



British American Security
Information Council

Background Briefing: The “P5 Process” History and What to Expect in 2015

Kate Chandley

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BACKGROUND AND HISTORY

History of the “P5 Process”¹

At the Conference on Disarmament in 2008, then UK Defence Secretary Des Browne made the first suggestion of a process for the nuclear weapon states to discuss NPT obligations, stating:

“[T]he UK is willing to host a technical conference of P5 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 weapon states to reinforce a process of mutual confidence building: working together to solve some of these difficult technical issues.”²

The first “P5 Process” conference was held in London in 2009, a year ahead of the 2010 NPT

Review Conference. The meetings picked up again in 2011 with one hosted in France, followed by one in the US in 2012, a Russian-hosted meeting in Geneva in 2013, and a meeting in China in 2014. In February, the UK will play host once again ahead of this year’s NPT Review Conference in April.

The initiation of the “P5 Process” was an exciting step forward for the non-proliferation regime, as this was the first time in the history of the NPT that a forum for the five nuclear weapon states (NWS) was created specifically to discuss issues related to nuclear disarmament.³ However, the P5’s progress has been slow and non-transparent; the rest of the international community has considerably lowered any kind of expectations that have previously been held. The pressure is on this year because of the forthcoming NPT Review Conference and many parties are losing faith in the NPT regime itself. Showing up without any sign of progress towards their disarmament obligations would put the NWS in a difficult

¹ The “P5 process” is the commonly used, but inaccurate term. The nuclear weapon states (NWS) recognized by the NPT are China, France, Russia, the UK, and the US. Those states are also the members of the P5, but there is no link between being a nuclear weapon state and a P5 member. In the context of meeting about the NPT, the states should be referred to as nuclear weapon states, as that is how they are recognized in the NPT

² Browne, Des. 2008. 'Conference On Disarmament Speech By The UK Secretary Of State For Defence'. *United Nations*. [http://www.unog.ch/80256EDD006B8954/%28httpAssets%29/11566BD9046FC3B8C12573E60047395F/\\$file/1087_UK_E_Rev.pdf](http://www.unog.ch/80256EDD006B8954/%28httpAssets%29/11566BD9046FC3B8C12573E60047395F/$file/1087_UK_E_Rev.pdf).

³ Berger, Andrea, and Malcolm Chalmers. 2013. 'Great Expectations The P5 Process And The Non-Proliferation Treaty'. *Royal United Services Institute*. https://www.rusi.org/downloads/assets/WHR_3-13_Web.pdf.

position and the majority of the NPT’s non-nuclear weapon states (NNWS) are likely to lose the little hope remaining for the process.

2010 NPT Review Conference

The 2010 NPT Review Conference was considered to be a success by many states and nongovernmental organizations. The conference agreed by consensus to a final document, the 2010 Action Plan and while it could be stronger, it was not generally considered a “lowest-common-denominator document.”⁴ The conference produced the 2010 Action Plan with steps for each of the three pillars of the NPT: disarmament, non-proliferation, and peaceful uses of atomic energy, as well as a commitment to hold an intergovernmental conference by 2012 to discuss the establishment of a zone free from weapons of mass destruction in the Middle East.⁵ This plan has been part of the basis of the work of the NWS within the “P5 process” over the past five years. The Action Plan, however, fails to outline timelines and has left disagreement over what is considered significant enough progress.⁶

THE “P5 PROCESS”: PROGRESS SO FAR

At the 2009 London meeting, the NWS discussed confidence building measures, transparency, verification, and creating a glossary of terms.⁷ The NWS gave reports on nuclear doctrine and capability. The sensitivity of the issue made for an uncomfortable meeting with varying levels of transparency from

⁴ Choubey, Deepti. 2010. 'Understanding The 2010 NPT Review Conference'. Carnegie Endowment For International Peace.

<http://carnegieendowment.org/2010/06/03/understanding-2010-npt-review-conference#2>.

⁵ United Nations. 2010. '2010 Review Conference Of The Parties To The Treaty On The Non-Proliferation Of Nuclear Weapons'.

[http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=NPT/CO.NF.2010/50%20\(VOL.I\)](http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=NPT/CO.NF.2010/50%20(VOL.I)).

⁶ Mukhatzhanova, Gaukhar. 2014. 'Rough Seas Ahead: Issues For The 2015 NPT Review Conference'. Arms Control Association. http://www.armscontrol.org/act/2014_04/Rough-Seas-Ahead_Issues-for-the-2015-NPT-Review-Conference.

⁷ Embassy London. 2009. *UK-Hosted P5 Conference on Confidence Building Measures Towards Nuclear Disarmament, September 3–4, 2009 (Part One of Three)*. <http://wikileaks.org/cable/2009/11/09LONDON2622.html>.

participants.⁸ France, the UK, and the US agreed to joint nuclear weapons accident response, but China and Russia did not feel in a position to agree at that meeting; no known work has happened on the issue since.⁹ It was decided that some of the NWS would take the lead on specific initiatives: the UK has led on disarmament verification with work being done on the UK-Norway Initiative; France has taken the lead on transparency with a common reporting framework; and China has been leading the project on creating a glossary of terms.¹⁰

Fissile Material Cutoff Treaty (FMCT)

The FMCT has historically been on the agenda of the Conference on Disarmament (CD), but the NWS incorporated it into the “P5 Process”. Members of the NPT are all already subject to legal prohibitions on the creation of fissile material for weapons.¹¹ France, Russia, the US, and the UK all agreed to stop producing fissile material for weapons, and while China did not publicly agree to stop, it is believed that they have.¹² Therefore, the FMCT aims to incorporate the few states outside of the NPT that are believed to still be producing fissile material, specifically India and Pakistan. Opening up a discussion about the FMCT outside of the CD means that parties are not bound by consensus, but little to no progress has been made other than it being initiated.

Transparency

The 2010 Action Plan from the NPT Review Conference included a call on NWS to create a standard template for reports, the first to be presented to the 2014 NPT Preparatory Committee, as well as agreeing to a regular

⁸ *ibid*

⁹ *ibid*

¹⁰ Berger, Andrea, and Malcolm Chalmers. 2013. 'Great Expectations The P5 Process And The Non-Proliferation Treaty'. *Royal United Services Institute*. https://www.rusi.org/downloads/assets/WHR_3-13_Web.pdf.

¹¹ United Nations,. 1968. 'Treaty On The Non-Proliferation Of Nuclear Weapons (NPT)'. <http://www.un.org/disarmament/WMD/Nuclear/NPTtext.shtml>.

¹² Crail, Peter. 2011. 'P5 To Take Up Fissile Material Cutoff'. *Arms Control Association*. https://www.armscontrol.org/2011_09/P5_to_Take_Up_Fissile_Material_Cutoff.

timeline for reporting.¹³ Action 21 of the 2010 Action Plan states, “all the nuclear-weapon states are encouraged to agree as soon as possible on a standard reporting form and to determine appropriate reporting intervals for the purpose of voluntarily providing standard information without prejudice to national security.”¹⁴ The NWS agreed to a common reporting framework which provides headings for each topic the report should cover, but no requirement for quantitative data. Each of the NWS submitted a report under the common reporting framework at the 2014 Preparatory Committee, but the level of transparency in the reports varied.¹⁵ The reporting framework is considered vague as it does not challenge states to become more transparent through specific data requirements.¹⁶

Verification

The UK has led the charge on verification, which until recently was seen as a priority of the “P5 Process”.¹⁷ The UK had worked bilaterally with Norway on international verification research before the “P5 Process” began; this is a project that continues. Other NWS have been skeptical of the merits of including a non-nuclear weapon state in verification, so it has largely remained separate from the “P5 Process”.

Glossary

The glossary of terms, which has been spearheaded by China, has seen a good amount of progress. China began the process began with a call for terms, which produced a list of more than 2,000.¹⁸ Following that, China led an ad-hoc group from the NWS in narrowing

the terms to a manageable list of 200-300 words, which are now being defined. This project has the possibility of being an important addition to the NPT as well as future disarmament and nuclear issues because states commonly use terms in disarmament that, in some cases, have multiple possible meanings or can be interpreted in several ways. The glossary is intended to standardize some common terms to minimize confusion or conflict of interpretation. However, there has been a critical response from some parties expressing concern that many of the chosen terms are already in existing glossaries and that this exercise is less innovative and productive than the NWS claim.

THE INTERNATIONAL NON-PROLIFERATION REGIME: BEYOND THE “P5 PROCESS”

Initiatives in the non-proliferation regime are also happening outside of the “P5 Process”: efforts to create a WMD-Free Zone in the Middle East were very strong; the US and Russia have continued bilateral arms reduction through the New START treaty; and the Nuclear Security Summits have brought together world leaders to curb threats of nuclear terrorism. Efforts to reframe the nuclear debate have taken place through governmental and civil society conferences looking at the humanitarian impacts of nuclear weapons, most recently with a conference hosted by the Austrian government in Vienna. All of these efforts include NWS in some capacity, but are happening outside of the meetings of NWS in the “P5 Process”.

WMD Free Zone in the Middle East

The 2010 Action Plan called for the UK, the US, Russia, and the UN Secretary General to convene a meeting including all states in the Middle East by 2012 to discuss the WMD Free Zone.¹⁹ The Helsinki Process, as it became known, was being administered by the Finnish diplomatic team and an appointed Facilitator, Ambassador Jaakko Laajava. A conference was

¹³ United Nations. 2010. '2010 Review Conference Of The Parties To The Treaty On The Non-Proliferation Of Nuclear Weapons'.

[http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=NPT/CO.NF.2010/50%20\(VOL.I\)](http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=NPT/CO.NF.2010/50%20(VOL.I)).

¹⁴ *ibid*

¹⁵ United Nations. 2014. 'Official Documents'.

<http://www.un.org/disarmament/WMD/Nuclear/NPT2015/PrepCom2014/documents.shtml>.

¹⁶ *ibid*

¹⁷ Berger, Andrea, and Malcolm Chalmers. 2013. 'Great Expectations The P5 Process And The Non-Proliferation Treaty'. *Royal United Services Institute*.

https://www.rusi.org/downloads/assets/WHR_3-13_Web.pdf.

¹⁸ *ibid*

¹⁹ Mukhatzhanova, Gaukhar. 2014. 'Rough Seas Ahead: Issues For The 2015 NPT Review Conference'. Arms Control Association. http://www.armscontrol.org/act/2014_04/Rough-Seas-Ahead_Issues-for-the-2015-NPT-Review-Conference.

tentatively scheduled to meet the deadline in December 2012, but it was postponed due to a “deep conceptual gap” among states in the region—including Israel who is not party to the NPT—that prevented the states from reaching an agreement on the conditions for the conference.²⁰ Russia urged that the conference be rescheduled before April 2013 but there have been no signs of progress on this initiative in almost two years.

Nuclear Security Summits

In 2010, the US hosted the first Nuclear Security Summit (NSS), following President Obama’s 2009 Prague speech about the dangers of nuclear terrorism.²¹ The first NSS produced the Washington Work Plan, a document outlining the goals of the NSS meetings. The Work Plan includes aims to universalize the International Convention for the Suppression of Acts of Nuclear Terrorism as well as the Convention on the Physical Protection of Nuclear Material.²² Additionally, states agreed to work to secure nuclear material and improve nuclear security globally.²³

Following the 2010 NSS meeting, there was a 2012 NSS in Seoul as well as a 2014 NSS in the Netherlands. The NSS goals have been declared a success, with 15 metric tons of highly enriched uranium being downgraded and 12 countries have eliminated all highly enriched uranium in their borders since the process commenced.²⁴ The NSS meetings have been a positive step in keeping sensitive materials out of the hands of nuclear terrorists.

New START Treaty

The New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) between the US and Russia

was signed in 2010 and ratified in 2011.²⁵ New START requires Russia and the US to reduce deployed strategic nuclear warheads and bombers to 1,500 by February 2018, seven years after the treaty entered into force.²⁶

Following a 2012 nuclear review in the United States, President Obama tried to work with Russia to reduce the START limits further, down to around 1,000 from 1,500.²⁷ Further negotiations have not been successful, and the limits from New START remain as they were negotiated in 2010.

The limits set in New START are not ambitious. The slow process of nuclear reductions between the US and Russia, who combined hold 90% of the world’s nuclear weapons, is disheartening to many NNWS.

The Conferences on the Humanitarian Impact of Nuclear Weapons

In December 2014, Austria hosted a conference on the humanitarian impacts of nuclear weapons. This conference followed previous ones in Oslo and Nayarit, marked by the lack of participation from the NWS. Speculation, supported by evidence from leaked memos, suggests that the British and Americans at least were prepared to attend but did not want to threaten the unity within the “P5 process” at a sensitive time. The US and the UK formally attended the Vienna conference (and China was represented informally), marking the first time any NWS attended any of the conferences on the humanitarian impact of nuclear weapons.²⁸ This may have signalled some desire on their part to neutralize the poor publicity they were receiving for staying out of the process, and their frustration with the diplomatic positioning of the other NWS.

²⁰ U.S. Department of State. 2012. '2012 Conference On A Middle East Zone Free Of Weapons Of Mass Destruction (MEWMDZFZ)'.
<http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2012/11/200987.htm>.

²¹ Nss2014.com. 2014. 'About The NSS'.
<https://www.nss2014.com/en/nss-2014/about-the-nss>.

²² The White House. 2010. 'Work Plan Of The Washington Nuclear Security Summit'. <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/work-plan-washington-nuclear-security-summit>.

²³ *ibid*

²⁴ Nss2014.com. 2014. 'Results of the NSS 2014'.
<https://www.nss2014.com/en/nss-2014/results>.

²⁵ Arms Control Association. 2012. 'New START At A Glance'.
<http://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/NewSTART>.

²⁶ *ibid*

²⁷ Pifer, Steven. 2014. 'New START At Three ... And What Next?'. The Brookings Institution.
<http://www.brookings.edu/research/opinions/2014/02/04-new-start-treaty-three-years-old-what-next-pifer>.

²⁸ Kristensen, Hans. 2014. 'FAS At Vienna Conference On Humanitarian Impact Of Nuclear Weapons'. Federation Of American Scientists.
<http://fas.org/blogs/security/2014/12/vienna-conference/>.

At the conference, the Austrian government issued the “Austrian pledge” stating the country’s aim “to fill the legal gap for the prohibition and elimination of nuclear weapons” and work with all relevant stakeholders “in efforts to stigmatise, prohibit and eliminate nuclear weapons in light of their unacceptable humanitarian consequences and associated risks.”²⁹ This declaration has been broadly welcomed by campaigners looking to build momentum towards a ban on nuclear weapons.

LOOKING AHEAD

The 2015 “P5 Process” meeting

The health of the nuclear non-proliferation regime demands progress from the “P5 Process” but their meeting this February occurs under a cloud. Tensions remain high between Russia and the Western NWS, particularly over control and strategic security in the Ukraine and Central and Eastern Europe. Russia and Iran recently signed a military cooperation agreement and a civil nuclear supply agreement.³⁰ In stark contrast, the US Congress threatens to undermine the Iran negotiations by passing a sanctions bill.³¹ The current precarious state of negotiations with Iran is likely to be a source of discomfort for the NWS.

Five formal meetings of the “P5 Process” have yet to achieve any significant breakthroughs that could contribute to disarmament and raise hopes for a strengthened NPT process. Whilst the hosts in London have introduced a new innovation by inviting a handful of non-nuclear weapon states to observe some of the secret proceedings, it is unlikely that this alone will achieve the benefits that greater transparency would bring.

Additionally, the NWS have acted, in some regards, as a unit since the inception of

the “P5 Process”. The lack of attendance of any NWS at the Oslo conference on humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons was due to a decision made between all five of the NWS not to attend.³² The NWS continued their united front of nonattendance at the second conference in Nayarit, Mexico. The initial collective decision of all NWS not to attend has hindered multilateral diplomacy due to the NNWS feeling it was a dismissal of humanitarian concerns.³³ This, however, was somewhat alleviated when the UK and the US attended the recent Vienna conference, but questions are now arising about the so called “P5 unity” and how this will affect any chance of success for the “P5 Process”.

NPT Review Conference

The last Review Conference in 2010 took place soon after the start of the “P5 Process”. Updates at the Preparatory Committee meetings about the achievements of the “P5 Process” have been sparse. In order to show that the meetings of NWS have merit, progress will need to be clearer and less ambiguous. There is already skepticism from NNWS, which will only deteriorate further if little progress can be shown for the six years of diplomatic investment.

CONCLUSION

The inception of the “P5 Process” created a forum for the NWS to discuss implementation of their commitments under the NPT, opening up the possibility of a constructive multilateralism. Six years since it began, progress has been achieved in deepening relationships and mutual understanding, but on the whole it has been disappointing. This upcoming “P5 Process” meeting will be important to prepare the NWS for the upcoming NPT Review Conference. The chances appear remote that this meeting of NWS will openly contribute significantly to a positive outcome in May; something that ought to concern everyone interested in the future

²⁹ Foreign Affairs Federal Ministry Republic of Austria. 2014. 'Austrian Pledge'.

http://www.bmeia.gv.at/fileadmin/user_upload/Zentrale/Aussepolitik/Abroestung/HINW14/HINW14_Austrian_Pledge.pdf.

³⁰ Haaretz. 2015. 'Russia And Iran Sign Military Cooperation Agreement'. <http://www.haaretz.com/news/world/1.638028>.

³¹ Calamur, Krishnadev. 2015. 'White House Seeks More Time From Congress On Iran'. *NPR*. <http://www.npr.org/blogs/thetwo-way/2015/01/20/378567377/white-house-seeks-more-time-from-congress-on-iran>.

³² Nielsen, Jenny. 2013. 'Conference Presentation Notes: The 'Humanitarian Initiative' On Disarmament And The 2015 NPT Review Process'. EU Non-Proliferation Consortium.

<http://www.nonproliferation.eu/documents/other/jennynielsen53391c6ad7c96.pdf>.

³³ *ibid*

prospects of the international non-proliferation regime. It is all too likely that the unity of the international community will come under significant strain in the coming months, with some states threatening to take forward the idea of negotiating a treaty banning nuclear weapons in another venue.

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