

LEARN ABOUT NUCLEAR WEAPONS

Defining a security assurance

In order to rid non-nuclear weapon states from the immediate threat of a nuclear attack from a nuclear weapon state, there is something called security assurances. A positive security assurance (PSA) means that a nuclear weapon state pledges to come to the aid of a non-nuclear weapon state if that state is the victim of a nuclear attack. An negative security assurance (NSA) is a declaration that a country will not use nuclear weapons against a non-nuclear weapon state.

There is no official treaty regarding negative security assurances, however, all official nuclear weapon states have issued security pledges. The five nuclear powers harmonised their positive security assurances in April 1995, in UN Security Council Resolution 984.¹

NPT 1995

During the Review Conference of the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT) 1995, many states required the nuclear weapon states to issue security assurances to non-nuclear weapon states. On 6 April 1995, the US, Russia, the UK and France put forward a common declaration to the UN Security Council, stating the importance of security assurances. This declaration said, States Parties to the NPT as non-nuclear weapon states have given up the possibility of acquiring nuclear weapons, shall be assured against the use or threat of use of nuclear weapons. The same day, China issued a statement undertaking not to threaten or use nuclear weapons against a non-nuclear weapon state.²

States Parties to the 1995 NPT Review Conference accepted a package of decisions on the continued work under the Treaty. One of these decisions regarded negative security assurances, calling for nuclear weapon states to take further steps in assuring non-nuclear weapon states against a nuclear attack – preferably in the form of an internationally binding treaty.³

An international convention?

Many states want to see an international convention on negative security assurances. Such a convention would be part of international law, clearly binding nuclear weapon states to their commitments not to threaten or use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear weapon states. So far, no such treaty exists, to the annoyance of many non-nuclear weapon states.

Negative security assurances are also not in line with the US National Security Strategy adopted in 2002. According to this, the US can use nuclear weapons to retaliate an attack with nuclear, biological or chemical weapons.⁴ The demands from non-nuclear weapon states on security assurances have increased since the US policy was revealed.

Stop nuclear weapon proliferation

Negative security assurances would be a means to reducing the nuclear proliferation threat, as non-nuclear weapon states provided with a negative security assurance does not need to consider acquiring nuclear weapons for its national security. Several states, e.g. Japan and South Korea have put off their nuclear weapon plans after receiving negative security assurances from nuclear weapon states. The fact that India did not receive negative security assurances from any nuclear weapon state likely contributed to India's acquiring of nuclear weapons.

Similarly, the fact that North Korea for numerous years have desired a nuclear weapon programme, is probably caused by a North Korean worry about a US attack – conventional or nuclear. In all negotiations, North Korea has asked for negative security assurances from the US. Thus, had negative security assurances been international law, the nuclear crisis in the Korean Peninsula could possibly have been avoided.⁵

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- 1 <http://www.nti.org/db/china/engdocs/unsc984.htm>
 - 2 <http://www.ppnn.soton.ac.uk/bb2/Bb2secK.pdf>
 - 3 <http://www.reachingcriticalwill.org/legal/npt/1995dec.html> recommendation 8
 - 4 <http://www.reachingcriticalwill.org/legal/npt/issues.html#NSA>
 - 5 http://www.pugwash.org/reports/nw/pugwash-mpi/GSIFactSheet_NSAs.pdf