

Brazil, Nuclear Weapons and the G20: Mamãe's The Word

Maddi Fearn
University of Sheffield

Executive Summary

Traditionally an economic forum, in recent years the G20 has [expanded its scope](#) to reflect the interconnectedness of economic stability with global challenges such as health, climate, and security. Nuclear weapons first made their way onto the communiqué two years ago, where their use was described as 'inadmissible' amidst escalating geopolitical tensions. Last year's communiqué from New Delhi reaffirmed this statement but did not commit to advancing nonproliferation or disarmament efforts. This policy brief examines the Brazilian government's leadership on this issue in an era where, geopolitically, the countervailing pressures against non-proliferation are intensifying. In short, much more could have been done to use this unique forum of the G20 to advance an agenda that is going backwards.

Where does Brazil stand on nuclear disarmament?

As a committed advocate for disarmament, a signatory to both the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW), and an avowed non-nuclear state with one of the strongest claims to permanent [membership of an expanded UN Security Council](#) which it has repeatedly reiterated, Brazil had a unique opportunity as 2024 summit host to elevate discussions on nuclear disarmament. The country landed one small victory: the updated language in the [G20 communiqué](#) marks an incremental step forward. The revised statement reads: 'We recommit to advancing the goal of a world free of nuclear weapons and a safer place for all and will uphold our obligations in this regard.' This represents a shift in focus, moving beyond the mere assertion that nuclear weapons should solely serve as a

deterrent, to a reaffirmation of commitments to disarmament and non-proliferation. It highlights the very early signs of potential for the G20 to serve as a multilateral forum which could help to foster meaningful dialogue on global security by bringing together nuclear, non-nuclear, and nuclear-aspiring states.

However, it remains a modest beginning. President Lula could have done much more to emphasise the critical link between nuclear disarmament and the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) at this year's G20. Disarmament plays a crucial role in advancing these goals in several key ways. First, redirecting the substantial resources currently devoted to nuclear programs could significantly strengthen efforts in poverty alleviation, healthcare, education, and sustainable development. Disarmament would also eliminate the dangers of nuclear testing, ending its associated environmental degradation and its role in perpetuating health and gender inequalities. Furthermore, by reducing the risk of nuclear conflict, disarmament would help avert the catastrophic consequences of a nuclear war, which could devastate the environment and human life. The widespread destruction caused by such a conflict—ranging from nuclear winter and agricultural collapse to long-term ecological damage—would exacerbate global hunger and destabilise the climate, creating far-

reaching implications for humanity's survival.

It is disappointing that, with their long historical commitment to disarmament, Brazil did not fully capitalise on its role as summit host to ensure that the threat of nuclear warfare - and its profound impact on the SDGs - was brought into G20 discussions. If Brazil aspires to solidify its reputation as a global leader in sustainability, it should assertively highlight the intrinsic connection between nuclear disarmament and the SDGs in future international dialogues.

A Tale of Two Treaties

The Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), established in 1970, serves as a cornerstone in global nuclear policy, aiming to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons, promote disarmament, and facilitate the peaceful use of nuclear energy among its nearly universal signatories. The NPT formally recognizes five nuclear-weapon states (NWS)—the United States, Russia, China, France, and the United Kingdom—as the only legitimate possessors of nuclear weapons under international law, since they had tested nuclear devices before the treaty's signing in 1968. For these nuclear-armed states, the NPT stipulates that they commit to pursuing nuclear disarmament over time, thus moving toward the treaty's ultimate goal of complete disarmament. For non-nuclear-weapon states (NNWS) that signed the

treaty, the NPT requires them to abstain from developing or acquiring nuclear weapons.

Scholars such as [Egeland](#) and [Ritchie](#) argue that the structure of the treaty has entrenched a nuclear hierarchy, referred to as the 'global nuclear order.' This hierarchy fosters an unequal power dynamic by allowing nuclear-armed states to maintain and benefit from the structural advantages conferred by the NPT. Thus, while these states may publicly present themselves as supportive of disarmament, they privately prefer to maintain the current nuclear status quo, due to the power and exclusivity that come with the ability to threaten nuclear violence.

It is therefore unsurprising that, while nuclear-armed states frequently cite the NPT as evidence of disarmament progress since the Cold War, they continue to evade their own disarmament obligations. This resistance can be seen domestically as recently as October 2024, when non-proliferation groups urged the UK to reconsider aligning with France, Russia, and North Korea in opposing a [UN resolution to study the global and local impacts of nuclear warfare](#) on both physical and societal levels. Although the resolution aims to enhance scientific understanding of nuclear conflict risks, this 'no' vote underscores a deep-seated reluctance to advance disarmament efforts, even when framed in the context of sustainability.

This disregard for the NPT has seen polarisation among signatories reach an all time high in recent years, driven by the frustration of non-nuclear weapon states' over slow (or no) disarmament progress, concerns about nuclear weapon use, and demands for fairness in the nuclear order.

This weakening of the legitimacy of the NPT has led non-possessor states to develop alternative initiatives, such as the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW.) The TPNW (sometimes referred to as the Nuclear Ban Treaty) entered into force in January 2021, and was adopted by 122 UN member states in 2017 and is the first legally binding international agreement to comprehensively prohibit nuclear weapons, aiming for their total elimination. The TPNW prohibits the development, testing, production, stockpiling, and use or threat of use of nuclear weapons, distinguishing it from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), which focuses primarily on controlling nuclear weapon spread rather than total abolition.

The Winter of Our Discontent

The shadow of nuclear escalation looms larger than ever in today's volatile political climate, casting a chill over global disarmament efforts. The escalating conflict in Ukraine, marked by Russia's frequent nuclear rhetoric and its suspension of the New START Treaty, has

amplified fears of nuclear escalation. Compounding these tensions are reports that Ukraine's Defence Ministry is allegedly exploring the development of a "dirty bomb" by extracting plutonium from spent nuclear fuel, amid concerns over diminishing U.S. military aid following Donald Trump's return to the White House.

President Putin's warning in September that Russia would consider deploying nuclear weapons if struck with conventional missiles further highlights the fragility of nuclear deterrence. This risk has been heightened after the U.S., only a day before the G20 summit in Rio, approved the use of Army Tactical Missile System (ATACMS) weapons for strikes within Russian territory. Russia's response has been to [officially lower the threshold](#) for its use of nuclear weapons in conflict.

Beyond Europe, North Korea's record-breaking missile tests and advancing nuclear capabilities, alongside China's rapid nuclear arsenal expansion, underscore the erosion of the global arms control framework. India and Pakistan continue to clash over Kashmir, and since they have no formal arms control agreements or communication channels for nuclear risk reduction, misunderstandings or escalations are a constant threat. The US and Israel view a nuclear-armed Iran as a significant threat to regional and global security, [while China is expanding its nuclear weapons arsenal at scale](#). All of

these concurrent issues have created a stall in progress under the NPT, and even more so for the TPNW.

Evidently, there is friction amongst these leading states when it comes to nuclear weapons. And whilst this does make diplomatic efforts difficult, it doesn't make them impossible. Despite its vast spectrum of interests, the G20 remains a key forum for multilateral diplomacy, where these tensions can be addressed through dialogue and trust building. It isn't likely that the G20 will race to adopt the TPNW any time soon, but in the same way that it took 13 years from discussions regarding non-proliferation after the cold war to solidify into the NPT entering into force, meaningful discussions can start in this forum. This focus on collaboration in responding to intractable global problems was, after all, the original premise of the G20.

This is especially important given that it provides such a rare opportunity to gather states such as China, India, Saudi Arabia around one table, offering a chance to kick start talks, reinforce multilateral frameworks, and foster cooperative approaches, as has been the case in previous efforts on climate action and economic stability.

All The World's A Stage

Brazil—a signatory of both the NPT and the TPNW—has consistently championed nuclear disarmament and non proliferation

on international platforms. Notably, from the cluster of G20 states who voted in support of the TPNW, Brazil's Aloysio Ferrerira was the only Foreign Minister to publicly comment on and celebrate the treaty's approval. He said it was a 'victory of humanity in the search for a world free of the absurdity of nuclear weapons', adding 'the new Treaty is an important complement to Article 6 of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), which established the obligation of nuclear disarmament.' Notably, here he presents the TPNW as a natural progression from Article 6 of the NPT (which focuses on reducing and eventually eliminating nuclear arsenals), reinforcing that if states are genuinely committed to disarmament, they must embrace the TPNW as a vital step forward.

Furthermore, Brazil actively participates in diplomatic initiatives at NPT Review Conferences, and has urged nuclear states, including the U.K., to honour their disarmament commitments. As a pivotal player in the Humanitarian Initiative that led to the TPNW and in [establishing Latin America as a nuclear-weapon-free zone through the Treaty of Tlatelolco](#), Brazil has significantly influenced global discussions on nuclear weapons. These diplomatic achievements position Brazil as uniquely qualified to advocate for stronger non-proliferation commitments among G20 nations.

Such advocacy opportunities are rare. The G20's declaration in 2022 that the use of nuclear weapons was "inadmissible" could have served as a springboard for more ambitious commitments. However, as Melissa Parke, Executive Director of the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN) noted, while the 2023 communiqué reaffirmed ['the obvious truth that the use, or threat of use, of nuclear weapons is unacceptable'](#), it fell short of translating these words into action.

Examining the track record of G20 host governments reveals why stronger commitments remain elusive. 2022 hosts Indonesia, despite being a TPNW signatory, focused primarily on regional advocacy through its role in the Southeast Asia Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone. Meanwhile, 2023 hosts India, which is not an NPT signatory and maintains a policy of nuclear deterrence, views its arsenal as essential for national security. It's less than surprising that disarmament didn't make it onto their agenda.

Brazil has both the diplomatic credibility and the thematic alignment to push for more robust discussions on disarmament. With 'Building a Just World and a Sustainable Planet' as the 2024 summit's theme, the stage was set for Brazil to lead. But this critical moment - likely the first and last chance for President Lula to have these leaders gathered around one table - was not fully leveraged.

To SDG or not to SDG: Nuclear weapons vs the Sustainable Development Goals

The G20 leaders' communiqué from Rio marks a small step forward thanks to its recommitment to non-proliferation and, most notably, the aspiration for a world free of nuclear weapons. However, a clear dichotomy remains between Brazil's ambition to lead on sustainability and its failure to explicitly link nuclear disarmament to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) during summit talks.

Nuclear disarmament provides a critical foundation for advancing multiple SDGs. Redirecting the vast financial resources currently invested in nuclear weapons could significantly bolster efforts to combat poverty (SDG 1), improve global health (SDG 3), enhance educational access (SDG 4), and build resilient infrastructure (SDG 9). Beyond the financial argument, reducing nuclear arsenals and reinforcing disarmament agreements would lower global tensions and foster the diplomatic cooperation necessary to achieve peaceful institutions (SDG 16) and stronger international partnerships (SDG 17).

[Nuclear radiation exposure already disproportionately impacts women and girls.](#) and female survivors of nuclear events have faced [stigma and reproductive health challenges.](#) Disarmament would

reduce these gender-specific health and social risks and help achieve the goals of SDG 5: Gender Equality. Furthermore, denuclearisation also supports SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-Being) by preventing further health crises that would arise from radiation. A nuclear conflict would also severely disrupt global agriculture, blocking sunlight and causing 'nuclear winter,' leading to crop failures, mass famine, and food insecurity, which poses a significant challenge to SDG 2: Zero Hunger.

Furthermore, the testing and production of nuclear weapons already severely impacts ecosystems, [contaminating water sources and degrading land.](#) By eliminating these activities, disarmament directly protects natural resources and biodiversity. Reduced contamination aligns with goals to ensure clean water (SDG 6), preserve ecosystems both on land and below water (SDG 14, SDG 15), and reduce climate impacts (SDG 13), fostering a more sustainable and safe environment for future generations.

The devastation a nuclear conflict would cause would completely nullify any possibility of achieving the sustainable development goals. Therefore, it is disappointing that Brazil did not go far enough in emphasising the intersection between nuclear disarmament and the SDGs at this year's G20. They may not have such an opportunity again. Nevertheless, incremental progress at the

G20 is valuable, and the strengthening of the communiqué signals a potential shift toward meaningful action and tentative progress. Yet even as we sit here in the G20 media centre, Moscow's approval of a new doctrine lowering the threshold for nuclear weapon use is a stark reminder: much, much more is needed, and urgently.

Maddi Fearn is an MA Broadcast Journalism student in the School of Journalism, Media and Communication at the University of Sheffield.