

II. Nuclear disarmament, arms control and non-proliferation

Overview

In 2019 the prospects for sustaining the achievements made in Russian–United States nuclear arms control appeared to be increasingly remote. During the year, the long-running dispute between the USA and Russia 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), culminated with the collapse of the treaty (see section I). The USA alleged that Russia had developed and deployed a mobile ground-launched cruise missile that had a flight range prohibited under the treaty—an allegation that Russia consistently dismissed as baseless. In August the USA confirmed its withdrawal from the INF Treaty in light of Russia’s failure to address US compliance concerns. The decision marked the effective demise of the treaty, which raised concern among European members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) about the risk of new nuclear weapons in Europe.

Also during the year, Russia and the USA made no progress towards extending the sole remaining nuclear arms control agreement between them—the 2010 Treaty on Measures for the Further Reduction and Limitation of Strategic Offensive Arms (New START). The two countries had achieved the final New START force reduction limits by the specified deadline the previous year. However, the treaty will lapse if there is no agreement between the two parties to extend it by February 2021, along with its notification and inspection regime. The impasse over New START came against the background of tensions between Russia and the USA over missile defences, advanced weapon delivery systems and increases in Chinese strategic capabilities, which have underscored differences in their respective goals and priorities for nuclear arms control.

Tensions persisted in 2019 between the USA and the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK, or North Korea) over the latter’s ongoing programmes to develop nuclear weapons and ballistic missile delivery systems (see section II). The two countries remained locked in a diplomatic stalemate over the commitments made by their respective leaders during a summit meeting the previous year to work towards establishing peaceful relations and achieving the denuclearization of the Korean peninsula. A second summit meeting between the leaders held in February ended with no concrete results. In addition, while North Korea continued to adhere to its self-declared moratorium on the testing of nuclear weapons and long-range ballistic missiles, during the year

it conducted multiple flight tests of shorter-range ballistic missiles, including several new types of systems.

In 2019 there continued to be controversy over the implementation of 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, Iran announced that it would incrementally scale back its compliance with the limits set out by the agreement, in response to the USA's reimposition of sanctions against it following the US withdrawal from the JCPOA in 2018. The Iranian Government appealed to the other signatories, particularly 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. Against the background of growing political tensions, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) confirmed that Iran continued to facilitate inspection and monitoring activities by the agency pursuant to the JCPOA.

There were various developments and activities during 2019 in relation to multilateral treaties and initiatives on nuclear disarmament, arms control and non-proliferation (see section IV). In the framework of the 1968 Treaty on the Non-proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (Non-Proliferation Treaty, NPT), the third and final session of the preparatory committee for the 2020 NPT Review Conference was convened in New York in April and May. There was also a steadily increasing number of signatures and ratifications for the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW), which is the first treaty establishing a comprehensive ban on nuclear weapons, including their development, deployment, possession, use and threat of use. In December, the United Nations General Assembly adopted a resolution calling on all states that had not yet done so to 'sign, ratify, accept, approve or accede to the Treaty at the earliest possible date'.

There were also events during the year connected with two long-running items on the multilateral nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation agenda. In September, the 11th biannual Conference on Facilitating the Entry into Force of the 1996 Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT) was convened in New York. The conference took place against the background of US allegations that Russia was violating its commitments under the CTBT. In November, a Conference on the Establishment of a Middle East Zone Free of Nuclear Weapons and Other Weapons of Mass Destruction held its first session at the UN in New York. While the decision to hold the conference was made by the UN General Assembly in December 2018, calls to establish a nuclear weapon-free zone in the Middle East date back to 1974.