

8. Nuclear disarmament, arms control and non-proliferation

Overview

The Russia–Ukraine war continued to have a negative impact on bilateral and multilateral engagement on nuclear arms control in 2023. While modest positive steps were made elsewhere, including between the USA and China, overall the war diminished opportunities to break the long-standing deadlock in nuclear arms control and reverse the worrisome trend of nuclear-armed states developing and deploying new weapon systems (see chapter 7).

Russia's continued targeting of critical infrastructure in Ukraine added to the nuclear safety, security and safeguards challenges in 2023 (see section IV). Frequent disturbances to the Ukrainian electricity grid caused by such attacks placed strain on Ukrainian nuclear power plants, while the destruction of the Kakhovka Dam in June threatened the supply of cooling water to Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP) and required a stopgap solution. The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) maintained a consistent presence in Ukraine throughout 2023. Building on its 'seven indispensable pillars of nuclear safety and security', the IAEA also formulated and began to apply five concrete principles for application at ZNPP.

Bilateral arms control between Russia and the USA took a significant turn for the worse in February 2023 (section I), when Russia suspended its membership of the 2010 New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START). This followed the USA's conclusion in January that it could no longer certify Russia's compliance with certain terms of the treaty, due mainly to Russia's refusal to allow a resumption of on-site inspections of its nuclear weapon-related sites. Efforts to restart diplomacy—including on a post-New START arms control framework—stalled, with Russia reluctant to 'compartmentalize' nuclear discussions from wider issues. In November Russia withdrew its ratification of the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT), citing 'an imbalance' with the USA, which has failed to ratify the treaty since it opened for signature in 1996 (see section II). However, Russia confirmed that it would remain a signatory and would continue to participate in the work of the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty Organization (CTBTO).

In the absence of arms control progress between Russia and the USA (possessors of the largest nuclear stockpiles), China showed little interest in bilateral or trilateral arms control. However, the June 2023 visit to Beijing by the US secretary of state, Antony Blinken, appeared to open space for dialogue on a range of issues, with the hope on the US side that this would subsequently

include arms control (section I). Later in the year the two sides did agree to resume military-to-military communication.

Developments in Ukraine and elsewhere also cast a shadow over long-standing efforts to revive the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) on the Iranian nuclear programme. Iran's transfers of uncrewed aerial vehicles (UAVs) to Russia continued to sour relations with the West. This led France, Germany and the United Kingdom to extend sanctions on Iran's arms exports as part of their national policies even after the expiry of the United Nations arms embargo on the country in October (see section III). An informal bilateral agreement between Iran and the USA in June 2023 initially seemed to de-escalate tensions and reduce the risk of conflict. It contributed to greater cooperation by Iran with the IAEA and to the USA unfreezing Iranian assets. However, the start of the Israel– Hamas war in October upended the agreement, with proxy attacks by Iran-backed groups on US forces in Iraq and Syria apparently ending Iranian–US diplomatic efforts. The war also undermined efforts to engage Israel in the Conference on the Establishment of a Middle East Zone Free of Weapons of Mass Destruction and Other Weapons of Mass Destruction (see section II).

The abbreviated review cycle of the 1968 Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) commenced with a session in July 2023 of a working group on strengthening the review process and the first session, in August, of the preparatory committee for the 2026 Review Conference (see section II). The working group failed to reach consensus, with suggestions to enhance transparency and accountability on nuclear disarmament dividing the non-nuclear weapon states and the five NPT-recognized nuclear weapon states. Meanwhile, discussions at the preparatory committee carried over many of the debates from the previous Review Conference, including the lack of progress on nuclear disarmament and the Russia–Ukraine war. Obstructive procedural manoeuvring in the conference room by a few states added another layer of uncertainty to an already fraught review cycle.

In contrast, the second Meeting of States Parties to the 2017 Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) adopted two outcome documents—a package of practical decisions and a political declaration that highlights the rise in nuclear risks and condemns nuclear-sharing arrangements (section II). The meeting also established a new intersessional consultative process on security concerns of states under the TPNW, seeking to ‘challenge the security paradigm based on nuclear deterrence’. Despite these positive developments, none of the nuclear-armed states has yet sought to engage in the TPNW process.

The dynamics surrounding nuclear disarmament, arms control and non-proliferation are becoming more complex. There are presently few indicators that key stakeholders can agree to disentangle nuclear issues from the broader geopolitical context and stem the rising tide of nuclear risks.