

# 11. Nuclear disarmament, arms control and non-proliferation

## Overview

*Although, on balance, 2020 was a difficult year for nuclear arms control and non-proliferation efforts, it marked an important milestone in the development of international norms on nuclear disarmament: on 24 October 2020 Honduras became the 50th state to ratify or accede to the 2017 Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW), triggering its entry into force 90 days later (see section III). The TPNW is the first treaty to establish a comprehensive ban on nuclear weapons, including their development, deployment, possession, use and threat of use. This prohibition has brought to the fore the tension between proponents of nuclear disarmament and nuclear deterrence: while civil society and many non-nuclear weapon states welcomed the entry into force of the treaty, the nuclear weapon states and their allies viewed it as undermining the existing nuclear order based on the 1968 Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (Non-Proliferation Treaty, NPT).*

*The Covid-19 pandemic led to the postponement of the 10th Review Conference of the NPT. It would have marked the 50th anniversary of the NPT's entry into force in 1970 and a quarter of a century since the treaty was indefinitely extended in 1995. Many welcomed the postponement as the conference appeared set to fail in the political context that prevailed in 2020—a context shaped mainly by the long-standing failure to make progress on nuclear disarmament.*

*In keeping with over a decade of diplomatic deadlock in bilateral nuclear arms control between Russia and the United States, little progress was made in their negotiations in 2020 (see section I). In addition to the deterioration in Russian–Western political and security relations, contemporary developments in military technology have also complicated strategic dynamics and contributed to this deadlock. Despite their efforts to address relevant issues in the Strategic Security Dialogue framework, by the end of the year Russia and the USA had still not agreed to extend their last-remaining bilateral nuclear arms control treaty, the 2010 Treaty on Measures for the Further Reduction and Limitation of Strategic Offensive Arms (New START), which was due to expire on 5 February 2021. The fate of New START remained in the balance due to the different approaches and goals of the two sides: Russia focused on preserving the treaty, while the USA sought to convince China—with no success—to join the agreement and to make it more comprehensive in terms of the weapons covered and the verification measures imposed.*

*The future of the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) also remained uncertain in 2020. The JCPOA is an agreement between Iran and six other countries, facilitated by the EU. It is designed to build international confidence about the exclusively peaceful nature of Iran's nuclear programme in return for the lifting of international sanctions (see section II). Iran remained a participant in the JCPOA, although it was no longer observing key provisions of the agreement. Iran had begun to exceed JCPOA limits on its nuclear activities in 2019 in response to the US 'maximum pressure' policy—which, following the US withdrawal from the JCPOA in 2018, included ever harsher sanctions on Iran. Iran continued to maintain that it would return to full compliance as soon as the other participants did the same. The prospects for reviving this ailing nuclear agreement in 2021 were improved by the election of a new US president in late 2020. However, the diplomatic window for Iran and the USA to agree on the terms for returning to their respective JCPOA commitments remained narrow.*

*In the case of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK, North Korea), since the breakdown of the short-lived nuclear diplomacy with the USA in 2018–19 a stalemate has ensued, and this continued throughout 2020. In January, North Korea announced that it would no longer observe its unilateral moratoriums on nuclear test explosions and test flights of long-range ballistic missiles that it had declared in 2018. While it conducted no such tests during the year, it continued development of its shorter-range ballistic missiles (see chapter 10).*

*Finally, the difficult political context for nuclear arms control was also apparent in relation to the 1996 Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT)—the international treaty that will ban all nuclear test explosions in all environments when it enters into force. In 2020 US officials reportedly discussed the option of conducting a so-called demonstration nuclear explosion, which would have been the first US nuclear explosive test since 1992 (see section III). By the end of the year, given the adverse political reactions, the political changes in the USA after the elections in November, and the technical difficulties involved, such a test seemed unlikely. Meanwhile, as in previous years, the USA questioned whether China and Russia were adhering to their unilateral nuclear testing moratoriums. Both denied the US assertions, which have not been substantiated by publicly available evidence, that they had been carrying out clandestine low-yield nuclear explosions.*

TYTTI ERÄSTÖ, VITALY FEDCHENKO AND PETR TOPYCHKANOV