Insights from the 2026 NPT Review Conference: The Future Role of Japanese Civil Society

Shizuka Kuramitsu

Research Analyst, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace

The 11th NPT Review Conference in 2026 was held amid growing uncertainty surrounding the three pillars—"disarmament, nonproliferation, and the peaceful use of nuclear energy"—that have long underpinned the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) regime. Following the previous session (2022) and the one before that (2015), the four-week conference once again failed to reach agreement on a substantive outcome document. As many had predicted even before the conference began, in addition to the intensifying multipolar competition in international politics, the discussions were significantly influenced by two major ongoing wars between nuclear-armed states—including the NPT nuclear-weapon states (N5)—and non-nuclear-weapon states: namely, Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the U.S.-Israeli attacks on Iran.

The fact that the conference did not adopt a final document is, in itself, a key factor in evaluating it. However, we must be cautious about using that fact to label the entire conference a "failure" or the NPT as having "lost its substance." The Chair explained that the main reason for the failure to reach agreement on the outcome document was that the United States and Iran could not find common ground on the wording regarding Iran's nuclear issue. On the other hand, the Chair's draft outcome document presented on the final day contained many other problematic points besides the Iran issue, and opinions among experts are divided regarding the failure to adopt the outcome document this time [1]. Furthermore, the adoption of the outcome document is merely one indicator of the conference's success or failure; even though the outcome document was not adopted at this review conference, some view it as a step forward compared to 2022, given that—amid a deteriorating security environment and the current absence of a U.S.-Russian strategic nuclear arms-control treaty—it provided a valuable opportunity for nuclear-weapon states to engage in discussion and coordinate their positions [2].

This paper focuses on two issues that the author felt were relevant to Japanese civil society in the future while observing the 11th NPT Review Conference. The first is the growing trend of reinterpreting past agreements, and the second is the fact that the information war surrounding Japan's nuclear policy is being brought into the NPT forum. In this paper, the term "civil society"

Published in Voice for Peace, Issue 2 (Japanese version), on August 31, 2026; English version published online on November 10, 2026.
http://www.peacedepot.org/dp_report/voice-for-peace-issue-1-may-2026-2/

refers to actors other than central governments, such as NGOs, researchers, the media, atomic bomb survivors, and peace organizations engaged in nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation.

Issues Surrounding Past Agreements

First, the term "past agreements" as used in this paper does not refer solely to the legal obligations outlined in the NPT itself but also includes outcome documents adopted at NPT Review Conferences, as well as the principles, objectives, and action plans reaffirmed in 1995, 2000, and 2010—that is, the political commitments that have been built up through consensus. Although these do not carry the same legal binding force as treaty obligations, they have played an important role as shared benchmarks and commitments among States Parties regarding how they should implement the three pillars of the NPT and how they should proceed with its future implementation.

During the negotiations at this Review Conference, some States Parties argued that they could not agree to reaffirm these past agreements—specifically, the wording of the 2010 outcome document, which had been agreed upon previously—in their current form. Although the draft outcome document included language confirming the validity of past agreements, several States Parties asserted during the session that they could not agree to the action plan. They demanded that it be reinterpreted or deleted. Specifically, the United States, France, the United Kingdom, Russia, and Denmark opposed the language regarding the humanitarian consequences of the use of nuclear weapons. At the same time, Brazil argued for deleting the reference to the Additional Protocol to the Comprehensive Safeguards Agreement of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), though it later softened its stance.

The structure in which a group of non-nuclear-weapon states (mainly non-aligned countries and the New Agenda Coalition) urges nuclear-weapon states to fulfill their disarmament obligations "now more than ever," when nuclear weapons are being modernized and expanded and the risk of nuclear weapons use is increasing, while nuclear-weapon states resist, arguing that disarmament should not be advanced "at a time like this," is by no means new. However, at this Review Conference, not only the nuclear-weapon states but also the non-nuclear-weapon states showed signs of shifting their positions on past agreements, and their arguments were not limited to disarmament issues alone. Behind this lies dissatisfaction with the NPT regime, including shifts in the balance of power among the U.S., China, and Russia; the expanding role of nuclear weapons

in regional security; the erosion of norms regarding nuclear test bans and nonproliferation, along with the rising risk of nuclear use; and frustration over the long-standing lack of progress on disarmament.

María Antonieta Jáquez, who serves as the Coordinator for Disarmament and Nonproliferation at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Mexico—a non-nuclear-weapon state actively engaged in disarmament—points out that, given the structure of the NPT's "grand bargain," for many non-nuclear-weapon states, the unanimous adoption of a final document at a Review Conference is an event that raises expectations for progress toward disarmament by nuclear-weapon states [3]. She also points out that the recent reinterpretation of past commitments, principles, and standards has made it more difficult for States Parties to find common ground and make concessions.

If, as in this Conference's case, debates over regressive reinterpretations of past agreements are permitted and become the norm, the significance of such agreements and commitments will gradually erode. Failing to respect past agreements as political benchmarks will negatively affect both the NPT review process and the maintenance of the NPT regime.

In light of the results of this conference, there is an increased need to call not only on nuclear-weapon states but also on non-nuclear-weapon states to reaffirm past agreements. Looking at the statements made by Japan, Australia, Norway, and Canada, among others, it is evident that they frequently referenced the 2010 Action Plan, and these countries appear to be seeking a compromise between countries making regressive arguments that deviate from past agreements and those making progressive arguments.

For decades, many civil society organizations participating in the NPT have been engaged in policy advocacy and activities aimed at urging nuclear-weapon states to fulfill past agreements, to advance disarmament in collaboration with non-nuclear-weapon states. Now that the NPT regime is facing a crisis, civil society is called upon to play a new role. This involves not only continuing to exert pressure for disarmament, as before, but also urging States Parties to reaffirm past agreements, and—when reaching an agreement proves difficult—closely monitoring and evaluating the efforts of countries seeking compromise and negotiation from the perspective of maintaining the NPT regime.

Following the failure to adopt a substantive outcome document for the third time, some non-nuclear-weapon states are beginning to view the political balance of the NPT's "grand bargain"—which encompasses the nuclear-weapon states' commitment to disarmament, the non-nuclear-

weapon states' commitment to nonproliferation, and the right to peaceful uses of nuclear energy—as having been disrupted, making it increasingly difficult for them to review their own nonproliferation commitments or to make concessions. Urging these countries to uphold the NPT regime could significantly benefit a country like Japan—which, while not a nuclear-weapon state, is deeply involved in extended nuclear deterrence as a U.S. ally and has actively engaged in disarmament and nonproliferation diplomacy.

The Information War Surrounding Japan's Nuclear Policy

The issues discussed above pertain to the NPT Review Conference process itself. Beyond this, Japanese civil society should focus on China's criticism of Japan's policies and the information war surrounding it. This is a recurring issue that surfaced at the 10th Review Conference in 2022 and during the 11th NPT Review Cycle meetings.

China is sensitive to Japan's defense policies—particularly, in the context of the NPT, any moves related to nuclear issues—and in recent years has been actively emphasizing Japan's "rearmament" and "resurgence of imperialism" in various forums. The NPT forum is no exception. At this Review Conference, China submitted a working paper titled "The Issue of Japan's Nuclear Armament" [4]. In the working paper, China suggests that the Three Non-Nuclear Principles [5] may be reviewed following the revision of Japan's three key defense documents [6]; cites remarks by certain lawmakers and bureaucrats regarding the possession of nuclear weapons, nuclear sharing, and the acquisition of nuclear-powered submarines; and calls for intensified IAEA verification, citing Japan's plutonium stockpile, while urging States Parties to exercise caution in nuclear energy cooperation with Japan.

Some of China's claims are based on statements made in Japan, policy debates, and news reports. However, caution is needed in how these elements are combined in an international context and what impression they create. For those who typically get information from Japanese-language news, it is easy to judge these Chinese claims as exaggerated statements, given their background and the debates taking place within Japan. On the other hand, when you get information from English translations of Japanese articles or from English-language articles, you may encounter content that omits specific sources or contextual details, or headlines that are overly condensed. Consequently, without taking the time to gather information carefully, it becomes difficult to

distinguish between factual matters and political assessments. This difficulty is not limited to the NPT and worsens in multilateral diplomatic settings, where more countries are involved.

A U.S. research paper notes that, as a countermeasure to Japan's nuclear armament, China may use tactics that combine economic pressure with this kind of information warfare. In response to Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi's remarks regarding a contingency in Taiwan, the paper points out that the Chinese government may be considering tactics to influence Japanese public opinion, such as nationwide image manipulation campaigns, as well as utilizing non-governmental frameworks and organizations—including the Japan-China Friendship Association and sister-city partnerships with Hiroshima and Nagasaki—[7].

Information warfare at NPT meetings is not new, nor is it limited to Japan-China relations. Similarly, in cases such as Russia's invasion of Ukraine, China's criticism of AUKUS, and the criticism surrounding the ALPS-treated water from Fukushima, the back-and-forth of accusations and rebuttals among the countries involved squeezed the time available for substantive NPT discussions. At this Review Conference, too, the Japanese government repeatedly exercised its right of reply in response to such claims by China. China may have intended to force Japan to exercise its right of reply, thereby compelling it to engage in denying allegations, as well as to undermine the Japan-U.S. alliance and damage Japan's international image.

Thus, statements by Japanese civil society could be arbitrarily quoted out of context and used within China or in multilateral diplomatic forums—including those related to the NPT—to fuel criticism of Japan or cast a shadow over the Japan-U.S. alliance. Therefore, Japanese civil society must strive to communicate information carefully, verify the facts based on primary sources, and, if there are any misquotations or misrepresentations of the facts, be prepared to correct them persistently and persuasively when necessary.

This does not mean that civil society should align itself with the government's position and refrain from criticism. Rather, it means being mindful of clearly articulating the basis and context of one's own arguments, including analyses and critiques of government policies—and communicating in a way that can withstand deliberate selective editing and misquotes.

Conclusion

Paul Meyer, who served as ambassador at Canada's Permanent Mission to the Conference on Disarmament in Geneva, described the NPT as "battered and bruised" [8] following this NPT

Review Conference. Precisely because the NPT is in this state, civil society will be called upon in the future not only to demand disarmament from nuclear-weapon states but also to play a role in upholding the credibility of the NPT regime. This means, from the independent standpoint unique to civil society, preserving the memory of past agreements and their significance, and, when states attempt to alter or reinterpret those agreements, carefully considering the reasons behind and the implications of such actions.

Furthermore, now that information warfare has crept into the NPT debate, we must be mindful of these circumstances and disseminate accurate information based on primary sources. Regardless of whether one agrees, we are called upon to fulfill both roles: understanding the facts about Japan's complex position on U.S. extended nuclear deterrence and nonproliferation policies and, when necessary, carefully explaining this position to the international community.

To overcome the crisis facing the NPT, not only the States Parties but also civil society must act with a clear awareness of their role as key actors in restoring trust in the NPT review process.

Notes

[1] Mark Goodman, "How the impasse over Iran sank the NPT Review Conference," July 22, 2026.
https://thebulletin.org/2026/07/how-the-impasse-over-iran-sank-the-nptreview-conference/

United Nations Press Conference, "Do Hung Viet (NPT) and Izumi Nakamitsu (UNODA), following the closing of the Review Conference of the Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) – Press Conference," May 22, 2026.
https://news.un.org/en/story/2026/05/1167580

Akiyama, Nobumasa. "Strengthen the NPT's Credibility Ahead of Its Next Review in Five Years" ["NPT、5 年後の再検討へ信頼性高めよ　秋山信将・一橋大教授"]. *Mainichi Shimbun*, May 23, 2026. (In Japanese).
https://mainichi.jp/articles/20260523/k00/00m/030/196000c

[2] Mark Goodman, "The 11th NPT Review Conference ends with a whimper," *The Bulletin of Atomic Scientists*, May 27, 2026,.
https://thebulletin.org/2026/05/the-11th-nptreview-conference-ends-with-a-whimper/

Published in Voice for Peace, Issue 2 (Japanese version), on August 31, 2026; English version published online on November 10, 2026.
http://www.peacedepot.org/dp_report/voice-for-peace-issue-1-may-2026-2/

Patricia Jaworek, “Three Strikes: Why Giving Up on the NPT Is Not an Option,” *Nuclear Threat Initiative*, June 3, 2026.
https://www.nti.org/risky-business/three-strikeswhy-giving-up-on-the-npt-is-not-an-option/

Gustavo Zlauvinen, “NPT Conference Shows Path Forward,” *Arms Control Today*, June 2026.
https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2026-06/features/experts-assess-npt-reviewconference

[3] María Antonieta Jáquez, “NPT Diplomacy Needs More Emphasis,” *Arms Control Today,* June 2026.

[4] NPT/CONF/2026/WP.64
https://docs.un.org/en/NPT/CONF.2026/WP.64

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

[6] Editor’s note: The three key security documents refer to Japan’s National Security Strategy, National Defense Strategy, and Defense Buildup Program.

[7] Evan Braden Montgomery and Toshi Yoshihara, “Friendly Proliferation and the Future of the Japan-US Alliance,” *Washington Quarterly*, Volume 49, Issue 2, Summer 2026.

[8] Paul Mayer, “NPT is Battered and Bruised,” *Arms Control Today*, June 2026.

About the Author



Shizuka Kuramitsu is a Research Analyst at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Before assuming her current position, she worked as an intern at the James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies (CNS) and the United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research (UNIDIR), as well as a research assistant at the Arms Control Association (ACA). She earned a master’s degree in nonproliferation from the Middlebury Institute of International Studies. She was born in Hiroshima Prefecture.

Published in Voice for Peace, Issue 2 (Japanese version), on August 31, 2026; English version published online on November 10, 2026.
http://www.peacedepot.org/dp_report/voice-for-peace-issue-1-may-2026-2/