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RESEARCH ARTICLE

# A subtle call to greatness: Unipolarity, US foreign policy, and the indefinite extension of the NPT

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**Abstract**
In this article, we analyse the implications of the end of the Cold War for US non-proliferation policy and the non-proliferation regime. Contrary to widely held expectations, we show that the end of bipolarity did not undercut the pursuit of non-proliferation but supercharge it. While bipolarity had afforded non-proliferation hold-outs opportunities to evade superpower pressure, the structural condition of unipolarity both incentivised and enabled the United States to pursue a more robust non-proliferation policy than before. Against the view that contemporary unipolar power is severely circumscribed by the need to make compromises and adhere to social norms, unipolarity allowed the United States to entrench a regime that was widely considered unjust. We support this argument with an analysis of non-proliferation dynamics in the early 1990s, focusing in particular on the process that culminated with the indefinite extension of the Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT) in 1995.

**Keywords:** diplomacy; institutions; non-proliferation; unipolarity; US foreign policy

## Introduction

The claim that the post–Cold War international system was unipolar for at least two decades following the collapse of the Soviet Union is no longer debated.[1] Some scholars contend that unipolarity has now definitely ended; others, that it is coming to an end; and still others, that it endures.[2] But no one of whom we are aware still maintains that the world was not unipolar at least during the last decade of the 20th century and the first of the 21st. Twenty years is a long enough time to analyse unipolarity as a distinct system, rather than a 'blip' or interregnum.

What is significantly less clear is what the unipole, the United States, has been able to do with its preponderance. Most obviously, Washington has been unable to parlay its overwhelming superiority in military power into a global *Pax Americana* along the lines of the Roman equivalent 2,000 years ago, in part because several states that would oppose this possess invulnerable nuclear arsenals. But even at less ambitious levels, it is hard to think of policies or actions the United States

[1]Structural realists such as Kenneth Waltz, Christopher Layne, and John Mearsheimer all predicted, soon after the Cold War ended, that the world would quickly revert to multipolarity. Waltz did not really retreat on this point before his death in 2013, but both Layne and Mearsheimer have done so. See Layne, 'This time it's real: The end of unipolarity and the *Pax Americana*', *International Studies Quarterly*, 56:1 (2012), pp. 203–13; and Mearsheimer, 'Bound to fail: The rise and fall of the liberal international order', *International Security*, 43:4 (2019), pp. 7–50.

[2]Mearsheimer, 'Bound to fail'; Stephen Brooks and William Wohlforth, 'The myth of multipolarity: American power's staying power', *Foreign Affairs*, 102:3 (2023), pp. 76–91. See also Eliza Gheorghe, 'Proliferation and the logic of the nuclear market', *International Security*, 43:4 (2019), pp. 88–127.

has successfully undertaken that clearly have resulted from its unipolar preponderance – policies or actions that could not have been executed absent unipolarity. In a recent essay, Stephen Brooks and William Wohlforth make a powerful case that the world remains unipolar.[3] Yet the two scholars have little to say about the effects of unipolarity upon specific American behaviour. If anything, Brooks and Wohlforth argue that many of the poor decisions made by the US government after the end of the Cold War had nothing to do with the structure of the international system.

Inattention to the effects (or lack thereof) of unipolarity is particularly evident in the literature on institutions; scholars working on international regimes and norms have shown relatively little interest in questions of the international distribution of power.[4] In fact, of the small number of scholars who have commented on the relationship between institutions and structure, leading voices have disputed the common-sense notion that unipolar powers should be able to dominate international regimes, arguing instead that unipoles are particularly vulnerable to multilateral constraints and soft balancing.[5] Others have made the case that the United States has failed to effectively exploit institutions for its own purposes, thus throwing into question the salience of unipolarity altogether.[6]

In this article, we show how the United States seized control over one of the world's most important international institutions: the nuclear non-proliferation regime. In 1995, at the Review and Extension Conference of the Treaty on the Non-proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), the US delegation successfully outmanoeuvred a large majority of the world's states to secure the indefinite and unconditional extension of the NPT – a feat that had been beyond the combined diplomatic power of the Cold War superpowers during the original NPT negotiations. Those eager to use the conference as an opportunity to advance the cause of nuclear disarmament, that is, to make the extension of the treaty conditional on progress toward global nuclear zero, were decisively defeated.

Why did the United States wish to see an indefinite extension? Many scholars believe that this was due to its genuine belief that non-proliferation was a clear international public good – that the world is better off when states are prevented from acquiring nuclear weapons.[7] But if this was so, why didn't Washington accept the majority's demand that the existing nuclear powers recommit to pursuing disarmament? This would have been an easy and effective way to secure extension and bolster the legitimacy of the non-proliferation regime. Instead, the United States and several of its allies engaged in diplomatic arm-twisting and divide-and-rule tactics to entrench an objectively discriminatory regime.

In a nuclear age, a unipolar power faces one overriding obstacle to its preponderance: the possession of nuclear weapons by its adversaries.[8] Thus the unipole has a powerful *motive* to prevent the spread of nuclear arms. After all, the more states that acquire such weapons, the less power the unipole is able to wield. This, not a genuine belief in the cause of non-proliferation per se, explains why the United States acted so decisively in 1995, and why it rejected calls for a firmer commitment to disarmament. In any age, a unipolar power also possesses the *opportunity* to exercise diplomatic domination. While major powers in bi- and multipolar systems are obliged constantly to

[3]Brooks and Wohlforth, 'The myth of multipolarity'.

[4]See, e.g., Richard Price, 'Reversing the gun sights: Transnational civil society targets landmines', *International Organization*, 52:3 (1998), pp. 613–44; Maria R. Rublee, *Nonproliferation Norms: Why States Choose Nuclear Restraint* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2009); Rebecca D. Gibbons, *The Hegemon's Tool Kit* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2022); and Alexander Cooley and Daniel Nexon, *Exit from Hegemony: The Unraveling of the American Global Order* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020). In our view, Cooley and Nexon provide a powerfully argued case for the collapse of US hegemony and its corresponding domination of international institutions, but they do not foreground the structural effect of unipolarity upon this process.

[5]Martha Finnemore, 'Legitimacy, hypocrisy, and the social structure of unipolarity', *World Politics*, 61:1 (2009), pp. 58–85.

[6]See Jeffrey Legro, 'The mix that makes unipolarity: Hegemonic purpose and international constraints', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 24:2 (2011), pp. 185–99.

[7]Gibbons, *The Hegemon's Tool Kit*.

[8]Alexandre Debs and Nuno P. Monteiro, *Nuclear Politics: The Strategic Causes of Proliferation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022); Nuno P. Monteiro, *Theory of Unipolar Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Gheorghe, 'Proliferation and the logic of the nuclear market'.

consider the effects of their actions on the overall balance of power, unipolar powers are free to apply full-court pressure. Under unipolarity, allies and partners that under different distributions of power would have been given an easy ride on certain issues due to their usefulness in a broader struggle can be subjected to disciplining actions; states formerly under the protection of a rival lose their diplomatic cover and thus become exposed; and erstwhile fence-sitters can no longer threaten defection to a rival power bloc to evade superpower pressures. They just have to take it, as the opponents of the indefinite and unconditional extension did in 1995.

The article proceeds as follows. In the first part, we discuss how the end of the Cold War and onset of unipolarity led the United States to attach significantly higher importance to nuclear non-proliferation than it had during the Cold War. In the second part, we briefly discuss how, contrary to the predictions of many scholars, the end of the Cold War fostered a golden age for proponents of nuclear non-proliferation. In the third and main part, we turn our attention to the 1995 NPT Review and Extension Conference to show how unipolarity played out in an institutional setting. In conclusion, we discuss how our findings speak to theoretical work on both unipolarity and institutions, how they are relevant to contemporary policy, and how the cause of non-proliferation is connected to renewed demands for nuclear disarmament.

We take issue with two commonly held views in security studies. First, we reject the claim that bipolarity offers more fertile grounds for non-proliferation enforcement than do alternative balances of power.[9] Second, we contest the suggestion that contemporary unipolar power is either irrelevant to institutional politics or severely circumscribed by the dominant power's vulnerability to accusations of hypocrisy and resultant need to make compromises and adhere to social norms.[10] Our article adds a structural layer to the discussion about how and why proliferation emerged as a defining problem in the study and practice of security policy after the end of the Cold War.[11]

## The onset of unipolarity, nuclear weapons, and the United States

The end of the Cold War yielded vastly different predictions about the future of nuclear weapons. For many, it provided an obvious invitation to move decisively towards nuclear disarmament. 'It was reasonable', Jonathan Schell maintained, 'to imagine that the end of the struggle in whose name nuclear weapons had been built would lead to their end.'[12] Others remained deeply sceptical about both the feasibility and desirability of denuclearisation. Influential observers predicted that the world was about to experience a major wave of nuclear proliferation.[13] Some went so far as to argue that the spread of nuclear weapons would be a prudent policy.[14] There were serious questions about

[9]See Robert Jervis, 'Unipolarity: A structural perspective', *World Politics*, 61:1 (2009), pp. 188–213 (p. 212); Benjamin Frankel, 'The brooding shadow: Systemic incentives and nuclear weapons proliferation', *Security Studies*, 2:3–4 (1993), pp. 37–78 (p. 37); Birthe Hansen, *Unipolarity and World Politics* (London: Routledge, 2011), pp. 74–6; Nuno P. Monteiro, 'Unrest assured: Why unipolarity is not peaceful', *International Security*, 36:3 (2011/12), pp. 9–40. For an opposing view, see Gheorghe, 'Proliferation and the logic of the nuclear market', p. 89.

[10]See, e.g., Charles L. Glaser, 'Why unipolarity doesn't matter (much)', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 24:2 (2011), pp. 135–47; Finnemore, 'Legitimacy, hypocricy, and the social structure of unipolarity'; Austin J. Knuppe, 'Handcuffing the hegemon: The paradox of state power under unipolarity', *International Politics Reviews*, 2:2 (2014), pp. 61–71.

[11]David Mutimer, *The Weapons State: Proliferation and the Framing of Security* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1999); Campbell Craig and Jan Ruzicka, 'The nonproliferation complex', *Ethics & International Affairs*, 27:3 (2013), pp. 329–48; Benoît Pelopidas, Hebatalla Taha, and Tom Vaughan, 'How dawn turned into dusk: Scoping and closing possible nuclear futures after the end of the Cold War', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, (2024).available at: {https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2023.2290441}.

[12]Jonathan Schell, *The Fate of the Earth and the Abolition* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), p. ix. See also Kjølv Egeland, *The Struggle for Abolition: Power and Legitimacy in Multilateral Nuclear Disarmament Diplomacy* (London: Routledge, 2024).

[13]John J. Mearsheimer, 'Disorder restored', in Graham Allison and Gregory F. Treverton (eds), *Rethinking America's Security: Beyond Cold War to New World Order* (New York, NY: Norton, 1992), pp. 213–36 (p. 225); Keith B. Payne, *Deterrence in the Second Nuclear Age* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1996), p. 13.

[14]Waltz, 'Nuclear myths and politics realities', *American Political Science Review*, 84:3 (1990), pp. 731–45; John J. Mearsheimer, 'Back to the future: Instability in Europe after the Cold War', *International Security*, 15:1 (1990), pp. 5–56 (p. 37).

the 'continued existence' of the NPT.[15] But, as it turned out, the post–Cold War period saw both the rejection of disarmament by the nuclear powers and a near-universal embrace of non-proliferation by the rest. The advent of unipolarity led neither to nuclear abolition nor to proliferation chaos. Instead, the most significant developments were the entrenchment and strengthening of the non-proliferation regime.

'The immediate post-Cold War world is not multipolar. It is unipolar', wrote Charles Krauthammer in an influential *Foreign Affairs* article published in 1990. It was indisputable, he maintained, that the United States, attended by its Western allies, was now the global hegemon.[16] Yet the emergence of American preponderance did not imply that the United States and its allies were invulnerable. In fact, Krauthammer suggested, the post–Cold War period might be better described as 'the era of weapons of mass destruction' (WMD). Their proliferation would 'constitute the greatest single threat to world security for the rest of our lives. That is what makes a new international order not an imperial dream or Wilsonian fantasy but a matter of the sheerest prudence.'[17] In this view, the alternative to unipolarity was not 'a stable, static multipolar world' but 'chaos', a world in which 'Weapon States' could evade the rules of world order and threaten the United States and its partners with devastating weapons. 'Compared with the task of defeating fascism and communism', Krauthammer concluded, 'averting chaos is a rather subtle call to greatness.' It was not 'a task we are any more eager to undertake than the great twilight struggle just concluded. But it is just as noble and just as necessary.'[18]

Krauthammer was far from alone in identifying proliferation as a central threat to US national security as the Cold War began to thaw. In early 1987, in the context of the Reagan administration's achievement of 'a dramatic easing of tensions [with the Soviet Union] on remarkably favorable terms,'[19] US Secretary of State George Shultz received a policy-planning memorandum warning of disturbing global trends. The proliferation of nuclear weapons and sophisticated missiles to 'medium-sized and even smaller states', it cautioned, could 'diminish the individual superpowers' ability to influence world events'.[20] As the Cold War wound down, the United States grew progressively more concerned with the diffusion of WMD and missiles than its capacity to handle the ailing Soviet Union. Washington had picked up the unipolar moment's subtle call to greatness.

Non-proliferation had been an important policy goal for the US government since the 1960s. That said, non-proliferation had clearly been subordinate to the far more important goal of containing Moscow.[21] For example, the imperative of balancing against the Soviet Union in Asia had led the United States to turn a blind eye to the nuclear weapons programme of Pakistan – an important ally in the struggle against Soviet aggression in Afghanistan.[22] Multiple proliferators and proliferation suspects, including Argentina, Brazil, Chile, India, Iran, Israel, and South Africa,[23] had for long periods been able to maintain good or at any rate workable relations with the US government due to their perceived roles in halting the spread of world communism. As late as 1989, prominent

[15]Jennifer Scarlott, 'Nuclear proliferation after the Cold War', *World Policy Journal*, 8:4 (1991), pp. 687–710 (p. 687).

[16]Charles Krauthammer, 'The unipolar moment', *Foreign Affairs*, 70:1 (1990/1), pp. 23–33 (p. 23).

[17]Krauthammer, 'The unipolar moment', pp. 31–2.

[18]Krauthammer, 'The unipolar moment', p. 33.

[19]Hal Brands, *Making the Unipolar Moment: U.S. Foreign Policy and the Rise of the Post-Cold War Order* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2016), p. 7.

[20]Office of the Historian, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1981–1988, Volume I, Foundations of Foreign Policy*, 'Information Memorandum From the Director of the Policy Planning Staff (Solomon) to Secretary of State Shultz', Washington (28 March 1987).

[21]See Or Rabinowitz and Nicholas L. Miller, 'Keeping the bombs in the basement: U.S nonproliferation policy toward Israel, South Africa, and Pakistan', *International Security*, 40:1 (2015), pp. 47–86; Or Rabinowitz, *Bargaining on Nuclear Tests: Washington and Its Cold War Deals* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

[22]Brands, *Making the Unipolar Moment,* p. 115.

[23]National Intelligence Estimate, July 1982, NIE-4-82, 'Nuclear Proliferation Trends Through 1987', Wilson Center Digital Archive (23 April 2013), available at: {https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/national-intelligence-estimate-nie-4-82-nuclear-proliferation-trends-through-1987}.

nuclear experts voiced sharp criticisms of the US government's apparent laxity vis-à-vis the proliferation problem.[24] However, as suggested by the 1987 memorandum referred to above, things were beginning to change. The process of change became evident to the outside world *inter alia* through the creation of the Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR) in the summer of 1987. Championed by the United States and launched through the G7, the purpose of the MTCR was and remains to curb the spread of nuclear-capable missiles, specifically means of delivery with the capacity to carry a heavy payload over 300 kilometres or more. Back in the 1960s, when the balance of power had been less in the West's favour, Washington had in fact provided allies such as Germany, Italy, and Turkey with precisely such missiles as part of its broader strategy of containing the Soviet Union. Several other allies had received nuclear-capable missile systems with somewhat shorter operational ranges, often free of charge.[25]

The creation of the MTCR in 1987 was followed by other US-sponsored non-proliferation initiatives such as the adoption of non-proliferation language at the UN Security Council in 1992, 1998, 2001, and 2004 (the 1992 statement being the first affirmation of proliferation as a threat to international peace and security as defined under the UN Charter); the 1996 adoption of the Wassenaar Arrangement regulating trade in dual-use goods; the 1997 approval of an Additional Protocol to the International Atomic Energy Agency's comprehensive nuclear safeguards agreement; the 1999 establishment of a WMD Nonproliferation Center at NATO headquarters in Brussels; the 2003 establishment of the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI) to facilitate interdiction of proliferation suspects at sea; the 2009 establishment of the Global Initiative to Combat Nuclear Terrorism; and the 2010–16 Nuclear Security Summit process. On the domestic front, four interagency working groups were created within the US executive over the course of the 1990s to deal with the spread of missiles, nuclear weapons, and other WMD. In 2003, Iraq was invaded under the justification that Saddam Hussein's regime had or was about to acquire WMD. Denying proliferation was at the heart of US foreign policy.

The Reagan administration's *National Security Strategy*, a document developed over the course of 1986, paid hardly any attention to nuclear proliferation. The Soviet Union occupied 9 of the 11 operative paragraphs in the key section on 'Principal Threats to U.S. Interests'. The 'proliferation of nuclear weapons' appeared only in the final paragraph, alongside threats such as 'trade imbalances', 'drug trafficking', and 'human rights violations'.[26] Altogether, the 41-page document mentioned the 'spread' or 'proliferation' of nuclear weapons or other WMD a total of three times. By contrast, the 34-page *National Security Strategy* released by the Bush administration in August 1991 mentioned proliferation and the spread of nuclear or other WMD as many as 31 times, devoting an entire section to the topic.[27] Finding itself 'standing alone at the height of power', the Bush administration saw it as crucial to maintain the United States' dominant position.[28] This necessitated an increased emphasis on nuclear non-proliferation, an approach that carried over into the Clinton era and beyond.[29]

The increasing salience in Washington of the proliferation issue was also reflected in the make-up of the US delegations to the review conferences of the NPT. Throughout the Cold War, NPT review conferences had been relatively low-key affairs, providing a regular stage for the non-nuclear-weapon states to air out familiar complaints about lacking progress towards disarmament

[24]Gerard C. Smith and Helena Cobban, 'A blind eye to nuclear proliferation', *Foreign Affairs*, 68:3 (1989), pp. 53–70; William Lanouette, 'Expectations for nonproliferation', *The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 45:9 (1989), p. 7.

[25]Rénald Fortier, 'It might not have changed history but would certainly have changed the geography', *Ingenium* (10 July 2022), available at: {https://ingeniumcanada.org/channel/articles/it-might-not-have-changed-history-but-would-certainly-have-changed-the-geography-a}.

[26]The White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States* (January 1987), p. 7.

[27]The White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States* (August 1991).

[28]Bush and Scowcroft, *A World Transformed*, p. 564.

[29]The White House, *A National Security Strategy of Engagement and Enlargement* (July 1994).

and insufficient access to civilian nuclear technologies.[30] The US delegations to the review conferences in 1975, 1980, and 1985 were all quite modest. Each was headed by the then-director of the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency (13th in the US government's order of precedence) and made up of 12, 19, and 25 individuals, respectively. By contrast, the US delegations to the conferences in 1995 and 2000 – the first two conferences after the end of the Cold War – were made up of 58 and 34 individuals, respectively. The 1995 delegation was led by US Vice President Al Gore (2nd in the US order of precedence) and included additional governmental heavyweights such as the then-secretary of state, Warren Christopher, and the then-permanent representative to the United Nations, Madeleine Albright (3rd and 4th in the order of precedence, respectively). The delegation sent to the conference in 2000 was led by Albright, now secretary of state, and included the United States' then-permanent representative to the United Nations, Richard Holbrooke, and the then-US secretary of energy, Bill Richardson (9th in the order of precedence).

The onset of American power preponderance and the shift to unipolarity coincided with the elevation of non-proliferation in the hierarchy of US foreign policy priorities. Non-proliferation went from being an important but secondary interest to one of the United States' key strategic aims. The next section shows how unipolarity affected the cause of nuclear non-proliferation globally. The discussion serves as a pattern-matching exercise for the argument developed in the section on the 1995 NPT review and extension conference, namely that the structural condition of unipolarity lent itself to the entrenchment of a nuclear non-proliferation regime in America's image.

## The Non-proliferation Treaty regime after the end of the Cold War

Well over 100 states, including critical players such as Australia, Canada, Indonesia, Italy, Japan, Sweden, Switzerland, and East and West Germany, had joined the NPT within a dozen years of the treaty's 1968 adoption. However, after the initial wave of ratifications, the universalisation process began to slow. The final decade of the Cold War (1980–9) saw only 28 new members join the agreement. Of these, just two had ever been suspected of harbouring any interest at all in acquiring nuclear arms (Egypt and Spain).[31] A significant number of states continued to oppose the treaty. Many of these were influential regional powers that for reasons of security, principle, or both refused to join the non-proliferation regime.

The shift from bipolarity to unipolarity generated new incentives and created greater pressure on states to adhere to the NPT. As many as 51 states joined in the 1990s, the vast majority of them prior to the treaty's indefinite extension in 1995. Two were major, nuclear-armed great powers formally recognised by the treaty as 'nuclear-weapon states' (China and France). At least four of the newcomers had previously been suspected of proliferation intent (Algeria, Argentina, Brazil, and Chile), three had given up nuclear weapons inherited from the former Soviet Union (Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Ukraine), and one had voluntarily dismantled its own nuclear arsenal (South Africa).[32] While a number of the states that joined the NPT during the 1990s were newly independent as a result of the disintegration of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia, the fact that they quickly joined the NPT is a testament to the non-proliferation regime's increasing salience in the new world order.[33]

[30]Bruce Unger, 'The Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty Review Conference: An unsuccessful attempt stem the tide', *World Affairs*, 139:2 (1976), pp. 87–111 (p. 87). For similar assessments of the 1980 and 1985 review conferences, see, respectively, John Simpson, 'Global nonproliferation policies: Retrospect and prospect', *Review of International Studies*, 8:2 (1982), pp. 69–82; William C. Potter, 'Nuclear proliferation: U.S.–Soviet cooperation', *Washington Quarterly*, 8:1 (1985), pp. 141–54.

[31]Sverre Lodgaard, *Nuclear Disarmament and Nonproliferation: Towards a Nuclear-Weapon-Free World?* (London: Routledge, 2010), p. 118.

[32]Lodgaard, *Nuclear Disarmament and Nonproliferation*, p. 118.

[33]Mariana Budjeryn, 'The power of the NPT: International norms and Ukraine's nuclear disarmament', *Nonproliferation Review*, 22:2 (2015), pp. 203–37; Mariana Budjeryn, *Inheriting the Bomb: The Collapse of the USSR and the Nuclear Disarmament of Ukraine* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2022).

The pressures were keenly felt well beyond the countries that needed to establish their nascent claims to international sovereignty. After decades of opposition to and disdain for the NPT, China and France both joined in 1992. For China, the decision reflected a desire to counter the 'China threat theory' and reassure the international community 'that it would conform to internationally accepted standards of behaviour'.[34] US officials pressured Beijing directly, sanctioning China over sensitive technology transfers to Pakistan and Iran while making nuclear cooperation with China conditional upon Chinese accession to the NPT.[35] Chinese policymakers eventually felt obliged to genuflect to the hegemon. In the French case, opposition to the NPT had long been anchored in French leaders' pursuit of 'independent' foreign and defence policies. In the unipolar world, however, staying outside of the treaty had 'lost its usefulness as a symbol of France's political independence'.[36]

Commenting on Argentina's acceptance of the NPT in 1995, Julio Carasales, one of the country's most seasoned diplomats, commented that it came as a result of the 'demise of the blocs and emergence of only one dominant power', the strengthening of the NPT as a 'mandatory' norm championed 'by the dominant world power', and of the 'strong pressure' placed on Argentina by the US government.[37] All three of these reasons were firmly grounded in the structural condition of American unipolarity. Argentina's neighbours, Chile and Brazil, felt exposed to similar forces and duly joined the NPT in 1995 and 1998, respectively. The case of Brazil is particularly telling because of the country's long-established and frequently voiced rejection of the NPT as unjust and discriminatory.[38] By the time Brazil signed up to the NPT in 1998, these features of the treaty were, as we demonstrate in this article, more pronounced than ever – largely as a result of the indefinite extension. Brazil was among the last five NPT hold-outs (along with Cuba, India, Israel, and Pakistan). Its accession to the NPT is typically presented as a linear extension of Brazil's nuclear cooperation with Argentina and 'based on the understanding that measures would be taken to eliminate nuclear weapons in the arsenals of nuclear weapon states'.[39] However, the unipolar condition and US pressure offer a stronger explanation. In the words of the preeminent historian of Brazil's engagement with the global nuclear order, it was above all 'international pressure' and the promise of 'a deeper relationship with the United States' that pushed the Brazilian government to finally join.[40] According to a senior Brazilian official, Brasilia's decision to reverse stance vis-à-vis the non-proliferation regime was profoundly shaped by the structure of the international system. Unipolarity invited a 'rapprochement with the order that had won'. In this view, the 'parameters of the Cold War that had afforded some room for maneuver to countries like ours had vanished'.[41]

Besides India, Israel, and Pakistan, which were able to shun the non-proliferation norm in part thanks to their own nuclear arsenals, only four states mounted significant challenges (of various degrees) to the non-proliferation regime by the late 1990s – Iran, Iraq, Libya, and North Korea. Of these, Iraq would eventually be invaded on the grounds of enforcing the non-proliferation norm. Libya was stripped of its rudimentary nuclear weapons programme through a US-led campaign of

[34]Nicola Horsburgh, *China and Global Nuclear Order* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 111.

[35]Evan Medeiros, *Reluctant Restraint: The Evolution of China's Nonproliferation Policies and Practices, 1980–2004* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007).

[36]Alan Riding, 'France will sign 1968 nuclear pact', *New York Times* (4 June 1991), available at: {https://www.nytimes.com/1991/06/04/world/france-will-sign-1968-nuclear-pact.html}.

[37]Julio C. Carasales, 'A surprising about-face: Argentina and the NPT', *Security Dialogue*, 27:3 (1996), pp. 325–35 (pp. 330–1).

[38]Michael Anthony Barletta, 'Ambiguity, Autonomy, and the Atom: Emergence of the Argentine–Brazilian Nuclear Regime', PhD diss., University of Wisconsin-Madison (2000), pp. 111–17.

[39]Diego Santos Vieira de Jesus, 'The Brazilian way', *Nonproliferation Review*, 17:3 (2010), pp. 551–67 (p. 555).

[40]Carlo Patti, *Brazil in the Global Nuclear Order, 1945–2018* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2021), pp. 178, 182.

[41]Rodrigo Mallea, Matias Spektor, and Nicholas J. Wheeler (eds), *The Origins of Nuclear Cooperation: A Critical Oral History of Argentina and Brazil* (Washington, DC and Rio de Janeiro: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars and FGV, 2015), p. 177. Note that the respective states' decisions to accede to the NPT fall largely outside the oral history project's scope (p. 12).

sanctions, diplomatic pressure, and threats of military action. Iran has succeeded in maintaining a nuclear hedging strategy and North Korea ultimately did manage to develop nuclear weapons. These 'successful' acts of resistance have, however, come at enormous financial and diplomatic costs. As far as is known, no other state has initiated a nuclear weapons programme since the end of the Cold War. Unipolarity goes a long way towards explaining that outcome.

## The 1995 NPT review and extension conference

The entrenchment in 1995 of the NPT as a status quo instrument was not a foregone conclusion. During the NPT negotiations three decades earlier, the two superpowers strongly favoured a treaty of indefinite duration. They were, however, forced to back down.[42] A critical mass of states insisted that the non-nuclear-weapon states could not 'take the responsibility of tying their hands indefinitely' absent robust guarantees that the nuclear-weapon states were moving toward disarmament.[43] A compromise was thus agreed that the treaty would last for 25 years, after which a conference would have to be convened 'to decide whether the Treaty shall continue in force indefinitely, or shall be extended for an additional fixed period or periods'.[44] This provision was meant to give bargaining leverage to the non-nuclear-weapon states. Failure to come to an extension agreement could result in a 'hung conference' that would call the continued application of the treaty into question.[45]

After weeks of negotiations, on 11 May 1995, the NPT review and extension conference defied long-running concerns and initial expectations by sanctioning the treaty's indefinite and unconditional extension – by consensus.[46] This was a surprising outcome – 'a feat worth explaining'[47] – given the regime's history. After all, many of the non-nuclear-weapon states had a long history of criticising the treaty's fundamental shortcomings, and a number of them were resolved to use the conference as a means to wrest stronger disarmament commitments from the nuclear powers.[48] Non-nuclear-weapon states dissatisfied with the lack of progress on nuclear disarmament had successfully blocked consensus outcomes at the review conferences in 1980 and 1990. In 1995, however, the supporters of the indefinite extension, led by the United States, won a resounding victory.

How did the United States and its allies succeed in 1995 where the Cold War superpowers and their allies had failed in 1968? One potential explanation stresses the United States' responsiveness and willingness to compromise in an exercise of carefully crafted multilateral diplomacy.[49] In this view, a unipole's power is 'inherently limited' because the dominant state must legitimate its exercise of power through concessions and principled behaviour.[50] This explanation has some merit, at any rate at the surface. The decision to extend the treaty formed but one part of a wider 'package' of decisions. The first element of this compensatory package was the expansion of the NPT review process. From now on, each five-year review cycle would involve three preparatory

[42]Mohammed I. Shaker, *The Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty: Origin and Implementation*, vol. 2 (London: Oceana, 1980), p. 859.

[43]Switzerland, Aide-Mémoire sent to the Eighteen Nation Committee on Disarmament in November 1967, reprinted in *Documents on Disarmament*, vol. 6 (Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, 2009), p. 573. The disarmament obligation is codified in the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, signed 1 July 1968, effective 5 March 1970, Article VI.

[44]Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, Article X.

[45]John Simpson and Darryl Howlett, 'The NPT renewal conference: Stumbling toward 1995', *International Security*, 19:1 (1994), pp. 41–71 (p. 59).

[46]Thomas Graham, Jr, 'The duration of the nuclear nonproliferation treaty: Sudden death or new lease on life?' *Virginia Journal of International Law*, 29:3 (1989), pp. 661–77.

[47]Michal Onderco, *Networked Nonproliferation: Making the NPT Permanent* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2022), p. 2.

[48]Onderco, *Networked Nonproliferation*, p. 2.

[49]See, e.g., Helen Leigh-Phippard, 'Multilateral diplomacy at the 1995 NPT review and extension conference', *Diplomacy & Statecraft*, 7:2 (2007), pp. 167–90.

[50]Finnemore, 'Legitimacy, hypocrisy, and the social structure of unipolarity', p. 59.

committee meetings as well as the quinquennial review conference itself. The review conferences would also be given a stronger mandate to make specific recommendations for the future implementation of the treaty's provisions, including those concerning disarmament. The second element of the package was a declaration on 'Principles and Objectives for Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament' that called, *inter alia*, for the negotiation of a treaty prohibiting the production of a fissile material for weapons purposes, the conclusion of negotiations on a comprehensive nuclear-test-ban treaty (CTBT), and 'the determined pursuit by the nuclear-weapon States of systematic and progressive efforts to reduce nuclear weapons globally, with the ultimate goals of eliminating those weapons'.[51] The third element was a resolution urging the creation of a WMD-free zone in the Middle East. This part of the package was a major demand of several Arab states eager to put pressure on Israel to eliminate its nuclear weapons programme.

Many observers have viewed the extension of the NPT and the wider package of decisions as reflective of a meaningful diplomatic compromise or even a victory for the proponents of disarmament.[52] In the words of a leading scholar, the 1995 review and extension conference marked the 'zenith' of global 'nuclear order', a grand enlightenment project geared towards the eventual elimination of nuclear weapons.[53] The president of the 1995 conference, Sri Lankan ambassador Jayantha Dhanapala, insisted that the indefinite extension represented a collective commitment to 'forge ahead in our tasks towards a nuclear-weapon-free world'.[54] US vice president Al Gore presented the extension as a strengthening of the 'binding legal obligation under article VI to pursue negotiations in good faith on arms control and disarmament', ensuring 'the conditions for its ultimate achievement'.[55]

But, on closer inspection, the disarmament pledges were non-binding, unenforceable, and wholly aspirational. The supposed compromise was thus well in line with what Krauthammer called 'pseudo-multilateralism'.[56] The outcome reflected a near-total victory for the United States and its allies in the pursuit of an indefinite and unconditional extension. The compensatory package was above all a face-saving exercise for the pro-disarmament camp, with few, if any, meaningful consequences for nuclear diplomacy. The aspirational commitments listed in the document on 'Principles and Objectives for Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament' were ambitious but neither enforceable nor legally binding. The resolution on the Middle East was aimed largely at a state that was not even party to the NPT. The expanded review process would have no authority to demand progress on disarmament or negotiate binding agreements. In one sense, it merely served to further entrench the existing regime. Finally, by agreeing to the indefinite extension, the non-nuclear-weapon states gave up their only leverage to extract concessions from the nuclear powers.[57] An analysis of the conference published by *The Washington Post* on 14 May noted matter-of-factly that the United States had given up 'surprisingly little'.[58] Mexican ambassador Miguel Marín-Bosch, widely recognised as the leader of the non-aligned supporters of disarmament, understood that

[51]NPT Review and Extension Conference, 'Principles and Objectives for Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament', Decision 2, New York, 1995, p. 2.

[52]See, e.g., Tariq Rauf and Rebecca Johnson, 'After the NPT's indefinite extension: The future of the global nonproliferation regime', *Nonproliferation Review*, 3:1 (1995), pp. 28–41 (p. 29); Jayantha Dhanapala, *Multilateral Diplomacy and the NPT: An Insider's Account* (Geneva: United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research, 2005); Cecilia Albin, *Justice and Fairness in International Negotiation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), chapter 6; Lewis A. Dunn, 'The NPT: Assessing the past, building the future', *Nonproliferation Review*, 16:2 (2009), pp. 143–72 (p. 160).

[53]William Walker, 'Nuclear enlightenment and counter-enlightenment', *International Affairs*, 83:3 (2007), pp. 431–53 (p. 432).

[54]NPT Review and Extension Conference, New York, 12 May 1995, doc. NPT/CONF.1995/32, p. 214.

[55]Al Gore, Statement to the NPT Review and Extension Conference, New York, 18 April 1995, UN doc. NPT/CONF.1995/32 (Part III), p. 53.

[56]Krauthammer, 'The unipolar moment', p. 25.

[57]See Jonathan R. Hunt, *The Nuclear Club: How America and the World Policed the Atom from Hiroshima to Vietnam* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2022), p. 253.

[58]Julia Preston and R. Jeffrey Smith, 'The nuclear treaty: Product of global full-court press by U.S.', *The Washington Post* (14 May 1995), p. A23.

the result represented a clear defeat for that cause. The international community had 'squandered a unique opportunity', he said, to advance the cause of abolition.[59] His assessment used an apt metaphor for the unipolar world: 'We used to play in the stadium of the Cold War. Now we are playing in Yankee Stadium.'[60]

A second potential explanation for the indefinite extension of the NPT stresses the United States' 'networked' position in the post–Cold War order. According to Michal Onderco, it was the United States' ability to enlist broad support and diplomatic aid from a range of allies and partners that secured the extension.[61] In this view, 'the US managed to lobby and entice countries, divide the opposition, and bring opponents on board. Back in 1995, the US could draw on a large network and on its position in the global diplomatic, trade, and military networks.'[62] This explanation fits well with the historical record. However, as we seek to demonstrate below, the United States' ability to shape the non-proliferation regime, and indeed its highly networked position within it, was largely an epiphenomenon of its unipolar dominance of the post–Cold War international system. In the following, we develop this structural argument through a detailed reading of the process that culminated in the NPT's indefinite extension.

### *The US approach to the 1995 NPT review and extension conference*

The emergence of non-proliferation as a pivotal US foreign policy interest was predicated on a realisation by key actors in the US foreign policy establishment that the world had become unipolar.[63] The main threat to US interests was no longer a peer competitor, so went the argument, but the proliferation of WMD to recalcitrant states. While non-proliferation was clearly advantageous to many states, none had a greater interest in preventing the spread of nuclear weapons or other WMD than the unipolar power. An editorial in *The Washington Post* stressed that 'point one' about non-proliferation was that it had been 'especially useful' to the United States: 'As a superpower – now the only one – with global interests and commitments, the United States has a greater interest than anyone else in global nuclear restraint.'[64] The spread of nuclear weapons seemed to be the only plausible way to resist the United States' conventional superiority, which had been so decisively demonstrated during the 1991 Gulf War.

As the 1995 conference approached, the US government quickly identified indefinite and unconditional extension as its major goal; the United States was 'very anxious' to prevent a tighter coupling of non-proliferation and disarmament.[65] Lewis Dunn, deputy leader of the US delegation to the NPT review conference in 1985, warned against 'the high risks of attempting to amend the treaty'.[66] However, Dunn also worried that the United States was not doing enough to prepare the ground for the 1995 conference.[67] Ben Sanders was similarly concerned: 'The whole world knows that the effectiveness and the very survival of the global nonproliferation system depends on the way the United States uses its power and its influence. Only Washington does not seem to be aware

[59]Miguel Marín-Bosch, 'Getting rid of nuclear weapons', *Medicine, Conflict and Survival*, 13:4 (1997), pp. 282–300 (p. 285).
[60]Cited in Preston and Smith, 'The nuclear treaty'.
[61]Onderco, *Networked Nonproliferation*.
[62]Onderco, *Networked Nonproliferation*, p. 110.
[63]Ironically, structural realists were among the last to realise the systemic change and its implications for nuclear non-proliferation. John Mearsheimer predicted that 'the most likely scenario in the wake of the Cold War is further nuclear proliferation in Europe' and argued that 'the best new order would incorporate the limited, managed proliferation of nuclear weapons'. See Mearsheimer, 'Back to the future', p. 37. For the widely held belief that bipolarity was being replaced not by unipolarity but multipolarity, and that this would lead to further nuclear proliferation, see Zachary S. Davis and Benjamin Frankel (eds), *The Proliferation Puzzle: Why Nuclear Weapons Spread and What Results* (London: Frank Cass, 1993).
[64]'Extending the nuclear treaty', *The Washington Post* (3 May 1995), p. A20.
[65]Interview with Thomas Graham, conducted by Michal Onderco (22 March 2017), Wilson Center, available at: {https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/177539}.
[66]Lewis A. Dunn, 'It ain't broke – don't fix it', *The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 46:6 (1990), pp. 19–20 (p. 19).
[67]Lewis A. Dunn, 'NPT 1995: Time to shift gears', *Arms Control Today*, 23:9 (1993), pp. 14–19. See also, e.g., Simpson and Howlett, 'The NPT Renewal Conference'.

of it.'[68] Yet by the time of the 1995 review and extension conference, the United States seemed well aware of its role indeed. In 1993, Thomas Graham, Jr. was appointed as Special Representative for the NPT extension. He would lead an 'all-out' US government effort to achieve the United States' aims.[69]

A major talking point in the lead-up to the 1995 conference was what to do about the demand for a comprehensive ban on nuclear testing. The conclusion of a CTBT had been one of the non-nuclear-weapon states' key demands since before the adoption of the NPT in 1968. At the NPT review conference in 1990, a group of non-aligned states had blocked consensus on the final communiqué because it did not urge the conclusion of a test ban treaty with sufficient urgency. When Mikhail Gorbachev reversed the Soviet Union's traditional opposition to on-site inspections, it put the creation of a robust CTBT verification regime within reach. The Clinton administration also supported the negotiation of a treaty. Importantly, by the mid-1990s, the major nuclear powers had all carried out enough nuclear tests to supply them with ample testing data to inform their nuclear weapons programmes for the foreseeable future.[70] It was increasingly clear that a CTBT would now function less as a means of curbing the nuclear arms race, as it had traditionally been conceived, and serve more as an instrument of non-proliferation. A strong norm against nuclear tests would increase the reputational costs of testing, and a robust verification regime meant that it would be very difficult to carry out test explosions in secret.

The non-proliferation regime had from the outset been based on the premise that compliance would be enforced by the two superpowers.[71] The demise of the Soviet Union thus raised fears that the regime would suffer. Yet, as it turned out, the realignment of power in the unipolar world substantially increased the prospects for enforcement. The bipolar distribution of power had in important cases incentivised the superpowers to look the other way when it came to proliferation.[72] The end of the Cold War eliminated this incentive. Freed from the need to constantly hedge against any military or ideological encroachment by the other superpower, the United States was able to increase the diplomatic pressure on non-proliferation fence-sitters in its own sphere of influence, among the states formerly under the Soviet Union's control, and in the non-aligned world.[73] While during the Cold War the superpowers had to treat the non-aligned states with a measure of restraint – too much pressure carried a risk of pushing non-aligned states into the arms of the opposing bloc – the collapse of the Soviet Union undercut the viability of true non-alignment. Under unipolarity, there was nowhere to hide – no workable formula for deflecting the hegemon's pressure. Finally, unipolarity fundamentally transformed the calculus of the liberal democracies that during the 1960s had been wary of 'tying their hands indefinitely'.[74] For states such as Germany, Italy, and Switzerland, which had all opposed indefinite duration in the 1960s,[75] the demise of the Soviet Union and emergence of US power preponderance undermined the argument for nuclear hedging.

The end of the NPT review conference in 1990 without a consensus document had highlighted how demands by a group of determined non-nuclear-weapon states could bring about a deadlock.

[68]Ben Sanders, 'What nonproliferation policy?', *The Nonproliferation Review*, 1:1 (1993), pp. 30–31 (p. 31).

[69]Thomas Graham, Jr, *Disarmament Sketches: Three Decades of Arms Control and International Law* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2012), p. 264.

[70]Sumit Ganguly, 'India's pathway to Pokhran II', *International Security*, 23:4 (1999), pp. 148–77 (p. 170).

[71]See, e.g., Jonathan R. Hunt, *The Nuclear Club: How America and the World Policed the Atom from Hiroshima to Vietnam* (Stanford, CL: Stanford University Press, 2022), p. 2; Roland Popp, 'Global order, cooperation between the superpowers, and alliance politics in the making of the nuclear non-proliferation regime', *The International History Review*, 36:2 (2014), pp. 195–209.

[72]George Perkovich, *India's Nuclear Bomb* (Berkeley, CL: University of California Press, 1999); Rabinowitz, *Bargaining on Nuclear Tests*; Rabinowitz and Miller, 'Keeping the bombs in basement'.

[73]Budjeryn, 'The power of the NPT'.

[74]Switzerland, Aide-Mémoire sent to the Eighteen Nation Committee on Disarmament in November 1967, p. 573.

[75]Shaker, *The Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty*, pp. 859–63.

Moreover, the conference had seen only 84 of the 140 parties to the treaty taking part in the proceedings. This prompted two seasoned American observers to note that, should a similar number of states show up in 1995, the decision to extend the treaty would require the consent of about three-quarters of the participating states; while the legalities could no doubt be debated, the wording of the NPT suggested that the decision to extend the treaty would have to be taken by a majority of treaty's *parties* – not the *participants* in the conference. They thus warned that 'the United States and the United Kingdom must seriously consider how much confidence they have in gaining such a three-quarters vote'.[76] On this basis, US officials concluded that it would be beneficial to secure a higher rate of participation. Most of the states that had not bothered to show up for the 1990 conference could likely be induced to support the US position, they believed. Moreover, if they were actually present at the conference, the potential resisters would have to face the diplomatic music directly, further increasing American leverage.

Towards this end, the US Arms Control and Disarmament Agency (ACDA) came up with the proposal that the 1995 conference take place not in Geneva, where all the preceding review conferences had been held, but rather in New York City.[77] The ostensible rationale was that New York hosted more permanent diplomatic missions than Geneva, meaning that a number of smaller states might find it easier to attend a conference convened at the former location. Eventually, the move to New York was accepted by the first meeting of the preparatory committee, which met in May 1993 and otherwise agreed on little else.[78] The decision provided the United States with a range of options that, while not impossible, would have been much more difficult to carry out in Geneva. The change of the physical venue was symptomatic of important shifts taking place under unipolarity. The Soviet Union would have almost certainly never accepted moving the conference to the United States during the Cold War. It was not without reason that Switzerland, a neutral state, had been the traditional hub of multilateral arms control and disarmament diplomacy.

The NPT offered a tool to prevent or at least seriously complicate the further spread of nuclear weapons. On 1 March 1995, President Clinton publicly made an impassioned case for the treaty's importance. 'Nothing is more important to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons than extending the treaty indefinitely and unconditionally', he argued.[79] Echoing Krauthammer's 'subtle call to greatness', Clinton argued that a failure to extend the agreement indefinitely 'could open the door to a world of nuclear trouble. Pariah nations with rigid ideologies and expansionist ambitions would have an easier time acquiring terrible weapons, and countries that have chosen to forego the nuclear option would then rethink their position.' The president declared that the 'challenge of this moment is matched only by its possibility'.[80]

The US government's effort to extend the NPT was formally led by Vice President Al Gore. It involved various organisations and actors in the US government, especially ACDA, the Special Representative and his office of several full-time staff, and the State Department and its various overseas stations. It also enlisted the help of various American allies.[81] Additionally, the United States could count on many of the states of the former Soviet bloc, which were eager to show they now belonged to the free world. It was also able to convince or force enough non-aligned states to accept its proposal or at the very least to drop their opposition. From its unipolar position, the

[76]Charles N. Van Doren and George Bunn, 'Progress and peril at the fourth NPT review conference', *Arms Control Today*, 20:8 (1990), pp. 98–102 (p. 12).

[77]Graham, *Disarmament Sketches*, p. 258.

[78]NPT Review Conference, 'Progress Report of the Preparatory Committee for the 1995 Conference of the Parties to the Treaty on the Nonproliferation of Nuclear Weapons', UN doc. NPT/CONF.1995/PC.I/2, 14 May 1993.

[79]William J. Clinton, 'The Vital Tradition of American Leadership in the World', Remarks at the Nixon Center for Peace and Freedom, Washington, DC (1 March 1995), The American Presidency Project, available at: {https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/remarks-the-nixon-center-for-peace-and-freedom-policy-conference}.

[80]Clinton, 'The Vital Tradition of American Leadership in the World'.

[81]After a meeting with the United Kingdom's prime minister, John Major, in early April 1995, President Clinton noted that they agreed the extension of the NPT was important to both countries, because such institutions 'have served our interests'. See U.S. Newswire, 'Press Conference by the President and Prime Minister John Major', 5 April 1995.

United States put forward the argument that the treaty embodied universal norms and beliefs about nuclear weapons that every country could and should subscribe to.[82] For example, ACDA Director John Holum claimed that the treaty's proponents were obliged 'to elevate NPT extension to a higher plane – above the din of politics as usual at the United Nations, above the ordinary international jockeying and horse-trading. History will not treat us kindly if we act irresponsibly.'[83] Following the extension decision, the US ambassador to the United Nations, Madeleine Albright, stressed how 'this sterling success should make the world a safer place for all of us, for our children, and for their children'.[84] ACDA's deputy director, Ralph Earle, labelled the event 'the most important multilateral arms control conference in history'.[85] The permanent extension, he argued, had been a 'gift' to future generations.[86] There is no reason to doubt these commentators' sincerity. As noted by E. H. Carr, international institutions invariably perpetuate 'an identity of interest between the dominant group and the world as a whole in the maintenance of peace'.[87] Unipolarity made this equivalence possible in a new way.

### *American preponderance and the unconditional extension of the NPT*

The NPT review and extension conference opened on 17 April 1995. The United States and its allies were adamant that the treaty be extended indefinitely and without conditions. A significant number of states had other ideas, however. According to the Indonesian government, an indefinite extension would 'lead to a permanent division of the world into nuclear haves and have-nots, ratify inequality in international relations and relegate the vast majority of non-nuclear nations into a second class status'.[88] Indonesia thus argued for an extension of 25-year rolling periods. Other models were also proposed. Nigeria suggested a single fixed-term extension; Venezuela proposed that the treaty be extended for five years only. Mexico, Egypt, and other states similarly opposed the US proposal. That none of these positions eventually gained any significant traction had to do with the unipole's actions.

The carefully orchestrated performance of US–Russian cooperation before and throughout the conference obscured the extent to which the NPT's indefinite extension was first and foremost the result of American efforts.[89] *The New York Times* reported shortly after the conference that, at crucial points, President Clinton had gotten personally involved, including by sending 'tough messages' to Egypt and Mexico, 'emphasizing the importance of the issue to the United States'.[90] Just prior to the conference, US Secretary of State Warren Christopher had not failed to note how Mexico's economy was saved from collapse by an extensive aid package advanced by the United States.[91] 'This is not one we'll forget about,' noted the ACDA director John Holum circumspectly.[92]

[82] See Onderco, *Networked Nonproliferation*.

[83] John D. Holum, 'A treaty for all time', *The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 50:6 (1994), pp. 19–22 (p. 22).

[84] Cited in Barbara Crossette, 'Treaty aimed at halting spread of nuclear weapons extended', *The New York Times* (12 May 1995).

[85] NPT Review and Extension Conference, New York, 12 May 1995, UN doc. NPT/CONF.1995/32 (Part III), p. 202.

[86] Ibid.

[87] Edward Hallett Carr, *The Twenty Years' Crisis, 1919–1939: An Introduction to the Study of International Relations* (London: Macmillan, 1946), p. 82.

[88] Indonesia, Statement to the NPT Review and Extension Conference, New York, 18 April 1995, UN doc. NPT/CONF.1995/32 (Part III), p. 35.

[89] The United States and the Soviet Union/Russia repeatedly stressed their joint support for the NPT in the run up to its extension. For the Bush–Gorbachev era, see 'Joint Statement on Nonproliferation' (4 June 1990), available at: {https://fas.org/nuke/control/npt/text/900629-144836.htm}; for the Clinton–Yeltsin period, see 'Joint Statement on Nonproliferation', *Arms Control Today*, 24:1 (1994), pp. 22–3.

[90] On President Clinton's 'last minute' interventions, Crossette, 'Treaty aimed at halting spread of nuclear weapons extended', p. A1.

[91] See, R. Jeffrey Smith, 'U.S. move to extend nonproliferation treaty meets strong opposition', *The Washington Post* (19 April 1995), p. A24.

[92] Cited in Gibbons, *The Hegemon's Tool Kit*, p. 114.

Other countries were exposed to similar pressure tactics, involving US officials subtly hinting that the extension vote could have implications for bilateral nuclear cooperation and perhaps also wider economic dealings.[93] The major powers, apparently, had issued 'endless démarches in capitals' over the course of 1994 and the first half of 1995,[94] engaging in 'arm twisting' and 'pressure with conditionalities' against smaller states.[95] The view that the process and outcome of the decision to extend the NPT indefinitely favoured the United States was widely shared among the conference's participants.[96]

Throughout the process, a key objective for the United States and its allies was to divide the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM). Some of the most vocal opponents of the indefinite extension were members of this group, whose origins lay in the Cold War. Eager to stress their independence from the two superpowers, the NAM countries had maintained their position by navigating the space between the Cold War blocs, something that was no longer possible in the unipolar world. The US-led strategy in the lead-up to the conference centred on neutralising and isolating its opponents in the NAM by dealing with them individually rather than as a group. A key supporter of the US position, the Canadian ambassador Christopher Westdal, described the strategy in the following terms: 'We identified both the salient peaks in the NAM which were initially opposed to indefinite extension, and the fertile valleys – countries that might be willing to support permanence. We then attempted to undermine and isolate the critics.'[97] Tom Graham, the US special representative for NPT extension, had been on countless bilateral visits to non-aligned and other countries prior to the conference. The classic divide-and-rule approach was crucially aided by the shift in the global balance of power towards unipolarity. As an Iranian representative at the 1995 conference put it, 'some factors, including the end of the bipolarity in international relations, weakened to some extent the *raison d'etre* of the NAM'.[98] But it was not just the *rationale* of its existence that critically wounded the NAM. The *possibility* to navigate between the two dominant poles of international politics had also ceased to exist. The US strategy, accordingly, was highly successful. As one US official put it, 'we've helped to kill the NAM by the work we've done here'.[99]

Public statements as to how much pressure countries faced from the United States at the actual conference unsurprisingly differ depending on who speaks and from the perspective of which country. For instance, in an interview shortly after the conference, Canada's Christopher Westdal told Susan Welsh that 'of course pressure was applied regarding the decision on extension – powerful countries often exert pressure over important issues'.[100] However, he dismissed the notion that the outcome was 'the result of a massive weapon state power play' as 'simplistic, unduly cynical, and simply wrong'.[101] As an important US ally who did a lot of diplomatic work to ensure the treaty's indefinite extension, however, Westdal would have had limited experience with being exposed to

[93]Venezuela's ambassador to the conference, Adolfo Taylhardat, resigned in the final week to protest the decision by his government to back away from its opposition to the indefinite extension. He attributed the change to the pressure to which his country was exposed. See Preston and Smith, 'The nuclear treaty', p. A23.

[94]Johnson and Rauf, 'After the NPT's indefinite extension', p. 32.

[95]Susan B. Welsh, 'Delegate perspectives on the 1995 NPT review and extension conference', *The Nonproliferation Review*, 2:3 (1995), pp. 1–24.

[96]Welsh, 'Delegate perspectives'. See also 'Extending the nuclear treaty', p. A20.

[97]See Welsh, 'Delegate perspectives', p. 4.

[98]Welsh, 'Delegate perspectives', p. 12.

[99]Cited in Preston and Smith, 'The nuclear treaty'.

[100]Welsh, 'Delegate perspectives', p. 5.

[101]Welsh, 'Delegate perspectives', p. 5. In a more recent interview with Michal Onderco for the Nuclear Proliferation International History Project, Westdal was even more dismissive of the notion that pressure was applied to ensure the desired result. He said about the process of getting the necessary number of states to agree: 'I don't think there had yet been any arm twisting.' Michal Onderco, 'Oral History Interview with Christopher Westdal' (17 February 2017), available at: {https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/177553.pdf?v=d27a41cc13a99f436e2bce0a65cff68d}.

intense American pressure.[102] Pressure could have been applied without grandiose threats but in a rather less blatant, but all-pervasive manner. Mexican ambassador Marín-Bosch articulated this clearly, noting that, 'in this now unipolar world, there was a campaign of "friendly persuasion"'.[103] Representatives from Indonesia, Venezuela, and Iran expressed similar views.[104]

Not all NAM countries had to be exposed to direct forms of pressure. In the unipolar configuration, many states understood that the issue of the NPT extension was an opportunity to signal their support for the US-led world order. This was the case not only for the countries of the former Eastern bloc, but also with one of the newest NAM members. South Africa is widely credited as having played an important role in the lead-up to and during the 1995 conference because of its advocacy for the indefinite extension. A country that had only recently given up its nuclear weapons and joined the NPT, it clearly had a stake in its continued existence. A member of the South African delegation to the conference captured in two rhetorical questions the conundrum his country was facing: 'What do you do if the position you reach on the basis of your national concerns is also the position the United States wants you to take? How do you avoid the impression that you caved in?'[105] There was also the fact that 'its desperate need for foreign investment and development assistance precluded South Africa from assuming a position that would weaken the strong linkages under construction at the time with the US as the world's leading economic power'.[106] This was a fact American officials grasped well.

The indefinite extension was also eased by the fact that some of the states that had opposed the treaty's indefinite duration during the original NPT negotiations had shifted their positions. For these states, the end of the Cold War and onset of unipolarity had made hedging militarily unnecessary and opposition to American normative leadership ideologically costly. In its opening statement, Italy acknowledged that during the NPT negotiations it had been in favour of limiting the treaty's validity to an initial 25-year period. But the international situation 'had profoundly changed. The danger to mankind was no longer the nuclear arms race – "vertical" proliferation – but "horizontal" proliferation, including the possibility of terrorist organizations arming themselves with weapons of mass destruction.'[107] Italy was therefore prepared to support the NPT's indefinite extension.

Similarly, Switzerland, which alongside Italy had taken the lead during the 1960s in arguing that the non-nuclear-weapon states could not give up their bargaining leverage and '[tie] their hands indefinitely' if the nuclear-weapon states did not pursue disarmament,[108] admitted in 1995 that the option of 'unconditional extension for an indefinite period seemed, in current circumstances, to be the most suitable'.[109] Switzerland did, however, express its hope that the nuclear powers would 'fully honour their pledges and would give tangible signs without delay of their will to eliminate nuclear

[102]Indeed, in the opinion of many observers, it was Canada that 'led the effort at the conference to achieve an indefinite extension'. See William Epstein, 'Indefinite extension – with increased accountability', *The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 51:4 (1995), pp. 27–30 (p. 28). See also Barbara Crossette, 'Consensus seen for indefinite extension of nuclear pact', *The New York Times* (7 May 1995), p. A21.

[103]Marín-Bosch, 'Getting rid of nuclear weapons', p. 285.

[104]Welsh, 'Delegate perspectives', pp. 6, 8, 13.

[105]Cited in Tom Collina, 'South Africa bridges the gap', *The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 51:4 (July–August 1995), pp. 30–32 (p. 31). On South Africa's role, see also R. Jeffrey Smith, 'Permanent nuclear treaty extension may be approved by consensus vote; most nations on record in support after effort by U.S. and allies', *The Washington Post* (8 May 1995), p. A7; Barbara Crossette, 'Nuclear pact may continue by consensus', *The New York Times* (10 May 1995), p. A15; for a larger overview of South Africa's nuclear project and eventual disarmament, see Robin E. Möser, *Disarming Apartheid* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024).

[106]Rian Leith and Joelien Pretorius, 'Eroding the middle ground: The shift in foreign policy underpinning South African nuclear diplomacy', *Politikon*, 36:3 (2009), pp. 345–61 (p. 350).

[107]Italy, Statement to the 1995 NPT Review and Extension Conference, New York, 18 April 1995, UN doc. NPT/CONF.1995/32 (Part III), pp. 19–20.

[108]Switzerland, Aide-Mémoire.

[109]Switzerland, Statement to the 1995 NPT Review and Extension Conference, New York, 20 April 1995, UN doc. NPT/CONF.1995/32 (Part III), p. 90.

weapons'. It expected that, by the review conference in 2000, treaties banning nuclear testing and the production of fissile material for weapons 'would be in force'. Furthermore, it argued that 'the five nuclear Powers would need to have reached agreement on a timetable for progressive and substantial reductions in their arsenals'.[110] The Swiss negotiators active during the 1960s would probably not have been surprised to learn that, by 2024, precisely none of this had happened.[111]

The United States could draw upon clear advantages arising from the fact that the conference took place on its home turf. Tom Graham noted the extensive involvement of Secretary of State Warren Christopher, who, 'when possible, made the case for indefinite extension personally'.[112] He also recalled that 'during the conference itself Assistant Secretaries Pelletreau (Middle East), Raphel (South Asia), Watson (Latin America), and Moose (Africa), and East Asia and Pacific Office Director Huddle from Assistant Secretary Lord's bureau, came to New York to talk directly with the representatives from their regions'.[113]

The US effort to secure as high a rate of participation as possible proved highly successful. This objective was pursued through a two-pronged campaign of convincing the states that had not showed up in 1990 to attend and encouraging new states to join the regime. For instance, several microstates in the South Pacific were convinced to join the NPT so as to be able to vote on the extension decision. A representative of Palau was even flown to the conference at the expense of the US Department of Energy, that is, the US government body responsible for the production and maintenance of America's nuclear weapons.[114] In the end, 174 states took part in the conference, more than double the number from the 1990 conference.

In the context of the mid-1990s, reinforced by the display of American dominance in the Gulf War earlier in the decade, it was quite apparent to smaller states wondering which side to back that reaching a deal was by far preferable to the alternative. The fact that the United States would have insisted upon the NPT's continued validity even if there had been no conclusive outcome only drove this point home more forcefully. The United States' position, first articulated by Tom Graham in 1989, was that 'if a conference is not held or if no agreement is reached, the Treaty will continue in force indefinitely until the parties can agree otherwise'.[115] In the event of a hung conference, 'the Treaty will, in fact, automatically continue in force beyond 1995'.[116] Given this stance, states resisting an indefinite extension would have gained nothing while drawing the United States' ire. When it became clear that the United States would win a vote, the remaining resisters at the review conference decided to drop their objections and join the consensus.

The indefinite extension of the NPT in 1995 was a turning point for the non-proliferation regime and provides a clear illustration of unipolarity's effects on an international institution. The treaty was extended not only in the temporal sense (indefinitely) but also in the spatial sense (near-global acceptance). Absent unipolarity, this would likely not have been the case, as the fence-sitters would have found it much easier to maintain their distance from the regime.

## Conclusion

In this article, we have argued that the structural condition of unipolarity provided the United States both the means and the motive to pursue a more ambitious non-proliferation policy than before. Contrary to the expectations of several scholars, unipolarity did not undercut but instead aid the cause of non-proliferation. In combination with a more forceful and committed American strategy of deploying both sticks and carrots in the service of non-proliferation, unipolarity facilitated the active subscription to the non-proliferation norm of a host of new states, laid the

[110]Ibid., p. 90.

[111]It is, of course, impossible to say whether a harder line would have succeeded in producing greater disarmament results. The point here is that the strategy initially pursued was abandoned before it was fully tested.

[112]Graham, *Disarmament Sketches*, p. 263.

[113]Graham, *Disarmament Sketches*, p. 263.

[114]Graham, *Disarmament Sketches*, p. 297.

[115]Graham, 'The duration of the nuclear nonproliferation treaty'.

[116]Graham, 'The duration of the nuclear nonproliferation treaty', p. 662.

foundations for a decline in nuclear weapons programmes throughout the world, and helped foster the indefinite and unconditional extension of an agreement that permits a small handful of states to possess nuclear weapons while denying them to others. Accordingly, our findings align with the hypothesis that unipolarity incentivises the unipole to elevate non-proliferation in its hierarchy of policy priorities.[117] Our findings also dovetail with the notion that unipolarity would provide the United States unprecedented latitude in achieving its diplomatic objectives.[118]

The findings presented in this article go against the widely held theoretical claim that institutions constrain unipoles to a greater extent than great powers in bi- and multipolar configurations. To the extent that the unipole is responsible for the prevailing international order, so goes the argument, it is bound to act by its rules. Against this view, we show that such claims did not obtain precisely because of the effects of unipolarity – at least with respect to the indefinite extension of the NPT. First, there is little to indicate that the United States actually had to limit itself to get what it wanted, i.e. the indefinite and unconditional extension: the enhanced review process merely led to greater focus on non-proliferation, which was entirely in line with American objectives; the resolution on the Middle East was and remains an unenforceable empty shell; the CTBT was negotiated and signed but has not been brought into legal force; and the aspirational language on disarmament, as delegates such as Bosch recognised, was not legally binding and in no way enforceable – indeed, negotiations on a treaty banning the production of fissile material for weapons purposes have not even been initiated. Second, the non-proliferation regime has long been criticised as discriminatory, as lacking in legitimacy, and as a manifestation of hypocrisy. Such charges were widely articulated both before and during the 1995 conference. However, far from generating 'outcomes that punish the hypocrite as much as anyone else',[119] the 1995 extension ended up entrenching an unequal nuclear order. The United States did not have to pay an increased cost despite widespread exhortations that it address at least the most glaring hypocrisies embedded in the existing regime.

What explains these discrepancies between theoretical expectations about institutions in unipolarity and what we can observe in the case of the NPT extension? Theoretical accounts of institutions under unipolarity mistakenly put more emphasis on institutions than on unipolarity itself.[120] The systemic distribution of power must be the starting point to understand the role and the workings of institutions in unipolarity, not the other way around. When that is the case, it is clear that institutions, rather than having a constraining effect on the unipole, can instead be instrumentalised for power political ends more freely than is the case under other distributions of power. Whether this advantage is always recognised and exploited by the unipole itself is another question.

Our findings correct what has become the dominant narrative of how the NPT extension came about, namely that the NPT's extension 'could be achieved only through a very inclusive multilateral diplomacy and relied upon perceptions that this was a robust and expanding treaty, honoured alike by its nuclear and non-nuclear weapon state parties'.[121] As with so many historical narratives that stick, this one has been written by the winners. It also has a number of inherently appealing characteristics. It offers an account of a better time in international politics when the United States cleverly engaged with multilateral institutions and conscientiously used them to advance global interests. The story gives recognition to a number of other states, making it seem as though the outcome hardly involved the United States at all: American allies (Australia, Canada, France, the

[117] Monteiro, *Theory of Unipolar Politics*, p. 15. See also Randall Schweller, 'The problem of international order revisited: A review essay', *International Security*, 26:1 (2001), pp. 161–86.

[118] Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth, *World Out of Balance: International Relations and the Challenge of American Primacy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008).

[119] Finnemore, 'Legitimacy, hypocrisy, and the social structure of unipolarity', p. 85.

[120] See, e.g., G. John Ikenberry, *Liberal Leviathan* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012); Jervis, 'Unipolarity: A structural perspective'.

[121] William Walker, *A Perpetual Menace: Nuclear Weapons and International Order* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012), p. 107. See also, e.g., Michal Onderco and Leopoldo Nuti (eds), *Extending the NPT?* (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center, 2020); Gibbons, *The Hegemon's Tool Kit*.

United Kingdom) were all supposedly instrumental in orchestrating a complex diplomatic process; states striving to gain full acceptance on the international stage (South Africa, Kazakhstan, Ukraine) endowed the whole process with increased legitimacy; and even some of the opponents (Egypt) are noted for their willingness to compromise. Last but not least, the narrative stresses agency over structure.

The problem is that this commonly accepted historical narrative overlooks all too conveniently the factors that unipolarity brings into sharp relief – the changed systemic distribution of power and how the new system incentivised and enabled the United States to achieve its goals. Absent a focus on unipolarity, it is difficult to explain the renewed attention that proliferation received in Washington. There is, likewise, no way to understand the sudden embrace by signatories (new and old) of a treaty that many of them had long described as unequal, discriminatory, and hypocritical. That such persistent criticisms would suddenly be forgotten or forgiven beggars belief. Rather, critics chose or were made to forget them. There was little else they could have done in the unipolar world.

We have sought in this article to establish that the United States recognised that non-proliferation had become a core policy objective after the Cold War, and that it now possessed the means to get precisely what it wanted from the non-proliferation regime – an indefinite extension of the treaty with no compromise on disarmament. The question posed in our introduction, however, remains: what benefits has the United States accrued as a result of its power play in the 1990s? To be sure, the non-proliferation regime does what Washington wants it to do, which is to deny the bomb to potential adversaries and sideline Article VI on disarmament. As we have argued, non-proliferation helps the United States prevent adversaries from obtaining the one means they can deploy to resist American coercion: the threat of nuclear use.

But the benefits of non-proliferation must be weighed against a larger cost. Because the non-proliferation regime works to prevent states from obtaining the bomb and goes along with the unwillingness of the nuclear haves to pursue nuclear disarmament, it serves a key role in locking in the extant nuclear order. With no new nuclear states, and the existing ones staying put, the most important military dimension of great-power politics essentially becomes frozen. In this static condition, a putative rival to the United States (most obviously China) can gradually increase its economic and military capabilities until it achieves peer status, without having to worry that the United States will wage a pre-emptive war against it – as a dominant power might have done against a rising one in the pre-nuclear era – or that a systemic war, one that it could lose, might be initiated for other reasons.[122] As long as the United States accepts the basic assumption that Mutual Assured Destruction will continue to obtain – that, as Ronald Reagan famously declared, 'a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought' – then American unipolar preponderance is fated to die a slow death, ending not with a bang but a whimper.

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[122]Monteiro, *Theory of Unipolar Politics*.

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