



ARMS CONTROL NEGOTIATION ACADEMY

Success Beyond Final Documents:

Strategic Recommendations for the

2026 NPT Review Conference

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MEMORANDUM: SUCCESS BEYOND FINAL DOCUMENTS: STRATEGIC RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE 2026 NPT REVIEW CONFERENCE

Policy Memo

TO: Heads of Delegations of Member States to the NPT, President of the NPT Review Conference, Vice Presidents of the NPT Review Conference

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SUBJECT: Success Beyond Final Documents: Strategic Recommendations for the 2026 NPT Review Conference

Global tensions are surging with Russia's invasion of Ukraine, echoing the Cold War era's geopolitical instability and dangerous nuclear rhetoric. The impending 2026 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) Review Conference (RevCon) is a juncture for the nuclear non-proliferation regime demanding a reinvigoration of arms control and multilateral diplomacy amid the continuous erosion of crucial arms control instruments. Otherwise, the continued NPT RevCon failure could contribute to several major negative consequences: further erosion of arms control frameworks; expansion of geopolitical tensions; diminished confidence in multilateral diplomacy; increased risk of nuclear conflict; or nuclear proliferation.

The international environment during the 1980s NPT RevCons was strained and marked by the invasion of Afghanistan, the Iran-Iraq war, and setbacks in arms control negotiations. These lessons can inform the approach to achieving success in 2026, in a similarly strained geopolitical environment. The analysis of 1985 RevCon can help identify and recognize key success factors between the 1980s and today's geopolitical environment. This is particularly true when considering adept negotiation tactics and the strategic emphasis on incremental achievements to cultivate cooperation in the realm of future nuclear non-proliferation.

Recognizing the pivotal role of multilateral institutions is crucial, given the difficulty in achieving consensus on key issues in today's global politics. While NPT RevCon success is seemingly tied to the adoption of an outcome document achieved by consensus, the current dynamics make reaching it nearly impossible. This leads to states parties being accustomed to not achieving consensus and results in a stalemate with no further progress towards more effective arms control that has clear objectives, confidence and security building measures, and adaptability. This raises questions about the efficacy of the existing approach to the NPT negotiations, and further emphasizes the urgency of exploring alternative mechanisms to ensure the "success" of NPT RevCons and foster progress in nonproliferation, disarmament, and peaceful uses of nuclear energy, especially when consensus is apparently elusive.

Lessons from the Past

The 1980 RevCon was marked by unresolved issues and the absence of a final document. For instance, the Iran-Iraq war impacted negotiations as Iranians were ideologically unwilling to compromise in fear of displaying weakness of the new post-revolution regime. Additionally, the

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pursuit of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) faced obstacles, with delayed concessions contributing to the breakdown of consensus.

In the following 1985 RevCon, strategic compromises among nations became instrumental. Diplomatic mediation found solutions to stalemates such as the Iran-Iraq discord. State members condemned attacks on civilian nuclear infrastructure in the final declaration and attached Iran and Iraq's statements on the attacks to the final document separately. Intentional negotiation pertaining to the CTBT impasse resulted in *agreement to disagree*: the language acceptable to all parties in addressing the test ban reflected the disagreement by including the statement that, "The Conference, except for certain states..." regretted that the treaty had not been agreed upon.

The 1985 RevCon success is attributed to various factors. Despite several ongoing crises, the tensions between key actors - the United States (U.S.) and the Soviet Union (SU) - were waning, and their new leaders were more inclined to cooperate at the Conference. In general, the credibility of the NPT hinged on steering clear of consecutive failures and reaching consensus on a final declaration. As a result, member states arrived with a shared determination to secure an outcome document and refrained from directly attacking each other. The U.S. and the SU had a common interest in preserving a strong nonproliferation norm and both recognized that their cooperation would shape the RevCon structure and tone. Because of this common interest, the U.S. and the SU were able to compartmentalize NPT-related issues.

Although at a similarly extreme height of geopolitical tensions among all the key players, the upcoming 2026 conference will experience many differences. While the desire to have a consensus document prevailed in 1985, at the moment the two major powers do not share common views on arms control. The polarization between Russian and U.S. interests are eroding the arms control mechanisms that existed in the 1980s. It is unclear whether the NPT holds the same significance for Russia. Its recent actions, such as the weaponization of the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant, or threats to use nuclear weapons against a non-nuclear weapon state run counter to the aims of the NPT. This outright defiance of the NPT's underlying principles and norms impedes compartmentalization within the framework.

In 1985, states parties invented options for mutual gain to reach consensus and breaking the stalemate that had led to the failure of the 1980 RevCon. 1985 RevCon key lessons include *the ability to acknowledge dissenting voices* while maintaining majority support and emphasizing listening, consulting, and backroom negotiations to *foster deeper mutual understanding*. This approach allowed the conference to navigate disagreements without compromising the NPT. Applying this approach to the upcoming 2026 RevCon would provide for flexible negotiation principles allowing for a wider definition of a successful RevCon.

Considering Possible Outcome Scenarios

The success of RevCons extends beyond consensus: *a shared commitment to nonproliferation and negotiation strategies are pivotal*. This nuanced understanding of historical challenges sets the stage for policy considerations for a successful 2026 RevCon.

In reevaluating the approach to the zones of possible agreement within the context of the NPT, it becomes evident that historical emphasis on achieving a consensus document may *limit* the scope

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of the success metrics. Perhaps the most optimal outcome lies not in a document adopted by consensus, but in a commitment to transform critical issues into actionable items and an opportunity to deliberate on these matters further.

Bearing the aforementioned in mind, the traditional “pass/fail” evaluation paradigm should be challenged. The following outlines a spectrum of 2026 RevCon outcomes that encourage flexibility in defining success:

<p>Course of Action (COA) #1: Least Favorable Outcome</p>	<p>No consensus on a weakly-phrased final document</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Potential erosion of the NPT, diminished confidence in multilateral diplomacy, increased risk of nuclear conflict, and nuclear proliferation
<p>COA #2: Lesser Favorable Outcome</p>	<p>An agreement by consensus on a weakly-phrased final document on basic issues such as reaffirmation of general principles, but failure to address key points of contention or detailed differences among state parties</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The document may lack specificity and may not provide a clear path forward on critical aspects, leaving major issues unaddressed and potentially causing frustration among participants and eroding trust in multilateral diplomacy
<p>COA #3: Neutral Favorable Outcome</p>	<p>An actionable strongly-phrased draft document that is not adopted by consensus. Parties agree to present negotiation outcomes, capturing differing views in an Information Circular</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Separate from the outcome document, the Circular allows an informal method to set direction for further negotiations, outline disagreements and issues that can be further agreed upon at different fora or bilaterally, and potentially specify quantifications of supporters and opposers if necessary
<p>COA #4: More Favorable Outcome</p>	<p>A strongly-phrased actionable outcome document adopted by consensus capturing agreements and disagreements</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It captures diverse perspectives, fostering an understanding of challenges and opportunities within the non-proliferation landscape
<p>COA #5: Most Favorable Outcome</p>	<p>A strongly-phrased unanimously agreed on (no disagreements) outcome document adopted by consensus</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The document addresses issues relevant for preservation and forward-looking development of the nonproliferation regime, includes strong language and actionable items, and fosters transparency, equality, and inclusivity

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The optimal course of action, in the absence of a consensus on a substantial draft document, aiming to uphold and fortify the NPT regime, would involve creating an Information Circular. This document, characterized by its non-binding and informational nature, would explicitly detail points of agreement and disagreement. Its publication would not necessitate a vote due to its purely informative purpose. Simultaneously, it would provide a trajectory for subsequent negotiations, address current issues, and create avenues for bilateral or multilateral exploration of specific aspects in alternative formats.

Charting the Course for a Successful 2026 Review Conference

Redefining success allows states parties to view RevCons as dynamic, systematic endeavors that contribute to the continuous growth and development of global non-proliferation efforts. *The outcome declaration, whether or not adopted by consensus, should systematically codify both points of convergence and divergent views among state parties* in case the negotiation comes to a stalemate. Inclusion of differences is essential for enhancing the transparency and comprehensiveness of the review process.

By utilizing *strong* (rather than diluted) *language*, the document ensures meaningful discussions fostering non-proliferation, disarmament, and peaceful uses of nuclear energy. A clear and detailed codification of differences serves as a valuable resource for policymakers, researchers, and stakeholders, enabling a more thorough examination of the complex dynamics shaping the global nuclear non-proliferation landscape *without sacrificing the integrity of the discussions through watered down language*.

Approaching the 2026 RevCon, the following *flexible* negotiation principles should be kept in mind:

Separate people from the problem. Understanding that individual diplomats represent state positions, which cannot be easily changed, rather than just their personal views is key. On the one hand, judging from the 1980s experience, personalities can deeply influence the process and outcome of the negotiation. On the other hand, while personal contacts and trust are helpful, they frequently cannot fully change policies.

Focus on Interests Not Positions. Each position in the negotiation carries the weight of geopolitical considerations and national interests. By directing attention towards underlying motivations, negotiations can tap into shared concerns. Conference participants can achieve better results. Sustaining ongoing dialogues across various levels with a broad spectrum of countries, especially among the states holding opposing positions can be helpful to understand the complexities and diversities of perspectives involved, encouraging collaborative problem-solving that aligns with the broader interests of the international community.

Invent Options for Mutual Gain. It is most important to emphasize that preserving the NPT and the dialogue is in the common security and development interest. Therefore, the NPT members have to make RevCons meaningful for mutual gain, which entails avoiding diluted language, talking substance even if it means just pinpointing the divergence in positions, and maintaining principles of equality.

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Insist on Using Objective Criteria. Such an approach is helpful in settling differences of interest that involve high costs. The objective framework to guide the RevCon negotiation should include the NPT itself, relevant IAEA documents, the UN Charter, ICJ decisions, and other applicable international norms. At the same time, it is important to admit that there exist limitations in applying international instruments as they themselves are subject to interpretation and bear no enforcement mechanisms.

Conclusion

In redefining success for the upcoming 2026 RevCon, it is paramount to embrace flexible negotiation principles that embody the evolving nature of global non-proliferation efforts. A key tenet is the *systematic reflection of both convergent and divergent viewpoints among state parties within the proposed outcome document* in case of a stalemate. As previously mentioned, a substantive and resolute approach, rather than a diluted consensus document, is the true benchmark of success. A separately drafted Information Circular drafted that captures the different views of the parties could set the direction for further negotiations. as seen in an Information Circular. Inclusion of differences enhances transparency and comprehensiveness, providing a valuable resource for policymakers, researchers, and stakeholders. By clearly articulating the intended progress as well as disagreements *without dilution*, the document becomes a foundation for constructive engagement and future dialogue while maintaining confidence in multilateral diplomacy and institutions. Approaching the 2026 negotiations, it is crucial to shift the focus from consensus, but to maintain strong language, engage in preparatory dialogues, understand positions and discuss differences, agree to disagree, and ensure knowledge transfer. By inventing options for mutual gain, understanding the distinction between individuals and state positions, focusing on issues that align with shared concerns, and insisting on objective criteria rooted in international norms, **the RevCon process can foster substantive progress that serves the common security and development interests of the international community.**

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