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POLL: Nonproliferation Experts on Emerging Challenges

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The Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) has served as the cornerstone of international efforts to constrain nuclear proliferation and pursue nuclear disarmament since 1970. Unfortunately, the most recent NPT Review Conference failed to reach consensus because Russia disagreed with statements regarding its military activities near Ukrainian nuclear power plants. Russia's objection to the most recent NPT Review Conference, along with its nuclear sabre-rattling during the Ukraine conflict, demonstrate why many experts are concerned about the potential erosion of international nonproliferation norms.

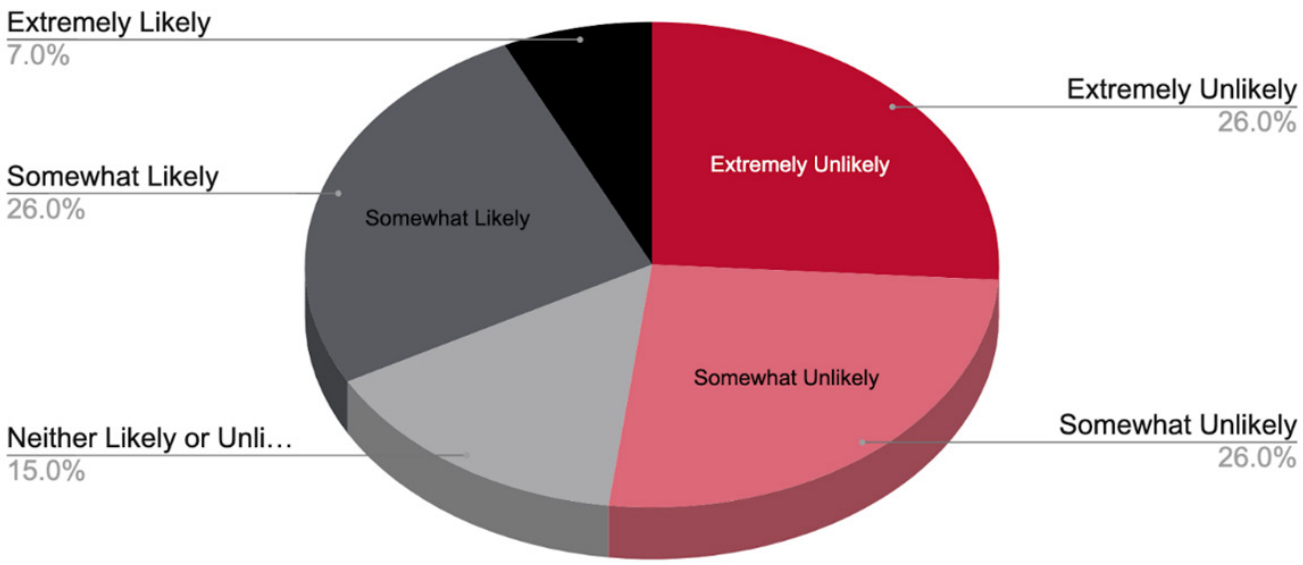
OUR POLL

To better understand the implications of Russia's behavior for the international nonproliferation regime, we conducted a CITS (Center for International Trade and Security) Poll of nonproliferation experts in late 2023. These polls are designed to provide timely estimates of professional opinions on current global issues. Our team has built a large network of strategic trade and nonproliferation professionals spanning countries, languages, and professions. Thanks to generous support from the Stanton Foundation, we are able to conduct periodic polling. For this round of questions, we collected 63 expert responses, providing insight into emerging nonproliferation issues.

WHAT TO MAKE OF RUSSIA'S RECENT BEHAVIOR

We first asked the experts their views on Russia's blocking of the NPT Review Conference final document. Specifically, we asked them, "Do you think Russia's objection is evidence of temporary political issues due to conflict in Ukraine? Or do you think it is indicative of a longer-term trend of Russia retreating from its international nonproliferation commitments?" The responses were divided almost

Figure 1: How likely is it that Russia will be a responsible player in the international nonproliferation regime over the next 10 years?



evenly, with 46% of respondents saying that Russia's objections are evidence of temporary political issues due to conflict in Ukraine. On the other hand, 48% of respondents believed that it demonstrates a longer-term trend of Russia retreating from international nonproliferation commitments. Two respondents provided their own reasons for Russia's behavior, blaming the West's "uncooperative attitudes" and "active coordination" against Russia.

We also asked respondents whether Russia will be a responsible player in the international nonproliferation regime over the next ten years (Figure 1). A majority (52%) believe that it is somewhat or extremely unlikely that Russia will be a responsible player in the next decade. By comparison, only 33% think it is somewhat or extremely likely. Ultimately, the experts seem pessimistic about Russia returning to the fold in the coming years.

HOW TO ENCOURAGE COOPERATION

Despite this pessimism, we asked the experts which strategies might encourage Russia to be a more responsible partner. Respondents identified diplomacy and deterrence as the two strongest avenues to encourage Russian cooperation. For diplomacy, respondents mentioned increased dialogue and renewed attempts at reaching international agreements. For deterrence, embargoes and sanctions were most frequently mentioned. Some respondents also recommended cooperative strategies such as economic incentives and consensus-building efforts.

EMERGING REGIONAL CHALLENGES

Like the most recent conference, the 2015 NPT Review Conference also failed to reach consensus. This was due to European objections over new rules in

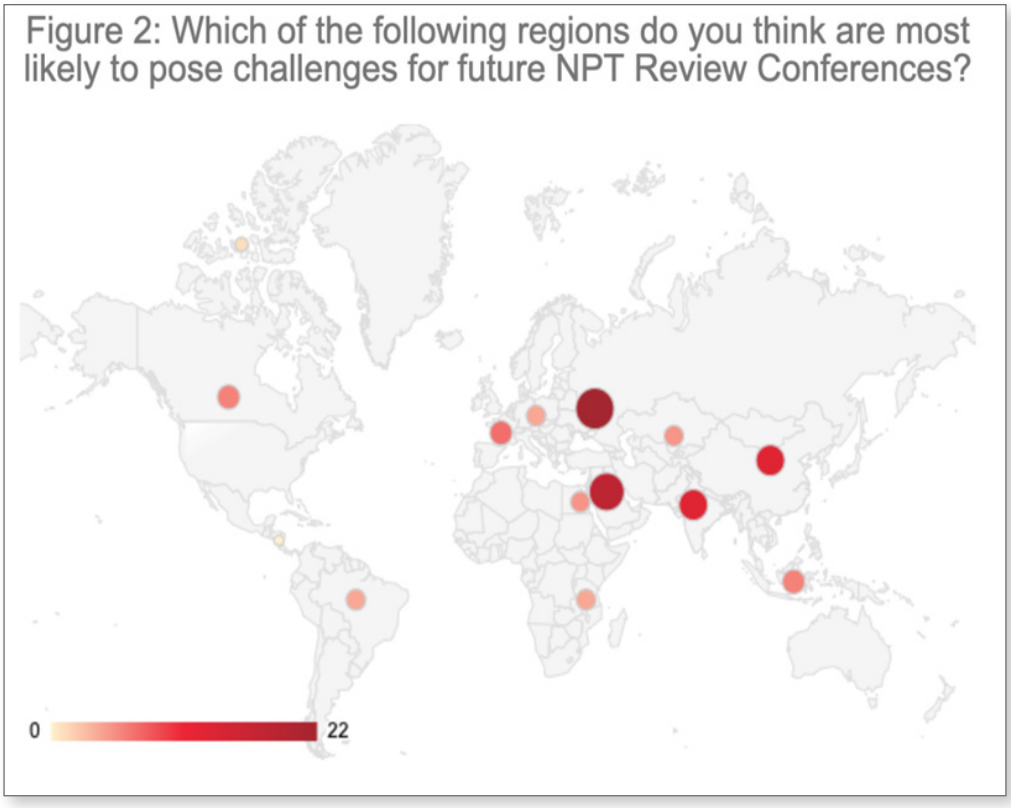
the Middle East. The failures of the two most recent conferences demonstrate how local or regional disputes can threaten global cooperation on nonproliferation. We asked the experts to speculate on where they see future challenges for cooperation. Respondents indicated that Eastern Europe and the Middle East will continue to pose challenges for future NPT Review Conferences (Figure 2). Notably, however, a large number of respondents also selected South Asia and East Asia as likely areas of concern in the future.

HYPERSONIC MISSILES

Finally, we took the opportunity to ask respondents about a specific issue that may affect nonproliferation efforts in the future. Russia has claimed that it deployed hypersonic missiles during the conflict in Ukraine. The Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR) only partially covers hypersonic missiles and related technologies. We asked respondents about their overall level of concern about hypersonic missile technology (Figure 3). A majority, 53% of our experts, reported that they are extremely concerned. An additional 20% expressed moderate concern. Only 10% of respondents expressed no concern at all. With a supermajority of the sample expressing at least some level of concern, it's clear that the proliferation of hypersonic technologies keeps many of our experts up at night.

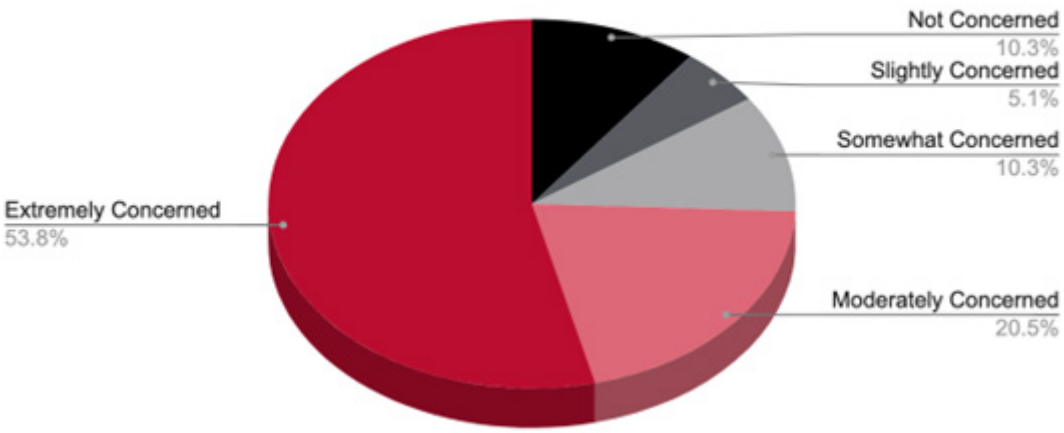
THE FUTURE OF NONPROLIFERATION

Predicting the future of global nonproliferation cooperation is a challenging task. However, if anyone can provide insights, it's the professional community that works on the frontlines. The results of our survey elucidate four key trends. First, Russian behavior will be hard to predict. Experts are divided



on where Russian intentions lie regarding nonproliferation cooperation. Second, most experts agree that the prospects for cooperation in the near term do not look good. Third, the proliferation of hypersonic missile technology is considered an issue of paramount concern. We are likely to see increasing scrutiny of this particular technology in the future. Finally, disagreements about future nonproliferation efforts are most likely to emanate from Eastern Europe and the Middle East. However, the experts have concerns about nearly every region of the planet. Addressing current challenges with respect to Russia may assist in mitigating those as-of-yet unknown crises.

Figure 3: Level of Concern for the Proliferation of Hypersonic Missile Technology



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