
Preface: the NPT despite it all

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Abstract: The Nuclear non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), imagined between Nuclear Weapon States (NWS) and Non Nuclear Weapon States (NNWS), is intended to limit the spread of nuclear weapons and promote disarmament. The universality of the Treaty has been quasi reached. Horizontal proliferation has progressed, but outside the NPT (Israel, India and Pakistan). Even though it is not perfectly applied, the NPT has managed to contain access to nuclear weapons. The number of countries aspiring to become NWS has gradually declined, while around 50 states have mastered nuclear research or built nuclear reactors, making them capable of crossing with ease the nuclear weapons threshold. The effectiveness of the NPT has been demonstrated.

Keywords: horizontal and vertical nuclear proliferation; international relations; Non Proliferation Treaty.

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When the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) was signed, only five states possessed nuclear weapons: the USA, the USSR, Great Britain, France and China (all permanent members of the Security Council). The first three signed immediately, France and China ratified it in 1992. Disagreement split the then nuclear powers, two out of five expressing reservations. This shows the extent to which the NPT was marked by the Cold War and the confrontation between military blocs, and the obvious reluctance of France and China to be caught up in this logic. The rift between Nuclear Weapon States (NWS) and Non Nuclear Weapon States (NNWS) appeared later, when the degree of commitment of the parties was evaluated, notably that of NWS to significantly reduce their arsenals.

The NPT was initially ratified by around 60 states, or roughly 50% of UN members. In 1980 there were 110 signatories and today there are 189. With the exception of three countries – India, Pakistan and Israel – the NPT is now an universal treaty. The function

of such treaties is to fix the spotlight on those reluctant states that in a way denounce themselves and betray their intentions by refusing to sign. This is why some states, rather than keeping their distance, prefer to sign without respecting it. This was the case with North Korea and is what Iran is suspected of. Proliferation can thus occur *within* the treaty (North Korea, Iran) as well as *outside* it (India, Israel, Pakistan). The former can be viewed as non-compliant and open to sanctions, the latter as legal since they cannot be bound by a treaty they have not signed.

The first objective of the NPT – universality – has been reached. Today it is a question of making sure it is adhered to. In this respect the result is multifaceted. Whether or not the NPT or human reason is the cause, it is still true that over 60 years after Hiroshima there has not been a nuclear war. Nuclear-free zones have been extended and codified by treaties: Antarctica, Latin America and the South Pacific. In 1996, a Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) was signed but it still has to be ratified by China and the US Congress. Four countries have dismantled their nuclear arsenals: three ex-USSR states (Kazakhstan, Ukraine and Belarus) and South Africa, which acquired nuclear weapons with the help of France, Israel and Switzerland. Western pressure played a role in preventing the spread of South Africa's nuclear arsenal to the ANC, which was at the gates of power. Other countries abandoned their research, including Brazil and Argentina, who were engaged in a dangerous regional arms race. More recently, Libya has taken this route. North Korea successfully pursued military nuclear technology within the NPT umbrella, but then opted out of the treaty. International pressure coupled with financial compensation encouraged them to commit to dismantling their nuclear reactors by the end of 2007. All of this demonstrates the effectiveness of the NPT.

However, vertical and horizontal proliferation have not been totally prevented. Firstly, the five NWS have not set the example for disarmament or shown their willingness to attain it. On the contrary, they have continued their research in order to modernise their arsenals. They have developed more effective arms systems in terms of penetration and miniaturisation. This has led us away from a policy of deterrence to utilisation. US military doctrine now envisages nuclear first strikes against a NNWS. Jacques Chirac in his Ile Longue speech in January 2006 followed a similar route when he referred to French nuclear forces being the guarantee of national security. The spirit of this declaration has been picked up by Nicolas Sarkozy.

Horizontal proliferation has progressed, but outside the NPT. In 40 years the number of NWS has increased from five to eight with the addition of Israel, India and Pakistan. This shows the success of the NPT, since no party to the treaty has acquired or retained nuclear power status. The new NWS all acquired their weapons with the help of the five original NWS, in violation of article 1 of the treaty. It is impossible to develop nuclear weapons capability in a short space of time without the help of those who already possess it. Since the three new NWS are not bound by the treaty, they can in turn generate more proliferation. If the number of NWS expands, the risk to global security will increase.

Brazil, Argentina and Libya have abandoned their nuclear goals, South Africa has dismantled its arsenal and Latin America and Africa can now be considered nuclear-free zones. The risk is now posed by Asia and the Middle East, where NWS are concentrated (China, India, Pakistan, Israel), countries in the process of dismantling (North Korea), countries on the threshold (Japan) and a suspect state (Iran). On the border between Asia and the Middle East, Iran is today the only country suspected of seeking to acquire military nuclear capability within the NPT, thus violating its commitments. This suspicion stems

from the fact that civil and military nuclear technologies are quite close, the transition from one to the other being a quantitative one that IAEA inspectors are supposed to monitor. Today Iran claims it is not seeking to build a bomb and justifies its programme by its energy requirements. The IAEA reports, even if they recognise that their inspectors have not been able to work untrammelled, are inconclusive as to whether or not Iran is pursuing a military nuclear programme. The priming of public opinion for a military strike on Iranian facilities is extremely irresponsible. The dialogue between the IAEA and Iran should be allowed to continue and at the same time the need for the latter to respect the NPT by sticking to civil nuclear research (as it has a need and a right to do) should be reasserted. An Iranian bomb would destabilise regional geostrategy and open the door to dangerous ambitions that until now have been contained.

Even though it is not perfectly applied, the NPT has managed to contain access to nuclear weapons. The number of countries aspiring to become NWS has gradually declined, while around 50 states have mastered nuclear research or built nuclear reactors, making them capable of crossing with ease the nuclear weapons threshold.

The great powers have the capacity to destroy the planet 20 times over as opposed to 30 times a few decades ago. But we still do not know who will be second to press the button. Beyond all sophistication – intellectually quite stimulating – the debate on nuclear strategy comes back to one question: who dies first and who dies second?