

go out; it would terrorise a population.

Mitigating the risks to nuclear security

In general, civilian NPPs are not a proliferation concern. But with seemingly endless conflict and deep mistrust in the region, the slightest perception of nuclear hedging can quickly be viewed as a proliferation risk. To mitigate the risk of a counter-proliferation attack, nuclear newcomers can both design and operate NPPs in a proliferation-resistant manner. For example, they can choose a reactor type, such as a light-water reactor using low-enriched uranium, less suitable for producing material for nuclear weapons. Plant operators can also opt for single-use fuel, including third-party fuel supply and take-back provisions. As relations between Israel and Saudi Arabia deteriorate, Riyadh

runs a greater risk of incurring an Israeli counter-proliferation attack if it pursues its nuclear-energy ambitions. Proliferation concerns around Saudi Arabia's nuclear programme have been heightened since Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman Al Saud said that his country would acquire nuclear weapons if Iran were to do so first. Furthermore, the kingdom's stated intention to develop fuel-enrichment and reprocessing capability — with peaceful nuclear activity enshrined as an "inalienable right" under Article IV of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty — has complicated Saudi-American negotiations on the terms of a civil nuclear agreement. Nevertheless, negotiations over a civil nuclear agreement have moved forward under the second Trump administration. While the details remain unclear, the US-Saudi Joint Declaration on

the Completion of Negotiations on Civil Nuclear Cooperation, announced in November 2025, "ensures that all cooperation will be conducted in a manner consistent with strong nonproliferation standards". It is unlikely that nuclear technology supplied and safeguarded by the US would be a target for an Israeli preventive attack. With the increased volatility and impunity in the region following the war on Iran, it is not inconceivable that more countries adopt such preventive attacks in their military doctrines.

Persian Gulf nuclear newcomers could also take measures to mitigate the impact of a hypothetical strike on an NPP. Persian Gulf states all adhere to the highest available international nuclear-safety standards and are all parties to the Convention on Nuclear Safety. In the case of the only operational nuclear power

plant in the GCC, the Barakah NPP, the UAE has consistently taken steps to strengthen the plant's operational security following periodic IAEA review missions.

Modern nuclear reactors have enhanced safety features which nuclear newcomers are likely to incorporate into new reactor designs. Containment structures housing the reactor core are now hardened to withstand a build-up of pressure inside the reactor in case of an accident, which also provides some protection against a high-kinetic impact on its exterior. The power supply to the reactor is also designed with redundancies such as diesel generators and batteries to ensure a continuous supply to its critical control and cooling systems in case the plant's internal power supply fails. While spent-fuel pools are usually housed outside the containment structures,

some newer designs of NPPs also integrate spent-fuel pools within the containment structure.

By virtue of their smaller size compared to large conventional NPPs, it can be argued that SMRs are safer than conventional reactors. However, the smaller scale sacrifices containment, making them more vulnerable to kinetic attack. Building SMRs underground can help shield them from attack, but would make them harder to reach in an emergency.

Conclusion

Even when pursuing nuclear power for peaceful purposes, doctrinal realities and the fragile regional-security landscape require nuclear newcomers in the region to consider the risks of attacks against civilian nuclear facilities and potential mitigation measures.

The US/Israel-Iran war and the subsequent Iranian retaliato-

ry attacks against Persian Gulf states have greatly strained the norms against attacking nuclear facilities and against attacking energy infrastructure. Yet neither risk need jeopardise plans to acquire NPPs by interested Persian Gulf states. Modern designs of NPPs come with extensive and diverse safety measures to ensure that, even if an incident occurs, radioactive releases can be contained.

While the Pandora's box on attacks against energy infrastructure has been flung open, the conduct of previous attacks against NPPs suggests that the proliferation-sensitive nature of a facility and environmental concerns continue to be an important consideration in target selection.

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Global cooperation on nuclear disarmament looks even further away



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OPINION

The 2026 Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) Review Conference concluded on May 22 without a consensus outcome document. It is the third time in a row that states parties have failed to agree on a review of the treaty's implementation and progress, or to set out a plan to support and strengthen the treaty's implementation. However, this failure was different from the last.

In 2022, it was Russia alone that blocked agreement

nt, following its invasion of Ukraine. This year, multiple countries were prepared to hinder progress. The fractures ran across the 'P5' — the UN Security Council permanent members, all of whom are classed as 'nuclear-weapon' states and are the only countries permitted to possess nuclear weapons under the treaty. (Other nuclear armed countries are not parties to the treaty).

But what happened in New York was not a targeted disruption. It was the latest sign of a non-proliferation system under strain in an increasingly dysfunctional environment.

What broke down and why

The primary cause of failure was the Iran conflict. Countries could not agree on adding a paragraph addressing Iran's non-compliance with its NPT obligations and stating that Iran could never acquire nuclear weapons. That remained bracketed in the final draft outcome document, meaning consensus had not been reached.

Conference President Đỗ Hùng Việt, whose management of an extraordinarily difficult process deserves credit, chose not to force states into a public confrontation on the issue. When he asked the conference to adopt at least a procedural consensus on strengthening the review process, Russia, China, and Iran



France's Foreign Affairs Minister Jean-Noel Barrot looks defeated at the 11th NPT Review Conference at UN Headquarters on April 27, 2026.
ANGELA WEISS/AFP

blocked that too.

Even if Iran had not been the breaking point, something else might have been. Other fault lines were close to the surface: Russia pushed for the deletion of text on North Korea's weapons programme, prompting South Korean objections. Disputes over language on Ukraine's Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant, still under Russian seizure, remained unresolved.

A pattern is emerging, where review conferences become a forum for airing regional and bilateral grievances. That reflects a broader shift in how the major nuclear powers approach multilateral institutions.

When powerful states believe that their security interests are better served by bilateral leverage than by collective frameworks, consensus-based multilateral processes become difficult to sustain.

The disarmament deficit

The failure to agree a final document obscured another serious problem. Even the draft that was on the table represented a significant weakening of prior commitments.

New START, a US-Russia nuclear arms control agreement, expired in February with nothing to replace it. That leaves the world's two largest nuclear arsenals without any agreed limits for the first time in over 50 years.

China's nuclear build-up is accelerating. The US has threatened to resume nuclear testing and has accused both Russia and China of conducting tests. France has announced an expansion of its nuclear programme.

In this environment, the five recognized nuclear weapon states arrived in New York and set about forcing the removal of language calling on them to begin negotiations on disarmament — or even to pursue discussions urgently.

Nuclear weapons states removed even more mild requests from the outcome document — for more transparency and accountability on their part. The final draft vaguely called for constructive dialogue that might facilitate future progress. Many non-nuclear weapons states will interpret this as a signal — that beyond ensuring other countries do not acquire nuclear weapons, the P5 are no longer committed to the wider NPT regime.

The grand bargain at the heart of the NPT — that non-nuclear states forgo nuclear weapons in exchange for progress on disarmament by the P5 — is under severe strain, and the cracks are

showing.

There were still meaningful signals from the wider membership. Countries pushed back against weakened disarmament language. There was strong opposition to any resumption of nuclear testing, with many states defending the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty. The fact that so many non-nuclear states remained engaged and vocal matters. But collective engagement can only do so much if the P5 are not listening.

What comes next

The next NPT Review Conference is in 2031. The risk is that the underlying conditions deteriorate further during the intervening five years, proliferation pressures mount, and the case for investing political capital in the NPT becomes progressively harder to make.

Avoiding that outcome requires a practical assessment of what went wrong and what can be done differently.

An important lesson is that review conferences cannot be the primary forum for adjudicating active crises. When countries demand that a consensus-based multilateral process takes sides on contentious regional issues like the wars in Iran or Ukraine, deadlock is almost guaranteed.

An alternative is possible. In the leadup to the 1985 Review Conference, nuclear arsenals were almost at their Cold War height, Israel had destroyed a safeguarded nuclear reactor in Iraq, and there were serious non-proliferation concerns relating to several non-parties (such as South Africa and Brazil).

In this insecure environment, the United States and Soviet Union famously set their differences aside and focused on strengthening the system by cooperating to reach consensus, rather than weaponizing it. That was a long time ago, but it is a reminder that cooperative behaviour during times of high geopolitical tension is possible.

The P5 need to strengthen engagement with one another on nuclear risk reduction through

the ongoing "P5 process" — a diplomatic forum between the countries. Dialogue has stalled in recent years. But this is a crucial route for progress on even modest confidence-building measures on doctrine, on new technologies, and on crisis communication.

The P5 demonstrating a willingness to engage in good faith, and treating the NPT as worth preserving, would itself send a signal. Seriously engaging with transparency and accountability initiatives put forward during the review conference would be a good start and is relatively low pressure and low-hanging fruit in terms of compliance.

Non-nuclear weapon states committed to the treaty also need to coordinate more effectively and sustain pressure on the P5 beyond the NPT conference. Diplomatic pressure from a coherent, persistent bloc raises the political cost of obstruction. It will not transform P5 behaviour on its own, but it could shift the calculus.

A crucial time ahead

The NPT's record on actual non-proliferation remains, by historical standards, impressive. The world has far fewer nuclear-armed states than analysts feared possible in the 1960s. The treaty continues to provide the legal and normative foundation for a global safeguards system that constrains proliferation and facilitates peaceful uses of nuclear energy.

But a treaty that cannot sustain its own institutional credibility will find it harder to underwrite the stability it was designed to protect. Three consecutive failed review conferences, against a backdrop of an accelerating arms race, expiring treaties, and mounting proliferation pressures, is not a temporary rough patch. The window for course correction is narrowing. States have five years to demonstrate they understand what is at stake.

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