

Focus: The Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) Regime in Crisis (Summary)

Essay: The Nuclear Non-Proliferation Regime at a Critical Juncture

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Russia's nuclear saber-rattling amid its invasion of Ukraine has eroded the nuclear taboo, and this has coincided with a looming arms-control vacuum created by the expiration of New START. Together, these developments have brought the international nuclear order to a critical juncture at which nuclear salience is returning while norms and institutions are retreating. The lapse of New START risks not only the loss of quantitative constraints but also the erosion of confidence-building measures, which in turn could fuel threat inflation premised on worst-case assumptions and trigger a self-reinforcing cycle of arms racing. At the same time, China's nuclear expansion is accelerating a shift toward a tripolar strategic landscape. The consolidation of North Korea's de facto nuclear status, the impasse in nuclear negotiations with Iran, and the growing normalization of counterproliferation by force could all spark regional chain reactions in the nuclear sphere. To prevent polarization from hardening, it is essential to build "loss-minimization" guardrails by concluding voluntary arrangements on warhead ceilings and confidence-building measures, establishing crisis communication channels, maintaining nuclear test moratoria, preserving the IAEA-based foundation, and reforming dialogue and review processes. These steps are key to sustaining the global nuclear nonproliferation regime going forward, and Japan bears a responsibility to serve as a bridge, both as the only country to have suffered atomic bombings and as a US ally. If the 2026 NPT Review Conference fails, the momentum and effectiveness of dialogue will dissipate. In that sense, it is a crucial litmus test.

1 Japan's Roles in Nuclear Disarmament and Non-Proliferation with a Focus on Treaties to Regulate and Prohibit Nuclear Weapons

Tatsuya Abe (Professor, Department of International Politics, School of International Politics, Economics and Communication, Aoyama Gakuin University)

Japan is the only nation to have ever suffered atomic bombings in war. This unique position has been, and undoubtedly will continue to be, a driving force behind international efforts toward nuclear abolition. Since the 1995 NPT Review and Extension Conference, Japan has taken more proactive roles in achieving nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation under the NPT review process. Despite the current severe realities surrounding nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation, Japan must continue to fulfill its own roles in these areas. Since the government identifies and emphasizes its role as a bridge-builder, it ought now to build new bridges with the States Parties to the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW). Should it prove reluctant to do so, perhaps Japan's bridge-builder role could be undertaken by actors other than the government. What is crucial is that each actor embodying "Japan" plays its respective part, acts as befits its position, shares and respects each other's actions, and remains open to criticism.

2 Post-New START Nuclear Arms Control and the US-China-Russia Relationship

Hirofumi Tosaki (Associate Professor, The Center for Peace / Graduate School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Hiroshima University)

With the expiration of the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) in February 2026, half century of US-Russia nuclear arms control has come to a de fact end. This stagnation stems from structural changes in the international system—the relative decline of US power and the rise of China and Russia—alongside China’s rapid nuclear force modernization. A trilateral nuclear balance is structurally unstable, and the expansion of weapons with strategic implications further complicates deterrence calculations. Consequently, coordinating interests and converging common interests through nuclear arms control has also become extremely difficult. Amidst the challenges of revitalizing arms control, it is necessary to first reconceptualize arms control not merely as a framework for weapon reductions, but as an ongoing political process involving dialogue and learning. Japan needs to seamlessly integrate deterrence enhancement with arms control, while pursuing meaningful, sustained dialogue with nuclear-weapon states, including China.

3 Critical Points in Iran’s Nuclear Decision-Making: The Logic of Regime Survival and Nuclear Doctrine Realignment Following June 2025 Attacks on Nuclear Facilities, and Implications for the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Order

Junichi Sumi (Principal Deputy Director, Resource Security Division, Economic Affairs Bureau, Ministry of Foreign Affairs)

This paper analyzes how Iran’s nuclear decision-making could evolve following a US-Israeli attack on its nuclear facilities in June 2025, focusing on a security outlook centered on regime survival, transformation in deterrence structures, and the reorganization of its decision-making mechanisms. Iran’s nuclear policy has traditionally relied on a nuclear hedging strategy—eschewing an explicit decision to acquire nuclear weapons while securing deterrence and bargaining leverage through the development of latent capabilities. This strategy has functioned within a multilayered deterrence structure linked to ballistic missile capabilities and a network of proxy forces. However, recent rapid changes in the regional strategic environment and the increasing salience of direct military confrontation have significantly undermined its underlying premises. In particular, the erosion of the two pillars of deterrence—proxy forces and missile capabilities—along with diminishing prospects for diplomatic resolution, growing domestic instability, shifting public opinion regarding nuclear weapons, the erosion of normative taboos, and the restructuring of decision-making within the regime, coupled with the articulation of a new defense doctrine, have collectively created conditions that could push Iran from nuclear hedging toward nuclear latency and potentially even breakout.

This paper examines how these factors affect intra-regime consensus-building and the redesign of external deterrence under crisis conditions, with the aim of provide comprehensive and multidimensional analysis of the range of Iran’s potential nuclear policy choices and their strategic implications.

4 North Korea’s Nuclear Weapon Development and the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT)

Sukeyuki Ichimasa (Head, Cyber Security Division, Policy Studies Department, National Institute for Defense Studies)

North Korea’s development of nuclear weapons raises the question of what role the international nuclear non-proliferation regime, centered on the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), can play against proliferators lacking the will to denuclearize. The fait accompli of a North Korean nuclear arsenal diverges from demands for denuclearization, while Security Council sanctions, coupled with insufficient engagement from China and Russia, have failed to halt expansion of this arsenal. The deepening

of Russia-North Korea relations since the start of Russia's invasion of Ukraine risks indirectly encouraging North Korea's nuclear development, making an early end to the war crucial. Keeping China engaged in North Korea's denuclearization, despite the former's waning influence continues to be of great significance. Additionally, the Trump administration in the United States, which has pursued nuclear non-proliferation through military force, including the use of decapitation strikes, must be urged to pursue denuclearization negotiations from the perspective of avoiding unintended escalation. With no foreseeable path to verifiable denuclearization, concerned nations must maintain the normative value of the NPT while drawing in major powers to chart a negotiation path leading from flexible responses to and risk management of North Korea's nuclear program toward eventual denuclearization.

5 Politicization of the NPT Review Process: Successes, Failures, and Political Compromises

Wakana Mukai (Associate Professor, Department of International Relations, Faculty of International Relations, Asia University)

This paper analyzes the politicization of the NPT review process in relation to criteria for evaluating success/failure and institutional structures and, in doing so, reexamines the functions and limitations of the review process in an attempt to garner a deeper understanding of the NPT regime's sustainability. While designed as forums for evaluating treaty implementation, the NPT Review Conferences have in practice become venues for political negotiations where competing interpretations of security perceptions and norms intersect. Consequently, the adoption of Final Documents has depended heavily on the feasibility of political compromise. Meanwhile, the NPT has persisted due to its normative legitimacy and institutional indispensability despite intrinsic issues such as the abstract nature of its obligations and institutional imbalances. This paper points out that politicization should not be viewed merely as an institutional failure but rather as a manifestation of the structural tensions and challenges that are inherent in the NPT.