

US-Russia Nuclear Dialogue: The Next 50 Years of the NPT

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I was inspired by one of the speakers in the previous session to take a somewhat more teleological approach to our topic for today than I might normally. As a result, in preparing my remarks, I was thinking a great deal about what we *want* the NPT to do in the next fifty years and working backwards to determine how best to achieve those goals. Obviously, I am not able to say what the world will look like in 2071, so it is hard to focus on specifics, but I think that, no matter what happens, we are going to want the NPT to prevent the emergence of any more nuclear weapon possessing states. We have nine nuclear weapon possessors today, only five of which can be party to the Treaty. How do we prevent this overall number from going to 10 or more over the course of the next five decades? Put more simply, how do we keep non-nuclear weapon States non-nuclear?

There are a number of ways to answer this question, but I see two priority areas within the NPT context on which it will be important to focus in order to achieve this goal.

The first of these priorities should be ensuring that the grand bargain at the center of the NPT remains credible, which means that all States Parties, but in particular the nuclear weapon States, need to engage in what a majority of NPT States Parties consider to be good faith negotiations toward nuclear disarmament (and general and complete disarmament). Those negotiations themselves can take place adjacent to the NPT through the P5 process, for example, or outside the NPT in a bi- or multilateral format, but I think it is particularly important that the Treaty continue to appear capable of enforcing a legally binding obligation upon States Parties to work toward achieving a world free of nuclear weapons.

The second of these priorities should be on ensuring that the NPT continues to fulfill its institutional role within the disarmament and nonproliferation regime. History and scholarship tell us that fora like the NPT play an essential role in reinforcing nuclear self-restraint, and I think we want to be sure the Treaty continues to shore up nonproliferation as a shared value—even among states with very different priorities.

These are two fairly obvious goals, but it is not so easy to achieve them. In fact, I see a number of philosophical divides that I believe stand in the way, two of which I want to mention in particular.

The first, and most obvious, of these is that NPT States Parties have always had different understandings of what constitute “good faith negotiations” under Article VI. Oftentimes, we attribute these differences of opinion to disagreements over the acceptable *pace* of nuclear disarmament, and we certainly hear frustration from the non-nuclear weapon States in particular about the fact that the nuclear weapon States are not moving quickly enough in fulfilling their obligations. Increasingly, however, I see these disagreements as a manifestation of two fundamentally opposing views about the *relationship* between disarmament and international security. On the one hand, you may have some states within the NPT who believe that arms control or arms reductions can improve the security environment, while on the other hand, you have other states who believe that the security environment needs to improve before further

progress toward disarmament can be made. Which of these views is correct? I do not know, but my sense is that the way States answer this question is very closely tied to what they see as the appropriate speed with which Article VI can and should be fulfilled—which help to explain why this remains a major source of disagreement.

Second, I would say that there are different beliefs among states parties about the overarching *purpose* of NPT final documents. On one hand are those parties who would argue that outcome documents are a summation of a shared vision for treaty implementation and for agreeing upon a series of concrete steps toward its operationalization. On the other hand are states who regard final documents as a reflection of the current state of play—a snapshot of what was possible and desirable in the moment at which they were adopted that may not necessarily endure beyond that review cycle. Which of these perspectives is right? The answer, I posit, lives somewhere outside of the literal language around the strengthened review process.

These are obviously not new problems, but to bring our discussion for today back to the present, I heard these debates crystalize around two opposing views at the 2019 NPT PrepCom.

The first of these is what I would describe as the TPNW versus CEND debate around nuclear disarmament. Proponents of the Ban treaty argue that it can serve two purposes. One is to fill a legal gap left by Article VI and the other is to increase the normative pressure on nuclear weapon States to make progress toward nuclear disarmament. Both of these arguments assume that, with sufficient political will, nuclear disarmament will happen irrespective of the overarching security environment. At least under the previous US administration, this perspective ran directly counter to the CEND initiative, which more or less centered around the idea that there needed to be improvements to the security environment before progress on Article VI could be made. I think the proponents of either of these two perspectives will have a hard time convincing their opponents in the other camp, and these divisions run the risk of further undermining the credibility of the grand bargain at the center of the NPT.

The second bone of contention I see relates to how we should treat past NPT commitments: are they an artifact of the context in which they were negotiated that are no longer valid, or are they something bigger that should be revisited and remeasured after their adoption? How do we address them in the NPT setting, and what kind of final document should be pursued when States Parties next gather in New York as a result?

I cannot resolve these debates, but I do think that, if we want to set the NPT down a good path for its next 50 years, it is worth thinking about some modest approaches we might take to prevent these philosophical disagreements from standing in the way of achieving the objectives I identified at the outset of my remarks. Obviously, the US and Russia cannot provide all the solutions here, but in keeping with the theme of our dialogue meeting, I do think they have some opportunities to present an alternative to the dichotomies I've identified here that might be worth considering.

First, with respect to nuclear disarmament, I would like to see the United States and Russia actively promote the view espoused in the joint Putin-Biden summit in Geneva that “even in periods of tension, [the US and Russia] are able to make progress on our shared goals of ensuring

predictability in the strategic sphere, reducing the risk of armed conflicts and the threat of nuclear war.” This view neither endorses the notion that disarmament will lead to improvements in the security environment or, conversely, that disarmament is conditioned upon improvements in the security environment. Instead, it aligns with the actual experience of the US and Soviet Union/Russia within this Treaty and elsewhere, which is that nuclear cooperation is so important that it should, and can, be isolated from bigger ups and downs in the superpower relationship.

Second, when we consider the normative value of the NPT review process, I would like to see the US and Russia as depositary states issue a joint recommitment to the Treaty itself and to reiterate their shared view of the importance of nonproliferation despite other challenges in their bilateral relationship. In concert, I’d also like to see them take a leadership role in revisiting those disarmament and nonproliferation measures agreed to in past review conferences that still make sense and are worth picking up again. These might include things like recommitting to their nuclear test moratoria prior to the entry into force of the CTBT or pursuing specific approaches relating to nuclear risk reduction in relation to Action 5 of the 2010 Action Plan. Even if the Russian and American delegations in New York are not recommitting to every single agreed outcome of past NPT review conferences, I think some revisiting of past agreed measures would help reassure nuclear and non-nuclear weapon States alike that that, even though the specifics might change, there *are* shared values across the NPT states parties that even two nuclear rivals continue to agree upon.

Third and most impactful, though, I think it’s going to be important for the US and Russia to—at least publicly—set aside their differences in the NPT setting and stop engaging in the kinds of vitriolic rights of reply that we’ve seen over the course of the last review cycle. More than anything, I think this act of self-restraint will help to reinforce the long-term credibility of the NPT, whether as it relates to the grand bargain itself or the normative considerations to which I made reference at the outset. I believe that the resulting improvement in atmospheric conditions will go a long way toward advancing those larger goals I identified at the top of my remarks.

Thank you.