

Reviewing the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons in 2020

Nuclear Non-Proliferation, Russia, and the Trump Administration

Published on 7 February 2020 | <https://issforum.org/to/PS3-1>

Editor: Diane Labrosse | Production Editor: George Fujii

Essay by Fabian Lüscher, Universität Bern

1. Introduction: The Promises and Problems of a Cold War Treaty

The 2020 Review Conference of the Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), the tenth such event, will be held from 27 April to 22 May in New York. One of the most important and controversial pillars of the global nuclear order will be evaluated there. The NPT was opened for signature in 1968 and entered into force in 1970. Its ratification was a milestone in nuclear history and gradually developed into a centerpiece of the liberal international order.¹ The NPT was the first joint international arms control treaty signed by the Soviet Union and the United States. With it, the Soviet government led by Leonid Brezhnev turned definitively away from demanding a complete ban on nuclear weapons, which had informed Soviet nuclear policy between 1946 and the mid-1960s.² The NPT encompassed a threefold strategy that aimed first at preventing further proliferation, second at reducing existing arsenals, and third at the promotion of non-military nuclear technology under the condition of compliance with a safeguards system based on inspections by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).³

The NPT has been partly successful in limiting the number of nuclear-armed states. It also constitutes the arms control and disarmament agreement with the most signatories (190 parties). Nevertheless, its overall record on disarmament is disappointing.⁴ The treaty has been criticized for several shortcomings and for a lack of success regarding its ambitious goals on the following grounds. First, the NPT perpetuates the status quo of power relations between nuclear weapons states and states without military nuclear programs. Second, even though Article VI of the NPT obliges nuclear states to work toward complete nuclear disarmament, the steps taken in this direction have been characterized as insufficient at best. Third, encouraging the spread of non-military nuclear applications while preventing the spread of military nuclear technology has

¹ See for example: Rohan Mukherjee, “Two Cheers for the Liberal World Order: The International Order and Rising Powers in a Trumpian World”, H-Diplo, ISSF Policy Series *America and the World – 2017 and Beyond*, 22 February 2019, <https://issforum.org/roundtables/policy/1-5bo-two-cheers>. (23.12.2019).

² For a comprehensive inside-history of Soviet/Russian non-proliferation policy see: Roland Timerbaev, *Rossia i iadernoe nerasprostranenie. 1945–1968* (Moscow: Nauka, 1999).

³ On the early history of the IAEA and nuclear verification see: Elisabeth Roehlich, “Negotiating Verification: International Diplomacy and the Evolution of Nuclear Safeguards, 1945–1972,” *Diplomacy & Statecraft* 29.1 (2018): 29–50, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09592296.2017.1420520>.

⁴ India, Israel (non-declared nuclear power) and Pakistan acquired nuclear weapons as non-signatories of the NPT and North Korea tested its first nuclear weapon after leaving the NPT. South Africa’s secret nuclear weapons program was uncovered by Soviet and American intelligence and South Africa dismantled its nuclear warheads and joined the NPT in 1991.

always raised questions about the separability of these two spheres, which are much more entangled in reality than the diplomatic wording suggests.⁵

The NPT is reviewed by the signatory states every five years at a conference in New York. Officials listen to reports on the progress regarding the three main pillars of the NPT, and discuss the next steps to take in order to pursue the NPT's goals. I use the 2020, or tenth NPT review as an opportunity to historicize the creation of the NPT and the non-proliferation regime that it helped to establish during the Cold War and to analyze the ways in which the treaty in fact helped limit proliferation. I also outline certain reasons leading to the initial consensus between the major nuclear powers that made the NPT possible. What were the hopes and plans connected to this treaty? How has the global nuclear order changed in the NPT's 50-year history? What was the role of the review conferences in this process, and what is to be expected from the NPT regime in the short-term? I place special emphasis on the last NPT review period (2015–2020), discussing the reactions that the current U.S. government's approach to nuclear security have evoked in Russia, the state with the world's largest stockpile of nuclear warheads and one of the most extensive programs for exporting nuclear technology. I argue that the Russian government is quite nimbly exploiting the U.S. withdrawal from several international treaties to depict its own nuclear strategy as purely defensive and reactive.

The historian Gabrielle Hecht has argued that the NPT put “Cold War moral injunctions” into words while offering different visions of what the global nuclear order should look like.⁶ This raises the question of the extent to which the NPT regime fits the needs of international politics in 2020, half a century after its entry into force. Meanwhile, the international nuclear order has changed several times. In the aftermath of the NPT negotiations, the Soviet and American governments began the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT I). In 1972, Brezhnev and President Richard Nixon signed the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty (ABM), which limited the number of defensive missiles to 100 for each country. Additionally, SALT I limited the number of intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) and submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLMBs). In 1979, Brezhnev and President Jimmy Carter signed the SALT II treaties, which aimed at a more comprehensive limitation of delivery systems, although SALT II was never ratified. However, the Soviet Union and the U.S. signed another treaty to reduce Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) in 1987, ratifying the treaty a year later. In 1991, President George H.W. Bush and Mikhail Gorbachev, then president of the USSR, signed the next arms reduction treaty, known as START I. This treaty, which entered into force in 1994, further limited ICBMs and nuclear warheads. Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Ukraine were the official Soviet successor states that were parties to this treaty. Only Russia, however, remained a nuclear power, after the others vowed to forgo nuclear weapons in the Budapest Memorandum of December 1994. The follow-up treaty, START II, never entered into force, as Russia would only respect the further limitation of warheads and delivery systems if the U.S. remained a party to the ABM treaty. In 2002, however, the U.S. withdrew from the ABM treaty. Russia responded with a significant qualitative buildup of its nuclear forces, with President Vladimir Putin subsequently referring to the American decision to leave the ABM treaty when he legitimized further investment in the development of nuclear weapons. Most recently, the Trump administration decided to cancel the INF treaty and the 2015 Iran nuclear deal. Both decisions dealt serious blows to the non-proliferation regime and to U.S.-Russian relations.⁷

In late April 2019, Russia's deputy foreign minister, Sergei Riabkov, claimed that Russia would enter the following year's NPT review conference with a moral advantage, as it was the U.S. that had decided to quit disarmament treaties and non-

⁵ Isabelle Anstey, “Negotiating Nuclear Control. The Zangger Committee and the Nuclear Supplier's Group in the 1970s,” *The International History Review* 40.5 (2018): 975–995, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/07075332.2018.1449764>.

⁶ Gabrielle Hecht, “A Cosmogram for Nuclear Things,” *Isis* 98.1 (2007): 100–108, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1086/512834>.

⁷ Robert Legvold, “U.S.-Russian Relations in the Trump Era,” H-Diplo, ISSF Policy Series *America and the World – 2017 and Beyond*, 6 September 2017, <https://issforum.org/roundtables/policy/1-5ax-russia>, (23.12.2019).

proliferation negotiations.⁸ Unsurprisingly, Russia also made it clear that complete nuclear disarmament could not be seriously considered in the near future. The Russian Foreign Ministry even called the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW), an initiative developed in the wake of the NPT 2010 review conference, a “mistake” that undermined the NPT.⁹ Obviously, there is little chance that the Ban Treaty, as the TPNW often is called, will receive support from any of nuclear-armed state in the current situation.

In his recent book, Gorbachev voiced strong opposition to any further erosion of the existing nuclear order and expressed his fear that the 2020 NPT review conference might become a fiasco if the major nuclear powers do not start serious negotiations regarding the long-term objective of global nuclear disarmament as defined in Article VI of the NPT.¹⁰ The current state of the debate about the NPT-based nuclear order raises questions about the significance and effectiveness of the 2020 review conference. Can we expect anything more than a reenactment of ritual declarations in favor of disarmament that will happen at some undefined moment in the future? Is the NPT still the best way to make the world a safer place, or is it just a relic of the Cold War that long ago lost its significance for contemporary politics?

2. *The NPT: A Very Short History*

The first steps toward the NPT were made in December 1961, when both the Soviet and American delegations to the United Nations voted in favor of a General Assembly Resolution drafted under the guidance of Frank Aiken, Ireland’s Minister of External Affairs.¹¹ The Irish Resolution was based on the assumption that non-proliferation and disarmament should be pursued independently.¹² Aiming to freeze the nuclear weapons’ status quo of 1961, the Irish Resolution was attractive for the Soviet government mainly because of two aspects that were central to Soviet international policymaking at that time.

In the same period, cracks in the fabric of the socialist friendship between the Soviet Union and the People’s Republic of China (PRC) became more and more apparent, and this was a conflict with a strong nuclear dimension.¹³ The Soviet Union had supported China’s nuclear program by providing material and know-how under the banner of “unconditional nuclear

⁸ “Zamglavy MID Rossii Sergei Riabkov provel brifing po podgotovke k Obzornoj konferentsii DNIAO,” *Mezhdunarodnia Zhizn*, 28 April 2019, <https://interaffairs.ru/news/show/22364>, (23.12.2019).

⁹ “Treaty on prohibition of nuclear weapons ‘a mistake’ – Russian foreign ministry,” *TASS*, 3 May 2019, online: <http://tass.com/politics/1056868>, (01.06.2019); see also: “Rossiia ne prisoedinitia k Dogovoru o zapreshchenii iadernogo oruzhiia,” *Kommersant*, 8 November 2019, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4153731>, (18.11.2019).

¹⁰ “Gorbachev opasaetsia provala peregovorov na konferentsii po DNJaO v 2020 godu,” *RIA Novosti*, 28 October 2019, online: <https://ria.ru/20191028/1560284271.html>, (23.12.2019).

¹¹ On the history of the Irish Resolution see for example: Catherine Manathunga, “The Evolution of Irish Disarmament Initiatives at the United Nations, 1957–1961,” *Irish Studies in International Affairs* 7 (1996): 97–113; William Burr, “60th Anniversary of Irish Resolution. A Forerunner of the NPT,” *National Security Archive Briefing Book 646*, 29 October 2018, https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/briefing-book/nuclear-vault/2018-10-29/60th-anniversary-irish-resolution-forerunner-npt#_edn1, (21.11.2019).

¹² UN General Assembly Resolution 1665 (XVI) “Prevention of the Wider Dissemination of Nuclear Weapons,” [https://undocs.org/en/A/RES/1665\(XVI\)](https://undocs.org/en/A/RES/1665(XVI)), (26.11.2019).

¹³ Lorenz M. Lüthi, *The Sino-Soviet Split. Cold War in the Communist World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008): 74; John Wilson Lewis/Xue Litai, *China Builds the Bomb* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988): 39–46; Danhui Li/Yafeng Xia, *Mao and the Sino-Soviet Split, 1959–1973. A New History* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2018): 63–68.

development aid.”¹⁴ When ideological arguments between the Communist nations started to weaken the Moscow-Beijing axis, the Soviet government suspended the flow of nuclear knowledge and material to the PRC, realizing that nuclear aid could lead to unintentional and undesirable proliferation. What initially was meant to be development aid for a fellow socialist country eventually developed into a real nuclear threat to Soviet national security.

Additionally, in the context of the 1961 Berlin Crisis, a nuclear-armed West Germany was nothing less than a nightmare for the Soviet government under Nikita Khrushchev. The Soviet decision to vote in favor of the Irish Resolution in 1961 was a first step away from the promise of unconditional nuclear development aid—a promise that had been propagated by the Soviet government since 1955.¹⁵ When it became obvious in 1963 and 1964 that non-proliferation measures came too late with regard to the Chinese nuclear program, the Soviet Union even changed its previous strict anti-safeguards policy in the IAEA and began to take part in an international nuclear security system that largely employed on-site inspections and clearly favored the interests of nuclear weapon states over those of non-nuclear states. The process leading to the NPT was, as the historian Roland Popp has emphasized, “a process driven and dominated by the two superpowers.”¹⁶ However, the NPT remained incomplete, as several states did not join it. Prominent absentees include nuclear weapon states like France and the PRC as well as states with nuclear ambitions, including Israel, India, and Pakistan.¹⁷

One of the main problems of the NPT is that it petrified nuclear hierarchies between the group of nuclear-armed states and the rest of the world. Of course, several states outside the NPT joined the nuclear club after 1970, but the NPT signatories complied with the treaty and did not (at least successfully) pursue military nuclear programs. India, Pakistan, and Israel never signed the NPT, while South Africa acceded to the treaty in 1991 after its secret military nuclear program was uncovered by Soviet and American intelligence and the South African government decided to dismantle its nuclear arsenal. North Korea withdrew from the treaty in 2003, three years before its first nuclear test. Except for these five states, no nuclear proliferation has occurred since the NPT came into force. This indisputably makes the treaty at least a partial success in terms of preventing the spread of offensive nuclear technology. The most controversial aspect of the NPT is, however, Article VI:

“Each of the Parties to the Treaty undertakes 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, and on a treaty on general and complete disarmament under strict and effective international control.”¹⁸

¹⁴ Sergey Radchenko, “The Rise and the Fall of the Sino-Soviet Alliance 1949–1989,” in: Norman M. Naimark/Silvio Pons/Sophie Quinn-Judge (eds.), *The Socialist Camp and World Power 1941–1960s. The Cambridge History of Communism, vol. 2* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017): 250.

¹⁵ Fabian Lüscher, “The Nuclear Spirit of Geneva. Boundary-Crossing Relationships of Soviet Atomic Scientists after 1955,” *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas* 66.1 (2018): 24–28.

¹⁶ Roland Popp, “The Long Road to the NPT. From Superpower Collusion to Global Compromise,” in: Roland Popp/Livia Horovitz/Andreas Wenger (eds.), *Negotiating the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. Origins of the Nuclear Order* (London: Routledge, 2017): 9.

¹⁷ Popp, 27.

¹⁸ “Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), online: <https://www.un.org/disarmament/wmd/nuclear/npt/text>, (18.11.2019)

While the absolute numbers of nuclear warheads has declined steadily since a notable peak in 1986, the relative hierarchy between the nuclear states did not change much, even after the disintegration of the Soviet Union.¹⁹ The 1994 Budapest Memorandum made the Russian Federation the only Soviet successor state to possess nuclear weapons, while Belarus, Kazakhstan, and the Ukraine joined the NPT as non-nuclear states.²⁰ Today, the Russian Federation and the U.S. possess 90% of all nuclear warheads. While both nuclear superpowers have reduced their nuclear arsenals significantly since the mid-1980s, it now seems clearer than ever before that complete nuclear disarmament is not an option for any state with a military nuclear program. This situation makes the NPT a one-sided instrument, forcing signatories without nuclear weapons to comply strictly with the articles aimed at preventing proliferation and allowing the nuclear states to retain their hegemonic position in the global nuclear order, avoiding compliance with Article VI. There is no reason to believe that the Ban Treaty, created to finally set the oft-promised nuclear disarmament in motion, will alter this situation in the near future.

3. *The Nuclear Order under Pressure: The NPT in the Time of Trump*

Immediately after taking office in January 2017, President Donald Trump directed the Department of Defense to conduct a Nuclear Posture Review (NPR), which was published in an extensive report in 2018. A look at this document and at Russian reactions to the NPR offers a sense of what to expect—and not expect—from the upcoming NPT review conference. The NPR's authors begin the report as follows:

“We must look reality in the eye and see the world as it is, not as we wish it to be. This NPR reflects the current, pragmatic assessment of the threats we face and the uncertainties regarding the future security environment.”²¹

Regarding the international non-proliferation regime and the NPT, its most important treaty, the NPR leaves no doubt about what its authors view as pragmatic approaches. They firmly reject the Ban Treaty, arguing that the initiative was “fueled by wholly unrealistic expectations” and that it “seeks to inject disarmament issues into non-proliferation fora, potentially damaging the non-proliferation regime.”²² The Trump administration thus made it abundantly clear that under no circumstances would it consider becoming a signatory to the Ban Treaty. Among other arguments against the Ban Treaty, the NPR's authors emphasize that non-proliferation and disarmament should remain decoupled. At the same time, they assure their readers that the Trump administration remained strongly committed to the NPT's goals:

¹⁹ Information about nuclear warheads is based on the estimation of the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* (BoAS) Nuclear Notebook: <https://thebulletin.org/nuclear-notebook/>, (18.11.2019)

²⁰ Mariana Budjeryn, “Security for Disarmament: Negotiating Ukraine’s Budapest Memorandum,” *Wilson Center Sources and Methods Blog*, 5 December 2018, online: <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/security-for-disarmament-negotiating-ukraines-budapest-memorandum>, (18.11.2019); Marjana Budjeryn/Polina Sinovets, “Denuclearization Again? Lessons from Ukraine’s Decision to Disarm,” *War on the Rocks*, 19 April 2018, online: <https://warontherocks.com/2018/04/denuclearization-again-lessons-from-ukraines-decision-to-disarm/>, (18.11.2019).

²¹ Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Nuclear Posture Review 2018*, online: <https://media.defense.gov/2018/Feb/02/2001872886/-1/-1/1/2018-NUCLEAR-POSTURE-REVIEW-FINAL-REPORT.PDF>, (02.01.2020), II.

²² *Nuclear Posture Review*, 72.

“The Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) is a cornerstone of the nuclear non-proliferation regime. It plays a positive role in building consensus for non-proliferation and enhances international efforts to impose costs on those that would pursue nuclear weapons outside the Treaty.”²³

While the NPR calls for the continued separation of disarmament and non-proliferation, the NPT explicitly couples the two through Article VI, which demands that nuclear-armed states seek complete nuclear disarmament. Regarding this NPT feature, the NPR is unsurprisingly very cautious: “In continuing support of nuclear non-proliferation, the United States will continue to pursue the political and security conditions that could enable further nuclear reductions.”²⁴ The Trump administration has thus defined the NPT as a mere tool to ensure non-proliferation and made it clear, that, for the time being, the U.S. views its Article VI commitment to disarmament as a vision for a distant future rather than an actionable agreement for the present. Obviously, the Trump administration has so far aimed to maintain the status quo regarding non-proliferation while reducing its commitments to arms reduction. Withdrawal from the INF treaty in early 2019 was the most prominent decision in compliance with this “pragmatic” policy to date.

In Russia, Putin’s administration has thus far also favored pragmatic approaches to the global nuclear order. In response to the NPR and the American resignation from the INF treaty, the Russian Foreign Ministry sponsored a situational analysis on multilateral strategic stability in May 2019.²⁵ The authors of the resulting report base their conclusions on the assumption that Russia and the world face a “fundamentally new and complex strategic situation”:

“The traditional understanding of strategic stability as a situation in Russian-U.S. relations in the field of nuclear weapons whereby neither side has any incentives to deliver a nuclear first strike against the other and both sides maintain approximate parity in their strategic nuclear forces through bilateral nuclear arms limitation regimes has become obsolete.”²⁶

Most importantly, the Russian experts refer to the “emergence of a ‘nuclear multipolarity’ due to nuclear arms proliferation and a possible increase in China’s nuclear arsenal” as a reason to fundamentally rethink the fabric of the international nuclear order. According to the authors, this quest for multilateral strategic stability renders traditional instruments based on a bilateral Russian-U.S. strategic balance obsolete. Both technological sophistication and the growth in the number of states in negotiations lead the Russian experts to the conclusion that the negotiations on arms limitations and reductions have become pointless.²⁷ The report states that discussion of the NPT “sparked an interesting dispute” among Russian experts. Some feel that the NPT has long been undermined and will soon be officially proclaimed dead, while another group favors a strong Russian defense of the NPT:

“Russia should publicly reaffirm its commitment to Article VI of the NPT. [...] In fact, the absence of intentions to build up its nuclear arsenals should be a key point of Russia’s position at the upcoming NPT Review Conference in 2020.”²⁸

²³ *Nuclear Posture Review*, XVI.

²⁴ *Nuclear Posture Review*, 71.

²⁵ Sergei A. Karaganov and Dmitry V. Suslov, *The New Understanding and Ways to Strengthen Multilateral Strategic Stability* (Moscow: Higher School of Economics, 2019), http://svop.ru/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/REPORT_Eng_1.pdf (02.01.2020).

²⁶ Karaganov and Suslov, 6.

²⁷ Karaganov and Suslov, 6-7.

²⁸ Karaganov and Suslov, 44.

This sketchy summary of two nuclear policy reports shows that neither Washington nor Moscow places high hopes on the upcoming NPT review conference. While American experts have explicitly ignored the NPT's significance as an instrument for disarmament, at least some Russian experts presume that the NPT is already clinically dead. Still, the U.S. withdrawal from the INF and the Iran nuclear deal has given the Russian government the chance to position itself as a keeper and defender of the NPT, including Article VI.²⁹

The political scientists Joelen Pretorius and Tom Sauer recently asked the provocative question, "Is it time to ditch the NPT?"³⁰ Their suggestion was to emphasize "the new kid on the block: the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, also known as the Ban Treaty."³¹ Adam M. Scheinman, a special representative for nuclear non-proliferation under the administration of President Barack Obama, immediately replied by warning that a mass withdrawal from the NPT would be a most dangerous undertaking, based on the assumption that the NPT helps harmonize state policies and practices aimed at non-proliferation and emphasizing that the Ban Treaty, proposed by Pretorius and Sauer as a possible substitute for the NPT, lacks support from any nuclear power or major nuclear supplier.³² The Brazilian diplomat Sergio Duarte, current President of the Pugwash Conferences on Science and World Affairs, tried to reconcile the opinion of Pretorius and Sauer with that of Scheinman.³³ He opted for the maintenance of the NPT for the time being but firmly insisted on the Ban Treaty as the best—if not only—solution to address the danger of nuclear warfare once and for all.³⁴ Duarte's arguments are reasonable, and his position in favor of both the NPT and the Ban Treaty is quite understandable.

At present, however, there is not a single reason to believe that any of the nuclear weapon states would actually shift their policy positions to favor the Ban Treaty. As the Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov has emphasized time and again, his government does not consider the Ban Treaty an option, calling the initiative a mistake and blaming its initiators for trying to apply "a one-sided and quite arrogant method" that impedes nuclear disarmament instead of accelerating it.³⁵ As of now, the Ban Treaty lacks any support from nuclear states.

American nuclear policy under the Trump administration, including the withdrawal from the INF treaty and cancellation of the Iran nuclear deal, is not helping to improve the chances for a productive revision of the existing nuclear order. The Putin administration's nuclear strategy is no less clear about its nuclear policy in the near future: National security has priority over nuclear disarmament and will be achieved by maintaining and modernizing the existing arsenal of strategic nuclear deterrents. Russia is in a position to blame the U.S. for dismantling the bilateral nuclear security regime and for undermining the NPT. Even though some Russian experts consider the NPT to be as good as dead, the upcoming review conference will provide the Russian delegation with a welcome opportunity to claim leadership in the field of international

²⁹ Vladimir Dvorkin, "Mirovoj dogovor. Nuzhen li Rossii balans s SshA po strategicheskim vooruzheniiam," *Novaia Gazeta*, 10 November 2019, online: <https://www.novayagazeta.ru/articles/2019/11/10/82673-mirovoy-dogovor>, (30.12.2019).

³⁰ Joelen Pretorius and Tom Sauer, "Is it Time to Ditch the NPT," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 6 September 2019, online: <https://thebulletin.org/2019/09/is-it-time-to-ditch-the-npt/>, (18.11.2019).

³¹ Pretorius and Sauer.

³² Adam M. Scheinman, "No, it is not Time to Ditch the NPT," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 7 October 2019, online: <https://thebulletin.org/2019/10/no-it-is-not-time-to-ditch-the-npt/>, (18.11.2019).

³³ Sergio Duarte, "Ditch the Bomb, not the NPT," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 18 November 2019, online: <https://thebulletin.org/2019/11/ditch-the-bomb-not-the-npt/>, (19.11.2019)

³⁴ Duarte.

³⁵ "Rossiia ne prisoedinit'sia k Dogovoru o zapreshchenii iadernogo oruzhiia," *Kommersant*, 8 November 2019, online: <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4153731>, (18.11.2019).

security, either by insisting on Article VI, with noncompliance blamed on the U.S., or by declaring the worthlessness of the NPT as such and demanding the negotiation of a new nuclear order based on at least trilateral negotiations—talks that would most likely strengthen the positions of Russia and China.

4. Conclusions and Outlook Regarding the 2020 Review Conference: Cold War Rituals Reenacted?

Even in 2007, when Gabrielle Hecht published her thoughts on the NPT as a “cosmogram for nuclear things,” the world had dramatically changed from the time when the nuclear order was established.³⁶ After 1991, the Russian Federation took the Soviet Union’s place as a state armed to the teeth with nuclear warheads. Unsurprisingly, the system of bilateral nuclear security based on the idea of mutually assured destruction between two superpowers started to crumble when the Soviet Union ceased to exist and when new powers, especially China, sought ever greater influence in international policymaking. While important treaties like the ABM and the INF ended up in the dustbin of history, the NPT still exists. Even if it has always remained incomplete, the NPT can still plausibly be called the central pillar of the global nuclear order. Still, the treaty is no less controversial than it was at the time of its creation.

The idea of complete nuclear disarmament today lacks the support of any nuclear power—the Ban Treaty is not even considered for propaganda purposes. In the short term, the intention to ban nuclear weapons seems to be even more utopian than in the early days of the Cold War. There is powerful momentum away from erosion of the Cold War nuclear order and toward an intensive buildup of nuclear capabilities, if not quantitatively then at least through the modernization of existing arsenals and delivery systems. Russia portrays its nuclear policy as a necessary reaction to American decisions, which from the Russian perspective are to blame for the end of several major bilateral agreements and the current impasse in the nuclear dispute with Iran. This conflict in fact poses a major threat to the NPT, as it brings to the fore the weaknesses of that 50-year-old treaty. As Hecht had already summarized in 2007:

“In 1970, nuclear technology promised ‘third world’ nations quantum leaps into the exalted state of ‘development.’ That promise already appeared empty by the end of that decade. So too did the promise of compartmentalization held out by the NPT. [...] What precisely did the ‘inalienable right’ to nuclear technology mean? How exactly could you tell if a technology was military or civilian? The more nuclear things spread out over the world, the less clear the answers. By 2004, Iran’s assertion of its “inalienable right” to enrichment technology triggered a major international crisis.”³⁷

The dispute over Iran’s nuclear ambitions is still far from resolved. Instead, the decision of the Trump administration to leave the agreement, which was supposed to bring Iran’s nuclear program back into compliance with the NPT, has led to a further loss of confidence in the effectiveness of the existing non-proliferation regime. Under these circumstances, it is more than doubtful that this faith in the NPT will reemerge during the upcoming review conference. If the NPT is to be preserved, the U.S. should return without delay to the negotiating table with Iran. With the latest escalation in the conflict between the U.S. and Iran, the resumption of these negotiations is, however, unlikely. After the killing of Iranian Major General Qasem Soleimani by a U.S. drone strike on 3 January 2020, Iran declared to no longer abide to restrictions regarding uranium enrichment and instead increased its enrichment capacity. Still, Iran did not leave the nuclear deal completely. For the time being, Iran continues to cooperate with the IAEA and allows international inspectors to monitor its nuclear program. It is pivotal to keep the dialogue about Iran’s nuclear program going – especially in times of crisis. Depending on the further development of the current conflict, the review conference can at least provide a platform for continued conversation.

Additionally, the major nuclear states would do well to begin seeking means to diminish the inequalities cemented in the NPT. As complete nuclear disarmament is currently out of reach, the 2020 review conference can at least provide an

³⁶ Hecht, 102-103.

³⁷ Hecht, 103.

opportunity to discuss alternative incentives that the nuclear-armed states could offer to the majority of NPT signatories in exchange for their compliance. Unfortunately, while much ink has been spilled on evoking a possible collapse of the NPT and stirring outrage about utopian ban plans, pragmatic suggestions that are focused on how to make the existing nuclear order more just and the goals of the NPT worth striving for are basically non-existent. At best, the 2020 review conference will provide fertile ground for pragmatic approaches to non-proliferation and disarmament. Given the official statements of the key NPT players, however, it seems more likely that the NPT will either collapse completely or remain what it is: a controversial, unfair, and only partly effective relic of the Cold War.

Fabian Lüscher is a Research Assistant at the History Department of the University of Bern, Switzerland. His research interests include the nuclear history of the Soviet Union and beyond, science and technology in the Cold War, and the international history of atomic energy. He has written on the boundary-crossing relationships of Soviet scientists and is finalizing his Ph.D. thesis on nuclear internationalism in the Cold War Soviet Union. His most recent publication on the subject has appeared in 2020: Fabian Lüscher, “Party, Peers, Publicity: Overlapping Loyalties in Early Soviet Pugwash, 1955–1960,” in Alison Kraft and Carola Sachse, eds., *Science, (Anti-) Communism and Diplomacy. The Pugwash Conferences on Science and World Affairs in the Early Cold War*, (Leiden: Brill, 2020): 121–155.