

Key Issues for the 2026 NPT Review Conference

ATTACKS ON NUCLEAR FACILITIES

Gaukhar Mukhatzhanova

The subject of attacks on civilian nuclear facilities was among the contentious issues at the 2022 NPT Review Conference due to Russia's attacks on Ukrainian nuclear facilities and occupation of the Zaporizhzhya Nuclear Power Plant (NPP). It is likely to be even more controversial at the 2026 Review Conference in light of the US and Israeli attacks against Iran. As State Parties grapple with attacks on safeguarded nuclear facilities in two non-nuclear-weapon States (NNWS) carried out by two nuclear-weapon States (NWS), the debates could well get bogged down in accusations of politicization and double standards.

During the current review cycle, the occupation of the Zaporizhzhya NPP continued along with [military activities around the plant](#), as well as attacks on electrical substations of other nuclear power plants in Ukraine. The IAEA Board of Governors (BOG) and General Conference (GC) have [adopted several resolutions](#) on the matter since 2022.

In June 2025, Israel and the United States conducted a series of airstrikes against a number of Iran's nuclear facilities in the course of the Twelve-Day War. On 24 June 2025, the IAEA Director-General Rafael Grossi [reported](#) "extensive damage" at [several Iranian nuclear sites](#), including uranium enrichment plants at Fordow and Natanz and conversion facilities at Esfahan. Some of the nuclear facilities, such as [Natanz](#) and the [heavy water production plant](#) in Arak, were hit again in March 2026, during the ongoing war in the Middle East. In early April 2026, in [several instances](#) strikes hit the [vicinity](#) or premises of the Bushehr NPP, [raising concerns](#) about the possibility of radiation release should the NPP itself be damaged.

At the 2022 Review Conference, European and other Western States condemned Russia's attacks and occupation of the Zaporizhzhya NPP and championed the inclusion of relevant language in the final document. The [draft final document](#), without directly naming Russia, expressed "grave concern at attacks or threats of attack on nuclear facilities devoted to peaceful purposes." The draft language further stated that attacks or threats of attack on peaceful nuclear facilities "have dangerous political, economic, human health, and environmental, implications and raise serious concerns regarding the application of international law, which could warrant appropriate action in accordance with the provisions of the Charter of the United Nations."

It is far from certain that States Parties would be able agree to the same kind of universal expression of grave concern at the 2026 Review Conference, given the more [mixed reactions](#) of the international community to the US-Israeli attacks on Iran's nuclear facilities. Iran's history of non-compliance with its safeguards obligations under the comprehensive safeguards agreement (CSA) has affected many States' official reactions to the bombing of its nuclear facilities, as was evident during the [debates](#) at the 69th IAEA General Conference in September 2025.

Furthermore, the US stance on resolutions concerning nuclear facilities in Ukraine has also started to shift. The United States abstained on the [GC resolution](#) on “Nuclear safety, security and safeguards in Ukraine” in September 2025 and voted against the March 2026 [BOG resolution](#) on the implications of attacks on Ukraine’s energy infrastructure for nuclear safety and security.

While it referred to the application of international law, the draft document of the 2022 Review Conference did not specifically mention the fact that attacks on nuclear power installations are prohibited under international humanitarian law (IHL), by the [Protocols I and II](#) to the 1949 Geneva Conventions.¹ Some States Parties may wish to include a more specific reference to the IHL and urge compliance with these prohibitions in the outcome document of the 2026 Review Conference. Whether the IHL prohibitions apply to attacks on non-reactor facilities such as uranium enrichment and conversion plants, which do not carry the same risk of radiation release, could become a subject of debate.

States Parties could also try to explicitly reiterate some of the language contained in several IAEA GC resolutions adopted since the 1980s, as well as the [final document of the 1985 NPT Review Conference](#), which referred to attacks on peaceful nuclear facilities more broadly. For example, IAEA GC resolution [GC\(XXVII\)/RES/407](#) adopted in 1983 declared that “all armed attacks against nuclear installations devoted to peaceful purposes should be explicitly prohibited.”

The forward-looking part of the [draft final document](#) of the 2022 Review Conference simply referenced Action 64 of the 2010 Action Plan and called on States Parties to “abide by the decision of the IAEA General Conference of 18 September 2009, on “Prohibition of armed attack or threat of armed attack against nuclear installations, during operation or under construction (GC(53)/DEC/13).” Decision 13, however, itself referenced prior IAEA General Conference resolutions on the subject, one of which ([GC\(29\)/RES/444](#)) stated that any attacks or threats of attack against nuclear facilities devoted to peaceful purposes jeopardize the development and further promotion of the peaceful uses of nuclear energy.” A similar formulation can be found in the final document of the 1985 Review Conference, adopted by consensus.

¹ See the discussion in John Carlson, “Prohibition of military attacks on nuclear facilities,” Vienna Center for Disarmament and Non-Proliferation, 12 September 2022, https://vcdnp.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Attacks-on-nuclear-facilities_Carlson-updated.pdf, and Noah Mayhew, “Mitigating the Threat of Attacks on Nuclear Facilities,” VCDNP, 25 February 2025, <https://vcdnp.org/attacks-nuclear-facilities/>.