The TPNW to Save the NPT

—Common Ground in Fulfilling Nuclear Disarmament Obligations

Kimiaki Kawai

Professor and Deputy Director, Research Center for Nuclear Weapons Abolition (RECNA), Nagasaki University

Introduction

From April 27 to May 22 of this year, the 2026 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) Review Conference was held at United Nations Headquarters in New York. Following the failures in 2015 and 2022, this marked the third consecutive time that a final document could not be adopted, leading to concerns that confidence in the NPT regime has been significantly shaken.

At this review conference, geopolitical conflicts—such as Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the use of force by the United States and Israel against the backdrop of the Iranian nuclear issue—cast a shadow over the discussions. Furthermore, the deep divide between nuclear-weapon states, which are reluctant to pursue nuclear disarmament, and non-nuclear-weapon states, which call for it, was once again brought into sharp relief. Nuclear-weapon states argued that disarmament faces difficulties because of the deteriorating security environment [1]. Non-nuclear-weapon states, on the other hand, criticized the NPT, stating that it risks becoming a system that effectively permits nuclear-weapon states to retain their nuclear weapons indefinitely [2].

However, it is necessary to distinguish between the fact that "the final document was not adopted" and the fact of "what was discussed and how." From the perspective of those calling for nuclear disarmament, the final draft of the document [3] contains statements that should not be overlooked.

First, it was stated that "the commitments from past Review Conferences" under the NPT "remain valid" [4]. Past agreements include the "unequivocal undertaking" by nuclear-weapon states to work toward the "total elimination" of nuclear weapons, as agreed upon at the 2000 Review Conference [5].

Second, the text included a provision stating that at the next Review Conference, nuclear-weapon states would "decide" [6] to report on their nuclear disarmament efforts and to establish a forum for in-person discussions. Third, the text referenced the First Review Conference of the Treaty on

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the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) [7], which could serve as a bridge between the NPT and the TPNW. The second and third points are the central focus of this paper from the perspective of non-nuclear-weapon states' fulfillment of their nuclear disarmament obligations, while the first point serves as the premise.

Faced with a crisis, where can the NPT find a way to restore trust? In April 2025, then Japanese Foreign Minister Takeshi Iwaya, attending the third Preparatory Committee meeting for the upcoming NPT Review Conference, stated, "As NPT States Parties, let us return to the NPT's founding principles and seek common ground" [8]. This paper examines this question by focusing on nuclear disarmament obligations—where implementation has stagnated—and by reaffirming the treaty text.

Nuclear-Weapon States and Non-Nuclear-Weapon States under the NPT

First, whose security concerns was the NPT intended to address? Given that the NPT is a multilateral treaty negotiated and established through negotiations, it should have been a system designed to address not only the security concerns of nuclear-weapon states but also those of non-nuclear-weapon states—in other words, the "common interests" of all States Parties [9]. If the interests of only certain countries are prioritized, a multilateral treaty cannot maintain its credibility. One of the core elements of the common interest is preventing the proliferation of nuclear weapons. That is precisely why it is called the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons.

The goal of nuclear abolition cannot be achieved without nonproliferation. If proliferation continues, the very number of nuclear weapons that must be abolished will increase, making verification and confidence-building more difficult. On the other hand, nonproliferation, too, cannot be sustained without disarmament. Unless progress toward disarmament is demonstrated, the very premise—why nations cooperated to establish the framework of nonproliferation—is threatened. Based on this interdependence, nuclear-weapon states and non-nuclear-weapon states have sought to achieve nuclear nonproliferation and nuclear disarmament through a multilateral legal framework.

At this point, let us examine the text of the treaty to clarify what is meant by "Nuclear-Weapon States" and "Non-Nuclear-Weapon States." Article IX, paragraph 3, explicitly defines only nuclear-weapon states, while the converse interpretation defines the status of non-nuclear-weapon

states. This paragraph is a classificatory provision that defines nuclear-weapon states based on the fact that they “manufactured and detonated nuclear weapons or other nuclear explosive devices before January 1, 1967”; it is not a provision that grants nuclear-weapon states the right to possess nuclear weapons.

Article I imposes on both nuclear-weapon states and non-nuclear-weapon states a mirror-image pair of nonproliferation obligations: a prohibition on the “transfer” of nuclear weapons and other items by nuclear-weapon states, and, in Article II, a prohibition on the “receipt,” “manufacture,” and “acquisition” of such items by non-nuclear-weapon states. Article VI imposes disarmament obligations on “each State Party.” It goes without saying that nuclear-weapon states, which currently possess nuclear weapons, bear the central responsibility for achieving nuclear disarmament. However, under the treaty, Article VI also applies to non-nuclear-weapon states. This inherent structure becomes apparent when we return to the treaty's fundamental principles.

The structure of the text described above indicates that the obligation to pursue nuclear disarmament rests not only with nuclear-weapon states but also with non-nuclear-weapon states, which are equally responsible for its implementation. This raises the question of what responsibilities non-nuclear-weapon states bear and what roles they can play regarding the implementation of Article VI.

Nuclear-dependent non-nuclear-weapon states are subject to the non-proliferation obligations under Article II of the NPT, yet they rely on nuclear deterrence in their security policies. Consequently, the practice of “nuclear sharing” and increased reliance on extended nuclear deterrence may raise questions regarding their consistency with the obligations under Article VI. This highlights the need to examine their responsibilities under Article VI. In particular, “nuclear sharing” calls into question its consistency with both nonproliferation and nuclear disarmament obligations.

About non-nuclear-weapon states that do not rely on nuclear weapons, the question may arise as to how they can contribute to the implementation of Article VI. The fact that the TPNW was adopted as a multilateral treaty based on scientific findings regarding the humanitarian and environmental consequences of the use of nuclear weapons can be viewed as an effort to fulfill the obligations under Article VI of the NPT. In fact, the preamble to the TPNW identifies a legally binding ban on nuclear weapons as a significant contribution toward the elimination of nuclear weapons. It reaffirms the obligation to engage in nuclear disarmament negotiations and the full and effective implementation of the NPT [10].

Fulfillment of Nuclear Disarmament Obligations by Non-Nuclear-Weapon States

As noted earlier, the final draft of the outcome document of the 11th NPT Review Conference retained a reference to the First Review Conference of the TPNW to the very end. It also retained language acknowledging calls for assistance to nuclear victims and environmental remediation. However, since the NPT and the TPNW are separate treaties, it is entirely plausible to argue that participation in the TPNW does not, in and of itself, imply fulfillment of obligations under the NPT. It is certainly true that the fact these references remained does not necessarily imply a positive recognition of the connection between the two treaties. However, since the reference to the TPNW was not excluded from the final draft, the door remains open, at least to that extent, to explore a link between the two treaties.

Based on the above discussion, two strategic approaches regarding the TPNW Review Conference can be derived.

First, we must consciously link the reports and in-person discussions by nuclear-weapon states at the NPT Review Conference, as reflected in the final draft of the outcome document, with the discussions at the TPNW Review Conference. TPNW States Parties can assess the implementation status of nuclear disarmament obligations under the NPT from their own perspectives and present the results as reference material for the next NPT process.

Second, at the Review Conference, we must further strengthen the narrative that promotes nuclear disarmament through the TPNW as the fulfillment of obligations under Article VI of the NPT and disseminate it widely.

Since Article VI applies to “each State Party,” these two initiatives can respond to the argument made by nuclear-weapon states—that “the TPNW weakens the NPT”—by demonstrating that the TPNW helps restore the NPT’s credibility.

Among the non-nuclear-weapon states responsible for fulfilling nuclear disarmament obligations under the NPT, Japan occupies a unique position. Although Japan is a nation that has suffered atomic bombings, it has adopted a security policy that relies on the extended nuclear deterrence provided by the United States. Japan has long maintained that the NPT is the “cornerstone of the international nuclear disarmament and nonproliferation regime” [11], and at this Review Conference, the Japanese government made a statement reaffirming its position as a “guardian of the NPT” [12]. This self-identification as a “guardian” should entail not only advocating for the

maintenance of the NPT, but also the responsibility to take the lead in returning to the NPT's original principles.

Japan is a non-nuclear-weapon state that relies on the nuclear extended deterrence. If Japan is to claim the role of a guardian of the NPT, it can only fulfill that responsibility by concretely demonstrating its commitment to reducing the role of nuclear weapons and by setting forth a policy direction aimed at reducing its reliance on nuclear force. This is also a prerequisite for gaining the trust of other states parties. Merely acting as a bridge between nuclear-weapon states and non-nuclear-weapon states cannot be considered a contribution worthy of the title of "guardian." Moreover, if Japan were to reconsider the Three Non-Nuclear Principles [13], which are regarded as a "fundamental national principle," there is no doubt that the consistency of its position as a guardian of the NPT would be called into question.

Conclusion

There can be no nuclear disarmament without nuclear nonproliferation, and the nuclear nonproliferation regime cannot be sustained without nuclear disarmament. Given this interdependent structure within the NPT, there is not only a moral imperative but also strategic rationality for nuclear-weapon states—which hold a relatively stronger position—to seriously address the security concerns of non-nuclear-weapon states.

History provides classic examples of cases where the powerful, by unilaterally imposing their will, ultimately lost their hegemonic status in the long term. The scenario in which nuclear-weapon states obfuscate the fulfillment of their own disarmament obligations while demanding that non-nuclear-weapon states uphold their nonproliferation obligations appears to mirror the logic of Athens in "The Dialogue of Melos" [14]. For nuclear-weapon states as well, a decline in the NPT regime's cohesive force could ultimately result in harm to their own interests.

Precisely because the international situation is currently unfavorable to nuclear disarmament, this year—when the review processes of both the NPT and the TPNW intersect— presents a rare opportunity to advance the discussion toward a world without nuclear weapons. How to make the most of this opportunity is a question facing both nuclear-weapon states and non-nuclear-weapon states. With regard to non-nuclear-weapon states in particular, the path is open for both non-nuclear-dependent and nuclear-dependent non-nuclear-weapon states to contribute to restoring the credibility of the NPT.

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*This article reflects the author's personal views and does not represent the views of the author's affiliated organization.

Notes

[1] For example, United Kingdom, General Debate Statement, 27 April 2026; Russian Federation, General Debate Statement, 29 April 2026; United States, Main Committee I Statement, 1 May 2026. Review Conference, July 22, 2026.

[2] For example, New Agenda Coalition, General Debate Statement, 27 April 2026; Indonesia on behalf of the Non- Aligned Movement, Main Committee I Statement, 30 April 2026.

[3] NPT/CONF.2026/CRP.2/Rev.4

[4] Ibid, paragraph #4.

[5] NPT/CONF.2000/28 (Parts I and II), Part I, para. 15(6).

[6] Ref. [3], paragraph #42.

[7] Ibid, paragraph #12.

[8] Statement by Japanese Foreign Minister Takeshi Iwaya during the general debate at the Third Preparatory Committee for the 2026 NPT Review Conference (April 28, 2025).

[9] Paragraph 1 of the NPT Preamble states that "nuclear war would bring catastrophe to all mankind; therefore, every effort must be made to avoid the danger of such a war." Furthermore, the United Nations General Assembly resolution calling for the commencement of negotiations on the NPT states: "Convinced that the proliferation of nuclear weapons threatens the security of all countries and makes it more difficult to achieve general and complete disarmament under effective international control," and "The treaty should embody an acceptable balance of mutual responsibilities and obligations between nuclear-weapon States and non-nuclear-weapon States." A/RES/2028(XX), adopted November 19, 1965, pp. 7–8.

[10] TPNW, Preamble, paras. 15-18.

[11] For example, "Regarding the 11th Review Conference of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) (Statement by the Minister for Foreign Affairs)" (May 23, 2026).

[12] “Statement by Japanese State Minister for Foreign Affairs Ayano Kunimitsu at the 11th NPT Review Conference General Debate” (April 28, 2026).

[13] Editor’s note: The Three Non-Nuclear Principles are to neither possess nor produce nuclear weapons, nor permit their introduction into Japan.

[14] In the “Dialogue on the Island of Melos” from the History of the Peloponnesian War by the ancient Greek historian Thucydides, the powerful state of Athens forced the neutral state of Melos to choose between submission and destruction, arguing that the strong do what they can, and the weak must accept what they must. Athens, having destroyed Melos for refusing to submit, subsequently suffered a devastating defeat in its Sicilian expedition and ultimately lost its hegemony. This is a classic example illustrating the danger that, in the long run, the strong unilaterally imposing the logic of power can undermine their own national interests.

About the Author



Kimiaki Kawai is Professor and Deputy Director, Research Center for Nuclear Weapons Abolition (RECNA), Nagasaki University. His area of expertise is international humanitarian law. After serving as Secretary-General of the Soka Gakkai Peace Committee and in other roles until October 2019, he served as a Senior Research Fellow at the Toda Institute for Global Peace and Policy Research before assuming his current position in April 2023. He participated in the July 2017 negotiating conference for the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons as a civil society representative while serving as secretary-general of the Japan NGO Network for the Abolition of Nuclear Weapons. He holds a Master of Arts in International Political Science from the Graduate School of International Political Economy at Aoyama Gakuin University, and a Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.) from the Graduate School of Multicultural Sociology at Nagasaki University.