

5-4-2005

# Threats to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty

Erika Simpson

*Political Science*, [simpson@uwo.ca](mailto:simpson@uwo.ca)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/politicalsciencepub>



Part of the [Political Science Commons](#)

---

## Citation of this paper:

Simpson, Erika, "Threats to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty" (2005). *Political Science Publications*. 57.  
<https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/politicalsciencepub/57>

# **Threats to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty**

by Erika Simpson

Every five years, diplomats gather in New York City at the United Nations to hold a full-scale review conference of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). The treaty is one of the world's most important multilateral agreements, dating from 1968 when it came into force; 189 states around the world are signatories. The NPT has helped to curtail nuclear proliferation to just nine countries—in the 1960s, many believed that there would be fifteen or twenty nuclear powers by now. But the fact that nearly all the countries in the world have signed and ratified the NPT is an indication of its long-term success.

## **Charges of 'Hypocrisy' Threaten the Nuclear Weapon States**

However, the treaty is facing the most daunting challenges in its history during this month's review conference. Part of the problem is that the original nuclear weapons states—the United States, Russia, the United Kingdom, France, and China—have not lived up to their promise under Article Six of the NPT to move decisively toward the irreversible elimination of their nuclear arsenals. That means many countries, like India, Pakistan and North Korea, have another rationale to obtain their own nuclear arsenals. The Great Powers' inaction is also contributing to charges of 'hypocrisy' because they want to deny access to nuclear technologies to non-nuclear weapons states, like Iran. The U.S. and U.K. have threatened military pre-emption to prevent the acquisition of nuclear weapons by other countries, as in the case of Iraq, yet their own disarmament records are spotty. Many representatives of the 189 nations meeting at the United Nations fear their meeting will end in acrimony and unfettered worldwide nuclear proliferation.

## **Last Year's NPT Meeting Collapsed**

Two weeks of diplomatic negotiations at the United Nations last spring did not produce recommendations for this year's conference, as preparatory meetings have in the past. Hours after the meeting was supposed to end, it was simply adjourned with a final report containing minimum details. Most of the meetings during the last week were held behind closed doors so it is difficult to ascertain what, exactly, happened. But it seems clear that the political debate at the heart of all the procedural wrangling was the relative weight that should be given to disarmament and non-proliferation. Diplomats could not agree on whether the treaty's chief priority should be disarmament, as promised under Article Six by the nuclear powers, or addressing proliferation threats by countries such as North Korea and Iran.

## **Stalemate Surrounds Implementation of the "13 Steps"**

Another key sticking point of the negotiations was whether to acknowledge the final document of the previous review conference in 2000. This procedural question was a lightning rod for the political divisions among the delegates since the final document included what became known as "the 13 steps"—specific actions the nuclear powers agreed to as part of their

disarmament commitments under the NPT. Most importantly, the 13 steps included “an unequivocal undertaking by the nuclear weapon states to accomplish the total elimination of their nuclear arsenals.” That undertaking included signing and ratifying the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, reducing tactical nuclear weapons, and halting the production of weapons-grade nuclear materials.

The U.S. administration under George Bush opposed the 13 steps, most notably it pulled out of the CTBT and the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty and it opposed halting the worldwide production of weapons-grade materials (which, ironically, Iran also opposes). Because of the stalemate, last year’s preparatory meeting could not even agree on seemingly routine items such as an agenda for this month’s conference. While the collapse of negotiations was met with great dismay among diplomats, the news received little media coverage in the United States, Canada or worldwide.

### **The New Agenda Coalition Builds a Bridge**

Recently, eight NATO States built a ‘bridge’ on the long road to nuclear disarmament by supporting a New Agenda Coalition resolution at the UN calling for more speed in implementing commitments to the NPT. The bridge gained extra strength when Japan and South Korea joined with the NATO 8—Belgium, Canada, Germany, Lithuania, Luxembourg, The Netherlands, Norway and Turkey. These states, along with the New Agenda countries—Brazil, Egypt, Ireland, Mexico, New Zealand, South Africa and Sweden—now form an impressive centre in the nuclear weapons debate and could play a determining role in this month’s review conference.

The fact that important NATO players such as Canada, Germany, Norway, the Netherlands and Belgium have taken a more pro-active stance indicates that they want to send a message to the nuclear weapons states, especially the US, to take more significant steps to fulfill commitments already made to the NPT. As retired Canadian Senator Douglas Roche, chair of the Middle Power Initiative states, “The situation the NPT finds itself in is so serious and the threat of nuclear terrorism so real that governments need to put aside their quarrels and power plays and take meaningful steps to ensure that the NPT will not be lost to the world through erosion.”

### **Working Together Toward an International Strategy**

The Middle Powers Initiative, chaired by Douglas Roche, held an international consultation co-hosted by former President Jimmy Carter at the Carter Centre in Atlanta, Georgia in January. Many middle powers and non-nuclear weapon states tried to build support for a series of achievable measures. We wrote the final report of this Extraordinary Strategy session to provide the launching point for discussions in other countries. We also initiated another Ottawa meeting in February 2005 to examine Canada’s potential role in this debate. The Middle Powers Initiative, Project Ploughshares, the Canadian Pugwash Group, Physicians for Global Survival, and Lawyers for Social Responsibility organized an ‘Ottawa roundtable’ that was attended by many high-level representatives from around the world, including Ambassador Sergio Duarte, the President of the NPT Review Conference. In a dialogue that engaged many prominent non-governmental organizations and government officials, we explored avenues to bring moderate

NATO states and New Agenda Coalition states together in support of a strategy to bridge the growing gap between disarmament and non-proliferation elements in the NPT review process.

### **Threats from the United States, France, the UK, Iran and North Korea Shadow Talks**

Yet there is no doubt that this month's conference—which everyone hopes will close huge loopholes in the Treaty—could likely fail despite its global importance. Canada's diplomatic representatives at the conference are painstakingly aware of the salience of their discussions for the future of humankind. But the first few days of discussion indicate that mid-level diplomats sent by the U.S. want to avoid the issue of 'vertical' proliferation—which relates to Article Six and previous promises to decrease, rather than increase the numbers of weapons of the nuclear weapon states. They prefer to focus on issues surrounding 'horizontal' proliferation—revolving around Iranian and North Korean plans to acquire or develop nuclear weapons. It appears American diplomats want to jettison the 13 steps rather than update them. Adding to the potential for a meltdown, Iran threatened on Saturday to resume producing nuclear fuel and North Korea dismissed President Bush as a “philistine whom we can never deal with.” Instead of moving toward nuclear disarmament—and eventual nuclear abolition—these countries are drastically decreasing global security. It is possible that the most-important arms control treaty in history collapses this month—not with a bang—but with a whimper.

*Dr. Erika Simpson is an associate professor of international relations in the Department of Political Science at the University of Western Ontario and the author of NATO and the Bomb (2001: McGill-Queen's University Press). She attended the 2004 Preparatory Committee meeting in New York City and the Extraordinary Strategy Session at the Carter Centre as a representative of the Canadian Pugwash Group which is working with the Middle Powers Initiative under the chairmanship of retired Canadian Senator Douglas Roche to support this month's review conference of the NPT at UN headquarters in New York City.*