**The nuclear caste system**

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Next week, U.S. Secretary of State **Hillary Clinton** will meet in New York with diplomats from more than 180 countries at the eighth review conference of the 1970 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty ([pdf](https://mail.hudsonny.org/exchweb/bin/redir.asp?URL=http://treaties.un.org/doc/Publication/UNTS/Volume%2520729/volume-729-I-10485-English.pdf" \t "_blank)), the Cold War pact that determines who can have nuclear weapons and who can't. The nuclear accord obliges the five original nuclear powers to disarm while exacting a pledge from other countries not to pursue nuclear weapons. In exchange, those that foreswore atomic weapons were assured the right to develop nuclear energy programs, under the monitoring of U.N. inspectors.

The Obama administration will seek to use the nearly month-long conference to plug gaps in a landmark agreement that has significantly limited the spread of nuclear weapons but enabled a small number of nuclear proliferators, including **Saddam Hussein** and **Kim Jong Il**, to develop clandestine atomic weapons programs under the nose of U.N. weapons inspectors.

The nuclear conference has gained increased urgency as concerns about global warming have fueled renewed interest in nuclear power, and the prospects of lucrative international trade in nuclear fuel. The U.S. wants to strengthen U.N. monitoring of nuclear-energy programs and to impose greater controls over the production and trade in enriched of uranium to ensure that Iran and other potential proliferators will not succeed in completing another nuclear weapons program. But American diplomats -- who see the conference as an opportunity to reinvigorate the NPT -- insist that they respect and recognize the rights of non-weapons states to develop peaceful nuclear energy programs.

Still, U.S. President **Barack Obama** is facing a major challenge to his nuclear vision from countries in the developing world that feel the nuclear treaty has been applied unfairly. Many states harbor a festering resentment against the major nuclear powers, saying they have used the NPT to establish an entrenched class system that guarantees their own nuclear defense, and that of allies like India, Israel, and Pakistan, but exposes the vast majority of U.N. members to the threat of nuclear annihilation. They are loath to accept new demands imposed by the big powers that would curb their own rights to develop nuclear power, or to participate in a burgeoning nuclear trade.

Call it the nuclear caste system. The Obama administration's ability to balance the interests of these various players and to strike a new nuclear bargain in the coming weeks may well determine whether the frayed nuclear bargain can survive another generation.

**THE A(tomic) TEAM:**

The original nuclear club -- Britain, China, France, China, and the United States -- consists of the only nations that have the right to possess nuclear weapons, but they are required, under the terms of the NPT, to disarm. The United States and Russia, which together possess 90 percent of the world's nuclear warheads, reached agreement earlier this month on a pact that will lead to the reduction of their strategic nuclear warheads to levels not seen in decades, and have pledged to work toward a world without nuclear weapons. The two nuclear superpowers are also weighing further reductions in their nuclear arsenals and have urged other nuclear powers to follow their example.

Key non-nuclear states have welcomed the move. But they contend there has been too limited progress on this disarmament front during the past 40 years. They note that the United States and its nuclear kin have made it clear they intend to maintain their nuclear deterrence policies for the foreseeable future, preserving enough firepower to annihilate their enemies many times over.

The United States, China, and Russia, meanwhile, continue to modernize their nuclear warheads. The new U.S. [Nuclear Posture Review](https://mail.hudsonny.org/exchweb/bin/redir.asp?URL=http://www.defense.gov/npr/) would require funds to extend the life of America's nuclear stockpile. China, meanwhile, is seeking to increase the number of warheads in its own nuclear arsenal, which is currently far inferior to those of Russia and the United States. And France -- which owes its residual great power status to its nuclear weapons and a permanent seat on the Security Council - has been reluctant to embrace a commitment to a world free of nuclear weapons. French President **Nicolas Sarkozy** [told](https://mail.hudsonny.org/exchweb/bin/redir.asp?URL=http://bit.ly/aElaHd) CBS news earlier this month that he could "not give up nuclear weapons" because "I cannot jeopardize the security and safety of my country."

The United States, in an effort to assuage concerns about its nuclear ambitions, has indicated it would consider reinforcing big-power security assurances to non-nuclear states in the upcoming conference. U.S. officials have also vowed to push for ratification of the [Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty](https://mail.hudsonny.org/exchweb/bin/redir.asp?URL=http://www.un.org/disarmament/WMD/Nuclear/CTBT.shtml), the passage of a treaty banning the production of weapons-grade fuel, and the establishment of an international nuclear fuel bank that would allow countries secure access to fuel without provoking fears that is diverting it to a weapons program.

**THE OUTLAWS:**

The nuclear ambitions of Iran, North Korea, and more recently Syria pose one of the strongest challenges to American efforts to impose greater scrutiny over the ability of non-nuclear states to develop secret nuclear weapons programs.

Iran, which is facing the prospect of a fourth round of U.N. sanctions, is expected to try to block any new measures requiring states submit to greater scrutiny by the International Atomic Energy Agency, the U.N.'s nuclear watchdog. Led by President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the Iranian delegation will argue that its treatment by the Security Council is a harbinger of the kind of pressure other developed countries should expect from the United States and its nuclear partners. (For their part, the United States and its Western allies believe Iran has taken advantage of weaknesses in the NPT's verification procedures to secretly make scientific advances that could help it make a nuclear bomb.)

North Korea's 2003 withdrawal from the NPT, once it acquired nuclear weapons, has underscored how countries can easily abandoned their treaty obligations. The U.S. and others are seeking to impose a rule that would block nuclear trade to countries that withdraw from the NPT, and require such states to return nuclear material and equipment received before they withdrew from the NPT.

"It is one of our goals," **Susan Burk**, the United States special representative to the NPT review conference, said in an [interview](https://mail.hudsonny.org/exchweb/bin/redir.asp?URL=http://bit.ly/cxIJ6c) in February with the Arms Control Association . "We would like to see the conference address this issue and ideally agree on some steps. But at this moment, are we close to agreement on that? No."

Syria emerged as a potential nuclear proliferator in 2007, when Israel jets destroyed a facility suspected of housing a secret enrichment plant. After initially inviting the IAEA to the site, which had been bulldozed by Syrian officials, Syria has subsequently barred U.N. inspectors from scrutinizing the location, raising concerns about Syria's nuclear ambitions.

**THE OUTLIERS:**

The development of nuclear weapons programs by key U.S. allies India, Israel, and Pakistan has led to charges that Washington maintains a double standard that allows its friends to make key nuclear weapons but prevents its rivals from doing so. The United States, with the backing of other nuclear powers, has permitted nuclear trade with India despite an NPT requirement that nuclear materials only be supplied to countries that allow IAEA scrutiny of their programs. Pakistan, meanwhile, has blocked negotiations in Geneva on a treaty that would prohibit countries from producing fuel for a nuclear weapon.

Egypt is expected to insist that the final document single out Israel's officially undeclared nuclear-arms program, and call for the convening of an international conference in 2011 to negotiate a binding, "verifiable" treaty for a nuclear weapons-free zone in the Middle East. Egypt's U.N. ambassador, **Maged A. Abdelaziz**, has also insisted that next month's conference also commit to a 1995 resolution calling for progress on a Middle East nuclear-free zone. Addressing a U.N. disarmament conference earlier this month, the Egyptian diplomatscolded the former U.N. weapons inspector, **Rolf Ekeus** of Sweden, who proposed the members set up working groups and seminars to try to overcome the divisive issue of Israeli's nuclear weapons program. "You come today after 15 years of the adoption of the resolution to say that we can have some seminars and workshops," he said. "You know better than that."

The United States supports Israel's position that there can be no serious discussion on Israel's nuclear program until the Arabs reach a comprehensive peace with Israel. But the Obama administration maintains that it supports the concept of a Middle East nuclear-free zone and will seek agreement on language promoting the idea.

**THE HEDGERS AND THE VIRTUAL NUCLEAR POWERS:**

The nuclear programs of North Korea and Iran have raised concerns in their respective regions about the power of the NPT to ensure a nuclear-free neighborhood. Several states have been hedging their bets by developing nuclear-power programs, or announcing plans to do so, that could raise the prospects of a nuclear arms race.

France's U.N. ambassador **Gerard Araud** has warned that Iran's program threatens to trigger a military confrontation with Israel or an arms race involving Iran's Arab rivals. "Once the genie is out of the bottle other countries will be obliged to follow," Araud said during a February 11 speech at Columbia University. "Military confrontation couldn't be excluded."

Others believe the threat of the arms race is overblown. "The bottom line is that the risk of further proliferation is not as some have suggested even in the Middle East and in East Asia," **Daryl G. Kimball**, executive director of the Arms Control Association, told *Turtle Bay*. "The costs of going nuclear are so extremely high. The greater risk is that there may be a number of ‘virtual' nuclear weapon states if many more countries acquire the ability to enrich uranium or to separate plutonium from spent fuel."

Japan has developed highly advanced nuclear reprocessing operations that would allow the country to move quickly to develop nuclear weapons if the need arose. Australia, Argentina, Brazil, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, South Korea, and Turkey are also considering developing commercial uranium enrichment or reprocessing programs.

**THE HAVE NOTS:**

The NPT treaty provides non-nuclear states with the right to produce nuclear energy, but the original U.N. procedures for monitoring nuclear reactors were woefully inadequate for detecting the diversion of nuclear fuel to a clandestine weapons program. The IAEA urged states in 1997 to voluntarily agree to submit to more stringent inspection procedures -- known as the Additional Protocol. It has also explored the idea of setting up a nuclear fuel bank that would ensure a safe supply of nuclear fuel for the world's non-nuclear powers. The United States and the European Union are seeking support for a proposal to make the additional protocol mandatory.

"We do believe that it should become the new verification standard," said Burk in her interview with the Arms Control Association. But she acknowledged there was little prospect of agreement on a nuclear fuel bank.

Egypt, which leads the 118 member non-aligned movement, is likely to champion the nuclear have-nots at the NPT conference. Egypt has insisted that non-nuclear states have an inalienable right to produce their own nuclear energy. "What is important is to preserve the right of non-nuclear states to the peaceful uses of nuclear weapons, and not to allow a fuel bank or any other kind of supply arrangement that is going to decide on behalf of the countries concerned what are there developmental needs," said Egypt's Abdelaziz.