This study seeks to explain and understand the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in world politics. The Treaty was signed in 1968 and entered into force in 1970. Since then, the NPT evolved into the global non-proliferation regime consisting of about 190 member-states by the beginning of this century. The Treaty set three objectives: (1) nuclear non-proliferation, (2) nuclear arms control and disarmament, and (3) civilian nuclear cooperation.

On the one hand, it is widely regarded that the NPT is the most successful case of an international security regime, and an indispensable foundation of the nuclear non-proliferation regime and international arms control and disarmament efforts. It is difficult to deny the positive role of the NPT to stop (reverse or delay) nuclear proliferation, and its contribution to international security as a whole. On the other hand, the Treaty has been intensively criticized for its discriminative nature and function at the NPT Review Conference since the 1970s. Non-Nuclear Weapon States, together with India, criticizes that five Nuclear-Weapon States especially the US and Russia do not make progress in their nuclear arms control and disarmament obligations. Although the 1995 NPT REC successfully decided its indefinite extension, the NPT-based non-proliferation regime has been increasingly facing problems and losing legitimacy and trust to deal with further and new proliferation challenge today.

This study analyzes the NPT to seek answers to the questions about (1) its evolution and dynamics, (2) its role and function, and (3) its meaning and relationship to the fundamental dilemma of order versus justice in world politics. For this purpose, this research uses three IR theories (Realism, Liberalism, and Grotian/ International Society theory). Based on theoretical and philosophical pluralism, comparative theoretical perspectives/approaches shed light on various aspects and meanings of the subject issue.

Realist theory explains that the great powers play crucial roles in the NPT evolution and dynamics. Great powers (the five NWS) use the Treaty as a tool of non-proliferation to
maintain their nuclear dominance (hegemonic stability, bipolar-stability, and great-powers concert). Strategic realists predict further nuclear proliferation anarchy but rational deterrence realists predict nuclear proliferation peace.

Liberal theory argues that ideas, rules, norms, and common interests do matter in the NPT evolution and dynamics. States join the NPT-based nonproliferation regime with expectations to halt nuclear proliferation and step toward arms control and disarmament (regime theory). Liberal democracies with developed economies are the key players to strengthen the NPT regime (democratic peace, economic interdependence). Cosmopolitan liberals are critical of the NPT-non-proliferation system, and argue the case for nuclear disarmament.

Grotian/International theory claims that the NPT should be explained and understood through both lenses of Realist competitive power politics and Liberal cooperative idealism. The NPT as a modern international law set norm, rules, and practice in the anarchical international society. Diplomacy and the great powers contribute to the international nuclear order based on the NPT. Legitimacy and efficiency indispensable for this international nuclear order consisted of realist hegemony, a balance of power, and liberal constitutionalism. What great powers and states-men do matter to the evolution of the NPT, which is the foundation of international nuclear order and justice.

This study concludes that both Realism and Liberalism offer significant insights of the NPT but not sufficient to understand the complexity of the NPT. Grotian theoretical pluralism contributes to explain and understand a more comprehensive picture of the NPT. The politics on the NPT reflect the complex and inter-related dynamics of power and ideas in the anarchical international society. The NPT regime as an international law and society reflect the inherent dilemma between order vs. justice in world politics at various levels of individuals, states, international society and world society.