Toda Peace Institute

SUMMARY REPORT

20 JAN 2026
REPORT
NO. 266

NUCLEAR FUTURES: (NON)PROLIFERATION, DANGEROUS DOCTRINES, AND ARMS CONTROL PERSPECTIVES

Apolline Foedit

About the Author

APOLLINE FOEDIT

Apolline Foedit is a PhD student in International History and Politics and a research assistant at the Centre on Conflict, Development, and Peacebuilding at the Geneva Graduate Institute. She holds a BA in International Relations from the University of Geneva and an MA in Development Studies from the Geneva Graduate Institute, where she specialized in development, human rights, and social movements. Her doctoral research examines the emergence and transformation of associations advocating for the right to asylum, particularly in the context of the Europeanization of migration policies, the tightening of borders in the EU and Switzerland, and the institutionalization of some of these organizations.

Cover image: HE68 /shutterstock.com

Toda Peace Institute
Samon Eleven Bldg. 5F,
3-1 Samon-cho, Shinjuku-ku
Tokyo 160-0017, Japan

Tel. +81-3-3356-5481
Fax. +81-3-3356-5482
Email: contact@toda.org

NUCLEAR FUTURES: (NON)PROLIFERATION, DANGEROUS DOCTRINES, AND ARMS CONTROL PERSPECTIVES

Report on the Toda Peace Institute and CCDP Conference held in Geneva, 30-31 October 2025

The American–Russian relationship—and with it the nuclear arms control regime—is in tatters, with existing agreements such as New START set to expire in February 2026 and no concrete follow-up on the horizon. Heightened nuclear sabre rattling, doctrinal shifts, and potential weapons developments, including in space, coincide with proliferation concerns from North Korea, Iran, and elsewhere, while debates over non-nuclear postures in Europe and Asia increasingly threaten the future of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. Despite the nuclear taboo holding and the firebreak between conventional and nuclear war remaining intact, technological, doctrinal, and political developments underscore the urgency of the situation. The Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, now ratified by 73 states, reflects the ongoing desire for a nuclear-free world but also highlights the lack of progress on long-standing promises. Against this backdrop, the Toda Peace Institute and the Centre on Conflict, Development, and Peacebuilding (CCDP) convened a conference to bring together experts and scholars to assess trends, explore preconditions for incremental progress in arms control, risk reduction, and confidence-building measures, and identify potential entry points for innovative global, regional, or national initiatives.

1. Introductory session: Key challenges, objectives

The introductory session opened with a call to think creatively and collaboratively about the current nuclear crisis, emphasizing the importance of bringing together people from diverse communities under the Chatham House rule. The core challenges highlighted included exploring the nuclear taboo, preventing further nuclear proliferation, and navigating a world marked by high levels of unpredictability and turbulence. One speaker noted the existence of 61 ongoing armed conflicts, underscoring the complexity of today's security environment.

A central concern was the global revision of nuclear doctrines, prompted in part by Russia's posture since its invasion of Ukraine. Russia has signalled a willingness to use all means to defend its security and has withdrawn from key agreements with the United States—developments that pose serious threats to arms control architectures. The discussion acknowledged that these are especially challenging times. Arms control remains vital, particularly for Japan, where the historical and emotional resonance of nuclear issues is profound. The speaker reflected that, whereas the 1990s once offered promise, today's landscape feels far more uncertain.

Participants were encouraged to engage in a frank and honest conversation about where we stand. While the agenda focused on nuclear disarmament and arms control, discussions naturally widened to urgent issues such as the proliferation of advanced conventional arms. A recurring theme was the need to question assumptions and revisit what has long been taken for granted. The upcoming discussions will address a wide array of topics, including nuclear governance, disarmament, arms control, and nonproliferation. The environment of informality and openness was described as a privilege: bringing together experts who do not often get the chance to interact.

2. The current global security environment: Risks and prospects for the arms control and disarmament architecture

Discussions started by examining the current state of the nuclear arms control regime, set against a backdrop of accelerating global and regional arms races and mounting geopolitical tensions. At its core lies the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), which entered into force in 1970 and continues to serve as the cornerstone of the international nuclear order, structured around three pillars: non-proliferation, disarmament, and the peaceful use of nuclear energy under IAEA safeguards. While nearly universal, the NPT is increasingly strained by slow progress on disarmament and widening asymmetries between nuclear-armed and non-nuclear states. Its credibility has long been reinforced by complementary and mainly bilateral arms control agreements such as New START, the last remaining US–Russia strategic arms reduction treaty. Yet New START's suspension by Russia and its likely expiration in 2026 raise the prospect of a legal and strategic vacuum that could further weaken the broader non-proliferation architecture.

In parallel, the regime has diversified with instruments designed to strengthen or expand the NPT's objectives, including the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), nuclear-weapon-free zones, and, more recently, the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW). Adopted in 2017, the TPNW seeks to ban nuclear weapons outright and has been embraced mainly by non-nuclear states and civil society, who view it as a necessary response to the stagnation in progress towards nuclear disarmament. However, its rejection by nuclear-armed states and their allies illustrates a deepening divide on how to achieve a world without nuclear weapons. Together, these overlapping instruments reveal a regime under pressure— fragmented yet still anchored by the NPT, whose future appears increasingly uncertain in a rapidly shifting global landscape.

Opening the discourse—broadening it beyond narrow security arguments to include justice, climate change, and more inclusive perspectives—is essential

The first speaker of the session offered a stark assessment of the nuclear arms control regime, describing a system under severe stress amid geopolitical tensions and accelerating arms races. Once shaped and upheld by cooperation among the P5 (especially the US and the Soviet Union) the institutional landscape has become increasingly dysfunctional, shifting from a P5 to a P3 process, and now effectively to 'P2'. Multilateral bodies such as the IAEA and disarmament conferences illustrate this erosion: debates that once focused on technical issues now stall over gender language, climate references, or SDG wording, with the US itself blocking language it previously supported. Meanwhile, key agreements like New START are suspended, humanitarian disarmament norms are weakening, and no major arms control negotiations are currently underway.

Against this backdrop, the future of the NPT review process emerged as a central concern. The treaty has already gone through two consecutive review cycles without producing an outcome document, an unprecedented situation that raises profound questions about the regime's credibility and cohesion. If the third review cycle also fails, the speaker warned, it could signal a deeper systemic breakdown—casting doubt on states' commitments, worsening mistrust among allies, and potentially undermining the NPT's role as the backbone of the global non-proliferation order.

The discussion underscored that we are facing an inflection point in the global nuclear order; one marked by the growing belief that nuclear weapons are essential for national security and, simultaneously, by rising concern over the dangers of this logic. Two opposing discourses are hardening: one asserting that reliance on nuclear weapons is necessary, and another warning that this security framing directly undermines global security. At the centre of this tension lies a fundamental question: who has agency in defining security, whose security is prioritized, and what kind of security is being provided? Nuclear weapons remain a global concern, yet the decision-making power over them is concentrated in a small number of states.

Because nuclear-armed states remain deeply dogmatic in their approaches, the speaker argued that meaningful change is unlikely to originate from them. Nuclear deterrence is presented to the public as a guarantee of safety, despite the enormous risks it entails. Opening the discourse—broadening it beyond narrow security arguments to include justice, climate change, and more inclusive perspectives—is essential. Without expanding who participates in these conversations and who holds agency, there is little hope for shifting the paradigm or addressing the global implications of nuclear policy.

Subsequent discussions emphasized that the humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons are far more complex and probable than commonly acknowledged. As risks multiply, it becomes increasingly untenable to rely on the assumption that 'nothing will ever go wrong'—an assumption that underpins much of today's nuclear security thinking. The speaker challenged the foundations of nuclear deterrence, noting that it is a theory built on subjective assumptions about rationality, stability, and predictable behaviour. These assumptions cannot be proven, and neither can the claim that nuclear weapons have prevented war; in reality, 'we simply don't know'. The logic of deterrence is deeply circular, abstracting away the catastrophic human and environmental realities of nuclear use while ignoring the vulnerability of states that are not part of the nuclear 'game'. The argument also highlighted that nuclear deterrence is a human construct—fallible in the same way humans are fallible. Accidents, miscalculations, and technical errors remain possible, while nuclear policies are shrouded in secrecy, leaving the world in the dark about targeting plans, compliance with international humanitarian law, or measures to protect third states from radioactive or environmental harm. Given these stakes, the concerns of the more than 180 non-nuclear states must be taken seriously and placed on an equal footing. Addressing these issues requires a broader, more global discourse—one that recognizes these critiques as profound, not marginal, and that questions what kind of security narrative the world chooses to adopt.

...past movements, from anti-testing coalitions to indigenous mobilizations, show that public pressure can halt dangerous policies

The discussion highlighted the growing paralysis of multilateral disarmament forums, including the First Committee in New York, where debates on the NPT and new technologies—especially the impact of AI on nuclear decision-making—revealed deep institutional fragility. The UN system faces a crisis of defunding and politicization, illustrated by delegations (notably the US) attempting to remove terms such as gender or sustainability from resolutions. Trust among major powers is eroding, P5/N5 meetings are stalled, and no substantive negotiations are planned. Coupled with geopolitical tensions, hybrid warfare, and the war in Ukraine, this has reinforced a negative trend in both nuclear and conventional disarmament, despite a few functioning treaty frameworks. The repeated failure of NPT review cycles to produce an outcome document remains a major concern heading into 2026. Speakers noted that while nuclear arsenals expand and nuclear sharing becomes normalized, space remains for progress on issues such as risk reduction, transparency, and accountability, including attention to India, Pakistan, and North Korea. Civil society voices stressed the need to rebuild political will by engaging communities and financial actors; outside the policy 'bubble', to engage concerns of the broader public. The erosion of the disarmament architecture is not inherent to treaties themselves but results from state actions—plans that normalize preparation for proliferation and nuclear use. Yet moments of crisis can also galvanize activism: past movements, from anti-testing coalitions to indigenous mobilizations, show that public pressure can halt dangerous policies.

The theories of change behind different approaches to arms control and nuclear disarmament were also discussed. Several participants argued that traditional, rationalist strategies—debate, persuasion, and evidence—have reached their limits, because politics is also driven by emotions and fear. One proposal was that non-nuclear states should consider using harder leverage, such as threatening to leave the NPT, to force nuclear-armed states to take their concerns seriously. Others stressed that public support for nuclear weapons and nuclear deterrence may actually be growing in some quarters, as people prioritize security concerns, revealing a failure of the disarmament community to communicate effectively. At the same time, public opinion surveys remain contradictory and often detached from real context, creating confusion about how people perceive nuclear weapons and nuclear risks.

Participants emphasized the need for multiple theories of change, not a single pathway. Ideas included seeing disarmament as an everyday process, examining strategies emerging from the Global South, addressing the core contradictions in deterrence logic, and integrating gendered perspectives and justice concerns. Civil society's role also depends on sustainable funding and more equitable representation: who gets to speak shapes what solutions become possible. The group converged on the idea that everyone seeks security, yet nuclear weapons cannot meaningfully provide it over the long run. In a moment of profound uncertainty—especially without a shared vision for Europe's future security architecture—creating space to reassess assumptions and shift public opinion is essential for any progress in disarmament.

3. A 'deep dive': the present and future of the American–Russian (nuclear) arms control regime

The afternoon session opened with a simple but increasingly urgent question: where is arms control today? This question has resurfaced repeatedly over the past five to six years as the US–Russian arms control architecture has eroded and uncertainty has grown around the future of strategic stability. Participants expressed a shared sense of nervousness and unease—regarding treaty collapse, shifting power dynamics, and the influence of various political and industrial actors—while also emphasizing the importance of broadening participation and ensuring that historically marginalized voices are better represented in arms control discussions. Against a deteriorating global backdrop, speakers argued for a fundamental rethinking of the assumptions underpinning arms control, particularly its purposes, tools, and limits.

A central theme of the discussion was the reminder that arms control has never primarily been about eliminating nuclear weapons, but about mitigating the risks of nuclear war. Historically, treaties have followed geopolitical shifts and openings rather than driven them. Agreements such as those reached in the 1970s were possible because political relations had already begun to change. US engagement in arms control has consistently been guided by national security interests, not idealism—a reality framed not as cynicism but as a factual description of past practice. Even during periods of significant numerical reductions, these were often the result of changing strategic requirements rather than treaty mandates.

Speakers emphasized a shift toward understanding arms control less as a matter of numbers and more as a process—a toolbox aimed at managing strategic competition, increasing transparency, and reducing escalation risks. This process-oriented view remains relevant even in the absence of comprehensive treaties like New START. Within this framework, four potential pathways for future bilateral or trilateral engagement were discussed. A comprehensive successor treaty to New START was widely seen as the least likely option, given diverging US and Russian agendas, the erosion of institutional expertise, and China's lack of historical integration into arms control regimes. More plausible, though still fragile, options included short-term arrangements to remain within existing limits, symbolic political agreements with minimal substance, and multi-track approaches focused on risk reduction. The latter—combining high-level political declarations with practical, technical measures—was presented as the most constructive path for incremental stability.

...in a fragmented and polarized nuclear order, rebuilding even modest forms of restraint will require creativity, political will, and a renewed understanding of arms control as a flexible, adaptive practice

The collapse of the post–Cold War arms control architecture loomed large in the discussion. Limited attempts to revive negotiations in the early 2020s failed, and Russia's invasion of Ukraine effectively froze any remaining dialogue. Russia's suspension of New START, mirrored by the US, further weakened the framework. Proposals to 'live within the limits' for another year without verification were debated as potential 'door-knockers'—minimal steps that could reopen dialogue—but participants noted that such measures would only be viable if paired with credible agendas and monitoring mechanisms aligned with US security interests.

Several speakers addressed the broader geopolitical context shaping these debates. The absence of any framework, they warned, increases the likelihood of destabilizing action–reaction cycles, particularly around weapons testing. In this sense, even minimal arrangements for restraint were seen as preferable to unconstrained competition. Others highlighted a deeper problem: widespread scepticism among political elites in Washington and Moscow that restraint and transparency serve national security at all. This lack of confidence in the process of arms control—rather than a lack of trust in adversaries themselves—was identified as a key obstacle.

China emerged repeatedly as a complicating factor. Participants criticized the pervasive 'what about China?' rhetoric in US politics, arguing that it has become an enduring barrier to US–Russia arms control and is likely to persist beyond any single administration. At the same time, speakers noted the absence of clarity about what the 'China threat' actually entails, cautioning that many assumptions about Chinese capabilities remain weakly substantiated. This ambiguity fuels divergent schools of thought in US debates, ranging from nuclear supremacy arguments to 'arms racing for arms control', alongside more marginal disarmament-oriented approaches and calls for political declarations grounded in domestic consensus.

Finally, the discussion returned to questions of inclusion and structure. Participants debated when—and whether—it would be appropriate to bring Europeans into arms control frameworks, warning that poorly timed expansion could exacerbate tensions rather than reduce them. Others questioned the assumption that arms control must be limited to two or three actors at all. Across these exchanges, a shared concern emerged: in a fragmented and polarized nuclear order, rebuilding even modest forms of restraint will require creativity, political will, and a renewed understanding of arms control as a flexible, adaptive practice rather than a fixed set of treaties.

4. Managing Multilateral Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Arms Control Challenges

The session situates current debates within a rapidly deteriorating international order often described as a 'second nuclear age'. Participants argue that nuclear weapons are once again becoming central to global security, amid renewed arms racing and declining confidence in existing regimes. The United States faces structural constraints, notably an industrial base ill-prepared for rapid arsenal expansion, while Russia shows little interest in new arms-control treaties after completing much of its modernization and perceiving inspections as offering limited value. Europe, meanwhile, remains deeply concerned with deterrence credibility, NATO commitments, and the normalization of nuclear threats, while struggling to maintain effective dialogue with Washington and considering whether and how to engage China more directly.

Against this backdrop, speakers explored medium-term options for managing strategic competition. One possibility discussed was a modified US–Russia framework with higher numerical limits but restrictions on delivery systems, potentially leaving space for China's inclusion at a later stage. Across these scenarios, verification, planning stability, and deterrence remain core priorities. Technological developments add further complexity: while effective space-based missile defence against large-scale attacks remains unrealistic, anti-satellite capabilities are advancing, and European debates increasingly contemplate deeper nuclear cooperation and mutual defence arrangements. Mutual threat perceptions—Russia's fear of NATO and NATO's fear of Russia—continue to shape any prospects for trilateral engagements including other nuclear actors.

The discussion then turned to proliferation dynamics in East Asia, where significant nuclear expansion is seen as increasingly likely. China is investing heavily in strategic nuclear infrastructure, developing a broad array of delivery systems and expanding its forces at a scale compared by some to the Soviet buildup of the 1960s. These developments have major implications for regional actors, particularly Japan and South Korea. North Korea's advancing ICBM program is interpreted as a tool for political leverage, while the absence of sustained US diplomatic engagement and domestic instability in Washington undermine confidence in extended deterrence.

Growing uncertainty is prompting Japan and South Korea to reassess their security options. While both currently rely on strengthened alliances and joint planning with the United States, participants suggest that South Korea may be the first to move toward nuclear sharing or independent capabilities, with Japan potentially following. Such shifts could trigger wider regional chain reactions, including among Southeast Asian states. From Russia's perspective, this raises two destabilizing possibilities: a nuclear-armed Japan decoupled from the United States, or one closely aligned with Washington and acting as a regional counterpart to the UK in Europe.

Participants also considered potential engagement pathways. Dialogue with North Korea is viewed as one avenue to reduce regional risks, though China is unlikely to engage meaningfully on its own nuclear forces until it reaches its desired capability levels. Over time, China may reconsider elements of its nuclear doctrine, including its no-first-use pledge, possibly through creative political or treaty-based arrangements. Some proposals envision asymmetric commitments in which nuclear-armed states exercise restraint while non-nuclear states receive security assurances, building on existing bilateral practices.

The session highlighted how the emerging nuclear arms race reinforces polarization and bloc politics, while exposing the limits of existing non-proliferation narratives. The Iranian nuclear program, often framed as the principal threat to the NPT, is cited as an example of how political bias and strategic framing can obscure broader drivers of proliferation. Failures in negotiation are attributed less to the NPT itself than to the strategic choices of states operating within shifting power structures.

The overall discussion emphasized that arms control and non-proliferation are fundamentally political enterprises. Their instruments have always evolved alongside changes in the balance of power and require renewed political commitment to remain effective. Several speakers stress that China's nuclear strategy differs markedly from that of the United States and Russia, having historically prioritized survivability and deterrence over numerical parity. This distinct strategic culture, combined with India's growing focus on China rather than Pakistan and debates in Europe over nuclear responsibility and US force posture, underscores the need to rethink the nuclear order beyond Cold War frameworks.

5. Techno-social developments: Upsetting or maintaining the 'delicate balance of terror'

The next session addressed how emerging and innovative strategic technologies impact nuclear weapons and deterrence in terms of predictability, stability, and acceptable risk. Emerging technologies have long shaped nuclear dynamics, but today their influence is amplified by the rapidity of innovation and a more complex, multipolar strategic environment. A significant concern is that technologies such as AI, cyber capabilities, and space systems interact across domains, creating compounding effects that cannot be assessed in isolation from each other. New capabilities may threaten both the security and reliability of nuclear forces. Advances in sensing, tracking, and remote surveillance expose assets once thought concealed, while missile defences, hypersonic weapons, and directed-energy weapons can under certain conditions erode confidence in second-strike stability. Some of these technological developments are thus pushing the boundaries of acceptable risk that is intrinsic to the concept of nuclear deterrence. The result is a deterrence environment that is less predictable and increasingly unstable, marked by greater ambiguity, faster technological change, and shifting perceptions of acceptable risk. This raises the chances of misunderstanding or miscalculation, especially as states race to develop and deploy new systems that may not be fully tested. However, technological progress can also help reduce some risks—for example, by improving cyber resilience or using AI to strengthen decision-making. Shared concerns about instability could still offer an opportunity for renewed dialogue on risk reduction.

Overall, emerging and disruptive technologies, especially AI, may reshape the nuclear landscape in ways not yet fully understood. While contemporary debates often exaggerate AI's immediate risks, they may overlook more subtle dangers. The concern is not that AI will allow anyone to 'build a bomb', but that latent nuclear states could use advanced tools—such as additive manufacturing, open-weight AI models, and precision engineering—to shorten the time needed to develop nuclear weapons and reduce detection risks. These technologies are advancing faster than international verification systems, which remain slow, underfunded, and reactive. The speaker used the metaphor of a crocodile to describe this pace: AI may seem manageable today, but it will grow beyond current policy controls. They argued for an agnostic but proactive approach—acknowledging both risks and opportunities—since today's assumptions may no longer hold tomorrow. AI could change proliferation dynamics, both horizontally (new states acquiring weapons) and vertically (existing states improving arsenals). At the same time, AI and machine learning could also strengthen monitoring and verification, through better data fusion, satellite imagery, and environmental sampling. The session emphasized the need for greater investment in verification and safeguards today, to prevent technological change from outpacing detection capacity.

Emerging and disruptive technologies also pose new arms control challenges, as their dual-use convergence and intangible nature make it harder to distinguish civilian from military applications. Commercial firms now drive much of the relevant innovation, lowering barriers to entry and reshaping who needs to be involved in arms control discussions. The presentation suggested that the most practical approach may be to verify observable behaviours and effects rather than to police broad R&D activity, and to rely more on regional or issue-specific 'clubs' and cartels that control access to key resources such as chips, compute power, or space launch services. Governments alone will struggle to keep pace, meaning the private sector must become an active participant in regulation and verification—not just an actor to be regulated. This raises the question of how to align incentives so that private companies contribute to arms control objectives.

The discussion also highlighted the need for regional dialogue mechanisms to manage shared concerns, since global frameworks currently struggle to keep up with technological developments. The example of a recent China–France dialogue on risk reduction in the South China Sea was cited as a sign that regional cooperation could become central to preventing escalation in an era where nuclear, cyber, and AI domains are increasingly entangled.

6. Pushing the envelope: Coalitions of the willing and civil society activism on nuclear issues

The session explored the complex landscape of nuclear politics, emphasizing the ways language and representation shape how the world understands nuclear weapons. Repeated narratives and familiar frames —within both pro-disarmament and pro-deterrence communities—can unintentionally reinforce the status quo, fuelling public anxiety while limiting imagination about what is possible. State-centric discourses dominate, often silencing everyday social and cultural perspectives, yet media and even video games reveal how perceptions of nuclear risk are formed far beyond formal diplomatic channels. Recognizing these patterns opens the door to new ways of thinking about nuclear risk, verification, and disarmament in a rapidly changing world.

At the heart of the challenge lies the broader erosion of core humanitarian and security values. Commitments to promoting human security and the prevention of violence are under pressure, and the efforts of women and indigenous communities to bring leadership and insight to conflict resolution take place against a backdrop of rising authoritarianism, fear-driven politics, cyber-enabled divisions, and climate-linked nuclear risks.

The economic consequences of nuclear weapons development are equally pressing. Resources devoted to nuclear arsenals divert funding from critical areas such as health, education, and public safety. As highlighted in the discussion, "It steals not only resources from what people really need for security like health and

education; it steals resources from the military that has to be dealing with all of the new and amplified threats." United Nations studies confirm the enormous global costs of nuclear weapons, demonstrating how investment in arsenals limits the capacity to address urgent societal and security needs. Framing disarmament in economic terms can be persuasive, showing that reallocating resources toward resilience, infrastructure, and public welfare is both practical and strategic. Tailoring arguments to one's audience will be essential for building support for meaningful action.

Innovation in disarmament also points to creative, flexible approaches. Ideas such as a 'Conference of Parties (COP) for disarmament', subregional initiatives like eliminating long-range missiles, and building on frameworks such as the Pact for the Future offer practical entry points for action. Yet the field remains fragmented, with disarmament discourses often constrained by traditional arms control frameworks. The TPNW represents a strategic shift, giving non-nuclear states and civil society a stronger voice, but its impact depends on wider adoption and careful coalition-building at both national and international levels. Even if described by some as utopian, this may be needed in order to move things to the middle ground.

Effective risk management also requires confronting assumptions about the 'nuclear taboo'—the idea that decision-makers will automatically rule out nuclear use. This view is misleading. Every military decision involves weighing costs and benefits, and nuclear weapons are no exception. One of those costs is international and reputational, but in the heat of conflict, these considerations may not dominate. The nuclear option is evaluated alongside all other military choices. The weakening of the nuclear taboo is largely due to an absence of memory: to understand the costs of using nuclear weapons, one must remember their historical consequences. Since the end of the Cold War, these costs have faded from collective awareness. Movements like the humanitarian consequences initiative and the TPNW help elevate awareness of these costs at critical decision points, strengthening norms and reducing the likelihood of use. Complementing deterrence with reassurance—showing that escalation can be prevented—further lowers risk. As emphasized in the discussion, while this does not immediately contribute to the elimination of nuclear weapons, it fosters shared understanding and common goals among diverse actors. As one participant put it: "NPT or TPNW or Steps to pull Back from the Brink? We need all of them. No treaty or action plan is sufficient on its own. We need to add them all—and future technologies—to the nuclear abolition and human security toolbox and see which works in what circumstances."

Moving forward thus requires reframing nuclear issues beyond humanitarian arguments towards a global security perspective, emphasizing the responsibilities of all states. Internal disagreements over strategy and timing risk reinforcing the status quo, yet there is reason for cautious optimism: there is a broad coalition to be built on and the disarmament community is not starting from zero. By linking nuclear disarmament to climate and existential risks, combining strategic pragmatism with collective action, there is an opportunity to challenge entrenched arguments, reduce the likelihood of catastrophe, and redirect resources toward a safer and more resilient world.

7. Identifying opportunities, breaking out of silos, building momentum

The final session reflected on key lessons from the two-day discussions, emphasizing ways to advance arms control and nuclear disarmament by breaking out of traditional silos and building momentum. Participants stressed the importance of looking beyond conventional divides, particularly the dichotomy between the 'nuclear North' and the 'non-nuclear South'. Countries in Latin America, Africa, and Asia have long contributed to arms control, non-proliferation, and regional trust-building, as shown by Brazil and Argentina's transformation from competitors to cooperative models of nuclear restraint. At the same time, gaps in attention to certain actors, such as Israel, highlighted the need for consistent and comprehensive assessments of nuclear risks.

The discussion also focused on understanding political dynamics and leverage points. Even authoritarian regimes depend on legitimacy, offering openings for internal and external pressures, while rising far-right movements introduce challenges through aggressive nationalism and organized transnational violence. These factors shape perceptions of risk and the potential for collective action. Historical patterns of escalation among major powers—including China, the US, and Russia—reinforce the need for dialogue, reassurance, and trust-building, while reflections on activism illustrated how social movements and intellectual engagement can shape policy and discourse.

Participants emphasized the need for rethinking conventional theories of change in nuclear policy. Traditional models that assume simple cause-and-effect often fail to capture complex feedback loops, adversarial interactions, and unpredictable events. Progress requires careful consideration of timelines, forces at play, and realistic expectations. Short-term measures to address crises must be aligned with longer-term disarmament objectives, balancing urgency with sustainability. Emerging technologies, such as hypersonic systems and dual-use (conventional or nuclear) weapons, blur the boundaries between nuclear and conventional deterrence, requiring careful oversight and attention to unintended consequences.

Short-term measures to address crises must be aligned with longer-term disarmament objectives, balancing urgency with sustainability

The session also highlighted the ‘bubbles’ in nuclear policy: technical elites and specialized discourse can isolate participants from the public and decision-makers, reducing awareness of human consequences and complicating communication. Addressing these divides requires rethinking language, culture, and inclusivity in decision-making. Risk perception and human behaviour are central: under conditions of uncertainty decision-makers often tend to avoid risk, and effective strategies should consider what is manageable, emphasizing prudence and clear communication. Economic and structural realities, including limited funding for arms control and strategic research, further constrain progress.

Finally, building an international arms control community beyond historical centers like the US and Russia could foster long-term, creative thinking and strengthen regional and global engagement. Change in nuclear disarmament is non-linear: crises can catalyse transformation, but sustained effort, careful timing, and multilateral cooperation—particularly engaging non-traditional, new, or regional actors — will be essential for resilient and effective progress.

THE TODA PEACE INSTITUTE

The Toda Peace Institute is an independent, nonpartisan institute committed to advancing a more just and peaceful world through policy-oriented peace research and practice. The Institute commissions evidence-based research, convenes multi-track and multi-disciplinary problem-solving workshops and seminars, and promotes dialogue across ethnic, cultural, religious and political divides. It catalyses practical, policy-oriented conversations between theoretical experts, practitioners, policymakers and civil society leaders in order to discern innovative and creative solutions to the major problems confronting the world in the twenty-first century (see www.toda.org for more information).

CONTACT US

Toda Peace Institute
Samon Eleven Bldg. 5 th Floor
3-1 Samon-cho, Shinjuku-ku, Tokyo 160-0017, Japan

Email
contact@toda.org

Sign up for the Toda Peace Institute mailing list
https://toda.org/policy-briefs-and-resources/email-newsletter.html

Connect with us on the following media.
YouTube: @todapeaceinstitute3917
X (Twitter): https://twitter.com/TodaInstitute
Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/TodaInstitute