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Policy brief

Pathways and Purposes for P-5 Nuclear Dialogue

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Pathways and Purposes for P-5 Nuclear Dialogue

In 2009 the UK began a new dialogue on nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation between the five states recognized as 'nuclear weapon States' under the NPT: the UK, USA, Russia, China, and France, otherwise known as the P-5 (the five permanent members of the UN Security Council). A sustained P-5 nuclear dialogue was an idea whose time had come. The UK, USA, and Russia are founding members of the NPT and are its three repository states. France and China eventually acceded to the Treaty in the early 1990s. Since then the P-5 have negotiated common statements at NPT Review Conferences to present a relatively united negotiating position to leading non-nuclear weapon state (NNWS) interlocutors. But a regular process of formal dialogue among the P-5 on nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation commitments over the NPT's five-year review cycles has been missing.

The P-5 process was initiated by UK Secretary of State for Defence, Des Browne, in 2008 speaking before the Conference on Disarmament (a first for a serving UK defence secretary). Browne (2008) stated, and it is worth quoting at length, that

If we are serious about doing our bit to create the conditions for complete nuclear disarmament, we must now also begin to build deeper technical relationships on disarmament between nuclear weapon states. So I come to this Conference with a proposal. As a next step, and following on from the AWE (Atomic Weapons Establishment) research, the UK is willing to host a technical conference of P-5 nuclear laboratories on the verification of nuclear disarmament before the next NPT Review Conference in 2010. We hope such a conference will enable the five recognised nuclear weapons states to reinforce a process of mutual confidence building: working together to solve some of these difficult technical issues. As part of our global efforts, we also hope to engage with other P-5 states in other confidence-building measures on nuclear disarmament throughout this NPT Review Cycle. The aim here is to promote greater trust and confidence as a catalyst for further reductions in warheads - but without undermining the credibility of our existing nuclear deterrents.

This led to the first P-5 meeting in London on 'Confidence Building Measures towards Nuclear Disarmament' in September 2009. The context was both the failure of the 2005 NPT Review Conference to agree a final text after an acrimonious fortnight of procedural wrangling between member states and the subsequent desire on the part of the UK and many other states parties to lay the foundations for a more cooperative Review Conference in 2010. Bringing representatives from the P-5 together proved difficult. This first meeting hosted by the UK is viewed in London as a major and praiseworthy diplomatic achievement in line with its commitment to take positive steps to meeting its obligations under the NPT.

Perceptions amongst the P-5 of the utility of the process were varied at the outset, but it gathered momentum and attracted high-level delegations (Interview, 2012).

Sustained engagement by the new Obama administration and other key states over 2009 and 2010 produced a successful outcome at the NPT Review Conference in May 2010 through a consensus final document containing a 64-point Action Plan on nuclear disarmament, non-proliferation, and peaceful uses of nuclear energy. The 2009 London Conference was therefore followed by a second P-5 gathering in Paris in July 2011, a third in Washington in June 2012, and fourth in Geneva hosted by Russia at the 2013 NPT Preparatory Committee to consider progress by the P-5 on commitments made in 2010. The P-5 have agreed to hold a fifth meeting in the context of the 2014 NPT PreCom (Joint Statement, 2013). The expectation is that China will host this conference. Meeting agendas have been broad and discussions reportedly fruitful. The meetings in Paris and Washington were taken forward by the host government with considerable preparatory work and consultation over a period of months involving all five states. Discussions to date have centred on voluntary nuclear weapons verification, transparency and confidence-building measures, non-proliferation (particularly with respect to Iran), exchanging information on nuclear doctrine and capabilities, and a process of standardising reporting to NPT meetings led by France. The process has generated a number of important outcomes, including: establishment of a working group, led by China, to develop an agreed glossary of key nuclear terms to submit to the 2015 NPT

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Review Conference; a common position to renew P-5 efforts to promote negotiation of a Fissile material Cut-off Treaty (FMCT) including support for the new Group of Governmental Experts (GGE) established by the UN General Assembly in January 2013 to catalyse FMCT discussions (UN General Assembly, 2013); and agreement on a process for P-5 signature of the

Protocol to the Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapon Free Zone, although this has yet to come to pass. This has all been supported by expert meetings, including a meeting of technical experts in London in April 2012 to discuss the joint UK-Norway project on the verified disablement of nuclear warheads (Burt, 2010; VERTIC, 2009), a meeting of experts in Beijing in September 2012 to discuss the nuclear glossary, and a UK-led P-5 Technical Experts Meeting in Vienna in March 2013 “to explore in what areas the P-5 could collaborate to enhance the implementation and effectiveness of the verification regime” (UK Statement, 2013).

The P-5 process is explicitly *not* a negotiating forum but a vehicle for dialogue on how the P-5 can meet the shared commitments they all made in the 2010 NPT Review Conference Action Plan (Interview, 2012). The process is a very welcome development, but what more can, or should, it try to achieve over the longer term? It is clear that sustained dialogue between the five NPT nuclear weapon states will be essential to achieving significant

progress towards a world free of nuclear weapons as a sustainable, long-term solution to the challenges of global nuclear order. From this broader perspective we can identify three interrelated pathways for this embryonic process, and they relate in part to the concept of 'minimum deterrence'.

1. Strategic Dialogue

The first pathway for the P-5 process views it as a means of fostering and managing long-term strategic stability through routine dialogue to build reciprocal knowledge, predictability, and familiarity in strategic relations between the United States, Russia and China. The UK and France are largely peripheral to this process and the process itself is only indirectly connected to the NPT's 2010 Action Plan disarmament commitments. The US and Russia have institutionalised a strategic dialogue through the START/New START process and associated tracks such as the Gore-Chernomyrdin Commission under Clinton and the NATO-Russia Council. The US and China have attempted to institutionalise a similar process in fits and starts, for example through the 1994 'US-China Lab-to-Lab Technical Exchange Program' (CLL), Clinton's 1997 Strategic Partnership, Bush's 2003 Strategic Dialogue and 2008 Nuclear Dialogue, Obama's 2009 Strategic and Economic Dialogue, and the resumption of the Strategic Dialogue in June 2012 following proposals in 2011 by then-Secretary of Defense Bob Gates after a four year hiatus.¹ It is often reported that poor communication and divergent goals hamper Washington and Beijing's efforts to improve mutual understanding of strategic and nuclear weapons policies (Oswald, 2011). Russia and China also have a form of strategic dialogue. Their 'strategic partnership' originated with the signing of the Treaty of Good Neighbourliness, Cooperation, and Friendship at the 1997 Moscow summit between Jiang Zemin and Boris Yeltsin and continues through regular summits, working groups and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (Mohan, 2009). There is one country absent from this type of long-term, major power, strategic/nuclear dialogue, and that is India.

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Institutionalising this type of strategic dialogue through the P-5 process has the *potential*, alongside sustained political and economic engagement, to dilute the mistrust that plagues US-Russia-China strategic relations and impedes deep cuts in nuclear forces. Radical nuclear reductions leading, eventually, to total nuclear disarmament will require far deeper mutual comprehension and accommodation of the different and often competing meanings these nuclear-armed major powers assign to their strategic weapons. This is only likely to

1 See the US Department of Defense's Annual Report to Congress on Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2013 for a more detailed breakdown of US-Sino military-to-military exchanges (Department of Defense, 2013: 61-64).

be realised through sustained dialogue and the political will and mandate to compromise hardline positions for common, long-term security gain.

A key question here is whether this sort of institutionalised strategic dialogue can successfully foster mutual and enduring confidence in the peaceful intentions of the major nuclear powers with regard to the political and economic structure of the post-WWII international

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order as the distribution of military, economic, and political power shifts over the coming decades. The answer has important implications for imagining a long-term P-5 nuclear dialogue and disarmament process that provides strategic reassurance. The success of any such process presupposes that these states do not identify negatively with one another and are concerned with absolute gains for all, based on reducing long-term global nuclear risk by marginalising and eventually

relinquishing nuclear weapons, rather than relative gains framed by antipathy and mistrust toward each other.² A common interpretation and acknowledgement of the imperatives of nuclear disarmament for sustainable management of long-term global nuclear risk will be necessary, but not sufficient, for the compromises needed over time for radical progress towards that goal between polities based on currently divergent and mutually-antagonistic (or anxiety-generating) political ideologies.

This is particularly acute for China and the United States where China consistently views US actions in East, South and Central Asia as a long-term strategy to contain its growing power through strategic encirclement, despite frequent US proclamations that welcome the emergence of a more prosperous and powerful China capable of playing a larger and more constructive role in global politics (Chase, 2010). US efforts, most recently in Obama's 'pivot to Asia' announced in Australia in November 2011, to balance deterrence, reassurance and restraint in its China policy are rightly or wrongly exacerbating China's concerns viewed through its pervasive 'century of humiliation' historical narrative (Obama, 2011).

The central frame of reference for this first broad and long-term potential pathway for a P-5 dialogue process is the evolution of mutual strategic security conceptions between the nuclear-armed major powers from the notion of strategic stability and balances of strategic military power towards strategic reassurance and collective security. The ambition, here, is to diminish the mistrust generated by current strategic security dilemmas and the dangers of self-fulfilling prophecies of a violent mid-century US-China hegemonic clash.

2 This is precisely what a recent report by the Nuclear Threat Initiative and European Leadership Network advocates for relations between Russia the US/NATO (Browne, Ischinger, Ivanov and Nunn, 2013).

2. Multilateralising START

A second pathway for the P-5 dialogue process is as a means of fostering consensus on what we might call multilateralising the START nuclear arms reduction process. This has a stronger association with the NPT 2010 Action Plan's disarmament commitments and encompasses a set of familiar issues associated with current understanding and practice of nuclear deterrence.

The smaller NWS, China, the UK and France, have all articulated similar conceptions of 'minimum deterrence' and configured their nuclear forces and doctrine accordingly. In the context of a P-5 process geared towards meeting NPT commitments a crucial question is whether it is possible for the P-5 or a wider P-5-plus grouping to elaborate and advocate a common set of 'minimum' policies and practices for nuclear possessor states.³ This is often implied when the US and Russia argue that the next or next-but-one START agreement will have to include the other nuclear weapon states as US and Russian strategic nuclear arsenals begin to approach those of the other nuclear powers. Moscow insisted in response to President Obama's nuclear disarmament speech in Berlin in June 2013 that all nuclear-armed states will have to be involved in any future nuclear arms reduction process (NTI, 2013). Within this pathway lies the potential for countries such as the UK and China to diversify START conceptions of nuclear disarmament beyond quantitative reductions in delivery vehicles and warhead numbers and a fixation on nuclear parity to include a range of qualitative measures that further restrict the practice of nuclear deterrence.

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A P-5 multilateralisation of the START process, then, could centre on a package of measures, including *inter alia*: further verifiable reductions in US and Russia nuclear delivery vehicles along with the much more difficult task of verifiable reductions in warhead numbers; statements from the UK, France and China of total warhead and delivery vehicle inventories; verification of UK, French and Chinese delivery vehicle numbers using START methodologies; a political commitment to cap UK, French and Chinese warhead numbers at current levels (though no doubt with caveats relating to conventional global strike and missile defence deployments by the US); a formal political commitment to no-first use of nuclear weapons; a formal commitment to reduce nuclear forces to the hundreds as soon as practicable; elimination of short-range nuclear weapons; a common/joint negative security assurance accepting of the 1996 International Court of Justice (ICJ) Advisory Opinion that

3 The idea of a P5-plus forum has been mooted in the context of steps to initiate negotiation of a fissile material cut-off treaty (FMCT) (Berger, 2012).

use of nuclear weapons is subject to international humanitarian law applicable in armed conflict; and reduced alert status of operationally-deployed nuclear forces.

This need not (and in all likelihood could not) be negotiated as a single instrument but could constitute an agreed programme of P-5 work in the context of successive NPT cycles

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that could include and encourage unilateral steps in a multilateral P-5 context with legitimate expectations of reciprocity. This could initially be cemented in a P-5 'Statement of Principles on Nuclear Arms Control, Disarmament and Non- Proliferation' (as suggested by Cottey, 2011: 2) to guide discussion and action or potentially a P-5 Strategic Concept akin to NATO's. The challenges are, of course, considerable. Each nuclear

weapon state has evolved its own idiosyncratic conception of what constitutes a 'credible' nuclear deterrent threat in terms of force structure, policy, posture, history, identity, and domestic politics. Some of these conceptions have become naturalised and deeply resistant to change, for example the UK commitment to 'continuous-at-sea deterrence' (CASD), a US commitment to a strategic nuclear triad, and a Russian commitment to nuclear parity with the US come what may.

For this second long-term pathway the concept of 'minimum deterrence' serves a broad *normative role* as a conceptual tool for discussing, communicating (negotiating?) and operationalising a set of common P-5 understandings on nuclear policy and practice. It could usefully centre on an amalgam of UK, French, and Chinese conceptions of 'minimum' in order to reduce the quantitative, operational, declaratory, and political salience of nuclear weapons in relations between the P-5 and other nuclear-armed states outside the NPT.

3. NPT Action Plan in Full

A third, and final, pathway sees the P-5 process as a means of fostering consensus on *fulfilment* of (not just limited progress toward) the specific steps outlined in the 2010 NPT Review Conference Action Plan that itself builds on the 1995 NPT Review and Extension Conference's Principles and Objectives for Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament and the 2000 NPT Review Conference Final Document's '13 steps'. This is directly related to the Action Plan's disarmament commitments and includes some of the issues associated with potential multilateralisation of the START process above.

The statement issued by the P-5 after the Paris conference in 2011 reported a "determination to work together in pursuit of their shared goal of nuclear disarmament under article VI of the NPT, including engagement on the steps outlined in Action 5..." of the 2010 NPT RevCon Final Document (Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 2011). The June 2012 communiqué

stated that “The P-5 recognize the importance of establishing a firm foundation for mutual confidence and further disarmament efforts, and the P-5 will continue their discussions in multiple ways within the P-5, with a view to reporting to the 2014 PrepCom, consistent with their commitments under Actions 5, 20, and 21 of the 2010 RevCon final document” (Burt, 2012). Actions 20 and 21 refer to standardised reporting by NWS and NNWS to the NPT to enhance transparency. Action 5 commits the NWS to “accelerate concrete progress on the steps leading to nuclear disarmament” including further reductions in all types of nuclear weapons, steps to further diminish the role and significance of nuclear weapons in all military and security concepts, doctrines and policies, steps to prevent the use of nuclear weapons and eventually lead to their elimination, measures to lessen the danger of nuclear war and contribute to the non-proliferation and disarmament of nuclear weapons, steps to reduce the operational status of nuclear weapons systems, and steps that further enhance transparency and increase mutual confidence.

For this third pathway the concept of minimum deterrence can be framed as an *iterative process* that progressively restricts the compass of nuclear policy and practice and goes *beyond* current conceptions of what constitutes ‘minimum’ on a path to nuclear prohibition and elimination. This will inevitably entail a deep devaluing and delegitimation of nuclear use and possession and this in turn will require reconceptualising the political, strategic and military logics that underpin current understandings of ‘minimum’ operational and declaratory nuclear weapons policies and practices. Current conceptions of minimum based, for example, on UK and Chinese practice still leave the logic of nuclear deterrence undisturbed. Its underlying idea that a credible nuclear deterrent threat rests on the permanent operational deployment of many tens of thermonuclear warheads at high-readiness to fire for a range of specific and general contingencies remains intact. A process that cumulatively reduces the number, role, and legitimacy of nuclear weapons, in short their value (strategic, political, economic, cultural), will eventually and inevitably begin to restrict this idea of minimum deterrence in accordance with the expectations of many NNWS (Ritchie, 2013). This process of moving to *and beyond* current iterations of ‘minimum’ could include a legally-binding negative security assurance, a no-first use commitment in a politically or legally-binding instrument, fully de-alerted nuclear forces, non-deployment of nuclear weapons, total stockpiles numbered in tens rather than hundreds, and verified termination of the production of fissile material for weapons purposes. This is a long-term process of nuclear devaluation as an inescapable part of the disarmament process and it is one that will require the socialisation of the P-5 in the first instance into a common culture of minimum deterrence and nuclear restraint (Walker, 2010).

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Conclusion

Institutionalising a P-5 nuclear disarmament dialogue is an important act in and of itself. P-5 nuclear disarmament discussions have the potential to embed expectations of regular dialogue as 'normal', legitimate and necessary with commensurate political costs for defection. Successfully institutionalising a long-term dialogue will likely require an agreed programme of work and cumulative even if stuttering progress on agreed challenges. Concrete achievements will also be necessary over time to provide a compelling narrative for domestic audiences, to minimise P-5 defection from the process, and to convince sceptical non-nuclear weapon states (NNWS) that the P-5 are actively working towards fulfilment of political commitments made over successive NPT cycles through collaborative endeavour including, in the first instance, those made in 2010. Here, the P-5 process will have to disperse NNWS mistrust of P-5 collusion to shape a disarmament agenda that frames fulfilment of NWS NPT commitments in ways that fall well short of NNWS expectations. NNWS will be wary of the manner in which the P-5 have bundled Action 5 together with Actions 20 and 21. This can be read as a political move to enable the P-5 to assert progress on that bundle of action points by presenting a P-5 consensus on standardised reporting and transparency to the 2015 RevCon. Whilst such a consensus and subsequent reports will be an important and welcome step forward if it occurs, by itself it will do little to advance the agenda of Action 5.

Transparency in terms of agreed but evolving P-5 dialogue objectives and congruence with NPT commitments and key NNWS expectations of P-5 disarmament progress will therefore be important in maintaining a positive international political context for ongoing dialogue. Clearly a careful balance must be struck between maintaining P-5 cohesion to engender genuine progress and mutual confidence and demonstrating acceptable forms of progress

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to the NNWS community. NNWS expectations of concrete disarmament-related steps at the 2015 Review Conference will be high. As the chair of the 2012 NPT PrepCom, Australian Ambassador Peter Woolcott, noted at the UN General Assembly First Committee in October 2012, "The nuclear-weapon States delivered a very detailed statement to the PrepCom, but they need to show even more leadership and especially to report more. There is a high level of expectation on the nuclear-weapon States in this review cycle, notably the reporting by nuclear-weapon States on their Action 5 disarmament commitments at the third PrepCom session in 2014. There is a genuine interest in and hunger for information about what they are doing to meet their commitments. It may be a challenge, but the nuclear-weapon States need to feed that interest for information. Active transparency is in their interest" (Woolcott, 2012). The tension between legitimate expectations of substantive progress on the one

hand and a more conservative P-5 agenda on the other will need skilful management over the current intersessional period.

The hope and expectation is that ongoing dialogue and cumulative if small-scale practical achievements will generate sufficiently enhanced mutual understanding of nuclear weapons and production complex policies, practices, processes, and people as to be able to take decisive advantage of the altogether infrequent political opportunities to negotiate legally binding disarmament instruments. In short, a load-bearing organisational, cultural and inter-personal foundation to make collective disarmament hay when the political sun shines. This will require the P-5 to commit to a process of constructive dialogue beyond the 2015 NPT Review Conference.

An important component ripe for the UK and China (and France if its leadership is willing) is facilitating and embedding a common understanding of 'minimum deterrence' between the NWS from a contentious and contradictory pool of meanings. This will require all sides to be prepared to revisit ingrained conceptions of deterrence and the values assigned to nuclear weapons and recognise others' conceptions as legitimate rather than immature or duplicitous. This could generate, over time, a body of common knowledge between the P-5 on what strategic deterrence is, its operation, the meanings assigned to nuclear and non-nuclear deterrent capabilities, and the costs of deterrence failure; what Adler calls a common 'deterrence culture' (Adler, 2009: 92-94). From that common vantage point the P-5 can look to collectively ameliorate the strategic security dilemmas plaguing their relations in ways that further restrict conceptions of minimum deterrence and reassuringly diminish the numbers and salience of nuclear weapons in national security policy and practice (on security dilemmas and their mitigation see Booth and Wheeler, 2008).

The P-5 process has raised hopes of meaningful outcomes at the 2015 NPT Review Conference for non-nuclear weapon states. Failure to generate such outcomes will likely compound the regime's current malaise and risk disengagement from the treaty review process by disaffected NNWS. Egypt's decision to walk out midway through the 2014 NPT Preparatory Meeting in protest over the failure to convene the planned conference in Helsinki to initiate a process leading towards a Middle East zone free of nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction could be a one-off, or it could have set a precedent (Grossman, 2013). ■

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