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Strengthening dialogue in the Non-Proliferation Treaty: the nuclear responsibilities approach

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Nuclear responsibilities and the Non-Proliferation Treaty: on discourse and dialogue

1. In an era of deepening geopolitical divisions and widening distrust within the nuclear non-proliferation regime, the quality and effectiveness of dialogue among States Parties has become a critical concern. The Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) review process cannot fulfil its essential purpose without sustained and substantive dialogue that bridges divides and builds mutual understanding. All States have a responsibility to uphold the NPT — a responsibility that fundamentally depends on States Parties' collective will and capacity to engage in constructive dialogue.
2. Within the NPT review process, responsibility discourses are common and widespread. Academic research¹ shows that the language of responsibility is frequently used by NPT States Parties in statements and working papers to articulate expectations and obligations, justify and critique behaviours, and to assert norms across each of the NPT's pillars. Those studies further highlight that responsibility and irresponsibility claims by NPT States Parties, particularly identity claims associated with a State 'being responsible', can fuel political polarisation and a culture of blame, hindering constructive dialogue. Responsibility claims are also often ambiguous. When States make responsibility claims, they are usually using the language of responsibility unreflectively. Historically, there have been few opportunities for States Parties to engage with one another on the meanings behind, and attributed to, responsibilities by different States Parties.

¹ Megan Dee (2025). Nuclear responsibilities and the NPT: Advancing the nuclear responsibilities approach. BASIC-CPCCR. November.

https://basicint.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/11/25_16_BASIC_Nuclear-Responsibilities-and-the-NPT-report_04-1.pdf;
Megan Dee (2026). Justification and critique in the global nuclear order: Nuclear (ir)responsibility as practice. IN: Todd Robinson and Stephanie Stapleton (eds.) *Nuclear Responsibility: Defining Responsible Nuclear Statecraft in an Era of Great Power Competition*. Bloomsbury; Alice Spilman, Chiara Cervasio, Eva-Nour Repussard and Mhairi McClafferty (2024). *The Nuclear Responsibilities Primer: Exploring Perspectives on Nuclear Responsibilities within the Non-Proliferation Regime*. BASIC. November.
<https://basicint.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/nuclear-responsibilities-primer.pdf>.

3. As the Chair of the 2024 NPT Preparatory Committee stated, ‘*it is important that States parties enable “habits of dialogue” by maintaining an open, non-confrontational, inclusive and transparent dialogue*’.² The **nuclear responsibilities approach** is a method by which States Parties can avoid confrontational dialogic practices and strengthen dialogue within the NPT review process.

The nuclear responsibilities approach

4. The nuclear responsibilities approach puts the meaningful exploration of responsibility at the centre of how we think and talk about nuclear weapons. It provides governments with tools for *critical introspection* and *constructive dialogue* to improve communication and build mutual understanding.
5. At the national level, *critical introspection* enables governments to look internally, with a critical eye, to ask: To whom or what do you have responsibilities? What are those responsibilities and how do you fulfil them? What are the tensions, competition, or conflicts between the fulfilment of different responsibilities, and how might these be managed or resolved? And how do you think other parties feel about these responsibilities and their fulfilment in policy and practice? Through critical introspection governments can reflect upon their nuclear responsibilities as they concern, for example, their security, obligations, ethics, principles or norms, and how those responsibilities lead to policies and actions to fulfil them. A critical introspection process also crucially enables governments to check and challenge what they do, and why they do it, to identify areas of conflict between actions and policies and how policies can be aligned to better fulfil responsibilities more holistically. Critical introspection can subsequently help governments explain to others why they undertake such actions and policies.
6. At the intergovernmental level, *constructive dialogue* enables governments to engage in the meaningful exchange and exploration of participants’ common and differentiated nuclear responsibilities, grounded in empathy and active listening. Constructive dialogue enables governments to build shared understanding of their respective and collective responsibilities—serving as a critical pathway to build mutual trust, strengthen dialogue and establish genuine deliberation opportunities. Constructive dialogue then enables governments to work together on ways to better fulfil their responsibilities.
7. The Government of the United Kingdom has promoted the use of the nuclear responsibilities approach, including through work with academics, government, and military representatives across the Indo-Pacific region to increase understanding of regional security issues and to identify additional mechanisms to reduce the risk of nuclear conflict in the future. As well as undergoing critical introspection through its own

² Towards 2026: reflections of the Chair of the 2024 session of the Preparatory Committee. [NPT/CONF.2026/PC.II/WP.43](#), pt.10.

national nuclear responsibilities roundtables held in 2018, 2021 and 2025, the United Kingdom has further supported the BASIC Responsibilities and Global Governance programme who have served as facilitators of other national nuclear responsibilities roundtables, including in the Netherlands, Japan, Malaysia and Brazil.³ The nuclear responsibilities approach has therefore served as a useful tool for nuclear-weapon States and non-nuclear-weapon States alike.

Utilising the nuclear responsibilities approach within the NPT framework

8. The nuclear responsibilities approach is a constructive pathway to facilitate the meaningful exchange and exploration of views among NPT States Parties as they look ahead to the next NPT review cycle. By encouraging national and intergovernmental critical introspection and constructive dialogue, the nuclear responsibilities approach offers NPT States Parties a foundation to build mutual understanding, confidence and trust, enhance transparency and accountability, and facilitate improved communication and deliberation. The approach can also serve as an inclusive dialogic tool to depoliticise and depolarise contentious issues.
9. Within the NPT framework, States Parties may utilise the nuclear responsibilities approach through critical introspection and constructive dialogues aimed at improving communication and mutual understanding of government's own nuclear responsibilities. Minilateral⁴ responsibilities dialogues would particularly provide opportunity for small groups of participating governments to: (i) engage in meaningful exchange and exploration of their common and differentiated responsibilities, (ii) reflect on how they communicate why their behaviours and practices fulfil their obligations, and (iii) consider how they could utilise a responsibilities lens to facilitate meaningful and constructive dialogue and advance multilateral progress within the NPT review process.
10. Minilateral responsibilities dialogues would further support NPT States Parties by providing space for the meaningful exploration and exchange of their responsibilities across the NPT's pillars. Such dialogues would particularly contribute to building mutual understanding of the responsibilities that inform different NPT States Parties' policies and practices both within and across the nuclear disarmament, non-proliferation, and peaceful uses of nuclear energy pillars.
11. Such dialogues could also provide opportunity for participating governments to explore, examine, deliberate and advance specific NPT issues utilising a nuclear responsibilities lens. Minilateral responsibilities dialogues could then be tailored to address issues such as, though not limited to, risk reduction, nuclear doctrine, transparency and accountability

³ For more information, see <https://basicint.org/portfolio/responsibilities-and-global-governance/>.

⁴ For further discussion on minilateralism and effective multilateralism in the NPT, see Megan Dee (2024). Minilateralism and effective multilateralism in the global nuclear order. *Contemporary Security Policy*, 45(3), 494–524. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13523260.2024.2373658> (open access).

measures, security assurances, nuclear safety and security, and strengthening the NPT review process.

12. The nuclear responsibilities approach is not an end in itself, but is a valuable framework to strengthen dialogue for the fulfilment of NPT objectives and commitments.

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