



Angela Kane¹ (August 2026)

Right to use science and technology for peaceful purposes (RUPP)

The Treaty for the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) establishes the requirement that nuclear-weapon states not transfer nuclear weapons technology to non-nuclear-weapon states to prevent the proliferation of nuclear weapons. Export controls have come to play a key role in states meeting these non-proliferation commitments, especially through the Nuclear Suppliers Group, which was established in 1974 as a multilateral export control regime for nuclear technology. Other export control regimes, such as the Australia Group, which controls biological and chemical weapons technology, play a similarly essential role in maintaining the non-proliferation commitments laid down in the Biological Weapons Convention and the Chemical Weapons Convention.

However, these same treaties also include as one of their foremost principles “the inalienable right to develop research, production and use of nuclear energy for peaceful purposes”², thus creating tension with the need to maintain non-proliferation commitments. Many states, especially

within the Non-Aligned Movement, have previously criticized export control regimes for their exclusive membership and for restricting the rights of developing countries to peaceful uses of nuclear, biological, and chemical technologies.

This criticism of multilateral export control regimes and of unilateral export controls has in recent years been expressed through a series of resolutions in the UN General Assembly, championed by the People’s Republic of China – which argues that export controls have gone too far in restricting the right of states to use science and technology for peaceful purposes – and call on the Secretary General to identify undue restrictions on exports to developing countries.

The first resolution on this topic was introduced by China in 2021 in the First Committee of the United Nations General Assembly, which deals with Disarmament and International Security.

¹ The paper benefitted from the research assistance of Zoe Edwards, Research Intern at the Vienna Center for Disarmament and Non-Proliferation (VCDNP)

² Language in Article IV of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT)

Some background on initiating a General Assembly resolution

There are 20 items on the First Committee's agenda; 18 are substantive, two organizational. It is interesting to note that the issue was first introduced under Agenda item 100, 'General and complete disarmament', which has some 30+ sub-items. The year after, in 2022, the resolution had its own agenda item, *Promoting international cooperation on peaceful uses in the context of international security*, and I will refer to it by its UN moniker in this paper.

The agenda items in the First Committee provide space for each State to discuss their positions on disarmament-related matters and offer the opportunity to come to consensus, to reach common understandings and principles, as well as agree on norms of behavior. In reality, there is discord between Member States' perceptions: they often differ widely from the ways other states perceive their own situation, or the global state of affairs.

As a general rule, States tabling – or sponsoring – a resolution need to do a lot of advance consultation and political advocacy, often months, sometimes even a year before obtaining political support from other Member States, including the very important co-sponsorships of the resolution. Partners are sought: who is with us, who can carry heft by adding numbers and/or political backing.

When the first resolution³ was adopted in 2021, it had 13 co-sponsors in addition to China. Except for the Russian Federation and Belarus, they came from the South: Burundi, Cameroon, Equatorial Guinea, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kiribati, Pakistan, Syria, Venezuela and Zimbabwe.

Resolution 234

The discussion on resolution 234 showed the divisions clearly: not only was the resolution voted on in its totality, but the four operative paragraphs (including one to place the item on the 2022 agenda) were voted on individually. Let me mention that in 2021 the First Committee held 66 votes on multiple provisions of the 60 draft resolutions submitted.

What did these operative paragraphs contain that aroused divisions? Operative paragraph 1 *"urges all Member States (...) to take concrete measures to promote international cooperation on materials, equipment and technology for peaceful purposes, in particular not to maintain any restrictions incompatible with the obligations undertaken"*.

The second operative paragraph *"requests the Secretary-General to seek the views and recommendations of all Member States on all aspects of promoting international cooperation on peaceful uses"*, and operative paragraph 3 *"requests the Secretary-General to submit a report containing the views and recommendations to the General Assembly"*.

The voting in the First Committee on all resolutions takes place at the end of October/early November, and the final voting in the General Assembly is usually 6–7 weeks later. While the resolution obtained 75 "yes" votes in both chambers, the number of "no" votes dropped from 55 in the First Committee to 52 in the General Assembly, and the abstentions fell from 43 to 27 in the GA. The changes occurred primarily in the non-aligned ranks, with most NAM states abstaining, and some voting against the resolution.

The views of Member States are reflected in their statements on the resolution, and especially in the "explanation of vote". While many states saw the resolution as a critique and constraint imposed by the multilateral export control regimes, others (such as Singapore, which voted in favor) saw the resolution as compatible with existing international arrangements for non-proliferation, and expected that it would strengthen the global non-proliferation regime.

From the "no"-vote side, let me cite from Japan's explanation of vote:

This resolution pits peaceful uses against non-proliferation and creates unnecessary conflict between them. Japan believes that preventing the proliferation of weapons and sensitive technologies actually paves the way for promoting international cooperation on peaceful uses. (...) This draft resolution could rather lead to the hampering of existing international cooperation in science and technology for peaceful uses by undermining international non-proliferation efforts, including existing export control regimes.

Switzerland voted no, as the text “*wrongly challenged the legitimacy of export controls*”. Brazil abstained, noting that “*proposals by other delegations to balance out the text were not incorporated*”.

A “no” vote was also cast by the Philippines, which stated: “*As a country that implements a Strategic Trade Management Framework, we are of the view that export control regimes do not place undue restrictions on international cooperation on peaceful uses and instead concretely uphold our non-proliferation obligations.*”

Parallel to resolution 234, another resolution with a similar title was tabled in 2021, namely the “Role of science and technology in the context of international security and disarmament”. This agenda item has been on the docket of the First Committee since 1988, when India first introduced it and is considered every other year.

The 2021 resolution on this item (A/RES/79/23) was adopted without vote (meaning two-thirds of the GA members voted in favor). It was sponsored by 21 Member States, a mixture of Western and NAM countries, with Equatorial Guinea and Kiribati co-sponsoring this resolution as well as the one submitted by China.

What is the difference between the Chinese-sponsored text and resolution 23? Resolution 23 focused on developments in science and technology **for disarmament and disarmament-related purposes**, including the verification of disarmament, arms control and non-proliferation instruments, and to make **disarmament-related** technologies available to Member States (author’s highlights).

In an explanation of position, a joint statement⁴ by France, the United Kingdom, and the United States, supported this text because

we believe that this resolution appropriately recognizes international efforts to understand the benefits and challenges of the development of science and technology in the field of disarmament, non-proliferation and arms control. (It) recognizes the importance of international mechanisms to regulate the transfer of sensitive technologies for peaceful uses.

It is only through the development and strengthening of these mechanisms as technology evolves that we can preserve the free flow of technology while also addressing the risk of proliferation by States and non-State actors.

Referring to specific provisions of a limited number of treaties (CWC, BCW, and NPT), it was noted that **none of these three treaties recognized a “right to technologies” or a “right to sensitive materials”** (author’s highlights).

Developments in the following year

The discussion on science and technology continued in 2022. Because resolution 234 had requested the UN Secretariat to issue a report with the views of Member States, this was issued in June⁵ with a compilation of submissions from 33 Member States plus the European Union, in a total of 78 pages of opposing and supporting views.

I invite you to look at the language in the report: the criticism of the opponents had become much more pointed (resolution 234 was “*a failure*”, and a consequence of 234 would be to “*unnecessarily impede access to exports for legitimate, peaceful purposes*”, and it “*infringes a fundamental principle of the United Nations to determine how best to safeguard their national security*”, while being a “*disappointing politicization of export controls and their work*” etc.).

Supporters of resolution 234 “*reject the imposition of unilateral coercive measures by individual States or Groups of States against third countries*” and criticize the “*lack of transparency and a deficit of inclusiveness with regard to their membership*”. “*Certain countries have abused export controls through the imposition of unlawful unilateral sanctions*”, several states alleged, while others noted the “*destructive impact of unilateral sanctions policies on the integrity of the global economic system and supply chain security as alarming and troubling*”.

The views also contained proposals for ways forward for the consideration of both sides. Here is a sample:

- **Australia**: Focus instead on further expanding and strengthening existing non-proliferation arrangements while continuing to safeguard legitimate trade;
- Explore, with others, how the United Nations could play a greater role in facilitating or brokering capacity-building for States to strengthen national export control arrangements;
- **Belarus**: Establish international legal frameworks and cooperation mechanisms for the promotion of peaceful uses of science and technology;
- **Canada**: Establish a new program: the Sustained Dialogue on Peaceful Uses;
- **China**: Practice true multilateralism, uphold the principle of shared consultation, contribution, and benefits;
- Promote dialogue: Make full use of the review mechanisms of existing treaties and conventions; optimize the existing non-proliferation export control regimes;

⁴ A/C.1/76/L.6 of October 5, 2021

⁵ A/77/96 of June 13, 2022

encourage them to admit all interested and eligible states in accordance with the principle of openness;

- Establish confidence-building measures; encourage members to report, on a voluntary basis, on their national implementation measures;
- **Italy**: Provide capacity-building in order to assist States that are not yet implementing effective export controls;
- **Kenya**: Hold regular ministerial-level meetings;
- Improve and formalize coordination at an institutional level between various entities;
- **Malaysia**: Develop research, production and use of nuclear energy for peaceful purposes, without discrimination;
- **Netherlands**: Safeguard and strengthen the existing international framework, which is essential for trade, stability and peace;
- Discussions on the transfer of sensitive items and technology and trade for peaceful uses and alleged undue restrictions should take place within the Second Committee (Economic and Financial Committee), not the First Committee.
- **Pakistan**: Adopt an agreed, criteria-based and non-discriminatory approach to promoting access to technologies for peaceful purposes;
- Establish a consultative process, in the form of an open-ended working group, for developing recommendations for more equitable access to technologies for peaceful purposes;
- **Saudi Arabia**: Emphasize the importance of establishing nuclear-weapon-free zones that will provide non-nuclear states with a security guarantee that nuclear technology will not be misused for weapons purposes;
- **Syria**: Promote increased transparency and expanded membership in export control systems; and explore possibilities for formulating confidence-building measures;
- **United Kingdom and United States**: Announce support for the Sustained Dialogue on Peaceful Uses initiative to be launched in August 2022;
- **European Union**: Further strengthen multilateral export control regimes and capacity-building in third countries.

Developments at the First Committee and General Assembly in 2022

China submitted another resolution on this topic in 2022. While the first operative paragraph was identical to resolution 234, the second paragraph⁶

encourages Member States, on the basis of the report of the Secretary-General, (...) to continue dialogues on promoting peaceful uses and relevant international cooperation, including by identifying gaps and challenges, as well as ideas and opportunities for strengthening cooperation, and exploring possible ways forward.

The third operative paragraph asked for the item to be included in the 79th Session of the General Assembly, a signal that consideration by the GA would now be biennial.

Resolution 96 had thirteen co-sponsors, including China. Eight states co-sponsored again: Belarus, Equatorial Guinea, Eritrea, Pakistan, Russian Federation, Syria, Venezuela and Zimbabwe. Cambodia, Cuba, and Laos were new co-sponsors in 2022.

Voting in the First Committee showed that the resolution had gained some strength. A/RES/77/69 obtained 88 “yes” votes, 54 “no”, and 31 abstentions. When voting took place in the General Assembly, the “yes” votes numbered 94 (with 53 “no” and 28 abstentions).

Voting again took place on individual paragraphs⁷, this time also on three preambular paragraphs that were opposed by the proponents of the multilateral export regimes. The language used in these preambular paragraphs was objected to in a number of statements by Member States and included:

- concern about “*the undue restrictions on exports to developing countries of material, equipment and technology for peaceful purposes*”;
- “*proliferation controls are best addressed through multilaterally negotiated, universal, comprehensive and non-discriminatory agreements*”;
- “*non-proliferation control arrangements should be transparent and open to participation by all States*”.

Voting on the individual paragraphs closely mirrored the vote on the resolution as a whole but clearly showed the fault-lines in the Assembly. From 2021 to 2022, movement on this issue was slow and compromise clearly out of reach.

⁶ A/RES/77/96 of December 16, 2022

⁷ See A/77/393 of November 10, 2022, Report of the First Committee

Developments in 2024

In 2024, the number of the resolution's co-sponsors had swelled to 28, including China. The newcomers were Congo, Dominica, Gambia, Kyrgyzstan, Mali, Nauru, Niger, Nigeria, Rwanda, Solomon Islands, and Somalia. It was adopted as A/RES/79/80 on December 10, 2024. The “yes” votes again increased slightly in the First Committee, from 102 in favor to 53 “no” votes and 25 abstentions. In the General Assembly, the numbers were similar: 105 “yes”, 53 “no”, 24 abstentions.

The preambular paragraph “*noting with concern the undue and increasing restrictions on exports*”, and so on, was again voted on separately⁸, as was the second operative paragraph which had similar language to the 2022 resolution⁹ (“*encourages all Member States, on the basis of sovereign equality (...) to continue dialogue on promoting peaceful uses and relevant international cooperation (...)*”).

I should note that voting on resolutions has become more frequent in recent years due to the increasing geopolitical polarization among Member States. In 2024, it reached a new height in the First Committee and the General Assembly: adopting 72 texts required nearly 200 separate recorded votes.

In a press release issued after the voting in the First Committee, China's Ambassador for Disarmament Affairs Mr. Shen Jiang emphasized¹⁰ “*that the problem of undue restrictions on exports to developing countries does exist. Member States (should) take concrete measures (...) and not maintain any restrictions incompatible with the obligations undertaken.*”

Developments in 2025 and 2026

In a meeting of the UN Security Council on 6 August 2025 on Non-proliferation and weapons of mass destruction¹¹, China called for “*firmly safeguarding the right to peaceful uses of science and technology. Enjoying the benefits of scientific and technological progress is the legitimate right of all countries.*” Referring to resolution 76/234 sponsored by China, Ambassador Geng Shuang called to “*eliminate restrictions imposed upon developing countries.*”

Another mention of China's initiative was included in the Statement by the Chinese Delegation¹² at the Third Session of the Preparatory Committee for the 2026 NPT Review Conference, at which China called to “defend the

legitimate rights of all countries”. China noted the promotion—with other countries—of the resolution it had initiated and posited that it “*made a positive contribution to protecting the legitimate rights and interests of all countries in the peaceful uses of science and technologies*”.

Finally, let me mention the opening statement made by Uganda on behalf of the Non-Aligned Movement in the First Committee on October 8, 2025. It reiterated NAM's position on the Chinese initiative but toned down the language, which in 2024 had included “*non-proliferation policies should not undermine the inalienable rights of States..., concern that undue restrictions on exports...*”

Instead, the statement said:

NAM reaffirms the inalienable right of each State to develop research, and to the production and use of nuclear energy, including the sovereign right to develop full national nuclear fuel cycle for peaceful purposes without discrimination. NAM once again reaffirms the sovereign right of each State to define its national energy policies. NAM stresses that any decisions on multilateral approaches to nuclear fuel cycle shall be made by consensus and without prejudice to the inalienable right of each State to develop a full national nuclear fuel cycle.

China is clearly using its prominent place on the geopolitical stage to pursue its support of the initiative. Since the item was made biennial and so was not considered at the General Assembly in 2025, Ambassador Shen Jian made a statement at the Non-Proliferation Treaty Review Conference in May this year¹³ to announce that another resolution would be submitted in 2026. He also used strong language to denounce the export control regimes. He called on the relevant parties to

uphold fairness and justice and jointly create a new landscape for nuclear energy cooperation. Efforts to prevent nuclear proliferation should not undermine the legitimate rights of all countries, especially developing countries, to the peaceful uses of nuclear energy. The international community should firmly oppose any practices that, under the pretext of non-proliferation, draw ideological lines, overstretch the concept of national security, adopt discriminatory approaches to normal nuclear cooperation, or impose illegal sanctions on entities and individuals of other countries. We firmly oppose the use of export controls as a tool for decoupling and supply chain disruption, or as a means to pursue geopolitical objectives.

⁸ In the First Committee: 87 “yes,” 53 “no,” 22 abstentions on preambular paragraph 18. In the General Assembly, 92 “yes,” 54 “no,” 21 abstentions

⁹ In the First Committee: 87 “yes,” 53 “no,” 17 abstentions on operative paragraph 2. In the General Assembly, 96 “yes,” 54 “no,” 16 abstentions

¹⁰ https://un.china-mission.gov.cn/eng/hyyfy/202412/t20241220_11507845.htm

¹¹ S/PV.9973

¹² https://un.china-mission.gov.cn/eng/chinaandun/disarmament_armscontrol/202505/t20250509_11617872.htm

¹³ Statement by Mr. Shen Jian, Ambassador for Disarmament Affairs of China, May 8, 2026, https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/wjbj/zjzg_663340/jks_665232/kjfywj_665252/202605/t20260508_11907007.html

Where are we now?

The foregoing account demonstrates the considerable effort China has put into building support for its initiative and to position itself as a major nuclear science power committed to South–South cooperation. Opponents, however, see this as an attempt to highlight and delegitimize the increasing number of export control measures that the United States, whether alone or with partner governments, has imposed on China (and other States) in recent years.

Technologies using nuclear and radioactive materials have the potential to transform health care, agriculture, industry, and energy. Articles IV and V of the NPT recognize the “inalienable right of all Parties” to research and recognize the potential benefits but stipulate its use with “appropriate international observation and through appropriate international procedures”¹⁴. Considering the NPT’s intensive review process, it is surprising that this matter was not addressed in the NPT meetings rather than being brought to the General Assembly.

Many non-nuclear states resent the failure by the nuclear states in the NPT and other arms control treaties to honor the commitments they made in those treaties, yet their forceful statements in the treaty discussions have not moved the positions of the major powers for decades. Disarmament, as demanded by Article VI of the NPT, has remained elusive. Let me note that the last three NPT Review Conferences (2015, 2022 and 2026) were unable to adopt a consensus Final Document, reflecting the divisions in the international community.

The statements and votes in the First Committee and the General Assembly show that many States from the South have long harbored grievances that have increasingly come out into the open in recent years. These States feel excluded from the mechanisms that impose rules on them and force them to abide by those rules, even though they were made without their consent.

While the discussion was tabled and conducted in the First Committee, the issue is not limited to non-proliferation and arms control. It raises issues of development and also of trade negotiations. A sovereign State can unilaterally impose tariffs; it can also impose rules to restrict shipments of sensitive material to foreign companies that pose a national security threat to them.

In a SIPRI brief¹⁵ published in December 2024, the authors discuss the US claim that the controls are aimed at limiting

transfers of technology that might advance China’s military capabilities. At the same time, US officials have spoken about using export controls, domestic subsidies, and other policy tools to stay ahead of other states in key technology areas. Limiting China’s access to advanced chips is one such restriction, as are controls on transfers of advanced semiconductors and quantum computers. In response, China initiated a request for dispute-resolution consultations with the US through the World Trade Organization.

Export controls, however, are used not only by the United States but also by China, which dominates the mining and processing of rare earth minerals. Chinese restrictions affect not only the US but also supply chains and industrial bases worldwide, thus hindering development globally.

It is, however, difficult to isolate export controls from national security–related technology controls as part of a trade negotiation. Recently, US Secretary of the Treasury Scott Bessent¹⁶ said that Beijing “made a real mistake” by threatening to shut off exports of its rare earths, insisting the US would secure alternative supplies within two years. Bessent said that the US and Chinese leaders had reached an “equilibrium” but warned that China would not be able to keep using its critical minerals as a “coercive tool.”

It is clear that political considerations are germane to measures such as export controls, but what also needs to be taken into account are the ways States have interpreted and implemented the various mechanisms that control access to peaceful uses of nuclear energy.

China’s initiative in the General Assembly has brought the issue into focus and spurred States in the various regimes to clarify and explain the benefits of export controls, including a positive correlation between their adoption and participation in the trade in high-technology and dual-use items.

The 2024 resolution acknowledged the initiatives but implied that more could be done.

¹⁴ For a detailed account of the regulations applied to peaceful uses, see Governing the Atom Brief No. 8, “Harnessing Peaceful Uses: Frameworks for Safety, Security, and Non-Proliferation,” by Dr. Sarah Case Lackner, Ingrid Kirsten, and Benedict Höfler, December 2024, https://vcdnp.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/Governing-the-Atom-Brief-8_-Harnessing-Peaceful-Uses_Frameworks-for-Safety-and-Security_Web.pdf

¹⁵ “Implications of the UN resolutions on ‘international cooperation on peaceful uses’: Balancing non-proliferation and economic development,” by Kolja Brockman, Dr. Mark Bromley and Giovanna Maletta, December 11, 2024, <https://www.sipri.org/commentary/topical-backgrounders/2024/implications-un-resolutions-international-cooperation-peaceful-uses-balancing-non-proliferation-and>

¹⁶ Quoted in the Financial Times, October 31, 2025, <https://www.ft.com/content/399ad440-ecd3-4fb0-b97d-a0d8e0a8a22c>

What is the way forward?

It is unclear whether or how the resolutions have affected the substantive work of the various export control mechanisms. This could change, however, with the adoption of further resolutions and more States joining the initiative, as pressure will increase to justify their activities and exclusion. The NAM, for example, seems to have closed ranks on the resolution, with none of their members voting against it in 2024.

Rather than repeating the texts of the previous three resolutions, it would be helpful to make recommendations, possibly from the list proposed by Member States in 2022, supplemented by suggestions arising from side-event discussions held at the United Nations. One such suggestion was to make an assessment of the current functioning of export control regimes, and to discuss ways to address challenges related to transfers of technology for peaceful uses.

It would also be helpful to de-link trade issues from the export regimes. China's request to the World Trade Organization has already been noted. UNCTAD has a Commission on Science and Technology for Development, a platform with 43 members (including China) which facilitates concrete collaborations between Member States and other actors in the science, technology, and development space.

In the UN, the Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA)—currently headed by a Chinese national—has a Technology Facilitation Mechanism (TFM), which facilitates collaboration and partnerships of scientific and technological stakeholders. Other UN entities also have programs to address the issue: particularly UNCTAD, the UN Development Programme (UNDP), and the UN Technology Bank, focused primarily on technology transfer to developing countries. Let me also mention the efforts within the Sustainable Development Goals to promote and enable developing countries' access to science and technology.

These mechanisms could be used to advance the right to use science and technology for peaceful purposes. The nuclear issue rightfully belongs to the NPT discussions and the First Committee's Disarmament and International Security, but related trade issues should be dealt with in different fora.

It is clear that an assessment process would be beneficial. The outcome requires more transparency on the part of the States participating in these regimes. Export control measures have important security functions but these need to be explained, justified, and coordinated, not imposed top-down.

The Chinese initiative deserves credit for initiating a wider and more inclusive debate on how to facilitate the sharing of technology for peaceful purposes. The support given by the European Union to the 2026 NPT Review Conference foresaw regional consultations on several topics, such as “access to the benefit of peaceful uses of nuclear technology, including for the attainment of the Sustainable Development Goals”¹⁷. Such support is welcome and would help the—often acrimonious—discussions, but there was more debate in abstract terms rather than consideration of practical actions to address the issue. The gap between the two sides (China: access rights and non-discrimination) and the Western States (safeguards first) could not be bridged.

The resolution China submitted to the 2026 UN General Assembly will most likely be similar to the previous resolutions, as will be the reactions by the Western States. The needle will have to move to advance, and I hope that both sides are able to engage in serious discussions to reach agreement on the way forward.

¹⁷ Council Decision (EU) 2025/646 of 27 March 2025 in support of facilitating a successful outcome of the 2026 Review Conference of the Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons

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