

## The Disarmament Deficit

- [Arms Control Today](#)

Over the past 45 years, the nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) has put in place an indispensable yet imperfect set of rules for creating a safer world. But to ensure the treaty remains relevant and effective, all states-parties must provide leadership and take action to fulfill the treaty's lofty goals and aspirations.

The imperfections of the NPT and the divisions among key parties were exposed at the treaty's most recent review conference in New York, which ended on May 22. In the final hours, states-parties failed to reach consensus on a final conference document due to differences between Egypt and Israel on the process for convening a long-sought conference on a zone free of weapons of mass destruction in the Middle East.

More significantly, however, states-parties failed to produce an updated, meaningful action plan on disarmament that builds on the commitments they made at the 2010 review conference. These include steps to "to accelerate concrete progress on the steps leading to nuclear disarmament," including "all types of nuclear weapons," and action toward entry into force of the 1996 Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT).

Since the negotiation of the 2010 New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START), which modestly reduces U.S. and Russian forces, progress on disarmament has been stalled. Neither Washington nor China, two key treaty holdouts, is any closer to ratifying the treaty. As New Zealand's delegation noted, progress in other areas has been underwhelming at best.

In response, three-quarters of all states at the 2015 conference argued that the catastrophic humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons use underscore the need to act with greater urgency to eliminate nuclear weapons dangers. The NPT's five nuclear-weapon states insisted that the pursuit of disarmament must be step by step, which requires time and the right security conditions. For now, they argued, their security requires nuclear weapons.

Surely, the recent downturn in U.S.-Russian relations and growing U.S.-Chinese tensions make progress difficult, but it does not excuse the nuclear-armed states from their NPT Article VI disarmament commitments. Unfortunately, the nuclear-weapon states came to the NPT conference without new ideas or proposals for overcoming obstacles to further disarmament.

U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry reiterated a June 2013 U.S. proposal for talks with Russia on a further one-third reduction of their strategic nuclear arsenals. But Russia's delegation argued that it had reduced to its "minimum level" and that, "[in] fact, it is the U.S. policy" and the "build-up of the

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global missile defense system” that prevent further progress.

Complicating matters, U.S. President Barack Obama and Russian President Vladimir Putin are pursuing very expensive strategic nuclear modernization programs designed to maintain force levels in excess of plausible deterrence requirements for decades to come.

For example, the U.S. Air Force wants 1,000-1,100 new, nuclear-capable air-launched cruise missiles, which are a nuclear warfighter’s dream and an arms controller’s nightmare because New START does not cap the number of bombs or cruise missiles that can be carried on treaty-limited strategic bombers. Meanwhile, China is continuing to gradually expand its arsenal and has begun to deploy multiple warheads on its intercontinental ballistic missiles.

The nuclear-weapon states successfully brushed aside calls for new benchmarks and timelines. The draft final document only would have “encouraged” Russia and the United States to hold talks on further nuclear cuts and the nuclear-weapon states to “engage...with a view to achieving rapid reductions in the global stockpile of nuclear weapons.”

In response, 107 governments joined an Austrian-led initiative known as the Humanitarian Pledge, which calls on states “to identify and pursue effective measures to fill the legal gap for the prohibition and elimination of nuclear weapons.”

It is in the interest of all states to pursue new and more-effective measures to address the disarmament deficit. The NPT draft conference document suggests a potentially useful path—an “open-ended working group” established by the UN General Assembly to “elaborate effective measures for the full implementation of Article VI of the treaty.”

Some states and civil society campaigners want to begin negotiations on a treaty to ban the possession and use of nuclear weapons. A ban is a necessary step toward a world without nuclear weapons, but will not by itself change dangerous nuclear doctrines or eliminate nuclear arsenals. Nevertheless, pressure for a ban treaty will grow unless the nuclear-armed states accelerate action on disarmament.

Moscow and Washington could announce they will implement New START cuts early and immediately begin talks on a follow-on treaty that would take into account other types of strategic weapons. China could freeze the overall size of its nuclear arsenal as long as the United States and Russia continue to reduce theirs. This would help establish the conditions for a series of high-level summits on multilateral, verifiable nuclear disarmament involving the world’s seven acknowledged nuclear-armed states and leading non-nuclear-weapon states.

Without fresh thinking and renewed action on the 70-year-old problem of nuclear weapons, the future of the NPT will be at risk and the possibility of nuclear weapons use will grow.

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