

LEARN ABOUT NUCLEAR WEAPONS

NPT History

The NPT stems from a worry about living in a world with many nuclear weapon states. After the US bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, first the Soviet Union, then the UK, France and lastly China acquired their own nuclear weapons. The Cold War terror balance between the US and the Soviet Union was unstable, and more actors with nuclear weapons would multiply the risks of use of nuclear weapons – intentionally or by mistake.

The Foreign Minister of Ireland, Frank Aiken, in 1958 suggested a treaty to regulate the proliferation and disarmament of nuclear weapons. After negotiations, the NPT was opened for signatures in 1968. Finland was the first country to sign, followed by a number of states during the first year. In 1970 the NPT entered into force. Not until 1992 had all nuclear weapon states signed the NPT.¹ As of April 2008, a few smaller island states, India, Israel, Pakistan, and North Korea are not members to the treaty.

The treaty stated that after 25 years a conference would be convened among States Parties to decide whether to extend the NPT for a limited period of time or indefinitely. In 1995 States Parties met and decided to extend the NPT indefinitely.

To have or not to have nukes

The NPT divides states into nuclear weapon states and non-nuclear weapon states. Nuclear weapon states, according to the NPT, are those who possessed nuclear weapons in 1967, before the treaty was opened for signatures. These are the US, the Soviet Union (today Russia), the UK, France, and China –the five permanent members of the UN Security Council. The issue of “haves” and “have-nots” has been controversial from the beginning.

All other states apart from these five chose to sign the NPT as non-nuclear weapon states. India, Israel, and Pakistan never joined the NPT, but have been urged by the Member States to give up their nuclear weapons and join the Treaty as non-nuclear-weapon states. The NPT gives Member States the right to withdraw from the treaty with three months notice, as North Korea chose to do in 2003, when it tested a nuclear device and declared itself a nuclear weapon state. No other state has withdrawn, which shows the strength of the treaty. Most countries wish to live in a world free from nuclear weapons.

The NPT imposes different obligations on nuclear weapon states and non-nuclear weapon states:

- The states possessing nuclear weapons promise not to transfer nuclear weapons to any recipient. They also cannot help or encourage non-nuclear weapon states to develop nuclear weapons. This means all forms of trade in, or transfer of, nuclear weapons, parts of

weapons, or technology and materials that make it possible for new states to produce nuclear weapons are strictly forbidden. The NPT is also the only legally binding treaty that mandates disarmament by the nuclear weapon states. The treaty, however, sets no time limit for when this has to be accomplished.

- Under the NPT, non-nuclear weapon states undertake not to accept or manufacture nuclear weapons. All states have the right to so-called peaceful use of nuclear technology (i.e., nuclear power reactors for energy production). Nuclear power reactors in non-nuclear weapon states must be inspected by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to assure that no state uses its nuclear power program to develop nuclear weapons.



Three pillars

The NPT has three main objectives:

- preventing the proliferation of nuclear weapons to new states
- eliminating existing nuclear arsenals
- facilitating the right of all states to develop peaceful uses of nuclear power.

Different countries tend to emphasize one or more of these three "pillars." The nuclear weapon states are often more interested in discussing the risk of nuclear weapons proliferation to new states. These states tend to express satisfaction with the pace of their disarmament undertakings, and assert that the focus must be on nonproliferation, which they see as the more important security issue.

Non-nuclear weapon states, on the other hand, more often pay attention to the need for complete elimination of nuclear arsenals. This, many states uphold, would contribute to an increase in international security and reduce the cravinging for nuclear weapons by other states. Disarmament of existing arsenals further reduces the risk of nuclear war – be it deliberate or by mistake.

The global disarmament movement has sharply criticized the third pillar on peaceful use of nuclear

technology, claiming that nuclear power reactors inherently create a capacity for developing nuclear weapons. Used nuclear fuel contains plutonium that can be reprocessed into weapons material. The same facilities that are used for enriching uranium for power reactors can be used to enrich weapons grade uranium. The NPT calls for IAEA inspections of nuclear facilities, but no inspections are required for nuclear weapons facilities or even nuclear power plants in nuclear weapon states – a situation that many find untenable.

Review Conferences

Every five years the States Parties to the NPT meet for a Review Conference (RevCon) of the treaty. The RevCon is to assess the implementation of the treaty and make decisions on how to more efficiently implement the undertakings of the member states. The RevCon makes all its decisions by consensus, which means all member states have to agree for a decision to be made. Member states take turn in chairing the RevCons.

During the month-long five-year Review, delegations from all States Parties come together in a general debate. Each state gives a statement on disarmament undertakings and important issues. The general debate is often lengthy and predictable, as states often reiterate the same issues year after year. Parallel to the general debate, negotiations take place behind closed doors. During these negotiations, member states try to agree on an agenda and a program of work for the conference.

After the general debate member states conduct their work in three Main Committees, each with a number of subsidiary bodies. The Committees basically correspond to the three pillars of the NPT: nonproliferation, disarmament, and peaceful uses of nuclear technology. The subsidiary bodies may deal with issues such as security assurances, the Middle East, or how to deal with withdrawal from the Treaty. Parallel with the Committees are meetings in so-called regional groups. By the end of the conference, all States Parties are expected to agree on a final document, which will become binding for the member states.

The regional groups consist of the Western Group, the Eastern European Group and the largest group called the Non Aligned Movement. The regional groups are a legacy from the Cold War divide into West, East and non-aligned states.

Member states, alone or in groups, may submit reports and working papers to the RevCon, that set the basis for the work of the Committees. Documents from Preparatory Committees are also used.

Preparatory Committees

Preparatory Committee (PrepCom) sessions are held once every year (except for the year immediately following a Review Conference). PrepComs last about ten days and — like the Reviews — consist of general debates followed by work in committees, called Clusters. The three Clusters are divided along the lines of the three pillars of the NPT: nonproliferation, disarmament and peaceful uses of nuclear technology.

During the PrepComs, many working papers are tabled, and the Chair drafts a Final Summary statement, but none of these documents are binding. Rather, these statements, working papers, summaries, and reports are to be used as assessment tools at the Review Conference. Only the RevCons produce a consensus document.

The role of civil society

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Disarmament NGOs from around the world participate in PrepComs and RevCons. General debates in both meetings are open to accredited NGOs, while working meetings are held behind closed doors by Member States. Civil society is usually allotted one half-day session to present statements to the government representatives. Half a day is a small fraction of a month-long conference, but the hall is usually filled with interested listeners.

Civil society – ranging from grassroots organizations and research institutes, to religious groups and academia – usually arranges a dense program of side events during the conference: seminars, lectures, debates, workshops, and briefings with government representatives. During the NPT RevCon in 2005 more than 2,000 members of global civil society attended – the largest number ever.

Civil society's participation in, monitoring of and reporting from these events is an important part of disarmament work. It increases pressure on member states to adhere to their undertakings under the treaty. Civil society organizations often have knowledge and expertise in specific topics that may be useful for member states.

Many NGOs find the implementation of the NPT too slow, particularly the undertaking of nuclear weapon states to eliminate their arsenals. During the RevCons and PrepComs, States Parties discuss how the treaty can be strengthened. Many NGOs have put forward suggestions on strengthening the treaty. Increased reporting on disarmament efforts, a strong verification regime to ensure that nuclear facilities in non-nuclear weapon states remain for peaceful purposes and to ensure that nuclear weapon states disarm, and a focused debate on tactical nuclear weapons currently not included in disarmament debates are a few examples of important ways to strengthen the NPT.²

1 http://www.carnegieendowment.org/files/Tracking_Ch02map.pdf

2 <http://www.reachingcriticalwill.org/pubs/MajorProposals.pdf>