

**ARGUMENT**

*An expert's point of view on a current event.*

# Our Nuclear Fatalism Must End

The upcoming Non-Proliferation Treaty Review Conference is the time to tackle it.

By [Ban Ki-moon](#), the former secretary-general of the United Nations and a deputy chair of The Elders.

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For more than 75 years, humanity has lived in the shadow of the nuclear bomb. We have gotten used to this danger. We shouldn't. Russian President Vladimir Putin's invasion of Ukraine and his threats to use nuclear weapons against any country that might intervene mean the risk of nuclear devastation is higher than at any time since the end of the Cold War.

Nuclear weapons pose an existential threat that could be greater than climate change. Yet the lack of international pressure on leaders to take transformative action and help poorer countries adapt to climate change and governments and heads of state for nuclear weapons must be a pressing priority.

The facts prove this neglect. The size of nuclear stockpiles remain significant. Around 13,000 warheads, although that number has decreased since its peak of around 70,000 warheads in 1986, for the first time in decades, it is likely to rise in the coming years, according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute.

Yet a frightening fatalism has taken hold of any attempts to pursue disarmament and nonproliferation. The upcoming Review Conference of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in August—the first in seven years—is a crucial opportunity for the leaders of nuclear states to show they take this threat seriously and remain committed to nuclear disarmament.

The NPT Review Conference, which takes place from Aug. 1 to Aug. 26, should be an occasion when nuclear states decisively commit to radical action to reduce stockpiles and risks of nuclear war, de-escalate tensions, and fully live up to their responsibilities under the 52-year-old treaty.

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## Nuclear states have conspicuously failed to live up to their disarmament responsibilities.

In the Cold War-era treaty, nonnuclear states committed to not develop nuclear weapons in return for the promise of access to the peaceful use of nuclear technologies, while five countries—China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States—were recognized as nuclear states in exchange for them committing to pursue nuclear disarmament in good faith.

The NPT is credited with preventing large-scale proliferation of nuclear weapons beyond those five countries, which also happen to be the five permanent members (P5) of the United Nations Security Council. (India, Israel, Pakistan, and North Korea are the notable exceptions; North Korea withdrew from the NPT in 2003, and the others never signed it.) The treaty has also contributed to more states development programs than develop nuclear states have conspicuously failed to live up to their responsibilities.

The last NPT Review Conference to secretary-general. It concluded with then, the risks of an accidental or deliberate worsened, as P5 relations, particularly have frayed.

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At the beginning of 2022, there was a rare glimmer of hope when all P5 nations finally reaffirmed the maxim of former U.S. President Ronald Reagan and former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev that “a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought.” But only weeks later, Russian forces invaded Ukraine, and Putin made thinly veiled nuclear threats against NATO, including an announcement in late February that he was placing Russia’s nuclear forces on “special alert.” Meanwhile, China—the only P5 country with a “no first use” policy—appears to be increasing its nuclear arsenal, and last year, the United Kingdom publicly signaled its intention to increase the cap on its nuclear warheads.

Beyond the immediate crisis of Ukraine and lack of progress with P5 disarmament, there is a wider risk of more nuclear proliferation if the international community no longer sees the NPT as fit for purpose and if other agreements are undermined. In this regard, former U.S. President

Donald Trump's withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal remains a damaging geopolitical decision. The ongoing inability of all parties to restore the deal is a failure of diplomacy, with consequences across the Middle East and beyond.

One reason the current moment is so perilous is that **through a combination of neglect, recklessness, and hubris, much of the architecture of international arms control has been degraded or abandoned in recent years.**

The New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (or START) agreement between the United States and Russia is due to expire in February 2026, raising the prospect of there being no major agreement limiting nuclear arms between the two traditional nuclear superpowers for the first time in more than 50 years.

This would be dangerous at any time, but it is particularly so now given Russia's military aggression. In times of tension among nuclear-armed states, dialogue, negotiations, and more essential than in times of detente moments of the Cold War, Moscow keep the doors to dialogue open—a today.

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Faced with such a frightening array and fresh commitment is paramount between the low expectations for a Conference and the energy that war parties to the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW), which seeks to ban nuclear weapons entirely, in Vienna in June.

Although the U.N. has formally adopted the TPNW, which entered into force last year with 66 states parties, nuclear states have refused to support the treaty, arguing that the NPT, combined with direct negotiations among the nuclear powers, represents the most realistic long-term path to disarmament.

Nuclear states should follow through on those arguments by making the first NPT Review Conference in seven years a success. If they do not, their claims ring hollow, since they would be doing little to present any credible alternative to the TPNW to advance disarmament and would instead be making plans for maintaining or increasing their nuclear arsenals for decades to come.

If nuclear states want to be taken seriously, they need to respond with the same energy and purpose as the TPNW states in advancing arms control and disarmament. This requires, at a minimum, that nuclear states make a commitment to start a sustained dialogue aimed at reducing current nuclear risks and get serious about developing a broader arms control framework that could make meaningful progress in tackling the existential nuclear threat.

The NPT is a precious achievement that was painstakingly negotiated at a time of grave international tensions. It has endured for more than half a century with almost universal international support, but it must not be taken for granted. P5 states need to step up at the review conference and show the world they are serious about peace and disarmament. The alternative of an ever-escalating arms race could be a betrayal of all humanity.

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