

Hot Topic № 4 (17), 2026. The NPT: A Patient, a Panel, and a Dose of Castor Oil



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11TH REVCON

NPT

NUCLEAR NONPROLIFERATION

Hot Topic



The 11th Review Conference of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) has opened on 27 April in New York. Delegations from nearly two hundred states will be «taking the pulse» of the international nuclear non-proliferation regime within four weeks. The ideal scenario would be for this mega-panel to reach a consensus by May 22, agreeing on the “diagnosis” and prescribing the “treatment” through the adoption of the final document. Yet, is the time really ripe to expect “ideal scenario”? If not, what other options remain?

Generally speaking, the NPT, which was signed in turbulent July 1968 and entered into force in March 1970, hardly carries the scent of the «mothballs» of bygone centuries and eras. It is more vibrant than most of the supposedly functioning international treaties which, given the current reality, are barely clinging to life or already defunct. Moreover, the NPT is still bearing fruit. Over 56 years of its existence only one state – one that used to be a party and has since withdrawn – has developed its own nuclear weapons. This fact stands as a testament to the Treaty's high effectiveness. No matter what anyone may say, today there are only nine states in the world that possess nuclear weapons. Half a century ago the number was de facto the same – except that the DPRK has joined the nuclear club, while the Republic of South Africa has left it. An impressive success, isn't it? It can be attributed to a simple yet unifying factor rather than to a «miracle»: regardless of various criticisms, the NPT still serves the interests of its member states. As a result, the Treaty broadly underpins the system of checks and balances. It also benefits Russia, the NPT's depositary state, granted with special rights and obligations under the Treaty as a nuclear-weapon state.

Under the provisions of this indefinite Treaty, the parties shall convene review conferences every five years, thereby conducting «check-ups» to ensure the Treaty's effectiveness and compliance, record achievements and identify key challenges. The previous ten conferences (six of which I had the opportunity to attend as a participant) have taken place with mixed success, while the last two (in 2015 and 2022) have been marked by growing confrontation, leaving the parties unable to adopt the final document. In 2022 Western states targeted Russia with absurd accusations concerning the Zaporozhskaya NPP, thus, ruling out any possibility of reaching a consensus.

These days the NPT is clearly showing signs of strain. First and foremost, it can be attributed to the unprovoked aggression by the United States (the Treaty's depositary state) and Israel (a state that remains outside the NPT regime and possesses its undeclared nuclear arsenal) against Iran, a non-nuclear weapon state, under the pretext of «combating nuclear proliferation». In doing so, the Americans have not only shot themselves in the foot, but also shot the NPT itself. As a result, neither Treaty membership nor cooperation with the IAEA has sufficed to deter aggression against Iran. Here comes the question: why does Iran need such a Treaty?

Furthermore, the arms control architecture is being noticeably dismantled and the prospect of nuclear disarmament is becoming increasingly elusive with the United Kingdom expanding its nuclear arsenal, France refusing even a minimal level of transparency and considering offering Europe «nuclear umbrella» and the

United States rejecting Russia's proposal to maintain the current nuclear ceilings envisioned by the expired New START Treaty.

Last but not least, an increasing number of states in the Asia-Pacific region, the Middle East and Europe are becoming more inclined towards the «nuclear option» either developing their own nuclear weapons or offering their territory for such programs. The PIR Center report «A New Nuclear Dozen? The Prospects for the Spread of Nuclear Weapons in the Medium Term Perspective», which is being prepared for publication, examines nine states (South Korea, Japan, Ukraine, Türkiye, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Germany, Brazil and Poland) and three «nuclear umbrellas» (the American, the French and that of the Union State).

The upcoming NPT Review Conference will not resolve these issues. Addressing them requires a different international environment, political will of the leading states and unity within the P5. In the best-case scenario the Conference will manage to avoid a public “break-up” and adopt a brief consensus-made document reaffirming that the Treaty still remains a viable legal framework in its entirety, with all eleven of its articles preserved. In the worst-case scenario confrontation will keep growing. Iran is never at a loss for words. China will adopt a far more assertive posture than before. If Westerns start goading Russia again – this time most likely over its alliance with the DPRK – Moscow will find ways to respond firmly.

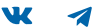
The final document is not the ultimate goal. This was recently recalled by Mr. Sergey Ryabkov, the Russian Deputy Foreign Minister, at the recent session of the Trialogue Club International. The NPT regime is undoubtedly more alive than dead. However, treating it with «castor oil» is hardly the best option. It would be far more productive to abandon mutual recriminations, work together and thereby prevent a situation when a growing number of states begin to withdraw from the Treaty.

This op-ed by Dr. Vladimir Orlov, PIR Center Founding Director, has been translated by PIR Center from Russian into English. The op-ed had been originally published in the [Kommersant Daily](#) on April 26, 2026.

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