Roland Timerbaev: The Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty Has Largely Achieved Its Goals

- Interviews

The nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT), which will be 50 years old next year, has proven to be the “cornerstone of the global nuclear order,” says retired diplomat Roland Timerbaev, who played a key role in the treaty negotiations as a member of the Soviet delegation.

The durable multilateral accord, the result of U.S.-Soviet cooperation during the Cold War years, has prevented what many at the time feared would be the rapid spread of nuclear weapons to many more countries, he said in an interview. It was the 1962 Cuban missile crisis that, he says, shifted the thinking of leaders in Moscow and Washington about the urgency of nuclear arms control, including steps to prevent the proliferation of nuclear weapons. “Humankind was faced with a crisis that could end in a global catastrophe,” he recalls. “It is after that crisis the negotiations on the nuclear weapons problem began in earnest.”

To strengthen the global nonproliferation regime in the years ahead, Timerbaev calls for extension of the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START), with further numerical reductions from the current ceilings in the treaty, and for active engagement of China into the dialogue on key nuclear issues.
Ambassador Timerbaev, what did you believe were the main goals of the NPT? Fifty years on, do you think those goals have been achieved?

Timerbaev: The main goal of the treaty is stated in its name: it is to prevent the proliferation of nuclear weapons. On the whole, that goal has been achieved. When the NPT was opened for signature [on July 1, 1968], Soviet and U.S. specialists thought that 20 to 25 new states could acquire nuclear weapons in the foreseeable future. Such a scenario has been averted largely thanks to the NPT. As you know, only eight countries currently possess such weapons [the five official nuclear-weapon states plus India, Israel, and Pakistan]. North Korea has also declared itself a nuclear power.
In this context, it would be useful to recall several historical events. First, South Africa has voluntarily relinquished its nuclear arsenal, as confirmed by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). Second, after the breakup of the Soviet Union, Ukraine attempted to claim nuclear power status because a large part of the Soviet nuclear arsenal was located on Ukrainian territory. It took a lot of effort to persuade Kiev to relinquish its nuclear ambitions, return all nuclear warheads to Russia, and join the NPT as a non-nuclear-weapon state. The third case I would like to cite is Iran. On the basis of a deal adopted in 2015, Iran has undertaken to limit the scale and scope of its nuclear program. At the same time, Iranian scientists continue their nuclear research in accordance with the right of every NPT member to peaceful use of nuclear energy, as stipulated in Article IV of the NPT.

The NPT’s Article VI sets the objective of launching the process of nuclear disarmament. The nuclear-weapon states have undertaken a commitment to that effect by joining the NPT. According to the latest assessments, over the past 25 years the combined nuclear arsenals of the nuclear-weapon states, mainly Russia and the United States, have been reduced by a factor of five or six compared to the peak Cold War levels. However, the situation with Article VI is not free of contention. I believe that the topic of nuclear disarmament is extremely important in the context of discussing the future of the NPT and the entire global nuclear order, so I would like to return to it later on.

Certain vulnerabilities of the NPT have come to light over the almost five decades since its opening for signature, I mean, first and foremost, the withdrawal of North Korea from the treaty. I visited Pyongyang in the early 1980s to persuade the North Korean diplomats of the need for their country to join the NPT. In 1985, North Korea joined the treaty, but 18 years later it announced its final withdrawal. It then stepped up its nuclear program and has since conducted five nuclear tests.

Have you identified any other vulnerabilities of the NPT? What is the nature of those vulnerabilities? Are they inherent to the nature of the treaty itself, which was drawn up in the geopolitical circumstances that existed at the time, or do they manifest only in the absence of political will to force certain states to abide strictly by their NPT commitments?

I would say there are two other vulnerabilities, both lying within the text of the treaty itself. Early efforts to draft the NPT began in New York in 1966 in a bilateral format between the Soviet Union and the United States. At the time, the Committee of Disarmament, or the Eighteen-Nation Committee on Disarmament as it was known at the time, was not involved in the negotiations process in any form. In New York, we managed to agree on the wording of Articles I and II. But we never planned to incorporate Articles IV and VI in their current shape into the treaty, and I believe these two articles to be the weakest of all.

Under Article VI, states are obliged to pursue disarmament negotiations “in good faith.” The initial draft of that article was proposed by Egypt, or rather by the entity then known as the United Arab Republic. Later on, other non-nuclear-weapon states joined in. There was another draft introduced by Mexico, listing practical measures that were not limited to disarmament. It was proposed, for example, to include a nuclear test ban and prohibition of the production of nuclear materials in the scope of the treaty. Using the Mexican draft as a starting point, the Soviet Union and the United States then presented an alternative version of Article VI. There were people in Moscow, such as Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko and his first deputy, Vasily Kuznetsov, who argued that at least some of the practical measures proposed by the non-nuclear-weapon states should be added in the final text of the NPT. But the United States, namely U.S. Ambassador to the UN Arthur Goldberg, insisted that these details should be left out of Article VI, and eventually they prevailed.

Starting from the 1960s, a series of bilateral and multilateral documents that had to do with nuclear disarmament and nuclear threat reduction were signed. They were aimed, one way or another, at facilitating the implementation of Article VI. Of course, there were also several pauses in that process, but up until 2010, negotiations were fairly regular, and a lot of work had been done on reducing nuclear arsenals. But seven years ago, that process ground to a halt. It is quite telling that, during the latest meeting between the Russian and U.S. presidents at the [Group of Twenty] summit on July 7, 2017, these issues were not even discussed, to the best of my knowledge. Regular dialogue between our two countries on nuclear disarmament issues should be resumed, and other
nuclear-weapon states should also become involved. The current state of affairs and the discussions on the nuclear disarmament issue have, in many ways, become hostage to the wording used in Article VI.

Article IV, the one on peaceful use of nuclear energy, was one of the key incentives for signing the NPT for many non-nuclear-weapon states. Its main shortcoming is that it does not say exactly how parties to the treaty should facilitate peaceful use of nuclear energy in other counties. So the question is, What is meant by “facilitate”? Take, for example, exports of uranium-enrichment equipment, including gas centrifuges. Should such equipment be supplied to non-nuclear-weapon states? Since Article IV is not specific in that regard, there are different interpretations of its text, especially since drawing a clear distinction between peaceful and military use of nuclear technologies is an impossible task.

Incidentally, recently declassified British archives contain documents showing that, during the NPT negotiations, the British tried to get the U.S. delegation to raise the enrichment issue. In particular, they argued that it would be very dangerous to leave a window of opportunity for supplying such equipment, and they wanted this to be somehow reflected in the treaty. But the U.S. delegation was confident at the time that the non-nuclear-weapon states would never manage to develop such an advanced technology, so they decided not to complicate the negotiations by this additional matter. Frankly, I am not at all sure how the Soviet delegation would react if the British or the Americans were to approach us with the proposal to include a clause in the NPT to the effect that assistance to third countries can be provided only in “nonsensitive” areas.

Speaking of the current situation in the nuclear industry, we cannot ignore the fact that global attitudes toward nuclear power are changing. The latest example is France, where nuclear power accounts for over 70 percent of all electricity generation. The French are gradually beginning to reduce the share of nuclear in their energy mix. They are aiming for 50 percent. Germany is going to abandon nuclear energy completely in the coming years; it will keep only several nuclear research facilities to continue the production of medical isotopes. Other countries may well follow suit. That is another factor that will affect the global nuclear order in the longer term.

**Was the signing of the NPT inevitable? What prompted the beginning of the NPT talks in earnest?**

I think that the change of attitude toward nuclear weapons and the idea of signing the NPT had much to do with the 1962 Cuban missile crisis. Up until that moment, the only senior politician who had raised the nuclear nonproliferation issue on the international stage was the then-foreign minister of Ireland, Frank Aiken. In 1958, four years before the Cuban missile crisis, he introduced a draft resolution to that effect at the First Committee of the UN General Assembly. On the whole, the initiative earned some support, but no practical steps were taken to implement it. Incidentally, Minister Aiken later visited Moscow in 1968 for the NPT signing ceremony.

But the 1962 crisis was the trigger that prompted a widespread change with regard to this issue. Humankind was faced with a crisis that could end in a global catastrophe. It is after that crisis the negotiations on the nuclear weapons problem began in earnest. In the summer of 1963, a few months after the Cuban missile crisis was resolved, U.S. President John Kennedy gave a speech in which he outlined the importance of Moscow and Washington working together to prevent “the further spread of nuclear arms.” Fairly quickly, in about a month’s time, [Soviet leader] Nikita Khrushchev and the Soviet government gave their own backing to the idea; and in another four or six weeks, on August 5, 1963, the parties signed the Partial Nuclear Test Ban Treaty. Then came the turn for the NPT.

A change of attitude toward nuclear weapons also manifested itself in NATO’s cancellation of its earlier plans to create a nuclear-armed multilateral force (MLNF) and the Atlantic Nuclear Force (ANF). The alliance came to realize that such a plan did not sit well with the state of international relations at the time.

**What do you think was the point of no return during the talks, the event after which the signing of the treaty became just a matter of time?**
I think that point came when the United States and the Soviet Union reached an agreement in New York in 1966 on Articles I and II. These articles were the constants around which the entire architecture of the treaty revolved. They became part of the NPT in their original form agreed in New York.

You have already mentioned that the NPT talks began in a bilateral Soviet-U.S. format. Who do you think played the key role in Moscow and Washington in making the treaty happen?

I believe they were, first and foremost, U.S. President Lyndon Johnson and Soviet Foreign Minister Gromyko. I once found in Johnson’s archives his correspondence with his aides who were in charge of the NPT talks at the White House. I was amazed at how closely and personally involved the U.S. president was in the details of the talks and by the degree of consensus on this issue among the key White House staff. At the same time, U.S. Secretary of State Dean Rusk opposed the NPT, but Johnson had his way in the end.

Meanwhile, Gromyko did his best to persuade the Politburo. The negotiating process was happening simultaneously with the NATO initiatives on establishing the MLNF and ANF. NATO had also established the so-called Nuclear Planning Committee (the McNamara Committee). The Soviet Foreign Ministry and the minister himself therefore had to work very hard to secure Soviet interagency support for the NPT.

Incidentally, the body responsible for making NATO nuclear policy decisions, which is now called the Nuclear Planning Group, de facto continues to exist. This gives a pretext to some politicians and officials to interpret the NPT in a way that allows bloc participation in nuclear issues. That is a mistaken interpretation. Joint nuclear missions by NATO members, or “nuclear sharing,” are
Looking back at the 50-year history of the treaty, how resilient has it been in various nuclear nonproliferation crises?

The NPT is the cornerstone of the global nuclear order. The examples of South Africa and Iran demonstrate that the treaty can successfully overcome various crises. At the beginning of our conversation, I mentioned that the settlement of those particular crises was achieved on the basis of the principles and provisions of the NPT. I hope this will continue to be the case in the future.

Considering the 1995 NPT Review and Extension Conference and the agreements that enabled an indefinite extension of the treaty, do you believe those agreements have been fulfilled? What issues do you think could be the source of new NPT crises in the foreseeable future?

To answer this question, one cannot avoid the Middle East issue. I think it was a great error for the United States to allow Israel to become an unofficial nuclear-weapon state. U.S. President Richard Nixon and Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir had a one-on-one conversation in September 1969. There was virtually no one else in the room, so the meeting notes were taken by Nixon himself. These notes will probably never be made available to the general public. But as I understand it, the gist of the conversation was that the Americans agreed to Israel developing its own nuclear weapons on [the] condition that Tel Aviv would always officially deny its possession of such weapons in the international arena. In the end, that is exactly how it happened. Apparently, the Americans would not have been able to secure a ratification of the NPT if they had not agreed to this. The situation with the Israeli nuclear arsenal hinders nonproliferation progress in the Middle East. It also remains the most problematic issue in terms of the decisions taken by the 1995 NPT Review and Extension Conference; no progress has been made at all on that front.

Another ongoing crisis in terms of the NPT is the North Korean situation. It cannot be ruled out that the Iranian problem will come back a few years down the line. How events unfold in each case will depend on the political situation in the respective countries, in the wider region, and in the international arena in general.

What do you think the NPT states-parties must do to make sure that the NPT remains a viable and effective part of the international security architecture for another 50 years?

I believe the time has come to think in earnest about a new format [for] the dialogue on key nuclear issues. The previous bilateral Russian-U.S. format no longer reflects the international reality. China must become actively engaged in this process, and I am not just talking about disarmament. China needs to play a more active role in order to reinforce positive NPT-related trends. As a first step, I believe, it would make sense to hold a high-level trilateral meeting on nuclear nonproliferation and disarmament between Russia, the United States, and China.

I am well aware that, in current political circumstances, such a meeting is unlikely. But when the so-called window of opportunity opens—and I’m sure that sooner or later it will—such a meeting should be held and used as an opportunity to propose several initiatives. First, New START should be extended for another five years; the parties should also discuss further numerical reductions from the ceilings already agreed in that treaty. The scale of these new reductions to be agreed as part of the New START extension can be symbolic. Demonstrating progress in the right direction is more important than the new ceilings themselves. Second, China should make a statement to the effect that it will not further increase its existing nuclear capability. Third, the parties could formulate their stance on the nuclear weapons ban treaty [and] jointly come up with a statement so that it could be mentioned in a positive light. That would help to strengthen the international nonproliferation regime as a whole and the NPT in particular.

What role do you see the new Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons playing in the global system of nuclear governance?

If all states were to join this treaty, including all those who possess nuclear weapons, then it would
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supersede the entire existing system of nuclear relations. So, eventually, the new treaty would also supersede the NPT. In essence, it would signal the arrival of a new global nuclear order. However, we will be able to reach that point only when all states without exception have fulfilled their commitments under the NPT because disarmament issues cannot be discussed in isolation from all the other clauses of the NPT. The time of the ban treaty has not yet arrived, but we should think about how to make progress in that direction.

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1. On October 31, 1958, at the meeting of the First Committee of the UN General Assembly, Ireland introduced a draft resolution on creating a special committee to study the dangers posed by further proliferation of nuclear weapons. The resolution was not passed at that meeting, but in 1959 a resolution was passed on establishing the Ten-Nation Committee on Disarmament.


3. The Kennedy administration explored with NATO allies the idea of a multilateral nuclear force, under which U.S. nuclear missiles would be placed on submarines or surface ships manned by NATO crews. The concept was to provide a more credible deterrent against Soviet attack in Europe and, by giving NATO allies some control over nuclear weapons, reduce the likelihood that other countries, particularly West Germany, would seek a nuclear weapons capability of their own. See Steven Pifer et al., “U.S. Nuclear and Extended Deterrence: Considerations and Challenges,” Brookings Arms Control Series, No. 3 (May 2010), https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/06_nuclear_deterrence.pdf.

4. The multilateral nuclear force proposal died for several reasons, including its inability to add to extended deterrence measures and the possibility that it would violate the requirement for a centrally controllable, unified strategic nuclear arsenal. Further, U.S. officials anticipated that European allies would not support such a plan once they realized the United States would retain its veto over launch and that NATO nations would be expected to share the costs of maintaining the force. See David N. Schwartz, NATO’s Nuclear Dilemmas (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 1983), pp. 94–95.

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