclear Weapon States” and happen in the context of N5 consultations.²⁸ It is unclear whether the N5 under the current Chinese chairmanship have initiated such exchanges on transparency.

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To stop the bleeding

Without successfully treating the biggest wounds inflicted upon Article 6, the NPT is unlikely to get better any time soon.

The ability and willingness of states parties to stop the bleeding on disarmament commitments is likely to be a necessary condition for success at the 11th RevCon. If nuclear weapon states continue their path towards new nuclear arms races and a resumption of nuclear testing, the 2026 RevCon is likely to end without a consensus agreement on steps to strengthen the NPT. To be sure, an agreement to protect existing NPT disarmament commitments is unlikely to be a sufficient condition for a positive outcome in 2026. Many non-nuclear weapon states are demanding not only a preservation of the acquis but significant additional steps in the direction of a world free of nuclear weapons. However, without successfully treating the biggest wounds inflicted upon Article 6, the NPT is unlikely to get better any time soon.

Over the last few years, Russia has inflicted the greatest harm to nuclear disarmament efforts, including by stopping the implementation of New START, de-ratifying the CTBT and raising the salience of nuclear weapons. It must be feared that the incoming Trump administration might add further wounds and that China will not stop the build-up of its nuclear arsenals.

Yet, nuclear disarmament is a shared responsibility. Unless the N5 can find ways to protect existing agreements, new nuclear arms races are likely to accelerate. Such a situation will be much more dangerous than the nuclear competition during the Cold War. Non-nuclear weapon states can help to allay conflicts between nuclear weapon states, holding them accountable to agreed standards and commitments and supporting efforts to lay the groundwork for disarmament, such as supporting verification work.

There is still considerable uncertainty under what political circumstances states parties will convene for the 11th RevCon in 2026. The international context may be worse, similar or better than the current global situation. An end to Russia's war against Ukraine, a more peaceful situation in the Middle East and a reduction of nuclear and proliferation risks in the Asia-Pacific are currently seen as three main variables that will determine whether the skies for the NPT in 2026 will be dark, grey or blue.²⁹

Apart from the competition between nuclear weapon states, proliferation pressures will affect arms race dynamics. In the nuclear world, as Alexey Arbatov has pointed out, "words are deeds."³⁰ Discussions around nuclear weapons acquisition – and thus a possible withdrawal or violation of non-nuclear weapon states' NPT obligations – undermine the regime as a whole.

In such a volatile environment, it is useful to consider steps that states parties may take to protect the nuclear disarmament acquis under different scenarios so as to have a range of options available as we approach the 2025 PrepCom and 11th RevCon. The steps proposed here under three different scenarios should be read cumulatively: what is possible under a dark sky should also be feasible in a more benign international context. It would be desirable for states parties to take all the measures outlined here under any circumstance. Therefore, the following categories of specific measures are based primarily on an assessment of their feasibility rather than overall desirability. This approach thus reflects the uncertainty that policymakers and analysts face, given the unclear political circumstances under which the 2026 RevCon will meet.

Existing disarmament commitments and agreements under a dark sky: keep the patient alive

Under a dark sky, Russia and the US would not have resumed discussions on nuclear arms control, nor would any other nuclear weapon state have pledged in a binding way to place limits on its nuclear weapon stockpiles. This would cast a dark shadow over conference proceedings. Further retrenchment from existing commitments on the CTBT, including backwards movement on ratifications or signatures, reductions of support for the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty Organization (CTBTO) or even a resumption of nuclear testing by one or more nuclear weapon states, would further darken the skies over the RevCon. Thunderstorm activities could include Russian nuclear weapons use in Ukraine, deployment of nuclear weapons in space or other shocks weakening the arms control acquis.

In such a scenario, the NPT would likely be on life support. After two failed Review Conferences, it would be important in 2026 to have agreement, at least on a set of baseline measures.³¹ States parties, under such a scenario, should:

- Call upon Russia and the US to pursue, without preconditions, talks on an arms control framework to follow on from New START;
- Urge Russia and the US to commit publicly to observing New START limits on warheads and delivery vehicles, at least until they have agreed on a new arms control framework;
- Call on China to join a dialogue between Russia and the US on nuclear arms control and risk reduction and to be transparent about the goals and extent of its nuclear buildup;
- Call upon the US and Russia to resume data exchanges on numbers of strategic warheads and delivery vehicles in order to provide some transparency on their nuclear weapons postures.

Under a dark sky, NPT states parties would need to take concrete action to strengthen (or, in a worst-case scenario, reestablish) the taboo on nuclear testing. This would not only involve emphasising the importance of the CTBT but should also involve measures to disincentivise (further) nuclear test explosions. Steps towards that direction include:

- Statements by all states parties on the importance of non-testing, in particular by those states that have political clout in China, Russia and the US or are allied with them;
- Support for efforts to document the effects of nuclear testing on humans and the environment;
- Pledges of continued support for the CTBTO's work to detect any nuclear test, anywhere;
- Statements of a clear intention to impose meaningful restrictive measures on states that violate the nuclear testing taboo.

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The imposition of restrictive measures in response to nuclear tests would be a justified response to states that sabotage the production of an important, generally recognised global public good.

Restrictive measures and other steps to disincentivise nuclear tests would likely be controversial because some countries view sanctions sceptically. However, these costs would be imposed in response to a violation of a global norm rather than as a means to achieve a specific national security goal. Preventing the spread and use of nuclear weapons are global public goods, and CTBT entry into force is a way to protect the greater good of peace and security.³² Viewed from this perspective, the imposition of restrictive measures in response to nuclear tests would be a justified response to states that sabotage the production of an important, generally recognised global public good. To be sure, it would be easier if such pressure were exerted in the context of statements by groupings that have collectively endorsed the CTBT. Members of regional organisations, such as the EU and Nuclear Weapon Free Zones, could issue collective commitments to meaningfully react to violations of the nuclear testing taboo.

It will be important that NPT states parties support such efforts to strengthen the taboo against nuclear testing with actions in other relevant contexts. Outside of the NPT, governments could, for example, support a UNGA Resolution which states that de-ratifying and un-signing the CTBT runs contrary to UNSCR 2310.³³

Nuclear weapon states should also explore the development of voluntary and unilateral confidence-building measures designed to reduce the risks of clandestine nuclear testing.³⁴

Under a dark sky, it would be difficult to get agreement on new intersessional mechanisms to discuss disarmament-related steps in a more meaningful way during the 12th NPT review cycle. States parties may, therefore, look to support efforts to have better transparency and accountability outside of the NPT. This could include independent monitoring mechanisms and voluntary reporting by nuclear weapon states, using formats like those proposed by the Non-Proliferation and Disarmament Initiative (NPDI).

Existing disarmament commitments and agreements under a grey sky: stop the bleeding

Under a grey sky, the disarmament context would be similar to today's environment. Even if Russia and the US had re-initiated a dialogue on strategic issues, including nuclear arms control, no such agreement would have been reached. There would be no further backtracking on arms control commitments but also no significant progress towards the entry-into-force of the CTBT. How sustainable such a situation would be depends also on whether China, the DPRK, and other actors would continue their nuclear buildup and whether there would be additional proliferation.

Under relatively unchanged conditions, NPT states parties should pursue realistic, pragmatic steps to begin healing some of the wounds inflicted on the disarmament acquis.

Building on some of the steps outlined for the dark sky scenario, NPT states parties should:

- Call on all nuclear weapon states to freeze the size of their nuclear arsenals, at least until the US and Russia have agreed on a follow-on agreement to New START;

- Urge nuclear weapon states to be more transparent, including by adopting the standardised templates developed by the NPDI as the mandatory reporting format on their nuclear postures and policies.

To strengthen the nuclear testing taboo, NPT states parties could recommit to the 2010 Action Plan language (which was also contained in the 2022 draft final document 2022), wherein states promised to maintain “all existing moratoria on nuclear-weapon test explosions”.³⁵

Such a reaffirmation of existing commitments would provide a baseline, which nuclear weapon states could reinforce through a number of actions, including reciprocal transparency measures to reduce ambiguity regarding the status of nuclear test sites and activities that might be misperceived as circumventing the CTBT.

The final document should also reaffirm the continued validity of commitments contained in UNSCR 2310, noting that 23 September 2026 will mark the tenth anniversary of the adoption of that resolution by the UN Security Council.

Such commitments should be made more sustainable by agreeing on ways for the 12th review cycle to provide more opportunities for structured reviews of nuclear weapon states policies. States parties could, therefore, agree to allocate an appropriate amount of time in the next review cycle to structured, inclusive and interactive debates on the reports related to the implementation of Article 6 commitments and have a structured peer review mechanism on such reports.

Existing disarmament commitments and agreements under a blue sky: accelerate the healing

While it is currently difficult to imagine a more disarmament-friendly environment for the 2026 RevCon, it remains important analytically and politically to envisage steps that could and should be taken in a more benign international context. Changes for the better can happen quickly and unexpectedly. Maybe more importantly, positive scenarios are important reminders of what the NPT states parties should aspire to and what meetings of NPT states parties must be expected to achieve. Not talking about positive scenarios could lead to a vicious cycle of self-fulfilling prophecies and a constant lowering of ambition.

In a cautiously optimistic scenario, by 2026, Russia and the US may have resumed talks on an arms control framework for New START. They may have pledged to comply voluntarily with the treaty’s limits on warheads and delivery systems indefinitely but may not yet have reached agreement on other issues related to such an agreement.

China may also have signalled its willingness to be more transparent about the goals and scope of its nuclear build-up and modernisation programme, and the N5 would have resumed their dialogue on nuclear doctrines and nuclear risk reduction.

In such a scenario, steps to be agreed upon by NPT states parties, beyond those possible under dark and grey skies, could include:

Such commitments should be made more sustainable by agreeing on ways for the 12th review cycle to provide more opportunities for structured reviews of nuclear weapon states policies.

- A call on nuclear-weapon possessors to freeze their nuclear arsenals;
- Agreement to begin discussions on a roadmap for nuclear disarmament in the 12th review cycle, taking into account proposals and suggestions from all states;

Under a blue sky, it should be possible to strengthen the norm against nuclear testing, move towards CTBT entry into force, and complete the work of the CTBTO by:

- Calling for the verifiable closure of all nuclear weapon states' test sites;
- Starting discussions on an instrument for transparent observation of all subcritical experiments to allow confirmation that the experiments are consistent with the CTBT spirit and letter;
- Urging all nuclear armed states to report any proposed modification of nuclear test sites to the UNSC (with CTBTO and IAEA independently verifying the accuracy of reports);
- Agreement that CTBT Article IX.3 of advance notice should also be applied to possible steps to de-ratify or with CTBT signatures.³⁶

Nuclear weapon states individually should also reaffirm their commitment to zero-yield testing standards and pledge to provide maximum transparency around their nuclear test sites to reduce suspicions of non-compliance.³⁷

Under a blue sky, it should be possible to strengthen the norm against nuclear testing, move towards CTBT entry into force, and complete the work of the CTBTO.

Conclusion

Different levels of the problems and interdependencies between policies make it all the more important to focus political attention on those measures that rank high on significance and feasibility.

Successful policies to stop the bleeding on Article 6 commitments will have to tackle several issues simultaneously. Proliferation and disarmament are intrinsically linked. Nuclear weapon states point to a deteriorating international environment, including growing risks of proliferation in the Middle East and Asia, to argue that now is not the time to talk about nuclear reductions. North Korea's nuclear build-up, in defiance of international norms and UN Security Council resolutions, is upsetting regional balances. Discussions about NPT withdrawals in Iran but also in some Western countries like Japan, South Korea or Germany are undermining the norms embodied in the NPT, as are speculations about an independent European nuclear deterrent.

Domestic politics also constrain nuclear weapon states. With Donald Trump's re-election, hurdles to any type of new executive agreement or international accord limiting the roles or numbers of nuclear weapons have become higher. At the same time, non-nuclear weapon states point out that the actions of nuclear weapon states themselves, such as Russian nuclear threats, have increased the salience of nuclear weapons.

Steps to protect the Article 6 acquis can be seen as a necessary condition for success. However, they are unlikely to be sufficient to reach a consensus on an agreement that balances different interests among NPT participants. On nuclear disarmament, a range of other issues would have to be included, such as steps to reduce the role of nuclear weapons³⁸ and risks of nuclear weapons use. Many non-nuclear weapon states will likely insist that nuclear weapon states agree to benchmarks and timelines for nuclear disarmament actions.

These different levels of the problems and interdependencies between policies make it all the more important to focus political attention on those measures that rank high on significance and feasibility. States parties at the next RevCon should also aim to agree on such measures to have more meaningful, productive and interesting discussions on all of these issues, particularly under the disarmament pillar. An agreement to protect existing disarmament commitments and agreements, focusing on preserving New START core obligations and the norm against nuclear testing embodied in the CTBT, ranks high both on desirability and achievability. These issues are, therefore, a good place to start any effort to protect the NPT and pursue ways to strengthen the treaty.

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