The Bomb Wins Again: What the Failure of the 2026 NPT Review Conference Tells Us About a World Sleepwalking Toward Nuclear Danger

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On the evening of Friday, 22 May 2026, Ambassador Do Hung Viet of Viet Nam, President of the Eleventh Review Conference of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), took his seat on the podium of the UN General Assembly hall in New York and confirmed what most delegations had feared for weeks: consensus could not be reached. For the third consecutive Review Conference — after the failures of 2015 and 2022 — the States parties to the most important nuclear arms control treaty in history could not agree on a single substantive sentence about nuclear disarmament. The NPT is now entering its third decade without an agreed outcome document. The bomb, once again, had won.

That the collapse surprised no one makes it more alarming, not less. The divergences between nuclear-armed and non-nuclear-armed States were visible from the opening day on 27 April, and what unfolded over four weeks is the story of a treaty hollowed out by the very States whose compliance is most essential to its survival. Responsibility is widely distributed: it belongs to Moscow and Washington in roughly equal measure, to NATO allies that shelter behind extended deterrence while preaching disarmament, to the impunity enjoyed by States violating the UN Charter and international humanitarian law, and to a multilateral system unable to hold any of them to account.

A draft designed to disappoint

The trajectory of the draft outcome documents told the story before the gavel ever fell. The President's penultimate draft [1], circulated in the small hours of 21 May, had already stripped virtually every meaningful disarmament commitment. A paragraph-by-paragraph comparison of the two final drafts — CRP.2/Rev.3 and CRP.4 [2] — reveals the erosion in granular detail. The word "urgency" was deleted. The affirmation that the indefinite extension of the NPT in 1995 does not mean indefinite possession of nuclear weapons disappeared. The landmark commitments of 1995, 2000 and 2010 were no longer "reaffirmed," merely "recalled," like something dimly remembered. "Urge," directed at the nuclear-armed States, softened into "call on." The requirement for "equal" transparency by the nuclear-weapon States was quietly excised, and transparency discussions were moved from open plenary settings into private ones — gutting the transparency mechanism of actual transparency.

The final version went further still. The paragraph on NATO nuclear sharing and extended deterrence was deleted entirely. Every reference to North Korea's nuclear and missile programmes vanished. The IAEA Director General's Five Concrete Principles for the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant, under Russian military occupation since 2022, disappeared without replacement. Language on artificial intelligence in nuclear command-and-control systems — which Russia alone had opposed — was dropped. The reference to the "catastrophic humanitarian consequences of the use of nuclear weapons" was narrowed to the consequences of "nuclear war," as if the distinction matters to anyone

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who has experienced a detonation. Civil society observers from Reaching Critical Will concluded that the text read as if "written by the nuclear-armed States." They were not wrong.

A bargain betrayed from both sides

The NPT rests on a grand bargain struck in 1968: non-nuclear-weapon States forgo the bomb in exchange for the genuine, good-faith pursuit of nuclear disarmament by the five recognised nuclear-weapon States — China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom and the United States. At this conference, that bargain came close to unravelling, and the blame is emphatically not one-sided.

Russia blocked language on AI and nuclear command-and-control, objected to the phrase "total elimination" of nuclear arsenals in favour of "ultimate and complete elimination" — disarmament at some endpoint approaching infinity — and demanded the removal of language recognising the norm against nuclear testing, one of the most broadly supported norms in the entire arms control canon. Its closing description of the unadopted text as "a serious compromise reflecting a delicate and well-calibrated balance" rang hollow from a delegation that had systematically diluted three decades of agreed language, all while its war against Ukraine and military occupation of Europe's largest nuclear power plant cast a shadow over the proceedings.

Yet it would be a serious error to treat Russia as the primary cause of failure, or to let that diagnosis exculpate the West. The United States arrived in New York as an active participant in the erosion of the treaty's disarmament pillar, signalling belligerence from the outset by opposing Iran's position among the conference's 34 vice-presidents. Its closing statement — "This is called the nuclear non-proliferation treaty, not the nuclear disarmament treaty" — was no slip of the tongue but a deliberate political declaration that inverts the treaty's architecture. Article VI imposes a clear legal obligation on all parties to pursue good-faith negotiations on nuclear disarmament — negotiations the International Court of Justice confirmed in 1996 must lead to nuclear disarmament — and the 2000 Review Conference produced an "unequivocal undertaking" by the five to eliminate their arsenals. These are solemn, negotiated commitments, not aspirations. Even Canada, a loyal NATO ally, gently rejected the American framing, calling on the nuclear-weapon States simply to "honour their word."

China spoke of the difficult security environment while staying conspicuously silent about its own expanding arsenal. France and the United Kingdom insisted that proliferation is the treaty's main challenge, as if their own weapons modernisation programmes inhabit a separate moral universe. The collective performance of the five was a masterclass in deflection: each blamed the security environment, proliferators, or one another — while jointly ensuring no new disarmament commitment survived into the text.

An arms race in plain sight

The strategic backdrop dispelled any lingering ambiguity. The nuclear-weapon States are not disarming; they are rearming — comprehensively, expensively, and with parliaments voting the funds. The United States is executing a multi-decade, multi-trillion-dollar recapitalisation of its entire triad, including low-yield weapons designed to lower the threshold of use. The United Kingdom is raising

its warhead ceiling, reversing a decade of reductions. France is modernising its submarine and airborne forces, including new nuclear-armed cruise missiles. Russia is fielding hypersonic glide vehicles and nuclear-powered cruise missiles while issuing explicit nuclear threats against European States. China, by multiple Western assessments, is expanding its arsenal and building a triad for the first time, even as it reaffirms no-first-use.

Meanwhile the architecture constraining these arsenals is collapsing. The New START Treaty expired in February 2026, leaving — for the first time since 1972 — no agreed ceilings, no verification, no inspections and no data exchanges governing the roughly 10,000 warheads held by Washington and Moscow, who together possess some 90 per cent of all nuclear weapons. The conference had no mechanism to compel them back to the table, and neither showed any inclination to return.

The Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT) came under deliberate attack during this review cycle. Although it has never entered into force, its practical effect has been enormous: no nuclear-armed State has conducted a test explosion since 1998 [3]. That norm is now under threat. Russia revoked its ratification in 2023. The current US administration has publicly questioned the value of the treaty and its Vienna-based monitoring organisation, accused China of prohibited very-low-yield tests [4] (which Beijing denies), and is credibly reported to be weighing withdrawal of funding from the CTBTO and even resumption of explosive testing in Nevada. The conference's draft language recognising the norm against testing was deleted — not a procedural footnote, but an active permission structure for the resumption of testing.

The Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW), now with 99 States signatories [5], remained the conference's most charged subtext. France was its most aggressive critic, characterising it as a destabilising instrument and pressuring States in its sphere of influence to keep their distance; the other four share the opposition in substance. That a bare factual reference to the TPNW survived into the unadopted text at all was a diplomatic achievement of its growing membership.

NATO nuclear sharing: a fight nobody won

Among the least publicly acknowledged fault lines was NATO nuclear sharing. The United States deploys an estimated 100 B61 gravity bombs on the territory of five non-nuclear-weapon States party to the NPT — Belgium, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands and Turkey — whose pilots train to deliver them. This sits in deep tension with Articles I and II, which prohibit the transfer and receipt of nuclear weapons or control over them. NATO's long-standing answer — that the arrangements predate the treaty and that control remains with the US until the moment of use — strikes many States as a transparent fiction, and Iran and much of the Non-Aligned Movement called the arrangements a clear breach.

NATO States countered that extended deterrence is a stabilising response to Russia's war and nuclear threats, and that the US nuclear umbrella is precisely what prevents allies from building their own bombs. The non-aligned rejoinder is legally powerful: the NPT's obligations are unconditional, and non-nuclear-weapon States did not forswear the bomb on the condition that the great powers would one day feel secure enough to disarm. Mexico put it sharpest: idealising stability predicated on nuclear weapons "ultimately erodes the NPT itself." In the end the entire nuclear-sharing paragraph was

deleted, pleasing no one and revealing that the parties cannot even agree on the words to describe a five-decade-old structural problem.

A related manoeuvre deserves notice. On 21 May, the Netherlands — on behalf of several EU members plus Argentina, Australia and Canada — proposed reducing the next review cycle's Preparatory Committee from three sessions to two. Presented as efficiency, this was in effect a surreptitious attempt to amend the 1995 Decision on the strengthened review process [6] without saying so, shrinking the time available to hold States — above all the nuclear-weapon States — accountable for implementing Article VI, while taking pressure off NATO's nuclear-sharing arrangements. The proposal was rejected, its proponents remained unapologetic.

The Middle East: thirty-one years of broken promises

The 1995 Resolution on the Middle East — co-sponsored by the three depositary States and an integral element of the package that secured the treaty's indefinite extension — called on all regional States to join the NPT, on Israel to place its facilities under comprehensive IAEA safeguards, and for steps toward a zone free of nuclear and other weapons of mass destruction. Thirty-one years later, none of this has been achieved, and the 2026 conference provided no new mandate to advance it.

The regional backdrop was the most volatile since 1995. Following Israeli and US military strikes on Iranian nuclear facilities at Natanz, Fordow and Isfahan in June 2025 [7], further strikes were conducted in early 2026, with drone attacks reported near the Bushehr and Barakah nuclear power plants [8]. These attacks on safeguarded facilities caused the IAEA to lose continuity of knowledge over nuclear material in Iran and raised acute safety concerns. Iran and the Arab Group demanded that the outcome document condemn attacks on nuclear facilities and obligate Israel — which operates an undeclared arsenal estimated at 80 to 90 warheads — to accept safeguards. The United States refused both, and by the final draft the reference to Israel's obligations had been reduced to near-invisibility. The contradiction was again on plain display: a depositary State invoking the 1995 Resolution while shielding its primary obstacle from accountability.

Iran: the trigger, not the cause

The formal reason consensus failed was a dispute over a paragraph singling out Iran with the line that it "can never seek, develop or acquire any nuclear weapons." Iran objected to being named in isolation; the United States refused to remove the language. But to treat this as the cause is to mistake a proximate trigger for the underlying condition. Two nuclear-armed States — one of them outside the NPT — had bombed safeguarded Iranian facilities in violation of the UN Charter, and Western delegations declined, in every forum, to condemn those strikes. These attacks — against facilities under IAEA comprehensive safeguards — caused the Agency to lose continuity of knowledge on nuclear material in Iran and raised acute nuclear safety concerns. Iran's own safeguards implementation is a legitimate concern that should be resolved at the IAEA through diplomacy and verification, and several States said so. But demanding Iranian compliance without any acknowledgement that the attacks rendered facilities "uninspectable" was an exercise in selective

principle that the majority of parties found impossible to accept. The President's decision — reportedly suggested by China — not to table the final draft for adoption spared any single State the blame, but changed nothing about the underlying reality.

A regime in freefall

The technical picture is equally bleak. The United States announced it will resume production of highly enriched uranium by 2030; China has restarted plutonium separation; negotiations on a Fissile Material Cut-off Treaty remain frozen in the moribund Conference on Disarmament. The AUKUS arrangement will transfer weapon-grade-uranium-fuelled submarines to a non-nuclear-weapon State with no clear precedent or adequate safeguards framework — yet escaped serious scrutiny in plenary.

Against this decay, the humanitarian argument remains the most powerful tool the majority possesses. That nuclear weapons cause catastrophic, indiscriminate, intergenerational harm is documented fact — from Hiroshima and Nagasaki to the test survivors of the Marshall Islands, Kazakhstan and Nevada. Russia's accusation that non-nuclear States were "instrumentalising" humanitarian concerns amounts to objecting that evidence about the weapons' real-world effects should inform the law governing them. But Western capitals share responsibility for the progressive weakening of humanitarian language, unwilling to accept words that might be read as undermining deterrence doctrine. As Austria observed, the debate is tilted heavily toward the security concerns of the nuclear-armed and barely reflects those of the vast majority.

Before the ashes

One bright spot deserves recording: the competent, transparent and inclusive leadership of Conference President Ambassador Viet [9], who circulated a zero draft early, structured the committees efficiently, and avoided secretive "friends" groups — earning praise across regional lines even as the conference failed around him [10].

The deeper problem, though, is not procedural. It is the absence of political will among the States that possess the weapons the treaty was designed to eliminate. They arrived modernising their arsenals and issuing nuclear threats; they left without accepting a single new commitment. The non-nuclear majority noticed. Malaysia warned that the nuclear-armed States "seem to increasingly be trying to normalise their indefinite possession of nuclear weapons." South Africa reminded the hall that the 1995 indefinite extension conferred no right to possess the bomb in perpetuity. Brazil restated the treaty's founding premise: as long as some States' security rests on nuclear weapons, insecurity will persist for all the rest.

By 2031, the 12th NPT review conference will mark twenty years without an agreed outcome. The erosion is incremental — a deleted word here, a softened verb there — but incremental erosion is not a lesser danger than sudden rupture; it is merely a slower one. Each failed conference makes the next harder; each weakened paragraph signals that non-compliance is cost-free. The choice, as Reaching Critical Will put it in a closing editorial titled "Let Us Not Await the Ashes," [11] is between

maintaining and implementing the painstaking architecture of disarmament law, or watching it dismantled paragraph by paragraph until nothing remains but the weapons themselves.

Where do we go from here? I end by recalling my comments titled "Ending the Perpetual Menace of Nuclear Weapons" at an event in Ottawa organized by Canadians for a Nuclear Weapons Convention and the Centre for International Policy Studies [12], that "an international order anchored on legal norms and treaties offers the best hopes for survival. In this regard the NPT and the TPNW, together with international humanitarian law, could establish an *erga omnes* [13] "right to nuclear peace" [14] and prevent nuclear weapons becoming a "perpetual menace" [15]. The bomb won this round. It must not and cannot win the next one!

Notes

[1] NPT/CONF.2026/CRP.2/Rev.3.
https://reachingcriticalwill.org/images/documents/Disarmament-fora/npt/revcon2026/documents/CRP2-Rev3.pdf

[2] NPT/CONF.2026/CRP.4
https://reachingcriticalwill.org/images/documents/Disarmament-fora/npt/revcon2026/documents/CRP4.pdf

[3] Editor's Note: Excludes nuclear tests conducted by North Korea and subcritical nuclear tests conducted by the United States and Russia.

[4] Xiaodon Liang, "U.S. Accuses China of Nuclear Test, Preparations", Arms Control Today, March 2026.
https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2026-03/news/us-accuses-china-nuclear-test-preparations

[5] Editor's Note: As of August 2026, 100 countries have signed and 75 countries have ratified the treaty.

[6] https://media.nti.org/pdfs/npt95rc.pdf

[7] Tariq Rauf, "Radiological Consequences of Military Attacks on Bushehr and Barakah Atomic Power Plants", IDN-In Depth News, June 30, 2026.
https://indepthnews.net/life-in-a-lawless-nuclear-world/

[8] https://www.iaea.org/sites/default/files/2026-04/infcirc1353.pdf

[9] https://www.reachingcriticalwill.org/images/documents/Disarmament-fora/npt/revcon2026/statements/22May_Mexico.pdf

[10] https://www.reachingcriticalwill.org/images/documents/Disarmament-fora/npt/revcon2026/statements/22May_NAC.pdf

[11] Reaching Critical Will, "Let Us Not Await the Ashes", NPT News in Review , Vol. 21, No. 9, 23 May 2026.
https://reachingcriticalwill.org/images/documents/Disarmament-fora/npt/NIR2026/NIR21.9.pdf

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http://www.peacedepot.org/dp_report/voice-for-peace-issue-1-may-2026-2/

[12] Tariq Rauf, “Ending the Perpetual Menace of Nuclear Weapons”, Center for International Policy Studies (CEPI), Policy Brief No. 42, October 2023.
https://www.cips-cepi.ca/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/Rauq_PB_42.pdf

[13] Masahiko Asada, “Identification and legal consequences of obligations erga omnes in international law”.
https://legal.un.org/ilc/reports/2025/english/annex3.pdf

[14] Thalif Deen and IDN, “The Nuclear Arms Control Architecture is Collapsing”, November 26, 2023.
https://www.eurasiareview.com/26112023-the-nuclear-arms-control-architecture-is-collapsing-oped/

[15] Michael Krepon, A Review of a book by William Walker, “A Perpetual Menace: Nuclear Weapons and International Order”, Arms Control Today , March 2012.
https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2012-03/building-nuclear-order

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