

7. Nuclear disarmament, arms control and non-proliferation

Overview

There was important new momentum behind global efforts to promote nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation in 2017. The year was marked by the negotiation and opening for signature of the new Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW). The treaty is the first legally binding international agreement to comprehensively prohibit nuclear weapons, with the ultimate goal of their total elimination. The opening of negotiations on the treaty had been mandated by a United Nations General Assembly resolution at the end of 2016 that had in turn been motivated by the growing international awareness of the devastating humanitarian consequences of any use of nuclear weapons (see section I). These steps reflected the frustration of many non-nuclear weapon states that the nuclear weapon states were not taking seriously their obligation under the 1968 Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) to pursue nuclear disarmament. While proponents of the TPNW acknowledged that it would probably have no immediate impact on existing nuclear arsenals, they highlighted its long-term normative impact—it would serve to delegitimize and stigmatize nuclear weapons and thereby contribute to achieving the ultimate goal of nuclear disarmament. At the same time, there was a recognition during the year that the relationship between the TPNW, the NPT and related agreements would have to be defined over time in order to prevent the fragmentation of nuclear disarmament efforts.

Russia and the United States continued to implement the 2010 Treaty on Measures for the Further Reduction and Limitation of Strategic Offensive Arms (New START). However, the prospects for sustaining the progress made in Russian–US nuclear arms control since the end of the cold war appeared to be increasingly remote. New START will expire in 2021 unless both parties agree to extend it, and neither Russia nor the USA expressed interest in negotiating deeper reductions in their deployed strategic nuclear forces beyond those mandated by New START. At the same time, the USA continued to allege that Russia was violating an important cold war-era arms control treaty, the 1987 Soviet–US Treaty on the Elimination of Intermediate-Range and Shorter-Range Missiles (INF Treaty), by deploying a new ground-launched cruise missile proscribed by the treaty (see section II). These developments come against the background of the further deterioration in political relations between Russia and the USA that underscored fundamental differences in their respective goals and priorities for arms control.

There were also developments during the year related to other multilateral treaties and initiatives on nuclear disarmament, arms control and non-proliferation (see section III). In February the Conference on Disarmament (CD), the world's sole multilateral forum for negotiating arms control and disarmament agreements, renewed efforts to break the deadlock that has left it unable to adopt a programme of work since 2009. It established a working group on 'the way ahead' to take stock of the progress on all CD agenda items and to identify common ground for a programme of work with a negotiating mandate. In May the first session of the Preparatory Committee for the 2020 NPT Review Conference was convened in Vienna. There were also events connected with two items of unfinished business on the multilateral disarmament and non-proliferation agenda: a fissile material cut-off treaty (FMCT) and the 1996 Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT). In July and August a high-level expert preparatory group met in Geneva to consider ways to commence negotiations on an FMCT. In September the 10th Conference on Facilitating the Entry into Force of the CTBT was held in New York.

North Korea's programmes to develop nuclear and other weapons of mass destruction, in contravention of UN Security Council resolutions, remained the source of grave international concern (see section IV). During the year, the Security Council adopted three additional resolutions imposing new or expanded sanctions on North Korea in response to its nuclear weapon and ballistic missile testing activities.

In 2017 Iran continued to implement the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) to limit its nuclear programme (see section V). The JCPOA was agreed in July 2015 between Iran and the E3/EU+3. During the year, however, political tensions between Iran and the USA threatened to undermine the JCPOA. In October US President Donald J. Trump refused to certify that the continued lifting of US sanctions was proportional to Iran's actions under the JCPOA—a decision that under US law triggered a 60-day review period for the US Congress to decide whether to reimpose the sanctions on Iran that were lifted under the agreement. Although Congress did not subsequently decide to do so, Trump's decertification decision put the USA at odds with all the other signatories of the JCPOA.