

At the Recently-Concluded Eleventh Review Conference (“Rev Con”) of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (“NPT”), the Nations of the World Failed Yet Again to Take Effective Measures to Protect Our Planet from the Evils of Nuclear Weapons. So It is Tasked to All of Us to Do

Once again,¹ the nations of the world assembled at United Nations headquarters in New York pursuant to the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (“NPT”) are returning to their capitals empty-handed, lacking a final agreed-upon outcome document.

And once again, the principal obstructionists to reaching consensus on a final outcome document were the nuclear-armed states – including the United States, the only nation ever to unleash the horror of nuclear weapons upon another country.

In legal circles, this fact alone would suggest bad faith. At a deeper level, it reflects grave moral turpitude. Domination, arrogance, and a refusal to abide by one’s Treaty obligations: it is these characteristics that continue to govern the responses to the NPT by nuclear-armed nations.

There is a growing divergence between the Treaty’s promise of disarmament and a reality increasingly defined by nuclear permanence. This places our fragile planet, and all its inhabitants, at existential risk. The erosion of the promises made in the NPT suggests that while the world may continue to recognize the threat of nuclear catastrophe in principle, it tolerates its possibility in practice.

The NPT

The NPT entered into effect in March of 1970. Those nations that had tested nuclear weapons prior to 1967 -- which at that time numbered five (the United States, France, the UK, Russia, and China) -- agreed, pursuant to the NPT, that over time they would

¹ As discussed below, attendees at the previous 2015 and 2022 NPT Preparatory Conferences (“Prep Coms”) similarly failed to reach a consensus regarding a shared statement.

eliminate their nuclear arsenals, in exchange for the other nations of the world agreeing never to develop or acquire nuclear weapons.

In subsequent years, four additional nations nonetheless proceeded to develop nuclear weapons: Israel (though never publicly acknowledging so), India, Pakistan, and North Korea.

While to date 189 nations have ratified the NPT, thereby becoming States Parties to the Treaty, there persists a compliance imbalance – a consequence of history, money, and military might. This imbalance is reflected in determinations of whose security is “global,” whose is “national,” and whose is worthy of little attention.

The fulfillment of disarmament obligations lags far behind non-proliferation commitments. Nuclear-armed nations are increasingly intent upon expanding and “modernizing” their arsenals, thereby increasing their weapons’ lethality. Those nations further proclaim that “nuclear-sharing” agreements, such as those among NATO nations (in which Belgium, Germany, the Netherlands, Italy, and Turkiye have hosted on their soil American nuclear weapons), somehow support non-proliferation goals, and strengthen the NPT – though those agreements are at odds with the very purpose of the NPT. Similarly, nuclear technology- and weapons-“sharing” agreements, such as that of the Australia-United Kingdom-United States (“AUKUS”) military alliance (pursuant to which Australia might acquire nuclear-powered submarines), and the stationing by Russia of nuclear weapons in Belarus, fly in the face of the NPT.

States Parties to the NPT meet every five years to review the status of the Treaty. Recent conferences have generally failed to make headway. The 2015 NPT Conference culminated in rejection of the final text by the United States, United Kingdom, and Canada. At the NPT Conference in 2022, the parties, working late into the final night, ultimately proffered a draft, rejected by Russia, focusing largely on the Zaporizhzya nuclear power plant. And now, in 2026, the assembled nations have again failed to reach agreement on a final outcome document. That refusal to agree seems to have included the United States pointing fingers at Iran – the very nation that, under an earlier US

Administration, had expressly signed an agreement not to pursue nuclear weapons – until that agreement was nullified by the current US Administration. The hypocrisy is dizzying.

The Power Imbalance Infecting the 2026 NPT

The 2026 NPT Conference – while failing to deliver what most of our world needs, and actively seeks – demonstrates distressingly the imbalance of power and influence exercised by certain of the “Permanent Members” of the UN Security Council, who effectively possess a veto power of not only Security Council Resolutions, but of other resolutions as well. This power is a consequence of history, money, military might, and global bullying.

The Key Role of Civil Society at NPT Conferences

Notwithstanding the failure to reach agreement, a number of UN Missions did endorse, sponsor, and attend events presented by civil society Non-Governmental Organizations (“NGOs”), which attempted to pull back the veils of secrecy, falsehoods, and bullying that too often characterize discussions about nuclear weapons. In a process too often dominated by States speaking in carefully-calibrated abstractions, it is NGOs that continue to speak truth to power – spotlighting the horrific human consequences and realities too often missing from the vocabulary of diplomats.

Civil society organizations presented oral and written statements to the assembled delegations; engaged in lobbying activities with UN Missions; sponsored “side events” featuring speakers from around the world decrying the dangers of nuclear testing, deployment, and waste disposal, as experienced in their own communities; hosted a weekend-long educational event featuring speakers addressing nuclear weapons’ horrific effects on communities and lands around the globe; and participated in public rallies in New York, at which speakers addressed the global impacts of nuclear weapons and marched peacefully across Manhattan, carrying signs decrying the development and use

of nuclear weapons. And global agencies dedicated to public health – including the International Committee of the Red Cross and the World Health Organization – effectively employed data making clear that nuclear war could lead to the end of all that we on earth know and love.

Pax Christi International, one of the many global NGOs present and active in nuclear weapons abolition work at the United Nations, sponsored a side event at the NPT highlighting nuclear weapons profiteers, spotlighting the connection between private industry and global catastrophe — with there being a significant overlap between private firms that profit from nuclear weapons and those profiting from war. The extent to which particular global behemoths profit financially from killing is shocking; by sharing the identities of the worst corporate offenders, members of civil society can formulate programs and strategies to share this information more widely, ideally leading to public boycotts or other pressures on those who profit from killing. And it is killing, after all, that nuclear weapons are designed to do.

Civil society was able to do what diplomats are often precluded from doing: remind the world, in plain language, that what is at issue is nothing less than the survival of all that we know, and all that we hold dear. As the Mission of the Holy See to the United Nations warned in its remarks at the close of the 2026 NPT,

“We are living in a time marked by rising nuclear risks, increasingly dangerous rhetoric, the continued modernization and expansion of nuclear arsenals . . . What is ultimately at stake . . . is human life itself. . . . The pursuit of a world free of nuclear weapons remains both an urgent necessity and a profound responsibility toward present and future generations.”

The Critical Role of Witness, Memory, Art, and Image in Conveying the Horrors of Nuclear Weapons

The most effective way to impress on citizens of the world the satanic character of nuclear weapons — and the imperative that those weapons never be used again — is

arguably found not in words, or reports, alone, but instead in realistic visual images of the damage wrought, on lands, on bodies, and on our common futures, by nuclear bombs. For when confronting the inconceivable, language and the ability of the human mind fully to grasp the risk and consequences of planetary destruction as being something more than an abstraction, fall short.

The Powerful Role of Personal Witness

Nowhere is moral clarity more powerfully embodied or expressed than in the testimonies of those who have experienced firsthand the horrors of nuclear weapons. The powerful presence and witness of the Hibakusha – people whose families, lands, and futures were ravaged by the bombing by the United States of Hiroshima and Nagasaki; South Pacific Islanders – whose soil, waters, bodies, and future generations have been irradiated and scarred by nuclear testing by the United States and others; and members of communities in the Southwest United States poisoned by nuclear testing and mining: theirs were the most powerful testimonies to the necessity of adhering to the NPT. The human mind cannot fully escape the moral force, and mental imprint, of witnessed suffering.

The Powerful Role of Visual Art

A single image is indeed worth a thousand words.

Among the events sponsored by NGOs during this year's NPT was a film newly released by a young Japanese filmmaker, "From the Shadows of Nagasaki." The visual images from that film — which depict the horrific disfigurement and death to people, land, and all of life in Nagasaki, following the August 9, 1945 US nuclear bombing there — remain lodged painfully in the mind and hearts of viewers in a way that verbal arguments against nuclear weapons have not. Indeed, in the midst of all the legalistic rumbblings and mumblings by the nuclear-armed nations, and their feint-and-spin justifications for possessing and threatening to use nuclear weapons, it is the raw, honest images of the devastation wrought upon the earth and all its inhabitants by the use of nuclear weapons that interrupt sleep at night.

One of the most haunting examples of this is the photograph that has been widely circulated, including on a card (*attached to this article*) carried by the late Pope Francis, bearing the inscription “il frutto della Guerra,” of a sad little boy waiting outside a crematorium in Nagasaki, carrying — strapped to his back — his dead baby brother. Having once seen that image, one cannot forget the horror.

Various panels at the NPT conference featured young artists who have created similarly stunning and unforgettable images depicting nuclear weapons atrocities. If anything gave us hope at the NPT this year, it was the presence of so many knowledgeable, committed, and creative young people from around the world who are committed to speaking truth — and doing so with fearlessness and courage — to power.

Conclusion

We cannot rely on governments, annual meetings, or international institutions, to lead the way to nuclear abolition. There is simply too much profit to be made by some, and too much bullying of others. Instead, it will be truth-telling by civil society; disruptions of the status quo; unvarnished testimonies and visuals; memories; and consciences shining a light on the truth regarding nuclear weapons — that will, if anything will, save us. The quiet irony of the nuclear age is that the preservation of our precious planet will be found not in documents, nor in choreographed diplomatic assemblies, but in love.

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