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Building better security for wider Europe

Can Moscow and London find a way forward on the NPT?

GLOBAL SECURITY
REPORT

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The European Leadership Network (ELN) is an independent, non-partisan, pan-European NGO with a network of nearly 200 past, present and future European leaders working to provide practical real-world solutions to political and security challenges.

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Introduction

The 2020 Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) Review Conference (RevCon) marks an important milestone in the life of the global non-proliferation regime. Given the political circumstances, how can London and Moscow **display leadership and responsibility, create opportunities, positively shape the 2020 conference and advance the NPT agenda beyond RevCon?**

As the Nuclear-Weapon States (NWS), and two of the Treaty's three depositary states, the UK and Russia hold **pivotal roles within the NPT regime**. Having reduced its nuclear weapon stockpile, moved towards a single platform, and leading disarmament verification research, it can be argued that the UK is the most progressive NWS. Russia, with the world's most extensive inventory of nuclear warheads, has a strong track-record on promoting the entry into force of the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty, the Fissile Material Cut-off Treaty, and the Middle East Weapons of Mass Destruction Free Zone.

A successful RevCon demands leadership by NWS. **London and Moscow share a common interest** in preserving the longevity and viability of the NPT regime, facilitating constructive P5 relations, and strengthening arms control and disarmament.¹ They are also well-placed to champion creative and pragmatic solutions to overcome the current nuclear impasse. While coordinated or parallel action promises a more fruitful approach, a joint exploration of opportunities could also serve as a step to rebuild bilateral dialogue.

The current political tensions between London and Moscow are challenging to any bilateral activity and might outlive the 2020 NPT RevCon. But **strained relations are neither new nor have they blocked cooperation where it was of benefit to the interests of both sides**. At the heights of the Cold War, London and Moscow agreed on nuclear risk reduction measures and conducted activities under a range of bilateral agreements.² Today, discussions on updates to protocols preventing incidents at sea (INCSEAs) as well as work in partnership in the P5 Process show that some forms of dialogue remain feasible.

Undeniably, improving relations between the UK and Russia requires high-level consent and for London, consultation with NATO allies. But there are **plenty of fora and areas with varying levels of engagement, intensity, visibility, and impact on the NPT regime to explore**.

Non-proliferation pillar

- The UK and Russia endorse the establishment of the Middle East Weapons of Mass Destruction Free Zone (MEWMDFZ). As depositary states, London and Moscow could dedicate support to the Conference on the establishment of a MEWMDFZ by **appointing a special MEWMDFZ coordinator** to work from 2020 to 2025 on creating the environment for a zone. By investing political capital, they would signal that they continue to take the effort seriously.

- Given that US efforts towards a “complete, verifiable, irreversible denuclearisation” of the DPRK has made little if any progress so far, the UK and Russia could contribute to a peaceful solution, particularly by **raising the profile of agreements such as the NPT and the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT)**, and involving the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty Organisation (CTBTO) and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) as a requirement for any verification discussions.
- Both the UK and Russia are long-standing ratifying member states of the CTBT, which is enshrined in the NPT and is known as its sister Treaty. Given the fact that the CTBT has not entered into force, recent emphasis has always been on the eight remaining non-ratifying Annex 2 states. However, several other countries also must ratify the CTBT to reach universalisation. Moscow and London could work towards **engaging Pacific Forum states to sign up to the Treaty**. As the UK will no longer be a part of EU voluntary contributions to outreach and training, especially to the next-generation of test-ban supporters through the CTBTO Youth Group (CYG), the UK and Russia could **propose joint projects for emerging experts to partake**.

Disarmament pillar

The UK and Russian governments both signal interest in **exploring risk reduction measures**.

These aim at making nuclear deterrence more stable, nuclear weapons use less probable, nuclear weapons more safe and secure, and intentions more transparent. Stabilising relationships defined by nuclear weapons is especially crucial in light of the bilateral UK-Russian tension and growing NATO-Russian confrontation. Possible nuclear risk reduction measures are:

- Against some unwillingness to **reiterate the 1987 Gorbachev-Reagan statement** that “a nuclear war cannot be won and should not be fought” in the P5 format, the UK – which is currently chairing the P5 Process – and Russia could explore the interest of other NWS to issue this or a similar declaration³ outside of the P5 format. In the case of unilateral statements, Moscow and London could endeavour to achieve unification, or at least coordination, of language.
- **Improving public communication on the existence and status of current nuclear risk reduction measures**; including on hotline agreements, incident prevention mechanisms, missile launch notifications, and de-targeting commitments; could build greater international confidence and trust in the safety and security of nuclear weapons complexes. The planned P5 NPT RevCon side event on doctrines could serve as an appropriate forum. Alternatively, Moscow and London could sponsor a relevant briefing or individual events in parallel.
- Given the significant changes in the security environment since the Cold-War, Moscow and London could **pursue a unified definition of nuclear risk reduction within the P5**, and scope possible new areas to work on relevant measures. These could include non-targeting commitments and addressing non-traditional kinetic⁴ and non-kinetic disruptions to nuclear weapon command and control systems.

- Risks related to the existence of nuclear weapons are not limited to NWS. The UK and Russia, along with other NWS, could **scope out what the Non-Nuclear Weapon States perceive as imminent nuclear weapons risks and work backwards to reduce them**. The “Stepping Stones” approach and the Creating the Environment for Nuclear Disarmament (which includes Israel, India and Pakistan) initiative present two fora to initiate such an exchange.
- The UK and Russia could seek agreement within the P5 on **institutionalising the nuclear doctrines dialogue** and shaping its agenda to include:
 - Discussing the role of ambiguity and uncertainty in nuclear doctrines.
 - Clarifying conditions of first use of nuclear weapons.
 - Understanding of what individual states consider an existential threat.
 - Clarifying concerns around individual state and alliance nuclear doctrines.
 - Pinpointing and discussing areas of doctrinal differences between states.
 - Discussing perceptions of stabilising/destabilising roles of specific weapon systems.
 - Exploring intentions on developing, deploying and using specific weapon systems, including high precision conventional weapon systems.
 - Exploring intentions on developing, deploying and using strategic and theatre missile defence systems.
 - Discussing historical turning points that lead to more doctrinal transparency.
 - Assessing how emerging disruptive technologies (including cyber capabilities, artificial intelligence, lethal autonomous weapons systems and hypersonic weapons) might affect nuclear risks, policy doctrines, and strategic stability.

Peaceful use of nuclear energy pillar

Peaceful use of nuclear energy is of great importance to the majority of NPT member states. Moscow and London could explore opportunities for the P5 states to agree on voluntary, individual contributions to the NPT 2020 RevCon under this pillar. The UK and Russia could share best practices and undertake science-to-science cooperation through small discrete projects.

- The expected increase in global demand for improved access to advanced medical care, including nuclear techniques for both diagnosis and therapy, is not receiving sufficient political attention. Developed economies have underinvested in medical isotope production facilities and, in most cases, are struggling to meet their own projected growth in domestic demand. Russia and the UK could scope the **development of new proliferation-resistant and terrorism-proof isotope technologies for global markets**, including an affordable proliferation-resistant reactor and related complex⁵.

Addressing mutual industrial challenges

The UK and Russia have some of the most advanced nuclear industries and complexes, and so face similar challenges: decommissioning of nuclear facilities, storage, nuclear waste and spent fuel management, and civil nuclear systems cyber vulnerability.

- Russia has launched its first floating nuclear power station, Akademik Lomonosov, in response to energy demands in remotely located areas without interconnected electricity grids or infrastructure required for stationary power plants. Similarly, China plans to deploy several power barges in the South China Sea.⁶ The trend towards transportable nuclear power plants demands discussion and sharing best practices on application and implementation of existing rules and norms. Especially as on the safety side, the Convention on Nuclear Safety defines nuclear installations as land-based civil nuclear power plants only. Even if the IAEA non-binding safety standards are of broader application, a **track 2.0 technical exchange on best practices could enhance safety and security measures for transportable nuclear power plants and installations**. With its specialist nuclear materials shipping company Pacific Nuclear Transport Limited, the UK is a leader in setting standards for maritime transportation of radioactive materials, and so is well-placed to support such an exchange.
- A significant challenge both the UK and Russia face is the **decommissioning of graphite-moderators of retired civil power nuclear reactors**. Russia plans to decommission 13 graphite-moderated reactors after shutting down and initiating decommissioning of four of them already, while the UK faces decommissioning of ten graphite-moderated Magnox power plants. In parallel to existing scientific fora and initiatives, on the exploratory track 2.0 level, British and Russian **technical specialists could jointly scope the problem, identify optimal ways to address it and exchange best practices**.

Endnotes

1. Strengthening and developing the system of arms control, disarmament and non-proliferation treaties and agreements, UNGA, A/C.1/74/L.56/Rev.1, 31.10.2019, <https://undocs.org/en/A/C.1/74/L.56/Rev.1>.
2. United Kingdom-USSR (Bilateral Agreements), House of Commons Hansard, 21 January 1988, Volume 125, <https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/1988-01-21/debates/46062100-2582-4552-96e5-dcc787c745e7/>. United Kingdom-USSR (Bilateral Agreements); Activities within the London Club – a series of London held meetings in the framework of the Nuclear Suppliers Group.
3. A possible formulation to consider could include the following language: “We believe that a nuclear war between strategic nuclear powers is unwinnable and should therefore never happen.”
4. E. g. servicing satellites.
5. William J. Nuttall and Peter Storey, Technology and policy issues relating to future developments in research and radioisotope production reactors [in:] Progress in Nuclear Energy, Vol. 77 (2014), pp. 201-213.
6. World Nuclear Association, Nuclear Power in China, January 2020, <https://www.world-nuclear.org/information-library/country-profiles/countries-a-f/china-nuclear-power.aspx>.



The European Leadership Network (ELN) works to advance the idea of a cooperative and cohesive Europe and to develop collaborative European capacity to address the pressing foreign, defence and security policy challenges of our time. It does this through its active network of former and emerging European political, military, and diplomatic leaders, through its high-quality research, publications and events, and through its institutional partnerships across Europe, North America, Latin America and the Asia-Pacific region.



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