

MP-IDSA *Commentary*

The 11th NPT Review Conference (2026) Was Doomed to Fail. What Did We Miss?

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S*ummary*

The estrangement in US–Russia bilateral nuclear dynamics is often overlooked when discussing the inevitability of the 2026 NPT Review Conference's failure.

There is more than one reason why the 2026 NPT Review Conference (Rev Con) failed. Many ex post facto analyses have attributed the failure to current geopolitics and fatigued Rev Con processes. Attention is also due to the structural inequalities, the very formative thought processes that shaped the NPT's present existence, in addition to the developments within the bilateral framework of the US–Russia nuclear relations. On 22 May 2026, the month-long review process of the NPT concluded. The 11th Rev Con failed to produce any consensus-based outcome document for the third time in a row. Given the deep political and strategic divergences, this outcome is unsurprising. In fact, it was expected.

The collapse of the strategic stability dialogue after the two initial meetings of the US–Russia working groups within eight months (from June 2021 to January 2022) was a death knell for any future conversation between the US and Russia on managing the global nuclear order as it had traditionally been managed. Further, the failure to renew the New START Treaty in February 2026 may be viewed as the final nail in the coffin.

If we step back 10 years, it is worth noting that the US–Russia Plutonium Management and Disposition Agreement (PMDA), which was suspended in 2016, was the first in the series to be called off. This landmark agreement between the two countries, which hold the world's largest inventory of nuclear weapons, had lasted for 16 years and effectively contributed to the disposal of tonnes of weapons-grade plutonium. This disposed plutonium was used to power civilian reactors to generate electricity.

What was significant was that PMDA made nuclear arms reduction irreversible, as the inherent non-proliferation guarantees ‘prevented the diversion of plutonium’ (received for conversion) into military purposes (research, design and testing) by the two parties.¹ Since 2016, a series of bilateral nuclear agreements and arrangements between the US and Russia have not been renewed or upgraded. PMDA (2016), the INF Treaty (2019), the Open Skies Treaty (2020–2021), and the New START (2026) are examples of treaties that were suspended, withdrawn, collapsed, or expired. This is more than symbolic but has negative consequences for the global nuclear order.

In practice, this implies that weapons-grade plutonium stockpiles are being ‘reserved not reversed’; that what prevented an entire class of forward-deployed

¹ Hina Pandey, “[US-Russia Nuclear Security: Moving Towards Insecurity?](#)”, CAPS In-Focus, 25 October 2016; “[Agreement Between the Government of the United States of America and the Government of the Russian Federation Concerning the Management and Disposition of Plutonium Designated as No Longer Required for Defense Purposes and Related Cooperation](#)”, US Department of State, 2017.

missiles (ground-launched ballistic and cruise) no longer exists. Further, it means that this category of weapons will figure in countries' strategic targeting calculus. Deterrence may now be more complicated, with deep distrust giving way to the erosion of existing Confidence-Building Measures (CBMs) and with practically no limits on the expansion of strategic nuclear arsenals. In addition to these, the multilateral treaties that, by design, were crafted to impose limits or restrict weapons-related development, such as the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) and Fissile Material Cut-off Treaty (FMCT), are either in the most precarious state as of now or deadlocked for over three decades, respectively.

In 2023, the Russian Federation withdrew its ‘ratification only’ status from the CTBT and remains a signatory—now matching the exact position of the US and China as signatories to the CTBT. Of course, this has implications—most obvious being the resumption of nuclear tests. While both countries do have a moratorium on nuclear testing, it is also true that this very norm is currently under severe strain.

Last year (2025), President Donald Trump made statements suggestive of resumption of nuclear tests by the US. However, it is unclear whether it is an official announcement of the lifting of the moratorium. In any case, the verification of the health and reliability of the nuclear arsenal can also be assessed through advanced computer simulations, supercomputing, subcritical tests, and detailed component assessments. Thus, the social media post by the POTUS indicating testing of nuclear weapons on an ‘equal basis’ could mean a wide range of things. In a related BBC report, it seems the US Energy Secretary has clarified that the US is “not planning to conduct nuclear test explosions”.²

In addition, at the NPT’s 11th Review Conference, the UK, US and France acknowledged the need for a ‘mechanism for pursuing confidence-building measures regarding nuclear explosive test monitoring’.³ However, rhetorical acknowledgement and the gap in ground realities point to a broader trend that includes the absence of any regulation on weapons production, weapons testing, their deployment, stockpiling of military fissile material, and even the threat of nuclear use.

² Brajesh Upadhayay, [“Trump’s Planned Tests are ‘Not Nuclear Explosions’, US Energy Secretary Says”](#), BBC, 3 November 2025; [“U.S. Nuclear Weapons Tests”](#), US Congress.Gov, 16 December 2025.

³ France–UK–US Joint Statement, [“P3 Joint Statement for Main Committee 1, 2026 Review Conference of the Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons”](#), UNHQ, 1 May 2026.

If this is the case, wherein the goals of horizontal proliferation and disarmament have become mutually exclusive, and the nuclear weapons powers that have the special responsibility to demonstrate their commitment fail to agree on broader contours on how to reimagine the nuclear deterrence frameworks to contribute meaningfully to the promise of the NPT, the failure of the Review Conference in reaching the consensus was somewhat inevitable.

Considerable onus is also placed on the Iranian issue in derailing the consensus.⁴ However, at the most fundamental level, the Iranian issue is tied to the unresolved ‘inalienable right to nuclear energy’, within the NPT—which the State Parties have failed to address. There is merit in raising a counterfactual question: would the outcome of the 11th Review Conference have been any different had the Ukraine and Iranian crises not occurred at all? Would the outcome document be any different?

What has transpired in the debates and shifting of languages in the Review Conference is only reflective of how, at a deeper level, the traditional architects of nuclear order and strategic stability disagree on a shared nuclear worldview that is inclusive of disarmament but agree on restoring, responding to, and reshaping nuclear deterrence and nuclear weapons coercion in their nuclear strategies. The estrangement in US–Russia bilateral nuclear dynamics warrants greater attention in any discussion of the Rev Con failure.

⁴ [“US Blames Divisions Over Iran After NPT Event Ends Without Agreement”](#), *Iran International*, 24 May 2026.

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