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NPT at a Breaking Point: Seven Fault Lines for the 2026 Review Conference

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The Illusion of Motion

Every Review Conference, the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) undergoes a ritualistic performance. Delegations convene, draft texts circulate, and after weeks of debate, the conference either collapses in acrimony or claims “success” through a consensus document carefully stripped of substance.

Like a broken record, the same fault lines emerge every time. The same red lines are drawn and defended with familiar rigidity. The result, too, is predictable: failure to advance the Treaty’s disarmament obligations in any meaningful way.

The NPT has become, in many ways, a *stage* rather than a forum – a place where states restate familiar positions with little realistic prospect of resolution. And while the oft-repeated argument that the world is better off with the NPT than without it remains true, the pattern of dysfunction is so entrenched that a more basic question now arises: *can the NPT deliver on its promise of nuclear disarmament?*

With geopolitical tensions at their highest point in decades, the 2026 Review Conference will test that question more sharply than any in recent memory. The treaty’s three pillars – non-proliferation, disarmament, and peaceful use – are all under considerable strain. The profound lack of progress on disarmament, in particular, has damaged the credibility of the entire regime. Faith in the NPT’s fairness and capacity to deliver is collapsing in real time.

Two consecutive Review Conferences (2015 and 2022) failed to agree on a final document. A third failure in 2026 would not be another broken ritual; it would mark a dangerous

threshold in the legitimacy crisis. The system cannot survive indefinitely on such dysfunction.

Below are seven fault lines that are likely to shape the upcoming Review Conference. Each exposes underlying tensions that, if left unaddressed, will continue to erode both the Treaty's credibility and its capacity to serve as a foundation for genuine progress on disarmament.

1. Benchmarks for Disarmament

Article VI stands at the core of the NPT, the promise that nuclear-weapon states would pursue negotiations on disarmament "in good faith." More than half a century later, that promise remains aspirational at best.

Nuclear-weapon states (NWS) continue to reject concrete frameworks – specific timelines, verification provisions, or other measurable criteria – that would translate rhetoric into accountability. Despite repeated calls from a majority of states parties for credible, time-bound steps toward elimination, NWS continue to rely on abstract reaffirmations of their undertaking to pursue disarmament and the "eventual" achievement of a world without nuclear weapons.

The 2010 Action Plan, once heralded as a breakthrough, was never rigorously implemented or updated. Its 64-point roadmap, intended to make progress tangible, has become a checklist of forgotten commitments. Successive Review Conferences have been content to reference it symbolically rather than to measure actual performance against its benchmarks.

This reluctance to accept measurable progress has effectively transformed Article VI from a legal obligation into a matter of political discretion. Review cycles now treat the question of "benchmarks" as a procedural irritant rather than a substantive duty. Without clear metrics, disarmament remains a moving target.

The 2026 Review Conference will again test whether "good faith" can be measured in anything other than words or whether the absence of accountability will remain the defining feature of the regime's disarmament record.

2. Nuclear Modernization

Even as they reaffirm disarmament obligations, NWS are investing billions in modernizing their nuclear forces, extending their arsenals well into the future. Delivery systems are

being replaced, warheads upgraded, and new categories of “low-yield” or “tactical” weapons considered.

This modernization is not a neutral exercise in maintenance. It entrenches the role of nuclear weapons in national and alliance doctrines, normalizes their continued existence, and undermines the credibility of disarmament commitments. The claim that modernization is “consistent with Article VI” is patently untenable.

When challenged about the long-term impact of these modernization programs on nuclear disarmament efforts, nuclear-armed states routinely justify them in the name of maintaining a “safe and secure” arsenal. Of course, safety and security are not in dispute. What is at issue is whether perpetual renewal of nuclear capabilities, whatever the rationale, can ever be reconciled with the obligation to eliminate them.

Some states also seem to want to reopen the door to renewed nuclear testing, arguing that new designs and technologies demand validation. Such a relapse would erode decades of restraint and accelerate the unraveling of the test moratorium that has underpinned the non-proliferation regime since the 1990s.

Moreover, “nuclear risk reduction” has become the new vocabulary of responsibility, focusing on managing dangers rather than eliminating them. While such measures are worthwhile, they cannot substitute for disarmament. Without firm commitments to reduce arsenals, de-alert weapons, and limit their role in doctrines, risk reduction risks becoming a mechanism for sustaining nuclear weapons indefinitely, not a bridge to their elimination.

3. The NPT–TPNW Relationship

The relationship between the NPT and the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) will again expose a divide in the nuclear disarmament regime.

For many stakeholders both in and outside government, the TPNW is not a challenge to the NPT but its natural extension – a concrete instance of implementation that gives renewed life to the NPT’s disarmament imperative. It reaffirms the Treaty’s ultimate objective and injects a long-overdue moral and humanitarian dimension into a process that has not delivered on the promise of nuclear disarmament. Non-nuclear-weapon states, in pursuing the TPNW, are in fact exercising their own NPT responsibility to advance a nuclear-weapon-free world.

Critics who have opposed the TPNW since its negotiation, particularly the nuclear-armed states and their allies, have done little to disguise the deeper issue: an entrenched reluctance to engage with any initiative that might unsettle the doctrine of indefinite deterrence. It is also diplomatically off-putting for nuclear-armed states and their allies to flatly dismiss or scoff at a treaty clearly valued by the majority of NPT members.

The 2026 Review Conference may face the familiar semantic battle over whether to “acknowledge,” “note,” or “recognize” the TPNW in its final text. But beneath the wordplay lies a clash between those who see abolition as an urgent obligation and those who indefinitely defer it. Meaningful engagement with the TPNW would expose the widening gap between rhetorical support for disarmament and the policy reality of permanent nuclear possession.

The NPT and TPNW are not rivals but companions in the same enterprise. The two communities would do well to avoid talking past one another, as doing so only increases the risk of institutionalizing division instead of building complementarity. Both should also recognize that progress toward nuclear disarmament can, and should, be welcomed whether it occurs within the NPT, through the TPNW, across overlapping initiatives, or outside either framework.

4. Nuclear Sharing

Few issues so reliably capture the NPT’s structural paralysis as the decades-long debate over NATO nuclear sharing. It is a prime example of repetition with no credible path to a constructive outcome. The argument replays at every Review Conference with the same positions, the same justifications, and the same absence of movement.

Current arrangements under which nuclear weapons are deployed in non-nuclear countries are clearly misaligned with both the letter and the spirit of the Treaty, particularly Article I, which prohibits the transfer of nuclear weapons to non-nuclear states, and Article II, which prohibits their acceptance. Critics rightly contend that joint planning, training, and potential wartime use by non-nuclear allies amount to de facto nuclear possession and that such practices undermine the NPT’s credibility by normalizing exceptions for allies while demanding strict compliance from others.

NATO members, for their part, maintain that these arrangements are fully consistent with the NPT and argue that the weapons remain under U.S. control at all times. They also frame nuclear sharing as an essential element of the alliance’s collective-defence posture,

claiming that any change would weaken deterrence and alliance cohesion, especially in an increasingly volatile security environment.

The recent deployment of Russian nuclear weapons to Belarus has further complicated this debate. It illustrates how long-standing justifications offered by NATO to defend its own nuclear-sharing practices have eroded the Alliance's moral leverage to challenge similar actions elsewhere. Moscow's move is framed as a mirror image of NATO policy – an argument that, while disingenuous, is politically effective precisely because the NPT has tolerated ambiguity for decades.

As the 2026 Review Conference approaches, the nuclear-sharing issue will again test whether the Treaty can apply its rules consistently or whether political convenience will continue to define legality. Unless this double standard is confronted, the NPT's authority as a universal framework for restraint will continue to weaken.

5. The Pursuit of a Middle East Free from Nuclear Weapons

The contradictions of the global non-proliferation regime are starkly visible in the Middle East, where decades of unfulfilled commitments and selective enforcement have exposed the double standards that have come to define the approach to regional actors. The 1995 Resolution on the Middle East, agreed as the political trade-off for the Treaty's indefinite extension, called for a regional zone free of nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction. Three decades later, that goal remains unfulfilled.

At the 2015 Review Conference, efforts to advance a Middle East zone, and to adopt a consensus final document, were derailed not by regional resistance but by the deference of the United States, the United Kingdom, and Canada to Israeli objections. Israel is one of only four states in the world that remain outside the NPT, and the only possessor of nuclear weapons in the region, with an arsenal beyond any international oversight.

The Iran nuclear deal (JCPOA) stands as a mirror to that dysfunction. Legitimate concerns about Iran's past activities and its potential to develop a nuclear weapons capability persist and must be addressed transparently and verifiably. Yet what was once celebrated as a triumph of multilateral diplomacy now illustrates the fragility of negotiated restraint when political will fades. The United States' withdrawal from the JCPOA in 2018, despite Iran's verified compliance, and the subsequent acquiescence of the E3 to U.S. secondary sanctions marked a profound failure of custodianship over the landmark deal.

Iran has predictably moved away from compliance, while European powers have moved to enact “snapback” sanctions, steps that deepen mistrust and further distance Tehran from the very commitments the NPT seeks to uphold. The question remains whether Iran is to be bound by the standards of the NPT and the IAEA, or by the shifting demands of individual states enforced under threat of attack or crippling sanctions.

The collapse of the JCPOA and the paralysis of the Middle East zone process together symbolize a regional order where non-proliferation norms apply selectively, if at all. Just as Iran must not acquire a nuclear weapon, so too must Israel disarm.

6. Ukraine and the Shadow of Nuclear Use

The war in Ukraine has brought into stark relief the real-time risks of nuclear deterrence. What for decades existed as an abstract theoretical model is now unfolding in practice, complete with signaling, brinkmanship, and the persistent threat of escalation. The spectre of nuclear use, once unimaginable in Europe, now hangs over the conflict and, by extension, the global non-proliferation regime.

It is convenient for many to attribute this renewed danger solely to Russia’s aggression – and Moscow bears undeniable responsibility for introducing reckless nuclear weapons rhetoric into a conventional war. But the deeper problem runs through the entire nuclear order.

To be sure, the risk of nuclear weapons in the Ukraine war emanates primarily not from Putin’s words, but from the very existence of nuclear weapons and the shared reliance on deterrence doctrines that all nuclear-armed states – including those lamenting the current situation – continue to defend. The same logic invoked to justify Russia’s arsenal underpins the policies of every other possessor.

For many states observing the war from afar, this new phase of nuclear anxiety is not only about Europe but about precedent. The message to the world is unmistakable: nuclear weapons are not merely defensive instruments but tools for enabling impunity. The longer this perception endures, the more it corrodes faith in disarmament promises and fuels arguments elsewhere that security can only be guaranteed by possession. What unfolds in Ukraine today risks normalizing precisely the type of conduct that the NPT was designed to prevent.

This reality will cast a long shadow over the 2026 Review Conference. A system that treats nuclear weapons as essential to security while promising their eventual elimination cannot

indefinitely sustain both propositions. The Ukraine war has made this contradiction visible in real time. Unless the NPT process can confront not only proliferation but the inherent instability of deterrence itself, it risks managing symptoms while ignoring the disease.

7. Proliferation Pressures and the New Nuclear Chatter

For decades, the NPT's greatest success was to contain proliferation. That success can no longer be assumed. A mix of geopolitical instability, regional rivalries, and eroding trust in the disarmament bargain has reopened debates once thought settled. What was once a near-universal taboo is again treated in some quarters as a rational response to insecurity.

Growing insecurity, technological diffusion, and perceived inequities have revived nuclear ambitions in multiple regions. Talk of a "Eurobomb" in Western Europe, small modular reactors marketed as dual-use technologies, and renewed interest in nuclear energy in states with fragile governance all point to a new era of latent proliferation.

While horizontal proliferation (more states acquiring nuclear weapons) remains the immediate concern for many, vertical proliferation (the expansion of existing arsenals) is no less destabilizing. The ongoing buildup of nuclear arsenals by existing possessors, through both expansion and modernization, reinforces the perception that nuclear weapons remain indispensable to security. Such actions not only undermine disarmament commitments but also erode the credibility of appeals for restraint directed at others.

The longer nuclear-armed states modernize and rationalize indefinite deterrence, the harder it becomes to sustain the moral and political case for restraint elsewhere. When elimination is treated as optional by some, proliferation pressures will persist as a byproduct of possession. Put simply: as long as nuclear weapons exist, others will want them and the risk of use will increase.

The 2026 Review Conference must reassert that non-proliferation cannot survive without visible disarmament progress, and that technological proliferation, left unchecked, may soon outpace political control. The durability of the NPT will depend less on its legal provisions than on whether its members can restore confidence that restraint is rewarded, and non-compliance is met with credible consequences rather than political indulgence.

From Fault Lines to Foundations

The seven issues outlined above are not discrete; they are interdependent. The absence of benchmarks enables modernization. Modernization erodes trust. Eroded trust fuels

regional insecurity. Insecurity drives proliferation, which in turn deepens reliance on deterrence. The cycle sustains itself, and so does the paralysis it produces.

The NPT's core promise has become dangerously hollow. Non-nuclear states have upheld restraint, while nuclear powers have turned their end of the deal into a performance of compliance without consequence. The promise of "good faith" has been replaced by procedural theater, where progress is measured by the survival of process rather than results.

The regime now faces a choice: to remain a stage for ritual repetition or to reclaim its purpose as a forum for genuine negotiation leading to concrete results. The same unresolved disputes – from nuclear sharing to regional disarmament, from deterrence doctrines to disarmament benchmarks – reappear each cycle like ghosts of unfinished business. The NPT cannot afford another round of managed paralysis disguised as consensus.

Without a fundamental shift in political will, what lies ahead is not simply another failed meeting but the slow unraveling of faith in multilateral disarmament itself. The NPT may endure institutionally, but endurance without relevance undermines its very purpose.

If the 2026 Review Conference is to break the impasse, it must deliver more than the appearance of unity amid paralysis. Success must be redefined not as consensus but as candor, and the courage to confront contradictions that have long been managed instead of resolved.