

12. Nuclear disarmament, non-proliferation and arms control

Overview

In 2016 developments in the realm of nuclear disarmament, non-proliferation and arms control included the adoption of a resolution by the United Nations General Assembly mandating negotiations in 2017 on a legally binding instrument on nuclear disarmament leading to the elimination of nuclear weapons. This followed earlier intensive discussions in the Open-ended Working Group (OEWG) on taking forward multilateral negotiations on nuclear disarmament, with a majority of participating states supporting the start of negotiations in 2017. Other developments concerned strengthening the security of nuclear materials in civilian use, continuing discord between Russia and the United States on nuclear arms control, implementation by Iran of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) and a UN Security Council resolution on the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT).

In 2016 US–Russian nuclear arms control, disarmament and non-proliferation efforts remained stalled by the broader deterioration in political relations between the two countries (see section I in this chapter). Russia and the USA continued to implement the 2010 Treaty on Measures for the Further Reduction and Limitation of Strategic Offensive Arms (New START). However, the prospects for the two sides agreeing to make deeper cuts in their strategic nuclear forces appeared increasingly remote. No progress was made towards resolving the impasse over the USA’s allegation that Russia had violated an important cold war-era arms control treaty limiting intermediate-range nuclear forces—a charge that Russia rejected and countered with its own treaty compliance concerns. The year also saw the suspension by Russia of the implementation of a bilateral agreement with the USA to irreversibly eliminate plutonium from dismantled nuclear warheads declared to be in excess of defence needs.

The fourth and final meeting in a series of Nuclear Security Summits was held in Washington, DC, on 31 March–1 April 2016 (see section II). One of the main objectives for the meeting was to find ways to sustain the political momentum created by previous summit meetings in support of work by states and international organizations to strengthen the global nuclear security system beyond 2016.

The OEWG on taking forward multilateral nuclear disarmament negotiations met in Geneva and completed its report to the UN General Assembly (see

section III). The report, which was adopted by the OEWG in a non-recorded vote, included the recommendation to convene in 2017 an international conference open to all states to begin negotiations on a legally binding prohibition of nuclear weapons leading towards their elimination. The UN General Assembly and its First Committee dealing with arms control and disarmament matters both voted overwhelmingly to accept the recommendation of the OEWG and mandated a UN conference to convene in New York in March and June–July 2017 to negotiate a legally binding instrument to prohibit nuclear weapons, leading towards their total elimination. They also voted to establish a high-level preparatory group to meet in Geneva for two sessions of two weeks each, the first in 2017 and the second in 2018, to consider and make recommendations on substantial elements of a future non-discriminatory, multilateral and internationally and effectively verifiable treaty banning the production of fissile material for nuclear weapons or other nuclear explosive devices.

The year was also marked by the 20th anniversary of the opening for signature of the CTBT on 24 September 1996. To promote the entry into force of the CTBT, a ‘Joint Statement on the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty by the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty Nuclear-Weapon States’ was issued on 15 September 2016 that pledged to strive for the CTBT’s early ratification and prompt entry into force. This was followed by the adoption of Resolution 2310 by the UN Security Council on 23 September 2016, which urged all states that have either not signed or not ratified the CTBT—particularly the eight remaining Annex 2 states—to do so without further delay.

The Conference on Disarmament, the world’s sole multilateral forum for negotiating arms control and disarmament agreements, yet again was unable to agree on a programme of work in 2016 and thus was unable to commence negotiations on any item on its agenda.

Iran continued to implement the provisions of the JCPOA covering limitations on its nuclear programme (see section IV). The JCPOA, which was facilitated by the European Union (EU), was signed in July 2015 between Iran and the E3/EU+3 (France, Germany and the United Kingdom (the E3), and China, Russia and the USA (+3).