

Take 360: The Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons at 50

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The Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) turns 50 on March 5. This year likewise marks the 75th anniversary of the only use of nuclear weapons in conflict. Since 1970, this landmark agreement has curbed the spread of nuclear weapons and shaped norms around arms-control. Below, experts from The German Marshall Fund of the United States give their perspectives from Washington, Paris, Brussels, and Ankara on the prospects for the NPT.

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The stability provided by the NPT—and the U.S. nuclear umbrella—helps prevent many countries from pursuing an independent nuclear deterrent by removing the incentive to do so. But some may turn from this assumption as a result of their increased skepticism toward U.S. security guarantees. Hints of this are already witnessed in Germany's brief and uncomfortable conversation around building the bomb two years ago. France is dangling its nuclear guarantee in front of Europe to create a more cohesive approach to security and defense on the continent.

As the NPT turns 50, the current geopolitical reality presents a difficult context for U.S. nuclear policy. Non-proliferation remains key to U.S. security interests—as policy towards Iran and North Korea shows. But the United States is also pursuing a more confrontational approach and placing less emphasis on the traditional bilateral agreements with Russia that used to guide U.S. policy. The Trump administration's withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Program of Action with Iran and the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces treaty, and the uncertainty regarding the future of the New START treaty beyond 2021 demonstrate this. This has caused fears of increasing instability in Europe and a new arms race among some NATO allies, particularly in Western Europe.

The United States has a significant interest in preserving the NPT. However, its ability to tackle key non-proliferation and arms-control challenges, as well as its will to pursue a robust foreign policy, will likely be determining factors in the treaty's longevity. If U.S. leadership at the geopolitical level fades, the NPT will likely fade along with it.

Martin Quencez, Deputy Director, Paris Office and Research Fellow, Security & Defense Program

For the past three years, President Emmanuel Macron has repeatedly called for European countries to take more responsibility in defense and strategic affairs. On February 7, he conveyed the same message including nuclear issues. As he gave his much-awaited speech on nuclear deterrence—a rite of passage for every French president—Macron made the case for a strategic dialogue among willing European countries on the role of France’s nuclear arsenal in European security. He also presented the idea of an international agenda on arms control designed and promoted by European partners. France considers indeed that end of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces treaty, and potentially the end of the New START treaty, symbolize the collapse of the European security architecture. The possibility of a nuclear arms race would be disastrous for the continent’s security, and it cannot be left to the United States and Russia to decide on the fate of this order. Macron has reaffirmed the traditional tenets of France’s nuclear strategy, but he has also aimed to anchor this strategy in the larger European security environment. Whether other European countries answer his offer to engage in a substantive discussion on this sensitive issue remains to be seen.

Özgür Ünlühisarcıklı, Ankara Office Director

By signing the NPT in 1968 and ratifying it as a non-nuclear-weapon state in 1980, Turkey agreed to forgo developing or acquiring nuclear weapons. The statement accompanying Turkey’s instrument of ratification included the following warning: “Proliferation of all kinds must be halted, and measures must be taken to meet adequately the security requirements of non-nuclear weapon states. Continuing absence of such assurances might have such consequences that may undermine the objectives and the provisions of the Treaty.” Being a NATO member, and therefore under the U.S. nuclear umbrella, Turkey has not perceived the need to build its own nuclear deterrent. President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan hinted at his disagreement with this policy last July when speaking to members of his Justice and Development Party. He said: “Some countries have missiles with nuclear warheads, not one or two. But [they tell us] we can’t have them. This, I cannot accept.” His vision of strategic autonomy for Turkey, the deteriorating relations with the United States, the U.S. withdrawal from Joint Comprehensive Program of Action with Iran, and the perception that the NPT is failing to reach its goals may have led to Erdoğan’s statement. However, in practice, there is no indication that Turkey has changed its position regarding remaining a non-nuclear-weapon state.

Guillaume Xavier-Bender, Non-Resident Transatlantic Fellow, Brussels

For the last 20 years, it has been tempting to see in the repeated attempts to curtail Iran’s nuclear ambition the limitations of international cooperation in non-proliferation. A signatory to the NPT since 1968, the country could neither provide the necessary reassurances that its nuclear program was only designed for civilian and peaceful purposes, nor be pressured into fully respecting its commitments. In this context, the framework of the NPT was failing, and other diplomatic initiatives proved too weak to be sustainable.

The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) Iran signed with the United States, China, Russia, France, Germany, and the United Kingdom in 2015 provided a new impetus to the global nuclear non-proliferation regime. Where multilateralism may no longer work, plurilateralism can make a difference: a small group of committed powers can find the tools to address jointly a nuclear ambition that is directly linked to a regime’s stability, broader regional influence, and prosperity.

With the United States having pulled out of the JCPOA and European countries having triggered the deal's dispute-resolution mechanism in an attempt to save it, Iran has threatened to withdraw from the NPT altogether. Paradoxically, such a warning is telling of the value the country has always put in the treaty. Iran's interpretation of its collaboration with the International Atomic Energy Agency is used as a justification of the legitimacy of its nuclear-related claims.

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