

Golden Anniversaries for Flawed Treaties: The Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) Turns Fifty

By [Dr. Binoy Kampmark](#)

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In an era where agreements have been abandoned as “bad”, to use that favourite word of US President Donald Trump, the [Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons](#) continues to feature on the books of diplomacy. But age seems to be wearying it and decoding sober readings from hype-filled tat has been a testing task.

United Nations Secretary General António Guterres [was glowing](#) enough in congratulation: “Throughout the past half century, the NPT has served as an essential pillar of international peace and security, and the heart of the nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation regime. It has conferred tangible security benefits on all States parties.” Very ceremonial, very proper. In 2003, the NPT [was deemed](#) by US ambassador Thomas Graham Sr. “the centrepiece of international efforts to control the spread of nuclear weapons”.

Commemorative praise for the NPT on its golden anniversary have sounded like the musings of madness. Michael O’Hanlon, Director of Research and Senior Fellow in the Foreign Policy program at the Brookings Institute, [says that](#), “Current arsenals are big, but they are only as one-fifth the size of what they were a half-century ago.” Only slightly less existentially murderous, then. O’Hanlon also has room for praising the Additional Protocol, enabling inspectors “to go places where they suspect monkey business, even if those sites are not officially declared by the country in question.”

Robert Einhorn, Senior Fellow in the Arms Control and Non-Proliferation Initiative [was warmed](#) by the treaty’s instilling of norms against nuclear proliferation, backed by the IAEA’s monitoring system, a threat of sanctions for those violating non-proliferating obligations and controls on the export of particular technologies. The group of five nuclear states were obligated, by the spirit and substance of the treaty, to also “make ‘good faith’ efforts to reduce and ultimately eliminate their nuclear arsenals.” Well, in a fashion.

For all the praise (O’Hanlon gives it a respectable 2.5 cheers) the NPT continues to be characterised by the aristocratic haves and the proletarian have nots: the traditional nuclear-weapon states (NWS) and non-nuclear-weapon states (NNWS). Only South Sudan, India, Israel and Pakistan remain outside the treaty, due to a combination of accident and design. To accede to the regime, these countries would have to dismantle their nuclear arsenals and place relevant nuclear material under international safeguards. Nuclear-weapons status is intended as exclusive, reserved for those who “manufactured and exploded a nuclear weapon or other nuclear explosive device prior to 1 January 1967.”

The NPT also propounds a mix of charity and weapons puritanism. Non-nuclear weapons

states would, under Article V, be able to access the research gained from nuclear explosions conducted by the aristos. But these same aristos would undertake not to assist any states not in the club to develop or acquire nuclear weapons. Commitments to the NPT, notably by non-nuclear weapon states, would be verifiable through the inspection powers of International Atomic Energy.

As Leonard Weiss has observed, the NPT [remained](#) “a flawed institution that requires considerable tending to, including constant efforts to obtain consensus of its parties concerning evolving interpretations of its provisions in order to maintain its effectiveness as a non-proliferation tool if not its survival altogether.” Problems with consensus can be demonstrated by the fact that five of the nine quinquennial treaty review conferences have yielded a satisfactory, agreed upon final document on the status of implementation.

The case of evolving interpretations was [demonstrated in sharp terms](#) on April 26, 1968 at a meeting of 124 delegations at the 22nd session of the United Nations General Assembly. The subject: drafting a viable nuclear non-proliferation instrument. US ambassador to the UN Arthur Goldberg envisaged “three major purposes”: reducing the chances of nuclear weapons falling into the wrong hands; building a global system led by the International Atomic Energy Agency overseeing equitable and fair access “to the peaceful blessings of nuclear energy” and globalise nuclear and general disarmament.

The Soviet position, less light on the hill in its realisation, [was fronted](#) by UN Ambassador Vasili Kuznetsov, and privileged non-proliferation as a fundamental objective. The closure of “all channels, both direct and indirect” that would lead “to the possession of mass destruction weapons” had to be the main aim of any international system of nuclear governance. Kuznetsov was mindful that “some States not yet in possession of nuclear weapons are approaching a level of industrial, scientific and technological development such as will enable them to quickly embark on the road to manufacturing weapons of mass destruction.” He proved less than oblique on which States these might be – namely, those “which are pursuing or have pursued in the recent past an aggressive policy that strive to enter the nuclear arms race.” The sceptre of Western Germany and historical enemies, in other words, loomed large.

Jonathan R. Hunt [suggests](#) that current views of NPT arrangements centre on US-Russian insistence against an enlargement of the nuclear club with the rest of the nuclear family firming up on the traditional “three pillars”. Amidst this lie such conceptual tangles as a Nuclear Weapons Free Zone in the Middle East, a point that riles rather than encourages consensus. The gulf between nuclear and non-nuclear states over the NPT’s implementation has, [observed](#) a well-grounded Sérgio Duarte, president of the 2005 Non-proliferation Treaty Review Conference, “widened considerably over the decades and still prevents meaningful dialogue.”

The NPT, after five decades, has certainly proved to be stubbornly durable ahead of the 2020 Review Conference. Other instruments of control have gone by the wayside, withered by expediency and self-interest; the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty and the 1987 Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces Treaty are now documents of history.

The Treaty for the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons has also been edging its way into prominence as a prizing rival, but the NPT retains a traditional mix, permitting the club to remain exclusive to the clubbable, and to discourage others from joining it. It’s central point – that states with nuclear weapons will pursue general and complete disarmament – remains

the stuff of hope, the aspiration of doddering types indifferent to certain timelines and programs. Those in the club speak less of disarmament than euphemistically modernising their arsenals and preventing upstarts (North Korea, Iran) from upsetting the order. This leaves the rationale *against* total non-proliferation intact. As long as nuclear weapons remain inextricably connected to sovereignty and terror-inducing deterrence, they will remain worthy of retention to those who have it, and acquisition for those who do not.

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Dr. Binoy Kampmark was a Commonwealth Scholar at Selwyn College, Cambridge. He lectures at RMIT University, Melbourne. He is a frequent contributor to Global Research and Asia-Pacific Research. Email: bkampmark@gmail.com

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