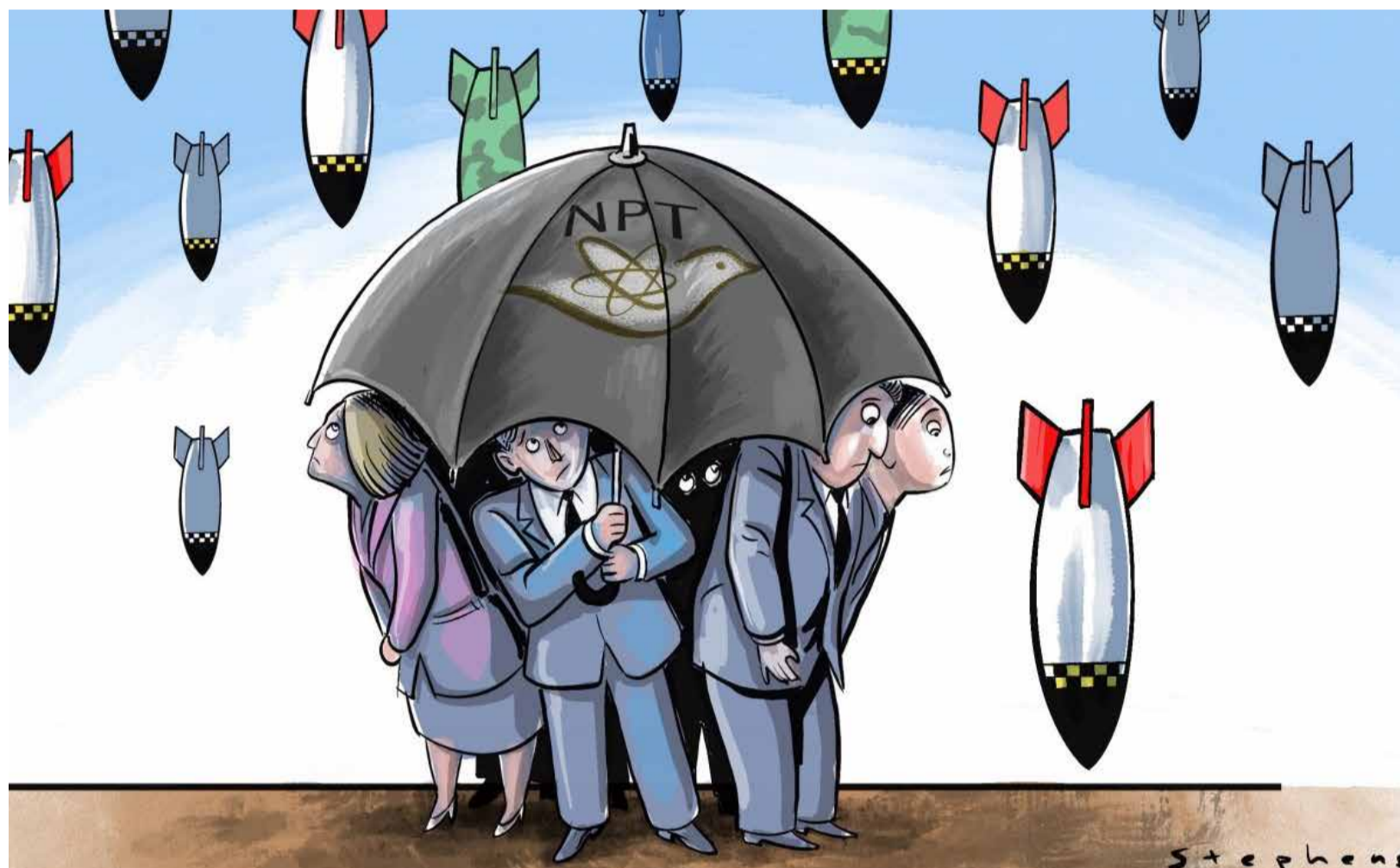


War on Iran eroding nuclear non-proliferation



● CRAIG STEPHENS/SCMP



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OPINION

On April 27, states party to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) have gathered in New York to begin their five-year review of its function. This year, the review conference has opened under the shadow of the war that the US and Israel launched on Iran under the pretext that it was about to develop a nuclear weapon.

As the 191 state parties have gathered to review the NPT, the grand bargain at the heart of this treaty will be put on trial. The treaty, which entered into force in 1970, is the central agreement through which most states accepted the current nuclear order. Non-nuclear-weapon states under the treaty (including Iran) have agreed never to acquire nuclear weapons, while the five recognised nuclear-weapon states (the US, the UK, France, China and Russia) have agreed to curb the spread of nuclear weapons, and to also pursue the disarmament of their own nuclear stockpiles.

All parties to the NPT retain the right to pursue peaceful nuclear technology, under safeguards overseen by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). Every five years, states meet to review whether that bargain is still being honoured. That is why this conference is happening now.

The problem is that Iran's case now raises a deeply uncomfortable question for the review conference: Does NPT membership offer any degree of protection for its non-nuclear-weapon states? To be fair, Iran is unlike any other non-nuclear-weapon state under the NPT. The IAEA has raised questions about Iran's unresolved safeguards issues, limited inspector access and its accumulation of uranium enriched far beyond normal civilian needs.

Yet, the agency has not found any evidence of a structured weapons programme. Despite that conclusion — confirmed by US intelligence — the US, an

official nuclear state, and Israel, an unofficial nuclear state, decided to attack Iran. This coercive approach to resolving concerns about nuclear activities is extremely damaging to the NPT. If the issue was uncertainty about what Iran's nuclear facilities are up to, then bombing them does not create any clarity. If the issue was limited access for weapons inspectors, waging war and blockading the country would not make inspections easier. If the issue was nuclear latency, attacking safeguarded sites risks teaching other states that remaining below the weapons threshold provides neither reassurance nor protection.

This is the darker lesson now hanging over the review conference in New York. Iran's working papers submitted to the conference, raise important issues. Tehran evokes Article IV of the treaty and the right to peaceful nuclear technology. It argues that attacks on safeguarded facilities violate the very logic of the treaty. It points to Israel's position outside the NPT, and to the long-unfulfilled

promise of a Middle East free of nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction.

One does not have to accept Iran's entire case to see why these arguments will resonate with other conference attendees. They speak to a wider anxiety among non-nuclear-weapon states: That the rules are observed when applied to the weak, and are bent when applied to the powerful.

It does not help that the location of the review conference is in the US — a party to the ongoing conflict, which is trying to impose by force commitments that are already outlined in the NPT and that Iran, as a signatory, had agreed to. If the war had not started, this could have been a convenient venue for the US and Iran to hold supplementary talks to resolve differences.

But the war, as well as other violations — such as the abduction of Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro — put US commitment to international law and UN-facilitated diplomacy under question. Notwithstanding all this, Iran's

existing mission and technical experts may be well placed to carry a quieter parallel track at the review conference. In the coming four weeks, the NPT state parties have work to do. They can reaffirm that attacks on safeguarded nuclear facilities are unacceptable. They can press Iran on safeguards without pretending force is needed for verification. They can place the enrichment debate within the treaty's actual terms, and remind the US that zero enrichment is not an NPT requirement. They can also bring up the issue of the regional imbalance created by Israel's nuclear opacity and non-membership.

As the conference begins, it is important to remember the key role the NPT has played in curbing the spread of nuclear weapons for over 50 years. Preserving the treaty is key to maintaining this state of affairs. That is why, at the review conference, states parties should categorically refuse to let the NPT's basic bargain be rewritten by war.

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France's Foreign Minister Jean-Noel Barrot speaks during the 11th Review Conference of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) at the United Nations Headquarters in New York on April 27, 2026.

● ANGELA WEISS/AFP