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# The Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty



# The Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty

**Kelsey Davenport**

*Arms Control Association, Washington, DC, USA*

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*For Dennis, with love and thanks.*



# Contents

<b>Preface</b>	<b>ix</b>
<b>Acknowledgments</b>	<b>xi</b>
<b>Author biography</b>	<b>xii</b>
<b>1 Recognizing the threat: origins of the NPT negotiations</b>	<b>1-1</b>
1.1 Early nonproliferation proposals	1-1
1.2 Atoms for peace	1-7
1.3 The impact of the Irish resolution	1-10
1.4 The threat from new technologies	1-17
1.5 The multilateral nuclear force	1-20
1.6 The Soviet reaction to NATO nuclear sharing	1-24
References	1-28
<b>2 Negotiating the NPT</b>	<b>2-1</b>
2.1 Early US and Soviet drafts	2-1
2.2 Finalizing nonproliferation language at the ENDC	2-6
2.3 The nonaligned push on disarmament	2-10
2.4 International versus regional safeguards	2-14
2.5 The influence of Tlatelolco on the NPT	2-21
2.6 Finalizing the text	2-29
2.7 Achieving entry into force	2-35
References	2-36
<b>3 Major NPT milestones</b>	<b>3-1</b>
3.1 Early efforts to end the arms race	3-1
3.2 Dealing with nuclear-armed post-Soviet states	3-5
3.3 Nonproliferation successes and failures	3-8
3.4 Strengthening safeguards: lessons learned from Iraq and North Korea	3-12
3.5 The 1995 indefinite extension debate	3-15
References	3-21



<b>4</b>	<b>A crumbling cornerstone? Future challenges to the NPT</b>	<b>4-1</b>
4.1	The Middle East WMD free zone debate	4-1
4.2	Interpreting Article VI's disarmament obligations	4-3
4.3	The North Korea nuclear crisis	4-7
	References	4-11

## **Appendices**

<b>A</b>	<b>Treaty on the Nonproliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT)</b>	<b>A-1</b>
<b>B</b>	<b>Glossary of Terms</b>	<b>B-1</b>

# Preface

The first resolution passed by the United Nations on January 24, 1946, called for the creation of a commission to make specific proposals for the ‘elimination from national armaments of atomic weapons and of all other major weapons adaptable to mass destruction.’

Passage of the resolution, just five months after the United States dropped nuclear bombs on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, underscored international consensus that the unique threat posed by nuclear weapons demanded their elimination.

Despite the immediate call for disarmament, it took more than two decades for the international community to negotiate a treaty to prevent further proliferation of nuclear weapons and commit states possessing them to take steps toward disarmament.

While nonproliferation and disarmament are now inexorably linked in the Treaty on the Nonproliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), the decision to address both issues within one treaty was not a forgone conclusion. States possessing nuclear weapons initially resisted the push to include disarmament in a treaty designed to prevent the further dissemination of nuclear weapons, arguing that it would complicate nonproliferation efforts and was an issue best left to the states with nuclear arsenals. Including text on disarmament, however, became known as the so-called ‘Grand Bargain’ of the NPT, namely that for states to legally commit to forgo nuclear weapons, states possessing those same weapons would commit to eliminating them.

Now, nonproliferation, disarmament, and peaceful uses of nuclear energy comprise what is known as the ‘three main pillars’ of the NPT. With 191 state parties, the NPT is one of the most universally ascribed to treaties and remains the cornerstone of nonproliferation and disarmament efforts.

Despite the successes of the treaty, its continued relevance should not be taken for granted. As technology and the global political order continues to evolve, the NPT faces new challenges that pose risks to the future of the treaty.

The first chapter describes the early attempts to regulate the spread of nuclear technology and the events that created the political will to negotiate a treaty to address the threat of nuclear proliferation. It discusses efforts in the UN, primarily led by Ireland, that proved critical in laying the groundwork to address nonproliferation and disarmament in the same treaty. This chapter also discusses the impact of the decision by the US to pursue a multilateral nuclear force in Europe, and the Soviet Union’s rejection of any arrangement that would allow western European states to control US nuclear warheads. The final section briefly touches upon the role that two technologies, the gas centrifuge and the ballistic missile, played in underscoring the urgent threat posed by the proliferation of nuclear weapons.

The second chapter addresses negotiations on the treaty itself. The first two sections outline the early efforts by the US and the Soviet Union to reach agreement on the definition of nonproliferation and draft language that would still permit

nuclear-sharing arrangements with NATO. The third section outlines the push by non-nuclear weapon states to include language on disarmament and the debate over whether or not to impose deadlines or list specific actions that states possessing nuclear weapons would be required to take. The fourth and fifth sections address safeguards requirements and access to nuclear technology. Particularly in the fifth section, the influence of Latin America's negotiation of a treaty to declare the region a nuclear-weapons-free zone is highlighted as driving some key provisions that were included in the NPT, including access to nuclear technology for peaceful uses. Finally, the chapter concludes with a description of the final debates over the text at the UN in 1968 and briefly outlines how the treaty entered into force in 1970.

Some of the early successes and trials of the NPT are discussed in the third chapter, although it is by no means an exhaustive list of events that strengthened the NPT or exposed weaknesses in the text. The first section outlines the efforts during the Cold War to slow the arms race and reduce the number of nuclear delivery systems deployed by the US and the Soviet Union. The next three sections highlight several important events that reinforced the NPT or demonstrated inadequacies in the treaty. These include the negotiations with the former Soviet states that inherited nuclear weapons to give them up and join the NPT as non-nuclear weapons states, the cases of Iraq and North Korea, which exposed the inadequacy of the NPT safeguards requirements, and South Africa's decision to dismantle its nuclear warheads. The chapter ends with a discussion of the historic decision in 1995 to indefinitely extend the NPT and the conditions placed on the extension decision.

Finally, the fourth chapter briefly discusses some of the challenges that the treaty faces more than 50 years after its negotiation. Unquestionably, the NPT will face additional challenges as the geopolitical landscape continues to evolve. This chapter, however, focuses on three areas that have continued to plague the regime. The first section focuses on the failure to make progress on a zone free of weapons of mass destruction in the Middle East. The second section highlights the growing frustration over the slow pace of disarmament and efforts by a group of non-nuclear weapons states to pursue a treaty that bans nuclear weapons. Finally, the last section briefly discusses the case of North Korea and the risks its nuclear program poses to the NPT.

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# Author biography

## Kelsey Davenport

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Kelsey Davenport is the Director for Nonproliferation Policy at the Arms Control Association, where she provides research and analysis on the nuclear and missile programs in Iran, North Korea, India, and Pakistan and on nuclear security issues. Kelsey also reports on developments in these areas for the organization's journal *Arms Control Today* and runs the Arms Control Association's project assessing the effectiveness of multilateral voluntary initiatives that contribute to nonproliferation efforts. She is the co-author of a series of six reports assessing the impact of the Nuclear Security Summits on efforts to prevent nuclear terrorism. Kelsey has been quoted in numerous outlets, including the *Washington Post*, *The New York Times*, *Foreign Policy*, and *The Guardian*. She also provides commentary on nuclear and missile developments in Iran and North Korea for TV and radio outlets such as, CNN, BBC, MSNBC, and NPR.

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