

The Nuclear Non-Proliferation Regime at a Critical Juncture, an interview with Hassan Elbahtimy



Hassan Elbahtimy is Senior Lecturer in the Department of War studies and director of the Centre for Science and Security Studies (CSSS). He is a Trustee and Executive Committee member of the British International Studies Association (BISA) and currently chairs BISA's L.H.M. Ling Outstanding First Book Prize. He is also an Associate Fellow of the UK Higher Education Academy.

The NPT Review Conference ended on 26 August without the approval of a final document due to Russia's opposition but the diplomatic process was widely considered constructive. What is your overall assessment of the conference's outcome?

This was always going to be a challenging NPT review conference. The NPT has been facing significant structural challenges due to various competing preferences, grievances and expectations from its large membership of state parties (191 in total). Add the recent tensions over Ukraine with its ripple effects on European and global security as well as widespread perceptions of global power shifts and the challenges become even more formidable. The diplomatic process within the conference followed cycles of ups and downs. None of the three main committees were able to agree on a consensual final report. The RevCon President's consultations and drafts in the final week provided some promise that a lower common denominator agreement could be reached but on the last day Russia objected to the President's draft and particularly paragraph 34 which highlighted the danger of military activities near the reactors of civilian nuclear plants in Ukraine as well as the negative impact of loss of Ukrainian control over the plants. This is the first time since the start of the review process that two successive conferences failed to reach an agreement on an outcome document, which indicates how difficult it has become to find common ground within the NPT regime. One silver lining is that the President managed to salvage agreement on the establishment of a working group to strengthen the NPT review process as well as a schedule for the next NPT review cycle. The former can be a good vehicle for conversations about how to make the review process more effective and productive.

How would you assess the impact of the Ukrainian war on the NPT Review Conference?

It had a significant impact. It further complicated cooperation between the five nuclear states and exacerbated polarisation between NATO and European states on the one hand and Russia on the other.

Moreover, the war brought to the fore a number of critical issues linked to the treaty which proved difficult to address at the conference. One is how to handle the security, safety and continuous application of safeguards in Ukrainian nuclear power plants that operate in an active fighting zone and are under Russian military control. While the Ukraine war was prominent it is also worth mentioning that the conference saw new discussions on nuclear risk reduction as well as cooperation over nuclear-powered submarine technology – on the back of the AUKUS agreement – alongside some traditional NPT topics such as disarmament, verification standards and the nuclear situation in the Middle East.

Considering the deepening geopolitical tensions, do you see any chances of reviving a strategic dialogue among nuclear powers to reach new nuclear disarmament agreements?

A strategic dialogue among nuclear powers seems difficult at the moment, but it remains of paramount importance for re-launching the arms control process. The conflict in Ukraine has clearly deepened the perception of nuclear risks but observes, analysts and policy makers will draw different, and sometimes contradictory, lessons from it. Before Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the US and Russia made an attempt to re-start a 'strategic dialogue' (also in view of the expiration of the New START treaty in 2026). The war brought this effort to a halt and now the two countries are barely on speaking terms. But such dialogue has now become even more crucial and restarting it would be a big step. However, there is also the need to think about how other nuclear states, with much smaller nuclear arsenals than Russia and the US but still significant holdings such as China, France and the UK can be included in arms control talks. The circle should be expanded even further by including countries from outside the NPT such as India, Pakistan, Israel and even North Korea.

"Playing with fire" in Ukraine's nuclear power plants – and beyond

The crisis around Ukrainian nuclear facilities, especially the Zaporizhzhya Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP), adds to the grim reality of the death and destruction caused by the Russian aggression against Ukraine.

Given its size and economic importance, it was inevitable for the Ukrainian nuclear sector to become one of the casualties of the Russian aggression. In the initial phase of the war, the Russian forces briefly took control of the site of the Chernobyl NPP and moved troops throughout the exclusion zone created in the aftermath of the 1986 disaster. The nuclear power plant at Enerhodar (ZNPP) was occupied by the Russian forces in early March 2022 (the other three nuclear power plants are in Yuzhnoukrainsk, Khmeinitzky and Rovne). As documented in the September IAEA report, the conditions of occupation and the fighting around the ZNPP have resulted in an "unprecedented" situation in which nuclear safety and security norms have been seriously compromised. The alarming developments included direct shelling and the loss of the external electric lines providing power for secure operation of the ZNPP (its six reactors are now in a cold shutdown state). Ukrainian personnel at the ZNPP have courageously continued to operate and maintain the plant, but under extremely difficult conditions and being subjected to Russian military control.

The IAEA's Support and Assistance Mission to Zaporizhzhya, led by Director General Rafael Grossi, and the subsequent establishment of the Agency's presence on the ground has helped to assess the pending risks and can contribute to early warning in case of any new threatening developments, but the situation remains highly unstable. Grossi's proposal to establish a demilitarized protection zone was aimed at addressing the direct risks stemming from the shelling and the apparent Russian use of the facility as a shelter for troop deployment and operations. The lasting solution however can only be achieved through the defeat or full withdrawal of Russian troops from Ukraine and the cessation of war, which would eliminate the danger to the ZNPP and other nuclear facilities in the country. The dangers beyond the ZNPP were made clear by the September 19th Russian missile attack on the Yuzhnoukrainsk (South Ukraine) NPP site. More strikes against Ukrainian critical infrastructure including its nuclear facilities and power grids may come in the following weeks and months, as Russia aims to stop Ukrainian counteroffensives and instigate fear in Ukraine and beyond.

Even if a nuclear accident at the ZNPP is averted and fighting around it ends, the broader conclusion may be that it is simply not possible to fully shield nuclear power plants and supporting infrastructure from the consequences of a military conflict. With 440 reactors in operation worldwide, and more than 30 new units being built, other countries may face similar security and safety crises, to which they must comprehensively prepare. As the situation in Ukraine shows the ability of the IAEA to assist may be limited despite its best efforts, and relying on good will or restraint on the side of the attackers is naïve.

Łukasz Kulesa

Polish Institute of International Affairs (PISM)



Funded by
the European Union

Latest Publications

Post-shipment On-site Inspections: Multilateral Steps for Debating and Enabling Their Adoption and Use
Mark Bromley, Laureane Héau, and
Giovanna Maletta, SIPRI October
2022

SLOW-ACTING TOOLS Evaluating EU sanctions against Russia after the invasion of Ukraine Clara Portela and
Janis Kluge, EUISS, 19 October 2022

NATO-Russia Relationship: Perspectives from Russia Gry
Thomasen, BASIC, 6 October 2022

Prohibition of Military Attacks on Nuclear Facilities John Carlson,
Vienna Center for Disarmament and
NonProliferation (VCDNP) 12
September 2022

Network Calls

The International Institute of Strategic Studies (IISS) is seeking a Programme Administrator for Strategy, Technology and Arms Control Programme, in its Berlin office. This position will assist the Strategy, Technology and Arms Control Programme in the management of current and future EU-funded projects as well as existing projects. The deadline to submit applications is 31 October 2022.

More info: [here](#)

The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) is seeking a Senior Researcher and Programme Director, Arms Transfer Programme. This position consists in ensuring the long-term sustainability and reliability of the arms transfers database, make sure that it retains its world-leading reputation and is adapted to the evolving means of warfare, to accurately capture global armament trends. Applications are accepted until the position is filled.

More info: [here](#)

EU NEWS

The Eleventh Consultative Meeting of the EUNPDC Discusses Multilateral Export Control Regimes

The eleventh Consultative Meeting of the EU Non-Proliferation and Disarmament Consortium, which took place on 14-15 September, was devoted to a critical review of the existing export control regimes (i.e. the Australia Group, the Missile Technology Control Regime, the Nuclear Suppliers Group and the Wassenaar Arrangement on Export Controls for Conventional Arms and Dual-Use Goods and Technologies).

Export control regimes are a long-standing and important part of the global non-proliferation architecture. They are implemented by informal groups of states that agree to coordinate their export control policies and practices related to military or dual-use goods and technologies in order to prevent the associated proliferation risks. EU specific mechanisms have been created. Additional restrictive measures including the sanctions imposed on Russia after the launch of its armed aggression against Ukraine, have been adopted and others are under discussion. All these measures, which require the involvement of industrial and scientific stakeholders, play a prominent role in the fight against proliferation and in non-proliferation norm setting.

At the Consultative Meeting the discussion addressed a wide range of issues, including the effectiveness of the existing arms control regimes, inter-regime coordination and control of emerging technologies. The focus was on the EU's non-proliferation objectives and policies and the lessons of the war in Ukraine.

NETWORK NEWS

2022 Stockholm Security Conference

On 8–14 November, SIPRI will convene the seventh annual Stockholm Security Conference, this year under the heading of “Trends of Conflict and Warfare in the 21st Century: Effects and Impact of the War in Ukraine”. The conference will be held in a virtual format.

More information: [here](#)

Call on European Think Tanks to Offer EU Non-Proliferation and Disarmament Internships

The EU Non-Proliferation and Disarmament Consortium will support up to 30 Non-Proliferation and Disarmament Internships in European think tanks between 2022 and 2025. The duration of each internship shall be 3 months (13 weeks). All members of the European network of independent non-proliferation think-tanks are eligible as host institutes for an EU Non-Proliferation and Disarmament internship. For each internship the host institute will be granted a fee for the supervision of the intern. The EU Non-Proliferation Consortium can provide limited subsidies (950 € / month) for a limited number of students for the duration of the internship. Please note that this call is not directed to students, but to research institutes and think tanks only.

More information: schoernig@hsfk.de