

The NPT: History and Background

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The [Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons](#), commonly called the NPT, aimed to stop the spread of nuclear weapons by brokering a deal between the Nuclear Weapon States (NWS) and the Non Nuclear Weapon States (NNWS). In Article VI, all States, including the NWS pledged “to pursue negotiations in good faith on effective measures relating to cessation of the nuclear arms race at an early date and to nuclear disarmament,” while in Articles I and II, States pledged not to acquire nuclear weapons or transfer them to other States. As an incentive not to acquire nuclear weapons, the NNWS were promised an “inalienable right” to “peaceful” nuclear technology and assistance with research, production, and use of nuclear energy for peaceful purposes “without discrimination.” In Article III, each NNWS also agreed to accept “safeguards” of their nuclear facilities under the auspices of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). These safeguards do not apply to the NWS. The Treaty defined a NWS as one which had manufactured and exploded a nuclear weapon or other nuclear explosive device prior to Jan.1 1967, thus effectively limiting membership in the exclusive “nuclear club” to the U.S., the Soviet Union (and its successor state, Russia), the U.K., France, and China. The NPT was signed in 1968 and entered into force in 1970. Its initial duration was 25 years.

In 1995, the NPT was extended indefinitely, with a review conference to be held every five years. Nearly every country in the world – 191 in all – is a party to the NPT, with four exceptions: India, Israel, and Pakistan (all nuclear-armed states) and South Sudan. North Korea, now nuclear-armed, withdrew in 2003, but its withdrawal is not recognized by the NPT States Parties.

At the 1995 Review and Extension Conference, there were deep divisions between the NWS and many of the NNWS about the terms for extension of the Treaty. The NNWS felt that the NWS had not lived up to their part of the bargain: that the nuclear arms race had not ended, as claimed by four of the five NWS (excluding China) and that the NWS were not demonstrating a meaningful commitment to disarmament. Essentially, they felt that the NPT was being used by the NWS as a mechanism for perpetuating a hypocritical international double standard. The U.S. and its allies insisted on indefinite extension. In order to make the deal palatable to the NNWS the extension decision was coupled with a package containing nonbinding [Principles and Objectives for Nonproliferation and Disarmament](#), a [Resolution on the Middle East](#), and a [strengthened review process](#).

With the end of the Cold War, hopes were raised for progress on nuclear disarmament. The 2000 NPT Review Conference was able to adopt a final document which included [thirteen practical steps for the systematic and progressive efforts to implement Article VI of the NPT](#) and paragraphs 3 and 4 (c) of the 1995 Decision on “Principles and Objectives for Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament”. In the document, the United States and the other NWS committed to an “unequivocal undertaking... to accomplish the total elimination of their nuclear arsenals.” For the first time in the NPT’s history they dropped qualifiers like “ultimate goal”

regarding their nuclear disarmament obligation. They also agreed to “a diminishing role for nuclear weapons in security policies to minimize the risk that these weapons will ever be used and to facilitate the process of their total elimination.” In addition, they committed to “concrete agreed measures to reduce the operational status of nuclear weapons,” and they agreed that a no-backtracking “principle of irreversibility” applies to nuclear disarmament.

The 2005 NPT Review Conference broke down over failure to agree on implementation of the 1995 Middle East Resolution. But hopes were raised again when the 2010 Review Conference, agreed to a [final document and far reaching action plan](#), resolving that, “In implementing the unequivocal undertaking by the nuclear-weapon States to accomplish the total elimination of their nuclear arsenals, the nuclear weapon States commit to undertake further efforts to reduce and ultimately eliminate all types of nuclear weapons, deployed and non-deployed, including through unilateral, bilateral, regional and multilateral measures.”

The 2015 Review Conference again broke down over failure to implement the 1995 Middle East Resolution and the lack of progress on disarmament. These failures in part led to the adoption of a United Nations General Assembly Resolution in 2018, calling for the UN Secretary-General to convene a conference on taking forward a Weapons of Mass Destruction-Free Zone in the Middle East in 2019 and every year thereafter until a zone is achieved. [The Conference on the Establishment of a Middle East Zone Free of Nuclear Weapons and Other Weapons of Mass Destruction](#) held its First Session in November 2019 at UN Headquarters in New York and its Second Session in November-December 2021, with all States in the region participating, except for Israel. The Third Session is scheduled for November 2022.

The failure of the 2015 Review Conference also provided impetus for negotiation of the [Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons](#) (TPNW) at UN Headquarter in New York in March, June, and July of 2017. It opened for signature on September 20, 2017 and entered into force January 22, 2021. The TPNW prohibits nations from developing, testing, producing, manufacturing, transferring, possessing, stockpiling, using, or threatening to use nuclear weapons, or allowing nuclear weapons to be stationed on their territory. It also prohibits them from assisting, encouraging, or inducing anyone to engage in any of these activities. The first meeting of States Parties took place in Vienna, Austria in June 2022, where they adopted [the Vienna Declaration and the 50-point Vienna Action Plan](#). [There are currently 86 signatories and 66 states parties](#). While all of them are NNWS Parties to the NPT, the TPNW is binding only on those States which have signed and ratified the Treaty.

While the States Parties to the TPNW feel that negotiating the TPNW was a good faith effort to implement Article VI of the NPT, the NWS Parties to the NPT assert that the TPNW undermines the NPT. This was among the areas of significant disagreement leading to the failure of the 2022 NPT Review Conference. The 11th NPT Review Conference will take place in 2026 in New York.