

MP-IDSA *Issue Brief*

NPT Review Conference 2026: Process and Prospects in a Fragmented Nuclear Order

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S*ummary*

The forthcoming review conference will be critical to maintaining the NPT's legitimacy as the cornerstone of the global nuclear order. While the NPT retains formal universality, its normative authority and capacity to deliver meaningful disarmament outcomes are, however, increasingly in question.

Introduction

The 11th Review Conference of the Treaty on the Non-proliferation of Nuclear Weapons will take place at the United Nations Headquarters in New York from 27 April to 22 May 2026.¹ Like the 2022 NPT Review Conference, which took place under the shadow of the Russia–Ukraine war, this Review Conference is also taking place amid major geopolitical upheaval in West Asia and global economic stress caused by the US–Israel war against Iran and the subsequent blockade of the Strait of Hormuz. The review conferences in 2015 and 2022 did not result in a consensus-driven outcome document. The forthcoming review conference will be critical to maintaining the NPT’s legitimacy as the cornerstone of the global nuclear order. The 2026 Conference President, Du Hong Viet, warned that another failure would further weaken the NPT.²

The Functioning of the NPT Review Process

The NPT review process is largely driven by a structured mechanism and practice-driven conventions that assess the treaty’s implementation and future direction. In accordance with Article VIII (3) and the 1995 decision on strengthening the review process, State Parties meet every five years at a Review Conference (RevCon), with three annual Preparatory Committee (PrepCom) meetings held in the preceding years. These PrepComs lay the procedural and substantive groundwork, including officer selection, agenda-setting and preliminary discussions. The past ten review conferences have been presided over by a Non-Nuclear-Weapon State (NNWS) (see Table 1).

Although the NPT Review Conference presidency rotates among five regional groupings³—Africa Group, Asia Pacific Group, Eastern European Group, West European and Others Group, and Latin American and Caribbean Group—empirical evidence since 1975 reveals an uneven pattern marked by the absence of Eastern European representation and the consistent selection of non-nuclear weapons states. Such a pattern indicates a managed rather than purely egalitarian distribution of leadership.

¹ [“Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons: Eleventh Review Conference”](#), United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs, United Nations, 2026.

² [“Review Conference of the Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons \(NPT\)”](#), United Nations, NPT Conference 2026.

³ The rotation of the NPT Review Conference presidency among five regional groups is not codified in the Treaty or its formal rules of procedure. Rather, it derives from the United Nations’ regional grouping system and is reproduced through established diplomatic practice and consensus-based decision-making.

The RevCon, which is held over four weeks at UN Headquarters in New York, begins with a general debate followed by detailed negotiations across three Main Committees (MC)—MC I (Disarmament and Security Assurance), MC II (Non-proliferation and regional issues), and MC III (Peaceful use of nuclear energy). Each committee can also establish Subsidiary Bodies for focused discussion on the most pressing issues, such as disarmament steps, the Middle East WMD-free zone, and other institutional concerns. The primary task of a RevCon is to review the implementation of the treaty and past commitments, and to develop a forward-looking action plan. While discussions are underway in the Main Committees, the Chair prepares draft reports based on the discussions, and the Conference President collates information from them to prepare the final document.

Decision-making at the conference is consensus-based, which effectively gives each state veto power. Hence, agreement among the states is difficult, especially on contentious issues; therefore, a comprehensive outcome document has historically reflected a positive geopolitical landscape. Because of the above-mentioned complication, the NPT review process can be considered an institutional and diplomatic forum in which progress depends not only on institutional design but also on political will, negotiation dynamics and geopolitical outlook.

Brief History of NPT Review Conferences

The NPT review process reflects a complex interplay between enduring structural issues and shifting geopolitical realities. The outcome of NPT Review Conferences has been shaped by two broad categories of factors: static/permanent concerns such as security assurances, nuclear technology transfer, and disarmament commitments under Article VI; and dynamic geopolitical contexts, including superpower relations, regional conflicts, and global strategic transformations.

The inaugural review conference of 1975 witnessed active cooperation between the superpowers amid persistent fundamental issues concerning the implementation of Article VI, nuclear safeguards and technology transfer. The conference was conducted in the backdrop of India’s Peaceful Nuclear Explosion (PNE) in 1974, giving further impetus to establishing firm control over the flow of nuclear material.⁴ Despite fundamental differences over structural issues, a consensus was achieved, and the final document was adopted. The second review conference unfolded in a far more turbulent environment with geopolitical disruptions caused by the Islamic

⁴ [“U.S. Embassy Japan Telegram 2216 to State Department, ‘Japan’s Ratification of NPT’, 20 February 1975, Confidential”](#), National Security Archive.

Revolution in Iran and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. These disruptions led the conference towards failure, preventing the final consensus outcome document from being achieved.⁵

The third NPT review conference demonstrated that innovative and pragmatic leadership could facilitate consensus. Despite the conference being conducted in the backdrop of Israel’s pre-emptive counter proliferation strike against the Osirak reactor in Iraq and the Iraq–Israel war, diplomatic innovations by President Mohammed Shaker helped dilute differences. For instance, diplomatic innovations like “agreeing to disagree” and the “Friends of the President” mechanism facilitated the adoption of the final declaration.⁶

Structural issues dominated the fourth review conference. While discussions emphasised peaceful uses of nuclear energy and the effectiveness of IAEA safeguards, persistent disagreements over nuclear disarmament, lack of negative security assurances, and stalled CTBT negotiations prevented consensus. The conference ended without a final declaration, underscoring the growing divide between nuclear and non-nuclear weapon states.⁷

The 1995 review and extension conference marked a watershed moment in the history of non-proliferation. This conference was not only to review the implementation of the Treaty, but also, as required by Article X, Para 2 of the Treaty, was to decide "whether the Treaty shall continue in force indefinitely, or shall be extended for an additional fixed period or periods". This conference was also significant because all NWS participated as State parties after the accession of China and France in 1992.⁸

By extending the treaty for an indefinite period of time, the signatories agreed formally to renounce nuclear weapons, however acute the security threats are. Other noticeable outcomes were the completion of negotiations on a comprehensive nuclear test ban treaty (CTBT), the conclusion of negotiations on a fissile material treaty, and the Resolution on the Middle East, which called for the establishment of a region free

⁵ [“Final document of the 2nd Review Conference of the Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, Part II”](#), United Nations Digital Library, 1980.

⁶ [“Treaty on the Prohibition of the Emplacement of Nuclear Weapons and Other Weapons of Mass Destruction on the Sea-Bed and the Ocean Floor and in the Subsoil thereof”](#), UN General Assembly, 1970, United Nations Digital Library, 1971; [“Final Declaration of the Third Review Conference of the NPT 1985”](#), NTI.

⁷ [“Review Conference of the Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons: Final document, Part 3, Summary Records \(NPT/CONF.IV/45/III\)”](#), United Nations Digital Library, 1992.

⁸ [“Final Report of the Preparatory Committee for the 1995 Review and Extension Conference of the Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons \(NPT/CONF.1995/PC.III/32\)”](#), United Nations Digital Library, 1995.

of nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction. Alongside these major outcomes, the legacy issues related to security assurances and Articles III, IV and VI of the NPT remained a major point of contention.

The 2000 Review Conference is regarded as one of the most successful review conferences despite major challenges. The review conference was able to achieve consensus on the outcome document despite India and Pakistan’s nuclear tests, the US rejection of the CTBT, and pressure from the New Agenda Coalition.⁹ One of the historic milestones achieved during the conference was the reinforcement of Article VI by adopting ‘13 Practical Steps’ towards disarmament. These steps included enforcement of the CTBT, negotiations on fissile materials, transparency measures, and the eventual elimination of nuclear arsenals.¹⁰

The 2005 Review Conference marked a departure from the previous conference, driven by geopolitical tensions and deep structural disruptions. Multiple global geopolitical tensions, such as the September 11 attacks and the invasion of Iraq, shifted the attention from disarmament (a momentum gained during the 2000 review conference) to counter-proliferation. This effectively distanced the United States from disarmament commitments. Withdrawing from the commitments made during a Review Conference created a virtual credibility gap between NWS and NNWS. The global non-proliferation regime was pushed into severe strain by other critical developments like North Korea's withdrawal from the NPT and declaring nuclear capability, undeclared nuclear activities in Iran and illicit proliferation networks of A.Q. Khan. All these developments ultimately led to the conference ending without any meaningful outcome document.¹¹

Events leading up to the 2010 Review Conference marked a significant recovery from the previous review conference. This conference demonstrated how a favourable geopolitical climate and cooperative leadership can revive multilateral consensus. The United States, under President Barack Obama, showed a renewed commitment to Disarmament. His Prague speech signalled a clear shift towards reducing the role of nuclear weapons and pursuing a world free of them.¹² This was also the phase when the New START Treaty with Russia was negotiated, which helped build

⁹ The New Agenda Coalition (NAC) is a diplomatic alliance of non-nuclear-weapon states—Brazil, Egypt, Ireland, Mexico, New Zealand and South Africa—formed in 1998 to advance global nuclear disarmament within the framework of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons. It seeks to bridge divides between nuclear-armed and non-nuclear states and to press for tangible progress towards the elimination of nuclear weapons.

¹⁰ [“Final Document of the 2000 Review Conference of the Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons \(NPT/CONF.2000/28\)”](#), United Nations Digital Library, 2000.

¹¹ [“Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons: Seventh Review Conference”](#), United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs, 2005.

¹² [“Remarks by President Barack Obama in Prague As Delivered”](#), The White House—President Barrack Obama, 5 April 2009.

confidence among member states. As a result of these positive steps, the conference adopted an outcome document, with the most notable component being a 64-point Action Plan covering three fundamental pillars of the treaty: non-proliferation, disarmament, and the peaceful uses of nuclear energy. Overall, the 2010 review conference reflected a renewed sense of optimism and engagement, which can be attributed to political will, leadership and multilateral diplomacy in sustaining the NPT regime.¹³

The conferences in 2015¹⁴ and 2022¹⁵ failed to produce an outcome document due to intense geopolitical tensions and structural deviations. The conference collapsed amid the escalating confrontation between the United States and Russia. The emergence of the humanitarian initiative significantly reframed the disarmament discourse, leading most states to create a parallel Treaty specifically addressing disarmament concerns: the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW).¹⁶ An overwhelming number of states joined this treaty, effectively challenging the NWS's non-committal approach to Article VI of the NPT.

The 10th Review Conference, postponed due to COVID-19, was held amid a further deteriorating geopolitical landscape, including the Russia–Ukraine war and intensifying rivalries between the USA and Russia, and between the USA and China. Further, key arms control frameworks had either collapsed or lost relevance. For instance, the collapse of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, the uncertainty surrounding the New START Treaty, and the challenges to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action. Thus, both conferences failed to produce a consensus document highlighting the persistent fragility of the NPT review process.

Table 1. NPT Review Conferences (Key Aspects)

NPT Review Conferences	Chair Country	State Parties	Consensus Document	Remarks
1 st RevCon (1975)	Sweden	91	Adopted	The Conference demonstrated that even during the Cold War, superpower cooperation could sustain consensus,

¹³ [“2010 Review Conference of the Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, 3–28 May 2010”](#), United Nations, 2010.

¹⁴ [“2015 Review Conference of the Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons \(NPT\)”](#), United Nations, 2015.

¹⁵ [“Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons: Tenth Review Conference”](#), United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs, 2022.

¹⁶ [“Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons”](#), United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs.

				though underlying disagreements on disarmament and technology transfer were already visible.
2 nd RevCon (1980)	Iraq	109	Failed to adopt	Cold War tensions, especially the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the Iranian Revolution, overshadowed negotiations, leading to the first failure to reach consensus.
3 rd RevCon (1985)	Egypt	131	Adopted	A triumph of diplomacy over division—innovations like “agreeing to disagree” and backchannel negotiations showed that procedural creativity can overcome political deadlock.
4 th RevCon (1990)	Peru	140	Failed to Adopt	A reflection of structural deadlock, deep divides over disarmament and security assurances highlighted the growing dissatisfaction of non-nuclear-weapon states.
5 th RevCon (1995)	Sri Lanka	178	Adopted	A historic turning point—the indefinite extension of the NPT ensured its permanence, but also institutionalised an

				unequal bargain between nuclear and non-nuclear states.
6 th RevCon (2000)	Algeria	187	Adopted	A high point of multilateralism—the “13 Practical Steps” restored faith in disarmament commitments and demonstrated that consensus is possible with political will.
7 th RevCon (2005)	Brazil	188	Failed to Adopt	A crisis of credibility—post-9/11 security priorities, the Iraq War, and rejection of past commitments led to a breakdown of trust and total failure.
8 th RevCon (2010)	Philippines	189	Adopted	A revival through leadership—renewed US engagement under Barack Obama and cooperative diplomacy enabled consensus and a comprehensive Action Plan.
9 th RevCon (2015)	Algeria	190	Failed to Adopt	A return to fragmentation—geopolitical rivalry and unresolved regional issues, especially the Middle East WMD-Free Zone, derailed consensus.

10 th RevCon (2022)	Argentina	191	Failed to Adopt	A reflection of a fractured world order—amid great-power rivalry, collapse of arms control regimes, and the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the NPT struggled to maintain relevance and unity.
11 th RevCon (2026)	Vietnam	191	--	Past haunting the present—the context in which the RevCon is being conducted: Two great powers (US and Russia) are at war; no consensus at PrepCom meetings—indicates potential failure unless a pragmatic approach is followed by member states, facilitated by the RevCon President.

Source: Prepared by the author

NPT Review Conference 2026

As in past review conferences, the 2026 RevCon of the NPT is mandated to undertake a comprehensive assessment of the Treaty’s implementation based on three pillars: non-proliferation, disarmament, and the peaceful uses of nuclear energy. The conference is further mandated to review past commitments made during the 1995 extension package, the 2000 Final Document and the 2010 Action Plan. Besides the procedural formalities,¹⁷ a detailed thematic discussion will be led by three Main Committees¹⁸—disarmament and security assurances (Committee I), non-proliferation and safeguards (Committee II), and peaceful uses of nuclear energy

¹⁷ The election of its President, adoption of rules of procedure, and establishment of committees.

¹⁸ [“NPT/CONF.2026/1: Document of the Review Conference of the Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons”](#), United Nations, 2026.

(Committee III). Finally, the consensus-driven outcome document is adopted, which contains both a backwards-looking review and forward-looking recommendations.

The 2026 Review Conference would be a test of the NPT’s credibility, which is under strain. Recent review conferences have suggested that geopolitical contestation has led the conferences towards failure, exposing a pattern of institutional paralysis. Failure to reach a consensus document in 2005, 2015 and 2022 reflects not only current geopolitical disagreements, but also the broader credibility deficit of the Treaty, in which commitments are reiterated but not meaningfully advanced. It also questions the legitimacy of the Treaty in restraining conflicting parties from using nuclear threats as an instrument of coercion. Therefore, the 2026 Review Conference will function as a critical inflexion point. Either it resolves the ongoing credibility crisis through pragmatic consensus, or it risks accelerating doubts about the NPT’s relevance in an evolving nuclear order.

Analysing the Failures of NPT RevCons

Firstly, the dominance of one contentious issue, which becomes non-negotiable for key states, blocks consensus and stalls the entire review process. For instance, the 1980 and 1990 RevCon were unable to produce an outcome document because of the disarmament and modernisation dispute. Similarly, the 2015 and 2022 RevCons couldn’t produce outcome documents due to the Middle East WMD Free Zone issue and Russia’s objection to the draft outcome document’s language during the ongoing Russia–Ukraine war, respectively.

Secondly, veto-like behaviour by Nuclear Weapon States has often been the reason for blocking consensus. These states have been reluctant to include strong disarmament commitments in the outcome document, while pushing for non-proliferation without reciprocity. Normatively, such behaviour often leads to the breakdown of the “grand bargain” balance. Hence, a perceived normative imbalance emerges, leading to collective resistance.

Thirdly, it has been observed that when consensus is not built during PrepComs, the Review Conference inherits conflict, leading to the collapse of formal negotiations as well (e.g., division over the Iraq war in 2005 and polarisation over Ukraine and Middle East issues in 2022). To achieve consensus on the outcome document, NPT member states must be mindful of the issues and patterns discussed above.

Further, the cyclical pattern of consensus and breakdown at the NPT Review Conference can be attributed to the interaction of structural and geopolitical factors.

The analysis of the last five decades of RevCon indicates three broad patterns. Firstly, there has been a persistent structural divide on issues such as disarmament, the CTBT and security assurances, hindering consensus. Secondly, it has been observed that intermittent periods of cooperation (e.g., post-Cold War, Obama era) facilitate agreements, while rivalry (e.g., Cold War tensions, post-2000 conflicts, contemporary great-power consensus) leads to failure. Lastly, leadership and diplomatic innovations have played a prominent role in marshalling the conference towards success. For instance, mechanisms such as ‘Friends of the President’ before 1985 RevCon, US-led network diplomacy in 1995, and Obama’s leadership role in 2010 RevCon have all resulted in a consensus outcome document.

Conclusion

While the NPT retains formal universality, its normative authority and capacity to deliver meaningful disarmament outcomes are increasingly in question. The context in which the RevCon is being convened is significant—a full-scale pre-emptive war premised on the possibility of nuclear proliferation. Further, there has been a complete breakdown of consensus-building at the PrepComs leading up to the 2026 RevCon. There has been no consensus recommendation from all three PrepCom meetings; instead, the Chair’s summary has been submitted. As discussed before, when PrepComs are unable to reach consensus, Review Conferences often fail to produce outcome documents. Moreover, both the United States and Russia are at war with their adversaries. All the warring countries (except Israel) are members of the NPT. The review conference is taking place amidst the ongoing Russia–Ukraine war as well as the US–Israel war against Iran. The ongoing geopolitical contestations involving great powers will be reflected in the Review Process. The above factors indicate that the 2026 RevCon is heading towards a potential failure to reach a consensus document.

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