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# The False Binary: Consensus Versus Failure and the 2026 NPT Review Conference

Rethinking Outcome Options at  
the 2026 NPT Review Conference

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# Introduction

In the run-up to the 2026 NPT Review Conference (RevCon) of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), significant attention has focused on whether States Parties can deliver a consensus final document.

After two RevCons without a consensus outcome document, a number of States Parties are feeling the pressure to avoid the unprecedented occurrence of a third “failed” review conference. For many, the stakes extend beyond any single conference, believing that without a substantive outcome, the credibility and legitimacy of the Treaty itself may be at risk. Senior practitioners in the current review cycle have articulated these concerns with notable urgency. Ambassador Viinanen of Finland, chair of the 2023

Preparatory Committee, has warned that continued failure to produce substantive outcomes risks becoming “detrimental for the credibility of the treaty”, while Ambassador Agyeman of Ghana, chair of the 2025 Preparatory Committee, has stated plainly that States Parties “cannot afford to have a RevCon that does not come out with an outcome document”.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Carol Giacomo and Shizuku Kuramitsu, “Is the NPT Still Viable? An Interview With Three Diplomats Working to Keep It Alive,” *Arms Control Today*, April (2025).

Scholars and practitioners have previously written on this topic, noting that consensus outcomes are indispensable signals of collective investment in the Treaty whose “credibility continues to be in jeopardy”.<sup>2</sup> On this view, the form of unanimous adoption is not merely procedural, it is the mechanism by which States Parties publicly recommit to the Treaty’s bargain and restore normative confidence between review cycles.

Other commentary has questioned whether the relationship between formal outcomes and substantive progress on the Treaty’s objectives is as direct as implied here, and has subsequently challenged the belief that a consensus outcome document is what defines a “successful” RevCon.<sup>3</sup> Scholars and practitioners have noted that there is little “discernable correlation” between the agreed outcome documents and what happens afterwards.<sup>4</sup> Agreed language in Final Documents has frequently been reinterpreted or simply disregarded by NWS in subsequent review cycles, suggesting that the functional value of consensus documents depends on conditions (notably great power commitment) that the documents themselves cannot generate.<sup>5</sup> Some take this further, arguing that weakly negotiated consensus texts can actively damage the Treaty by papering over fundamental disagreements about the nature of the NPT’s disarmament obligations, thereby deferring rather than resolving the tensions that drive non-compliance.<sup>6</sup> On this reading, a formally agreed outcome that lacks substantive depth is not merely insufficient, it may also be counterproductive.

The tension between the institutional need for some output to shore up the legitimacy of the Treaty and the warning against hollow outputs is precisely what the 2026 RevCon must navigate.

Against this backdrop, this brief argues that substance matters more than form in determining the value and durability of RevCon outcomes, and that States Parties possess meaningful agency to select the outcome format best suited to prevailing conditions. A comprehensive consensus outcome remains politically valuable, but the NPT review process is more flexible than its participants tend to assume. The consolidation of a single comprehensive outcome document norm obscures the range of options that Article VIII.3 leaves open. Treating a final consensus document as the only meaningful outcome overlooks both the history of the NPT review process and the wide range of outcomes available to States Parties at the RevCon. This brief sets out to explore some of these options. It proceeds in three steps. First, it traces the historical variation in outcome documents across RevCons between 1975 and 2022. Second, it evaluates consensus as a measure of progress in the NPT review process. Finally, it assesses strengths and challenges associated with a range of possible outcome formats for the 2026 RevCon, including consensus and non-consensus options.

2 Wilfred Wan, “Why the NPT Review Conference Outcome Matters,” *United Nations University Centre for Policy Research*, Blog Post (2015), accessed March 2026, <https://unu.edu/cpr/blog-post/why-npt-review-conference-outcome-matters>.

3 Lewis Dunn, Patricia Jaworek, Mark Melamed and Isabelle Williams, *Toward a Successful 10th NPT Review Conference: Recommendations Informed by NTI’s Global Enterprise to Strengthen Nonproliferation and Disarmament*. Washington DC: Nuclear Threat Initiative, October (2021), [https://www.nti.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/NTI\\_Toward-a-successful-10th-NPT.pdf](https://www.nti.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/NTI_Toward-a-successful-10th-NPT.pdf); Sanaa Alvira, “How to redefine “success” in upcoming nuclear nonproliferation talks,” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, Voices of Tomorrow*, (2023), <https://thebulletin.org/2023/07/how-to-redefine-success-in-upcoming-nuclear-nonproliferation-talks/#:~:text=Last%20August%2C%20those%20strained%20tensions,to%20achieve%20consensus%20in%202022>.

4 Henrik Salander, “Reviewing a Review Conference: Can there ever be a successful NPT RevCon?,” *ELN*, June 8, 2015, <https://europeanleadershipnetwork.org/commentary/reviewing-a-review-conference-can-there-ever-be-a-successful-npt-revcon/>.

5 Salander, “Reviewing a Review Conference,” Rebecca Gibbons, *The Hegemon’s Tool Kit: US Leadership and the Politics of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Regime*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press (2022).

6 Robert Einhorn, “The NPT Review Process: The Need for a More Productive Approach,” *Arms Control Association*, September 2016 <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2016-09/features/npt-review-process-need-more-productive-approach>.

# The History of NPT Review Conference Outcome Documents

**Article VIII.3 of the NPT mandates that RevCons be held at five-year intervals to review the operation of the Treaty, but provides no specific guidance on what written outcome, if any, the conference participants should produce.**

Despite this lack of firm guidance, every RevCon to date has sought to produce, by consensus, a final outcome document or political declaration. From 1975–1990, RevCons were held with the primary aim of reviewing the operation of the Treaty. Outcome documents during this period were therefore largely backward-looking. From 1995 onwards, the conference agreed that a “forward-looking” dimension was also required. The traditional and most sought-after outcome since 1995, therefore, has become a comprehensive document that a) reviews the Treaty’s operation over the past five years, b) sets out recommendations and forward-looking action, and c) is agreed upon unanimously.

A consensus final document has been achieved only four times: 1975, 1985, 2000, and 2010, with the 2010 package adopting a distinct structure. When consensus on a substantive final document proves unattainable, the conference will issue a procedural or technical report on conference activities, and sometimes the chair will still issue a non-consensus draft final document. The tendency to characterise the latter outcomes as straightforward “failures,” set against the “success” of a comprehensive consensus final document, imposes a false binary on a review process that has in practice generated a much wider spectrum of outputs – and obscures the agency that States Parties retain to shape that outcome. In 1995, the RevCon produced a package of decisions despite failing to agree on a final document reviewing the implementation of the Treaty. States Parties have also adopted arrangements that depart from standard practice to preserve consensus on at least part of the package. In 1985, a limited Final

Declaration was agreed upon by consensus, while the most contentious issues were handled in a separate text. In 2010, the Final Document split the outcome into a 122-paragraph presidential “review” section that recorded disagreements and a separate consensus action plan. The remainder of this section explores the wide variation in outcomes at RevCons between 1975 and 2022 demonstrating that flexibility in outcome format is not a departure from the review process but a recurring and legitimate feature of it – one that States Parties have exercised deliberately, and can exercise again in 2026.

## 1975–1990

At the first Revcon, States Parties adopted a relatively short Final Declaration by consensus as a consequence of the strong leadership displayed by the Swedish President. The declaration reaffirmed States Parties’ strong support for the Treaty and reflected their agreement that the provisions relating to the fundamental objective of averting the further spread of nuclear weapons had been faithfully observed by all parties. On disarmament, the declaration welcomed arms limitation agreements concluded since entry into force but expressed serious concern that the nuclear arms race had continued, urging resolute efforts to implement Article VI. The declaration also welcomed growth in membership while noting continued concern about universality.<sup>7</sup>

In 1980, States Parties failed to agree on a Final Declaration. The international environment in the run-up to the RevCon was unusually hostile to compromise: US -Soviet relations had deteriorated sharply after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan; the Non-Aligned Movement was increasingly fractured,

<sup>7</sup> “Final Declaration of the First Review Conference of the NPT,” NTI, accessed February 18, 2026, <https://www.nti.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/NPTRevCon75.pdf>

particularly by rising tensions between Iran and Iraq.<sup>8</sup> Against this backdrop, disputes emerged concerning Article VI implementation, security assurances, and the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty.<sup>9</sup> Disarmament issues derailed the possibility of consensus, driven by the perception among many non-nuclear weapon states (NNWS) that the nuclear weapon states (NWS) had not delivered on Article VI and that the conference should urge accelerated efforts in this area.<sup>10</sup>

In 1985, States Parties returned to producing a consensus Final Declaration. The RevCon saw the Egyptian President run an effective informal consultative system, which helped put this outcome into place despite key differences. The Final Declaration was strongly supportive of the Treaty, although it was critical of its implementation in some areas, particularly those relating to the cessation of the nuclear arms race and nuclear disarmament. The declaration offered recommendations aimed at further strengthening the NPT. But above all, States Parties solemnly declared “their continued support for the objectives of the Treaty” and “their conviction that the Treaty is essential to international peace and security”.<sup>11</sup> Consensus was achieved by keeping divisive issues out of the Final Declaration and handling them instead in a separate accompanying document.<sup>12</sup>

In 1990, the RevCon failed to adopt a Final Declaration. Disagreements again centred on disarmament progress, with the CTBT emerging as the decisive obstacle.<sup>13</sup> A group of NNWS pressed for the final document to include a clear commitment by the nuclear powers to negotiate an agreement, with Russia supportive, but the UK and US initially resisting binding language. A compromise text attracted wide support, but American insistence on additional qualifying language on the need for “step-by-step negotiations” was rejected by the Mexico-led NAM group.<sup>14</sup> With neither side willing to yield, the conference ended without consensus.<sup>15</sup>

In both 1980 and 1990, despite the failure to adopt Final Declarations, the Main Committees produced “unbracketed” paragraphs on some issues, reflecting de facto consensus language.<sup>16</sup>

## 1995 Review and Extension Conference

By focusing almost exclusively on the issue of extension, the 1995 Review and Extension Conference left little time to reconcile divergent positions on sensitive issues such as the pace and scale of disarmament progress. Consequently, the conference was unable to adopt a Final Declaration. However, the conference simultaneously adopted a package comprising three decisions:

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### Decision 1:

Strengthening the review process - Reconfigure the review cycle so that Preparatory Committees address substantive issues and universality (not just procedure), and so that RevCons both assess implementation and identify priorities and means for progress (the forward-looking aspect).<sup>17</sup>

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### Decision 2:

Principles and objectives for nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament - Set out a guide for nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament efforts in the subsequent review cycles.<sup>18</sup>

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### Decision 3:

Extension of the Treaty on the Non-proliferation of Nuclear Weapons - Determined (without a vote) that, since a majority existed under Article X(2), the Treaty would continue in force indefinitely.<sup>19</sup>

8 William C. Potter, “The NPT & the Sources of Nuclear Restraint,” *Dædalus* 139, no. 1 (2010): 60.

9 Jayantha Dhanapala and Randy Rydell, “Multilateral Diplomacy and the NPT: An Insider’s Account,” in *Reflections on the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons*, eds. Jayantha Dhanapala and Tariq Rauf (SIPRI, 2017), 22.

10 Carlton Stoiber, “The Evolution of NPT Review Conference Final Documents, 1975-2000,” *The Nonproliferation Review* 10, no. 3 (2003): 126.

11 “Final Declaration 1986 NPT Review Conference,” NTI, accessed February 18, 2026, <https://www.nti.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/NPTRevCon85.pdf>

12 Such issues where language was “disposed” included the CTBT, a nuclear “freeze” and attacks on nuclear facilities. See: Dhanapala and Rydell, “Multilateral Diplomacy and the NPT,” 23.

13 Dhanapala and Rydell, “Multilateral Diplomacy and the NPT,” 23-24.

14 Rebecca Johnson, *Unfinished business: the negotiation of the CTBT and the end of nuclear testing* (United Nations Publications, 2009), 34.

15 Harald Müller, “The NPT Review Conferences” in *The Nuclear Nonproliferation Regime at a Crossroads*, eds. Emily B. Landau and Azriel Bermant (Institute for National Security Studies, 2014), 19.

16 Stoiber, “The Evolution of NPT Review Conference Final Documents,” 126

17 “Decision 1 Strengthening the Review Process for the Treaty,” Reaching Critical Will, accessed February 18, 2026, <https://www.reachingcriticalwill.org/images/documents/Disarmament-fora/npt/GENERAL-DOCS/outcome1995-1.pdf>

18 “Decision 2 Principles and Objectives for Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament,” Reaching Critical Will, accessed February 18, 2026, <https://www.reachingcriticalwill.org/images/documents/Disarmament-fora/npt/GENERAL-DOCS/outcome1995-2.pdf>

19 “Decision 3 Extension of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons,” Reaching Critical Will, accessed February 18, 2026, <https://www.reachingcriticalwill.org/images/documents/Disarmament-fora/npt/GENERAL-DOCS/outcome1995-3.pdf>

In parallel with those decisions, the conference also adopted, without a vote, a resolution on the Middle East. The resolution, reaffirming the importance of universal adherence to the Treaty, inter alia, called upon all States in the Middle East to accede to it as well as to take practical steps towards the establishment of a zone free of weapons of mass destruction in the region.<sup>20</sup>

Measured against the success/failure binary of achieving a consensus outcome document or not, the 1995 RevCon should qualify as a failure, yet rarely is it characterised as such. Not only did the conference secure the indefinite extension of the Treaty, the States Parties also made decisions which would lay the institutional groundwork for subsequent review cycles - most notably the inclusion of forward-looking elements of the review process. The significance of the conference then lay not in the absence of a Final Declaration but in demonstrating that the review process could generate authoritative and consequential outputs through means other than the traditional consensus document. The 1995 conference thus set a precedent for what can be achieved even when a substantive final document cannot be agreed upon.

## 2000–2010

Between 1995 and 2000, the geopolitical context was unfavourable for a successful RevCon: the three Preparatory Committee meetings had failed to produce agreed recommendations, India and Pakistan tested nuclear weapons in May 1998, and the CTBT remained short of entry into force.<sup>21</sup> Nevertheless, the 2000 RevCon marked a significant achievement. For the first time in 15 years, the RevCon successfully concluded with a Final Document agreed by consensus that included a set of steps for implementing Article VI.<sup>22</sup> The 13 Practical Steps established a set of concrete steps States Parties should take toward disarmament and demonstrated the potential of the strengthened review process established in 1995. Whilst the States Parties also agreed by consensus a backward-looking element of the final document, what the NPT community continues to engage with, contest, and

measure progress against are the forward-looking 13 Practical steps.

In a contemporaneous assessment, Harald Müller referred to the 2005 RevCon as “the biggest failure in the history of this Treaty”.<sup>23</sup> Among reasons cited for this failure include the tense international political environment, procedural issues stemming from the revised NPT review process, divides between NNWS seeking to expand on the 2000 “13 Steps” and a US delegation unwilling to treat that package as the baseline, and perceptions of weak follow-through on the 1995 resolution on the Middle East.<sup>24</sup> The Main Committees were unable to agree on any substantive text, giving drafters little to work with, and the conference was only able to agree on a technical report on its activities, with the Main Committee I/Subsidiary Body 1 non-consensus drafts attached.

The 2010 RevCon took place in a markedly mixed geopolitical environment, with positive signals from US-Russian arms control and President Obama’s Prague speech alongside ongoing concerns regarding the Iranian nuclear programme.<sup>25</sup> The conference achieved success, introducing a structural innovation in response to the challenge of achieving consensus.<sup>26</sup> The conference created a unique division between the review of the Treaty’s operations, which contained recognised areas of disagreement and was not technically a consensus document, and a separate consensus forward-looking action plan with 64 recommended actions covering all three pillars of the Treaty. The unique structure of the 2010 Final Document is significant because it broke with a convention that had constrained NPT parties for 35 years. Since 1975, States Parties had operated under the assumption that a RevCon should produce a single, unified consensus document or nothing at all. By separating the review section from the action plan, the 2010 conference showed that this procedural habit was one that States Parties could set aside when circumstances demanded it. The division made in 2010 is a precedent that could be adopted in future years.

20 “Resolution on the Middle East,” UNDIR, accessed February 18, 2026, [https://undir.org/files/2020-06/1995-05-11\\_1995%20NPT%20Review%20and%20Extension%20conference%20adopts%20the%20Resolution%20on%20the%20Middle%20East.pdf](https://undir.org/files/2020-06/1995-05-11_1995%20NPT%20Review%20and%20Extension%20conference%20adopts%20the%20Resolution%20on%20the%20Middle%20East.pdf)

21 Tariq Rauf, “An Unequivocal Success? Implications of the NPT Review Conference,” *Arms Control Association*, July/August 2000, <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2000-07/features/unequivocal-success-implications-npt-review-conference>

22 “NPT/CONF.2000/28 (Parts I and II),” Reaching Critical Will, accessed February 18, 2026, <https://www.reachingcriticalwill.org/images/documents/Disarmament-fora/npt/GENERAL-DOCS/2000FD.pdf>

23 Harald Müller, “The 2005 NPT Review Conference: Reasons and Consequences of Failure and Options for Repair,” *The Weapons of Mass Destruction Commission*, August 2005, <https://www.wmdcommission.org/files/No31.pdf>

24 Müller, “The 2005 NPT Review Conference,” Jayantha Dhanapala and Sergio Duarte, “Is There a Future for the NPT?,” *Arms Control Association*, July/August 2015, <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2015-07/features/there-future-npt>

25 Harald Müller, “The 2010 NPT Review Conference: Some Breathing Space Gained, But No Breakthrough,” *The International Spectator* 45, no.2 (2010).

26 “NPT/CONF.2010/50 (Vol. I),” Reaching Critical Will, accessed February 18, 2026, <https://www.reachingcriticalwill.org/images/documents/Disarmament-fora/npt/revcon2010/FinalDocument.pdf>

## 2015-2022

The 2015 RevCon closed without adopting a consensus Final Document. With none of the three Main Committees able to agree on consensus reports for incorporation, responsibility for producing an outcome moved to the President, and a consolidated draft only emerged on the final day of the conference.<sup>27</sup> Explanations for why this draft text failed vary. One has focused on elements of the draft centred on the implementation of the Resolution on the Middle East. An alternative position argues that, given widespread dissatisfaction with the draft text, even resolving the Middle East dispute may not have been sufficient to secure consensus.<sup>28</sup> Unable to reach a substantive agreement, the conference adopted a procedural report during its final plenary before the end of the RevCon.

The 2022 RevCon came remarkably close to adopting a consensus final document, although expectations in the lead-up to the meeting were markedly low. Despite disappointment that the draft text did not offer meaningful forward-looking disarmament steps, critical States Parties were prepared to accept the proposals as a route to reinforce the regime after more than a decade without a consensus document.<sup>29</sup> Consensus ultimately broke when the Russian delegation demanded last-minute changes to the language concerning nuclear safety at the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant. The conference nonetheless agreed on a modest procedural step by agreeing to establish a working group to strengthen the review cycle.<sup>30</sup> Whilst a modest step, the working group decision demonstrates that States Parties retained the agency to produce a formal output with institutional value even after the preferred outcome had collapsed.

## Variation in Outcome Formats Across NPT Review Conferences

The history of outcome documents highlights a recurring gap between what the Treaty legally mandates, what outcomes have emerged in practice, and what States Parties have come to expect as the norm. Over time, a strong expectation has consolidated around a particular outcome: a single, comprehensive final document adopted by consensus and composed of both a retrospective review and, since the 1995 Review and Extension Conference, a forward-looking programme.

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The historical record shows that, in practice, the NPT has repeatedly relied on flexible outcomes.

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These adaptations did not depart from the RevCons mandate; instead, they were routes to overcome the challenges of achieving one specific, significantly challenging benchmark of success.

27 Hassan Elbahtimy, "NPT Briefing Book (2022 Edition)," *Centre for Science and Security Studies, King's College London and James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies*, <https://nonproliferation.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/npt-briefing-book-2022.pdf>, 22.

28 Andrea Berger, "Gangs of New York the 2015 NPT Revcon," *ELN*, May 27, 2015, <https://europeanleadershipnetwork.org/commentary/gangs-of-new-york-the-2015-npt-revcon/>.

29 "Gabriela Rosa Hernández and Daryl G. Kimball, "Russia Blocks NPT Conference Consensus Over Ukraine," *Arms Control Association*, September 2022, <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2022-09/news/russia-blocks-npt-conference-consensus-over-ukraine>.

30 "Decision on the next review cycle: 2020 Review Conference of the Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons," United Nations Digital Library, accessed February 16, 2026, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3985558?v=pdf&ln=en>.

# Evaluating Consensus

**A consensus document, particularly one that is both backward and forward-looking, can carry significant political and procedural value.**

Nevertheless, it is a precarious diplomatic route to pursue at RevCons and is an imperfect indicator of progress in achieving NPT goals. A Final Document can be held hostage to a single issue or State Party, and, even when consensus is achieved, the concessions required can produce diluted language, which States Parties may then choose to ignore. This section weighs the advantages of a consensus final document against the shortcomings of this output as the main measure of success and the vulnerabilities associated with making it the exclusive focus of diplomatic efforts at RevCons.

## The Political and Practical Value of a Consensus Document

States Parties producing a consensus final document at the RevCon can support the NPT review process in several ways. A robust consensus final document carries the highest degree of formal legitimacy within NPT practice and remains the most politically authoritative outcome available at RevCons. In a period of heightened geopolitical tension, a consensus document would send a powerful signal that the NPT remains capable of producing collective political guidance despite strategic rivalry and disagreements among States Parties. A strong consensus text can also perform practical functions: demonstrate that all States Parties can endorse a shared assessment of the current review cycle, establish priorities for the next review cycle, and, where commitments are sufficiently specific, create accountability pressures by establishing benchmarks against which implementation can be assessed.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Robert Einhorn, "The 2020 NPT Review Conference Prepare for Plan B," *UNIDIR*, May 2023, <https://unidir.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/The-2020-NPT-Review-Conference-Prepare-for-Plan-B.pdf>, 3.

## The Gap between a Consensus Document and Genuine Consensus


States Parties producing a consensus final document at the RevCon does not necessarily indicate endorsement of all proposals in this output. States Parties may accept a document with aspects they are opposed to as a way to support the commonly accepted critical goal of the RevCon, while reserving the option to disregard certain elements of the text following the conference.<sup>32</sup> While States Parties hold differing positions on the implications of agreements in consensus documents, most states, particularly NWS, do not view them as legally binding agreements. Therefore, a consensus document can function as an (arguably important) political measure, but one that does not necessarily signal States Parties' willingness to support follow-on action following the RevCon.

## The Risks of a Weak Consensus Document

Language crafted with the goal of achieving consensus can be achieved through ignoring or removing contentious elements in the text. States Parties' failure to agree on a weak final document can lead to a particularly adverse outcome, a no-output conference without even substantive non-consensus language to provide direction for the next cycle.<sup>33</sup> Even when adopted by consensus, a watered-down final document can generate follow-on issues and exacerbate existing disputes among States Parties. First, a weak document can mean that the drivers of non-compliance or inaction remain unchanged, thereby doing little to stimulate progress towards NPT goals following the conference.

<sup>32</sup> Henrik Salander, "Reviewing a Review Conference: Can there ever be a successful NPT RevCon?," *ELN*, June 8, 2015, <https://europeanleadershipnetwork.org/commentary/reviewing-a-review-conference-can-there-ever-be-a-successful-npt-revcon/>

<sup>33</sup> Cesar Jaramillo, "NPT Review Conference: No outcome document better than a weak one," *The Bulletin*, June 3, 2015, <https://thebulletin.org/2015/06/npt-review-conference-no-outcome-document-better-than-a-weak-one/>



A robust consensus final document carries the highest degree of formal legitimacy within NPT practice and remains the most politically authoritative outcome available at RevCons.

Second, by sidestepping underlying disputes, a weak consensus document can act as a source of tension among NNWS States Parties concerned with issues overlooked in a weak final document, namely, the pace and scale of disarmament.

## The Costs of Solely Pursuing a Consensus Document

Pursuing consensus at RevCons can impose high costs by concentrating negotiating time on a single, all-or-nothing output.<sup>34</sup> Investing this time in pursuing consensus when there is a realistic pathway to success (particularly with a robust final document) could appear a justified risk. There are two issues with this position. First, the nature of consensus creates significant opportunities for a single State Party to block a final document up to the very last minute of the conference. Second, gauging the likelihood of States Parties achieving consensus is difficult to calculate in advance. Geopolitical contexts are imperfect indicators: the 2022 RevCon, seen as an unlikely venue for success, came close to achieving consensus; the 2005 RevCon, seen as an easy win, failed to achieve consensus.

## The Uneven Relationship Between Consensus and Progress

There is no clear relationship between a RevCon adopting a consensus final document and meaningful progress in NPT goals following the conference.<sup>35</sup> This relationship breaks down in two directions. First, when consensus is achieved, implementation depends on the political will of an often small number of States Parties. Moreover, progress in achieving these goals is often pursued in a wide range of bilateral and multilateral forums operating under their own institutional and geopolitical constraints. Alternatively, the absence of consensus has not necessarily prevented meaningful advances in NPT goals. Ideas developed in years of “failure” can provide the basis for progress in later review cycles or in forums outside the NPT review process.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>34</sup> Robert Einhorn, “The NPT Review Process: The Need for a More Productive Approach,” *Arms Control Association*, September 2016 <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2016-09/features/npt-review-process-need-more-productive-approach>

<sup>35</sup> Salander, “Reviewing a Review Conference.”

<sup>36</sup> Einhorn notes that proposals at the 1990 RevCon informed the later development of the IAEA Model Additional Protocol. Einhorn, “The 2020 NPT Review Conference Prepare for Plan B,” 3.

# Assessing the Options for the 2026 NPT Review Conference

**The 2026 RevCon should not be understood as presenting a binary outcome between a comprehensive consensus Final Document and a failed conference.**

The history of outcome documents at RevCons shows that the review process has never operated with a single model of success. States Parties have repeatedly relied on flexible arrangements, and there is not one alternative to a comprehensive consensus final document, but many options with varying benefits and issues associated with them. What follows maps and analyses the strengths and challenges associated with a selection of plausible outcomes at the RevCon.

## OPTION 1

### Traditional Consensus Final Document

*A comprehensive agreement adopted by consensus that a) reviews past implementation and b) sets out forward-looking commitments across the Treaty's three pillars.*

#### Strengths:

- A consensus document outcome is a highly public demonstration that States Parties remain committed to the objectives of the NPT. This signal can help sustain confidence in the Treaty, particularly in periods of geopolitical tension and lack of progress.
- Agreed outcome language can provide a shared point of reference for how States Parties understand and apply key Treaty provisions, past commitments, and current priority areas.
- An adequately specific, forward-looking consensus document can shape the trajectory of the next review cycle by establishing priorities following the conference.

#### Challenges:

- Under current geopolitical conditions, a consensus outcome will be exceptionally difficult to secure. The range of unresolved disputes among States Parties raises the likelihood that efforts to produce a comprehensive text could become hostage to highly contested issues or specific demands from a small number of States Parties.
- Negotiations focused on achieving a single all-or-nothing outcome can consume substantial diplomatic time and effort, limiting the possibility of success for narrow but actionable agreements.
- Even when consensus is achieved, the substantive quality of the outcome may be reduced by lowest-common-denominator language in which major disputes are left unaddressed, deferred, or obscured through vague language.

## OPTION 2

### Standalone Political Declaration

*A short, high-level declaration reaffirming commitment to the Treaty's core principles. More expansive forms of this output could include a reaffirmation of support for previous conference outcomes.*

#### Strengths:

- A standalone political declaration is generally more feasible than a detailed final document. By focusing on shared principles rather than issue-specific commitments, this outcome format narrows the negotiating agenda and lowers the threshold for agreement. In a difficult political environment, this could make consensus possible where a comprehensive final document would be likely to fail.
- Even a limited declaration may have real political value. A short consensus text reaffirming support for the Treaty could provide a political signal of States Parties' continued commitment, challenge the narrative that the conference "failed", and demonstrate that consensus remains possible on the core principles of the regime.

#### Challenges:

- A political declaration may be criticized as performative or symbolic – an attempt to preserve optics without generating substantive progress.
- If the declaration simply restates longstanding principles without accompanying forward-looking measures, the broad language in the declaration would be unlikely to generate progress on follow-up actions.
- A drafting process perceived as closed or unrepresentative may attract criticism over a lack of transparency and representation in the NPT review process, even if it is adopted by consensus.

## OPTION 3

### A Package Approach

*Alongside a political declaration, States Parties could agree to individual, isolated decisions on key issues e.g. transparency and accountability, forgoing consensus on the review of the Treaty's implementation.*

#### Strengths:

- By isolating issues, this approach allows States Parties to make progress on areas of genuine agreement without requiring consensus across all pillars simultaneously, reducing the risk that intractable disputes in one area derail the conference entirely.
- The flexible structure means the package can be adapted in real time to reflect the actual distribution of agreement within the conference, making it better suited to unpredictable negotiating dynamics than a single all-or-nothing document.
- Meaningful precedent exists within the NPT review process itself, most notably in 1995, lending this approach a degree of procedural legitimacy that entirely novel formats would lack.

#### Challenges:

- A fragmented outcome risks appearing disjointed or incoherent to outside observers, potentially undermining the political signal that a RevCon is intended to send about the health of the regime.
- Separating issues across multiple documents may implicitly establish a hierarchy of commitments, with some pillars or issues appearing marginalised relative to others.
- Coordinating a coherent package under the time pressure of a RevCon's final stages is logistically and diplomatically demanding, and the approach may be difficult to execute effectively without early planning and broad buy-in from key delegations.

## OPTION 4

### Recording Consensus/ Noting Disagreement (split structure)

*A two-part output that includes a) a consensus section (i.e., a short political declaration or limited set of recommendations); b) an annex/attachment/president's paper that records recommendations that did not achieve unanimity, potentially describing levels of support.*

#### Strengths:

- The outcome option could provide a flexible route to handle contentious issues, while simultaneously achieving consensus on a smaller set of action items.
- This format offers a way to acknowledge disagreement rather than erasing it through diluted language. In practical terms, this approach may also allow stronger recommendations to be recorded, even if not adopted by consensus.
- A recorded non-consensus section could be useful for follow-on diplomacy. Even where proposals do not achieve unanimity, documenting them could identify coalitions of support and signal where future progress may be possible.

#### Challenges:

- The viability of this model depends on securing a meaningful consensus core. If consensus cannot be reached on the first part of the output, the package loses much of its practical and political value, leading to a weaker overall outcome at the RevCon.
- Some delegations may also view the non-consensus section as a de facto "naming and shaming" mechanism, particularly if levels of support are described in a way that makes opposition highly visible. These procedural fights could themselves become a source of contention.

## OPTION 5

### Process-Focused Outcomes

*An agreement on mechanisms, procedures, working groups, and follow-up meetings rather than comprehensive substantive commitments.*

#### Strengths:

- Process-focused outcomes may be more adaptable to politically adverse conditions. By narrowing the scope of negotiations and concentrating on mechanisms rather than a comprehensive substantive agreement, this format could allow States Parties to generate momentum in selected areas where cooperation remains possible.
- Agreements on reporting, working groups, review-cycle format, or follow-on dialogues may strengthen institutional performance and create more structured opportunities for engagement between review conferences.

#### Challenges:

- Certain States Parties may object that process-centred outcomes privilege certain priorities while side-stepping substantive commitments in other pillars. This issue could be particularly divisive if Pillar I issues are neglected.
- Process-focused outcomes can be dismissed as "thin" if they are not tied to implementation. Their value depends heavily on follow-through measures; without them, these measures risk being seen as a way of deferring challenging issues.
- This option has a questionable historical precedent due to the ongoing failure to implement some elements of the package agreed at the 1995 Review and Extension Conference.

## OPTION 6

### Partial Consensus/Coalition Approach

*Groups of like-minded states agree on specific commitments without requiring universal consensus. This option could include multiple tracks for different issues with varying levels of state participation, and documents could note different levels of support for proposals.*

#### Strengths:

- A coalition-based approach can prevent one or a small number of delegations from vetoing all progress and may generate leadership groups capable of advancing practical initiatives.
- If negotiators know that broad support rather than universal support is sufficient, stronger language may be viable in the drafting process.
- A flexible architecture could permit differentiated engagement while still allowing initiatives to remain connected to the broader NPT framework. In some areas, coalition outputs may serve as a basis for later progress.

#### Challenges:

- Coalition-based outputs could be seen as undermining the NPT's character and review process culture by creating tiers of participation and commitment. Non-consensus-based commitments could, therefore, lack political legitimacy.
- Even if politically useful to participants, coalition approaches could shift energy away from shared institutional processes and, therefore, deepen perceptions of polarization within the NPT.
- Multiple overlapping initiatives with different memberships and standards could create a complex outcome, potentially complicating potential follow-on actions.

## OPTION 7

### No Outcome

*The conference fails to reach consensus, producing only a procedural/technical report on conference activities with no agreed recommendations for follow-on actions.*

#### Strengths:

- A no-outcome conference can function as an honest acknowledgment of genuine divisions. In some circumstances, this may be preferable to the adoption of a weak text that creates the appearance of unity while obscuring important divisions.
- A failed consensus process may create pressure for States Parties to explore alternative outcome formats in future review cycles and spur state activity between the RevCon and subsequent PrepComs.

#### Challenges:

- The absence of a substantive outcome would signal deep divisions within the NPT community and could erode confidence in the review process. Repeated failures may reinforce perceptions that the regime can survive legally but cannot function politically.
- This outcome could have effects beyond the NPT review process, weakening confidence in multilateral diplomacy more broadly.
- A no-outcome conference creates a continuity problem. Without agreed recommendations or action plans, there is no shared roadmap for follow-on work. Previous commitments may remain politically relevant, but their status could become increasingly contested as time passes since they were agreed upon.

# Preparing for Outcomes Beyond Consensus

## A consensus final document is often treated as the default measure of success at RevCons.<sup>37</sup>

While a comprehensive consensus final document remains valuable when attainable, treating one comprehensive consensus final document as the only acceptable endpoint at the 2026 RevCon is a high-risk strategy without a dependable basis for predetermining the likelihood of consensus.

As the above section demonstrates, while there are clearly more and less favourable options, each of the plausible outcome formats has merits. The strongest approach is, therefore, to pursue a consensus final document where it is realistically achievable – particularly where it carries genuine substantive or procedural value – while simultaneously preparing alternative pathways that can protect continuity, signal confidence in the Treaty, and structure work across the NPT's three pillars.

In practical terms, this approach at the 2026 RevCon means shifting from a framing of “consensus or failure”. Each of the options outlined above is, to a lesser or greater extent, a possible outcome option at the RevCon. However, as the history of RevCons demonstrates, historical contingency, as much as other factors, can play a role in determining the outcomes. Therefore, the favourability of each option is not wholly dependent on the strengths and challenges outlined above, but will also be shaped in real-time by the negotiating dynamics at the conference.

The call here is not for States Parties to abandon the pursuit of a comprehensive consensus final document, but to approach 2026 with the creativity and open-mindedness that the moment demands. That means arriving at the conference with a genuine willingness to consider the full spectrum of outcome options, to build the coalitions and prepare the draft texts necessary to pursue them, and to recognise that protecting the integrity and continuity of the review process is itself a form of success.

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**The Treaty has survived repeated moments of institutional strain because States Parties have, at critical junctures, found ways to move forward that neither the Treaty's text nor its established conventions explicitly anticipated.**

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The 2026 RevCon is another such juncture. What States Parties choose to do with it, and how creatively they exercise the agency that the review process affords them, will determine not only the outcome of a single conference, but the trajectory of the NPT for the review cycles that follow.

<sup>37</sup> “Is the NPT Still Viable? An Interview With Three Diplomats Working to Keep It Alive,” *Arms Control Association*, April 2025, <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2025-04/interviews/npt-still-viable-interview-three-diplomats-working-keep-it-alive>

# NPT Review Conference Outcome Document Formats

| Option  | Description  | Precedent   |
|---|--|---|
| <b>Full consensus final document</b>                  | Comprehensive agreement by all states parties covering both backward-looking review of past implementation and forward-looking action steps on all three pillars   | <b>1975</b><br><b>1985*</b><br><b>2000</b>  |
| <b>Split-structure consensus final document</b>       | Separate review section acknowledging disagreements (can be President's document) from consensus forward-looking action plan with concrete steps covering all pillars  | <b>2010</b><br>(Review as President's document + 64-point consensus Action Plan)<br><b>1985</b><br>(Contentious issues in separate Final Document from Final Declaration) |
| <b>Package approach – multiple separate documents</b> | Main consensus declaration on agreed issues plus separate documents for contentious matters (e.g., different pillars, regional issues, procedural matters). Could include documents with different levels of endorsement | <b>1995</b><br>(Package of 3 decisions + Middle East resolution without consensus review)   |
| <b>Process-focused outcomes</b>                       | Agreement on mechanisms, procedures, working groups, transparency measures, and follow-up meetings rather than comprehensive substantive commitments. Focus on “how” rather than “what”                                  | <b>Partial precedent in 1995</b><br>(Decision on Strengthening the Review Process)  |
| <b>No substantive outcome</b>                         | Conference fails to reach consensus, producing only a procedural/technical report on conference activities with no agreed recommendations for follow-on actions  | <b>1980</b><br><b>1990</b><br><b>2005</b><br><b>2015</b><br><b>2022</b>   |

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