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## RESCHEDULING OF 2020 NPT REVCON AT A NEW VENUE: WILL IT CHANGE THE PROSPECTS OF THE REVCON TOO?

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The Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) marked its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary from its entry into force on 5<sup>th</sup> March 2020. The treaty is viewed as the foundation of the global endeavours towards exploitation of peaceful use of nuclear energy, non-proliferation and disarmament of nuclear weapons. Thus, given its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary, this year's review conference (Rev Con) that was scheduled to be held from April 27 to May 22, 2020 at the U.N. headquarters in New York, was all the more important for the global powers. Abiding by the Article VIII.3 of the NPT that states, "Five years after the entry into force of this Treaty, a conference of Parties to the Treaty shall be held ....in order to review the operation of this Treaty...", the first review conference was held in the year 1975. Since then the committee decided to conduct quinquennial<sup>1</sup> reviews in the form of Rev Cons every preceding five years. This year's RevCon was to be the tenth in a series of such quinquennial NPT RevCon.

Though its journey towards the goal of nuclear disarmament has not yielded much success, yet the NPT has survived many crises and has successfully contributed in strengthening international security by curbing horizontal proliferation of nuclear weapons. Nevertheless, the recognized five nuclear weapon states (NWS) or the P5 the US, Russia, the UK, France and China have continued to expand their respective arsenals without any constraints.

Today, the NPT has a membership of 193 states. Only four have not joined the treaty. The kind of universalization the treaty has obtained is not a mean feat given that at its inception, it had the support of only 95 countries. According to the United Nation's General Assembly Resolution 2373 (XXII) of June 12, 1968<sup>2</sup>, the treaty opened for signature and ratification at the earliest possible date. The international support that it received was not quite concrete. Leaving apart the 21 nations who abstained from

voting and the 4 who voted against it, even the 95 allied nations of the two superpowers who initially voted for the treaty, later on found it to be an imbalanced instrument. Yet having something would be better than nothing was the logic behind their support for the treaty initially. However, at a later stage, all the nations who had actually abstained or voted against the treaty too ended up joining the treaty. Apart from regulating nuclear proliferation, the NPT has helped nations to undertake peaceful use of nuclear energy while keeping them away from developing nuclear weapons. As it today stands, nearly 40 countries are generating around 10% of electricity of the world, while also using nuclear energy for other purposes such as medicine, agriculture, and water desalination.

However, the vision of global nuclear disarmament remains a distant dream. More than 14,000 nuclear warheads are with the nine nuclear armed states at more than 100 locations in 14 States and stocks of nearly 1,400 tonnes (or 1,400,000 kg) of weapon-grade uranium and 500 tonnes (or 500,000 kg) of weapon-usable plutonium good for more than 130,000 nuclear warheads<sup>3</sup>. Moreover, the modernization of nuclear arsenals by all the nuclear armed states, and the withdrawal of the US from the 1987 Intermediate- and Shorter-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) limiting Iran's peaceful nuclear program and the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty that formed the basis of strategic stability

between Russia and the United States, makes the prospect of progress towards global nuclear disarmament even more bleak.

### **Postponement of the 10<sup>th</sup> RevCon**

This year's Rev Con has had to be postponed till 2021 due to the global outbreak of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. Given this scenario, and keeping in mind the highly infectious nature of this virus, the conference has been deferred by a year until April 2021, now to be convened at Vienna. According to the decision makers, a yearlong gap would not only provide enough time for the COVID 19 to subside but might also have a prospect of developing a COVID 19 vaccine<sup>4</sup>. On the other hand, other uncertainties related to international travel and global economy might also settle down during the given year.

### **Why Vienna?**

The NPT Review Conference 2021 is now scheduled to be convened at Vienna, the capital of Austria, instead of in New York. Amongst the various factors that makes Vienna an ideal venue to host an NPT Review Conference, the most significant one is that Vienna is the headquarters of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), which has been responsible for two of the three "pillars" of the NPT – nuclear verification (safeguards) security and safety, as well as the peaceful applications of nuclear technology<sup>5</sup>. This city has also successfully hosted the first preparatory committee session of

the series of quinquennial NPT review conference since 2007, while the second PreComs are hosted in Geneva and third in New York. Additionally, the headquarter of Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty Organization (CTBTO) as well as the United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs (UNODA) are also located in Vienna. Given this, Vienna is well equipped from a Secretariat perspective to host an NPT review conference.

Besides, in comparison to the US, the food, lodging and travel expenses are way cheaper in Vienna. Furthermore, complaints from Russian and Iranian delegates about denials of visa by the American authorities during this year's UN Disarmament Commission, also contributed towards the decision of the venue change.

### What to Expect?

Given the increasing rift between nuclear armed states who vouch for nuclear deterrence and the non-nuclear states who pledge for absolute disarmament of nuclear weapons, 2021's NPT RevCon will be a crucial one. It is not clear as to how the two would reconcile their positions. Meanwhile, there are also glaring rifts amongst the NWS. Lack of a shared vision will impact the conference. While efforts must be made by the NWS to preserve and strengthen the NPT so that it can provide an essential foundation for the prevention of further proliferation and realize its actual goal of absolute elimination, this looks highly unlikely. Will the NPT crumble under

extensive pressure as there might be a blame game on the state of nuclear Arms control since the last Rev Con? Such a situation may not come to pass since many nations still see a stake in the continuance of the NPT. But, unless nations begin to build a habit of cooperation, a secure future for arms control and nonproliferation cannot be ascertained.

*(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])*

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Recurring every five years.

<sup>2</sup> UN. 2020. "Audio Visual Library of International Law." UN Legal. March 03. Accessed 2020. <https://legal.un.org/avl/ha/tnpt/tnpt.html>.

<sup>3</sup> Tariq Rauf. 2020. UN Insider. March. <https://www.indepthnews.net/index.php/armaments/nuclear-weapons/3351-relentless-spread-of-coronavirus-obliges-postponing-the-2020-npt-review-to-2021>.

<sup>4</sup> World Health Organization

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.