

7. Nuclear disarmament, arms control and non-proliferation

Overview

In 2018 there was renewed diplomatic engagement between the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK, or North Korea) and the United States over the latter's long-standing demand—supported by multiple United Nations Security Council resolutions—that North Korea verifiably abandon its nuclear weapon and ballistic missile programmes (see section I). In June, the first-ever summit meeting between a sitting US president and a North Korean leader was held in Singapore, after which North Korea committed to work towards the 'complete denuclearization' of the Korean peninsula. As part of the easing of political and military tensions during the year, North Korea announced that it had suspended the testing of nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles and had destroyed its nuclear weapon test site.

In 2018 Russia and the USA completed the implementation of the 2010 Treaty on Measures for the Further Reduction and Limitation of Strategic Offensive Arms (New START). In February, the two countries announced that they had achieved the final New START force reduction limits by the specified deadline. 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 any interest in negotiating deeper reductions in deployed strategic nuclear forces beyond those mandated by New START. This came against the background of tensions between Russia and the USA over missile defence and advanced conventional strike systems that underscored differences in their respective goals and priorities for nuclear arms control.

The future of nuclear arms control was also called into question in 2018 by the intensified dispute between Russia and the USA over a seminal cold war-era arms control treaty, the 1987 Soviet–US Treaty on the Elimination of Intermediate-Range and Shorter-Range Missiles (INF Treaty, see section II). The USA has alleged that Russia has developed and deployed a mobile ground-launched cruise missile that has a flight range prohibited under the treaty—an allegation that Russia has consistently dismissed as baseless. In October, US President Donald J. Trump announced that the USA would formally withdraw from the INF Treaty if Russia did not promptly address US compliance concerns. The year ended with growing pessimism that neither party would take steps to preserve the treaty at a time when other states, most notably China, were deploying land-based intermediate-range missile systems.

In 2018 Iran continued to implement the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), an eight-party agreement designed to limit Iran's proliferation-sensitive nuclear activities and to build international confidence about the exclusively peaceful nature of its nuclear programme (see section III). During the year, political tensions between Iran and the USA threatened to undermine the JCPOA. In May, President Trump announced that the USA would cease participation in the JCPOA and take steps to begin reimposing the US sanctions against Iran that were lifted or waived in connection with implementing the agreement. In response, the Iranian Government appealed to the other signatories, in particular to the European Union, to provide guarantees that at least some degree of sanctions relief—one of Iran's principal benefits under the JCPOA—could be provided despite the extraterritorial impact of the US sanctions in order for Iran to stay in the deal.

In 2018 the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW), which was negotiated and opened for signature in 2017, remained a focus of international efforts to promote progress towards achieving the long-term goal of global nuclear disarmament (see section IV). The TPNW is the first legally binding agreement to prohibit the development, deployment, possession, use and threat of use of nuclear weapons. During the year there were debates in a number of states about whether the respective governments should accede to the TPNW. The debates tended to focus on assessments of the normative impact of the proposed nuclear-weapon ban as well as its implications for nuclear deterrence-based security strategies and alliance relations. The treaty will enter into force once it has been signed and ratified by 50 states.

There were also developments during the year in relation to multilateral treaties and initiatives on nuclear disarmament, arms control and non-proliferation (see section V). In April–May the second session of the Preparatory Committee for the 2020 NPT Review Conference was convened in Geneva, Switzerland. In May the United Nations Secretary-General, António Guterres, introduced a new UN disarmament agenda that identified several priority tasks, including reducing and eliminating weapons of mass destruction (WMD). In June the high-level fissile material cut-off treaty (FMCT) expert preparatory group completed its work with the adoption of a final report that made recommendations on the scope and substantive elements for the future negotiation of an FMCT. In December the UN General Assembly First Committee adopted, inter alia, a resolution calling for the UN Secretary-General to convene a conference in 2019 on creating a WMD-free zone in the Middle East.