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Over the course of its 40-year existence, the nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) has established an indispensable yet imperfect set of interlocking nonproliferation and disarmament obligations and standards. Rather than the dozens of nuclear-armed states that were forecast before the NPT was opened for signature in July 1968, only four additional countries beyond the original five possessors have nuclear weapons today. On the other hand, several states have abandoned nuclear weapons programs.

The NPT, bolstered by nuclear export controls and a safeguards system, makes it far more difficult for non-nuclear-weapon states to acquire or build nuclear weapons. Equally important, NPT Article VI commits the United States, Russia, the United Kingdom, France, and China to achieve nuclear disarmament.

Yet, once again the nuclear nonproliferation regime is at a critical juncture. Nuclear and missile programs in the Middle East, South Asia, and North Korea, as well as the specter of nuclear terrorism, threaten regional and international stability. Several more states may get into the uranium-enrichment or plutonium reprocessing business, allowing them to become virtual nuclear-weapon states.

Since the end of the Cold War, strategic nuclear forces have been cut, but all of the nuclear-weapon states continue to rely on and modernize their nuclear arsenals. Washington has repudiated key NPT disarmament commitments made at the 1995 and 2000 NPT review conferences and has sought to carve out special exemptions from the rules for allies such as NPT holdout India.

As a result, a growing number of states believe the NPT is being applied unevenly and that the nuclear powers do not intend to fulfill their end of the NPT bargain. This has led the non-nuclear-weapon-state majority to become less willing to agree to further measures that would strengthen the treaty and the nonproliferation regime.

To re-establish the U.S. nonproliferation leadership needed to repair the system, the next president must act quickly to verifiably reduce still-bloated U.S. and Russian nuclear arsenals, ratify the 1996 Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), and end the pursuit of new nuclear warheads. Leaders in Washington and elsewhere must also recognize some fundamental lessons of the nuclear era in order to prevent the erosion of the NPT regime:

The possession of nuclear weapons by some states may lead others to pursue development of their own. A world of nuclear haves and have-nots cannot be sustained indefinitely. Nuclear weapons are dangerous no matter who possesses them. Although the vast majority of states have neither the resources nor the motivation to build nuclear weapons, some will hedge their bets so long as nuclear weapons are used to threaten or intimidate.

The overwhelming destructive capacity of nuclear weapons renders them useless as instruments of military power, whether against states or nonstate actors. Nuclear weapons, even "low-yield" weapons, cause unacceptable and indiscriminate damage. So long as they exist, nuclear weapons should only serve to deter the use of nuclear weapons by others. Consequently, there is no need for any state to possess more than a few hundred such weapons, if
that many. The sooner the major powers act to verifiably and irreversibly eliminate their stockpiles and pledge not to attack non-nuclear-weapon states, the stronger the nonproliferation taboo will become.

Nonproliferation requires sustained diplomacy to resolve regional disputes. Nuclear weapons look more attractive to those who feel threatened or disrespected, and the NPT cannot by itself fix long-standing rivalries or perceived inequities. For that, the United States and other countries must engage in a comprehensive dialogue to help remove the underlying causes of conflict and establish the conditions for zones free of weapons of mass destruction.

NPT holdouts must be encouraged to meet the commitments expected of NPT members. It is unlikely that the three states that never acceded to the NPT (India, Israel, and Pakistan) will do so anytime soon. Yet, it is a mistake to ignore their responsibility to prevent proliferation and join with others to halt and reverse their weapons programs. To start, India, Israel, and Pakistan, along with China, should be lobbied to enter the mainstream by ratifying the CTBT and officially capping fissile material production.

Nuclear energy must not be promoted in a way that proliferates sensitive nuclear technologies. Since 1968, new states have acquired the capacity to produce nuclear bomb material through "peaceful" nuclear programs, which are guaranteed by Article IV. To reduce the risk of diversion, it is essential that nuclear fuel-cycle facilities come under multilateral or international control. Nuclear suppliers should also tighten access to a broader range of sensitive technologies. To improve transparency and confidence, all states should agree to more effective safeguards under the 1997 Model Additional Protocol.

The NPT is not doomed to failure. In response to earlier setbacks, leading states have come together to fortify the regime. But in order to survive well into this century, states must renew, strengthen, and fulfill the NPT bargain—and soon.

Source URL: https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2008-06/issue-briefs/npt-past-present-future