



**EUROPEAN  
LEADERSHIP  
NETWORK**

## **Group Statement on P5 Strategic Risk Reduction**

Over the past decade, relations among the major powers have deteriorated, while strategic risks and mistrust among nuclear powers have increased. Key factors have been the near-total erosion of arms control, and new complexities and risks arising within nuclear and strategic conventional modernisation, including the imminent arrival of artificial intelligence and machine learning in the military-strategic domain. These developments, and the fiftieth anniversary of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty's entry-into-force, are stark reminders of the risks stemming from nuclear weapons.

Meanwhile, the Covid-19 pandemic has shown the need for more international cooperation to recover from the global health crisis, as states continue to place blame on each other's lack of transparency or belated decisions. In the run-up to the tenth NPT review conference, the P5 states (China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, the United States), have stopped short of delivering nuclear reductions. Both the P5 and non-nuclear-weapon states have a joint obligation to move towards disarmament under NPT Article VI.

The progress that the P5 have made on Article VI has slowed in part due to persisting mistrust about each other's intentions, stemming from allegations of non-compliance with arms control agreements and claims that the nuclear force modernisations of some states contradict their rhetoric. As a result, nuclear-weapon states have hardened their nuclear postures in response to threat perception instead of cutting arsenals.

At this critical time, therefore, we call upon the P5 states to reduce nuclear weapons risks through several concrete measures. Committing to a regular, sustained and open-ended P5 dialogue on strategic risk reduction through a dedicated working group could be the first step towards concerted efforts to this end by the established nuclear powers.

A sustained dialogue committed to preventing and reducing the risk of nuclear weapons use is in the vital interests of both the P5 and non-nuclear-weapon states. The P5 can build on their ongoing exchanges on nuclear doctrines to clarify remaining ambiguities that have jeopardised geostrategic relations within the frameworks of their respective nuclear policies. Resolving misunderstandings about each other's intentions and actions would increase strategic stability by reducing the risks of miscalculation and misperception.

Given the expressed interest of non-nuclear and nuclear-weapon states to engage in strategic and nuclear risk reduction – as prominently reflected in the NPT final documents of 2000 and 2010, the 2019 G7 Statement on Non-Proliferation and

Disarmament, and in the work of the Creating an Environment for Nuclear Disarmament (CEND) initiative and the Stockholm Initiative – committing to a P5 dialogue process presents an opportunity to incorporate P5 views into the overall agenda and explore synergies with the aforementioned risk reduction initiatives.

Creating a working group on strategic risk reduction is a feasible action that the P5 can undertake in the current environment to positively affect the proceedings at the next NPT Review Conference and contribute to its success. In the absence of nuclear reductions, a working group on strategic risk reduction is a practical way for the P5 to demonstrate their seriousness about addressing the concerns expressed by many non-nuclear-weapon states, as well as civil society, about the potential risks stemming from nuclear weapons, despite the current challenges.

Despite its value, a dialogue process on strategic risk reduction can only be a first start for agreeing and implementing concrete measures in the next review cycle, for defusing tensions, as well as for responding to non-nuclear-weapon state interest in addressing the risk issue as comprehensively as possible. In line with their obligation under NPT Article VI, the P5 should at a minimum discuss measures related to restoring military-to-military engagement between the P5 to avoid missteps and misunderstandings and to decide on actions not to take in a crisis in the space and cyber domains. The P5 must also address the risks of most concern to non-nuclear-weapon states, including through steps to reduce the role of nuclear weapons in national security strategies.

To have meaningful impact, a P5 working group must be embedded in the NPT process and be receptive to the input of non-nuclear weapon states regarding the risks of most concern. All States Parties have a vital stake in these issues. The P5 and non-nuclear weapon states can work on tangible P5 and non-P5 deliverables in the sphere of risk reduction for the next NPT review cycle that are conducive to disarmament.

*The opinions articulated above also do not necessarily reflect the position of the European Leadership Network or any of its members. The ELN's aim is to encourage debates that will help develop Europe's capacity to address pressing foreign, defence, and security challenge.*

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