

Reflecting on the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty: A New Zealand Perspective

The New Zealand public has long protested nuclear weapons, and many flotillas of boats left New Zealand to sail up into the Pacific to disrupt and oppose nuclear testing by France, the United Kingdom and the United States in the 70's,80's and 90's. This conviction against nuclear weapon testing became more entrenched following the bombing of Greenpeace's flagship 'The Rainbow Warrior', berthed in Auckland on the 10th of July 1985, by the covert actions of the French government. By their actions, the French government had murdered Greenpeace photographer Fernando Pereira, who was asleep on board at the time.

New Zealand political parties are aware that shifting away from a nuclear-free stance or from supporting initiatives for nuclear weapons will cost them votes. The actions of the French in 1985 in New Zealand territory galvanised the New Zealand government to pass the New Zealand Nuclear Free Zone, Disarmament and Arms Control Act 1987 into law. This act includes New Zealand's binding agreement to the United Nations Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, 1968, which the government signed shortly after it was introduced at the United Nations.

It has been nearly 60 years since the Non-Proliferation Treaty was introduced. New Zealand ministers, on behalf of the government, have consistently spoken at the United Nations in support of nuclear non-proliferation and have endorsed the peaceful use of nuclear technology (i.e., for energy purposes) if it is coupled with transparency and robust safety measures.

Recently, in April 2026, New Zealand's permanent representative to the United Nations, H.E. Ms Carolyn Schwalger, made the following observation within her statement at the review conference for Nuclear Non-Proliferation.

'...Progress on nuclear disarmament consistent with the NPT's Article VI obligation is being eroded and, in some cases, reversed.

We see some nuclear-armed States building up their nuclear arsenals. Others are giving nuclear weapons more prominence in their security policies and increasing nuclear and related war readiness. They justify these actions on the basis that increasing strategic mistrust makes these changes necessary.

But such steps also contribute to further mistrust and strategic competition. And they increase the risks that nuclear weapons could be used.

There are also troubling indications that, in the face of nuclear threats or coercion, at least a few non-nuclear weapon States are starting to ask whether nuclear weapons might be their only guarantee against aggression.

Meanwhile, the demise of nuclear arms control-related agreements has removed important guardrails against falling into the nuclear abyss, and there are gaps emerging in strategic dialogue among the States with the largest nuclear arsenals....’ ([Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty: 2026 Review Conference General Debate Statement | New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade](#)).

Since the introduction of the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty, technology related to nuclear fusion and military hardware has developed exponentially. Major nuclear States may state that the number of nuclear weapons they hold has diminished. The capabilities of the weapons they now hold are more deadly and devastating than those they had over a decade ago.

Of concern is the focus by major nuclear powers on potentially weaponising space. Unfortunately, new companies focused on rocket technology could be contributing to this future development. New Zealand-founded Rocket Lab operates in New Zealand and the United States and works closely with the US Department of War. Our laws in New Zealand prevent them from launching rockets with nuclear weapons. However, their US rocket site would not be subject to such restrictions. Currently, Rocket Lab denies assisting the US War Department in deploying weapons into space and says its work for the US War Department is primarily for intelligence gathering.

Weaponising space will be the new frontier as superpowers again look to the stars to conquer and control the narrative of power dominance. There is a United Nations Outer Space Treaty that prohibits placing nuclear weapons in space. If nation-states continue to recognise and abide by this treaty, nuclear weapons won't be placed in the atmosphere; however, the sophistication in weapons technology may also allow nation-states to circumvent this treaty.

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