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The 'P5' Conferences: Past Meetings and Policy Considerations for Geneva 2013

Backgrounder

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This background briefing gives context, recent history, and key issues affecting the 'P5' meeting of NPT nuclear weapon states in Geneva this week, and speculates as to what is likely to be on the agenda.

The five countries formally recognized under the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) as nuclear weapon states (NWS: China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom and the United States)¹ have been hosting private meetings since 2009 to discuss their responsibilities and commitments to nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament under the NPT. They will meet again this year in Geneva on April 18th – 19th, days before the start of the 2013 NPT Preparatory Committee (PrepCom) meeting, under

¹ The gatherings of the nuclear weapon states have been dubbed the P5 meetings, as the five nuclear weapon states are also the permanent members of the Security Council. This is misleading, however, as their status on the Security Council is not linked in any way to their possession of nuclear weapons or their status under the NPT (which is formally defined by virtue of their having tested nuclear weapons prior to 1 January 1967). In this briefing we refer to the group by their NPT status (NWS), and to the gatherings specifically as the 'P5' meetings.

the chairmanship of the Russian Federation.² Discussions will likely continue in order to reaffirm their commitments to implement the [2010 NPT Action Plan](#) as well as their obligations under Article VI of the Treaty. Action 5 of the 64-point Action Plan, commits the NWS to report back to the NPT Preparatory Committee in 2014 on their progress in implementing steps towards nuclear disarmament. It seems likely that what progress they are able to report on will fall short of the concrete results non-nuclear weapon states (NNWS) have been calling for.

The roles, responsibilities and international presence of the NWS mark them as a unique group in global nuclear politics. Some argue that there is a clear gap between NWS rhetoric and reality when it comes to their nuclear policies: their statements of commitment to disarmament are undermined by a lack of clear action. Indeed, the extent of their nuclear weapons modernization programs more

² *Permanent Mission of the Russian Federation*, 'About fourth P5 Conference.'
http://www.geneva.mid.ru/sg/dis_other_002.html

than hints at a long term commitment to retaining their arsenals.³

The NWS are focusing their attention on agreeing steps to achieving greater transparency. They have some way to go. Their own discussions are highly secretive, though they have also been holding side meetings with journalists and NGOs to outline the context of discussions. As a result, there is still very little evidence of what has been achieved by the ‘P5’ meetings in the last four years.

This closed door approach is based upon the need for the five to build mutual trust before the process can be opened up in any constructive way. The project to agree a common [glossary of terms](#) being led by China is a positive step towards that goal; the group collectively reflecting upon how core concepts like ‘nuclear deterrence’ apply in the 21st century context.

This ‘P5’ process has evolved out of an attempt to better coordinate positions at NPT meetings within the group. These have led to joint statements, and outside to joint decisions. The latest of these was the decision to stay away from the March 2013 Oslo conference on humanitarian dimensions of nuclear weapons at which 127 countries were represented. Days before the conference kicked off, the NWS issued statements saying that they would not attend, even though some had earlier indicated that they would. French sensitivities in particular had led to the group pulling ranks, and collectively agreeing that this process would ‘divert discussion away from practical steps to create conditions for further nuclear weapons reductions.’⁴ Reference was made in most of the statements to claims that the ‘existing mechanisms such as the Nuclear Non-Proliferation

³ Ian Kearns, *Beyond the United Kingdom: Trends in the other Nuclear Armed States*, Discussion Paper 1 of the BASIC Trident Commission, BASIC, November 2011

⁴ U.S. Department of State, ‘The Obama Administrations Second Term Priorities for Arms Control and Non-Proliferation’, 30 March 2013
<http://www.state.gov/t/us/206454.htm>

Treaty (NPT) and conference on disarmament have proven to be the most effective means to increase stability and reduce nuclear dangers’.⁵

Progress on the NPT Action Plan and Article VI is vital in order for the NPT to maintain its credibility. Many have expressed frustration that commitments given at the 2010 Review Conference (RevCon) have remained unfulfilled. This in the context of the damage to the good will from many members states caused by the failure to convene the 2012 Helsinki Conference due to ‘present conditions in the Middle East and the fact that states in the region have not yet reached an agreement on acceptable conditions for a conference’. The blame is likely to land on the shoulders of the three co-sponsoring states (Russia, the U.S., and the UK), and particularly the United States.

Contextual issues for Geneva

The NWS have remained united in their approach to NPT meetings despite differences in national and international priorities. The following give an indication of some of the key issues affecting the process:

Iran: The group, acting with Germany (termed E3+3, or more informally the P5+1), are still in a deadlock with Iran in negotiations over Iran’s nuclear program. Two high-profile rounds of talks in Almaty, Kazakhstan, have already happened this year without any noticeable improvement, and the deadlock is likely to continue until Iran’s Presidential election in June.⁶ There remains tension among the P5 on how to approach Iran on the issue.

North Korea: Tensions have escalated significantly in the wake of Pyongyang’s third underground atomic

⁵ UK Foreign Minister Alistair Burt parliamentary written answer to Martin Caton MP, *Hansard*, 6 Mar 2013: Col 1021W

⁶ *The Wall Street Journal*, ‘Iran Powers remain apart after nuclear talks’, 6 April 2013
<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424127887323646604578406451542562368.html>

test. Pyongyang's explicit threats of nuclear strikes against South Korea and the United States have generated a great deal of uncertainty, and promises of "significant consequences" if Pyongyang continues its provocative behavior.⁷ China bears significant weight in the issue as it has for several decades been North Korea's closest ally and largest trading partner – it remains unclear how they will respond.

Arms Control between the United States and

Russia: The ratification and implementation of the bi-lateral New START was welcome, but was relatively modest in its impact on weapons numbers. Only 203 deployed warheads have been cut since it entered into effect more than two years ago, and nearly 10,000 nuclear warheads remain across the two stockpiles (not including weapons awaiting dismantlement). Many continue to press for the United States and Russia to speed up implementation of the Treaty and agree to significant additional reductions.⁸ Forthcoming bi-lateral talks in the coming months hold some hope that the two sides will eventually find some rapprochement on their differences, and start to talk on a broad range of relevant and linked issues that include not only offensive strategic nuclear weapons, but also theatre nuclear weapons, missile defense, prompt global strike and other emerging conventional capabilities. U.S. Defence Secretary Chuck Hagel's recent announcement that Washington has decided to abandon the fourth stage in the Phased Adaptive Approach ought to have assisted in this process (though officially it was cancelled for technical, cost and threat assessment issues).⁹

⁷ *BBC News Europe*, 'South Korea U.S. begin naval drills amid nuclear tensions', 4 February 2013.

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-21318597>

⁸ *Strategic Security Blog*, from, *The Federation of American Scientist*, 'New START data: U.S. Reductions finally picking up; Russia flat lining', 3 April 2013

<http://blogs.fas.org/security/2013/04/newstartdata13/>

⁹ *Global Security Newswire*, 'Russia U.S. Plan High – level Defence talks', 26 March 2013

The UK's decision on the renewal of Trident: The UK is the most likely member of the NWS group to radically change its nuclear posture. Its final decision on the renewal of its only nuclear weapon system (Trident) is due to be taken in 2016. Prime Minister David Cameron recently argued that increasing uncertainty over the "evolving threats" posed by North Korea and Iran, greatly "underlined the need for the UK to maintain its ultimate deterrent."¹⁰ But his government in split on the issue, that is likely to feature heavily in the September 2014 referendum on Scottish independence, and next General Election due in May 2014. The UK will have to consider the impact of any decision on its 'special relationship' with the United States, bi-lateral arrangements with the French under the 2010 Teutates Treaty, and their commitments to the NATO alliance.

Inception of the 'P5' Meetings

Hosting private meetings of the NWS was a process first proposed by Des Browne, then UK Defence Secretary, at a ground-breaking speech in February 2008 to the Conference on Disarmament (CD). This led to London playing host to the first Conference on *Confidence Building Measures towards Nuclear Disarmament* in September 2009. This was followed by a second meeting in Paris in June 2011 which focused on the Action Plan, while the third meeting in Washington of June 2012 focused on implementing responsibilities agreed at NPT meetings. The Russian Federation will host 2013's 'P5' meeting in Geneva. This fourth 'P5' meeting will deliberate specifically on the commitments that were laid down under the 2010 NPT Review Conferences [Final Document](#) Action Plan.

<http://www.nti.org/gsn/article/us-russian-militaries-hold-first-antimissile-talks-years/>

¹⁰ *The Telegraph*, 'David Cameron: We need a nuclear deterrent more than ever', 3 April 2013

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/david-cameron/9969596/David-Cameron-We-need-a-nuclear-deterrent-more-than-ever.html>

London 2009: CBMs for disarmament

In London 2009, at the *Conference on Confidence Building Measures towards Nuclear Disarmament*, the NWS stressed their intention to work with all States Parties to the NPT in creating the conditions to enable further progress under Article VI and called upon all non-NPT States to work towards the same objective.¹¹

Confidence-building and cooperation measures

- The group shared definitions of nuclear terminology and information about their nuclear doctrines and capabilities for the purposes of common understanding.¹²
- It discussed strategic stability and building mutual confidence through transparency and other measures.¹³

Advancing International treaties

- The group agreed to work towards the early entry into force of the CTBT and achieving its universality, calling upon all states to ratify.¹⁴
- It agreed on the importance of negotiations in the CD on a Fissile Material Cut-off Treaty (FMCT).¹⁵
- It agreed on the importance of the prohibition of chemical, biological and toxin weapons in realizing the objective of Article VI and urged all countries ratify the Chemical Weapons Convention and the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention.¹⁶

Proliferation in Iran and North Korea

- The group urged Iran to comply promptly and fully with the relevant UN Security

Council Resolutions and with the requirements of the IAEA.

- It urged North Korea to fulfil commitments under the Six-Party Talks, including the complete and verifiable denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula in accordance with the September 2005 Joint Statement.¹⁷

Securing nuclear material and export controls

- The group urged that the additional protocol should become the universally-recognized verification norm and called on all to bring it, or a modified small quantities protocol, into force.¹⁸
- It committed its members to the prevention of proliferation financing and shipments; strengthening export controls; securing sensitive materials; and to controlling transfers of intangible technology; and reaffirm support for the Nuclear Suppliers Group and Zangger Committee.¹⁹
- It stated that the threat from non-state actors' ambition to acquire fissile material or nuclear weapons has altered the nature of the proliferation challenge, and joined President Obama's call to secure all relevant nuclear materials within four years.²⁰

Paris 2011: The NPT Action Plan

The second 'P5' conference was held in Paris in June 2011 whereby it was to "signal the start of a process of regular 'P5' consultations, with a view towards preparing for the next NPT Review Conference" in 2015.²¹ The NWS also stated (in the most comprehensive of the '[P5' statements](#)) that the conference was focused on fulfilling Action 5 of the

¹¹ *Kings College London*, 'P5 London 2009 Statement on disarmament and non-proliferation issues.'

<https://www.kcl.ac.uk/sspp/departments/warstudies/research/groups/csss/BB/SectionNfinal2.pdf>

¹² *Ibid.* para 4

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.* para 7

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.* para. 10

¹⁸ *Ibid.* para 11

¹⁹ *Ibid.* para 15

²⁰ *Ibid.* para 16

²¹ *French embassy in New Delhi India*, 'Statement leading to 2011 Paris P5 conference' 30 June 2011

<http://ambafrance-in.org/P5-Conference-on-the-follow-up-to> (note: some incorrect dates in statement)

Final Document, which required them to report on progress to the 2014 PrepCom.²² Many of the same issues were covered, but resulted in more specific recommendations and actions.

Confidence and Cooperation measures among NWS

- The group established a working group on an agreed glossary of definitions of nuclear terms, led by China.
- It agreed a 'P5' verification group.²³
- It received information on the UK-Norway-Initiative.²⁴

Advancing International Treaties

- The group called on all states to uphold moratoria, but recognized that this was no substitute for CTBT ratification.
- It reported on progress made towards signature of the Protocol to the Treaty on the Southeast Asia Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone (SEANWFZ) and confirmed commitment to establishing the Central Asian Nuclear Weapon Free Zone.²⁵
- It welcomed the commitment to a Conference in 2012 on the establishment of a Middle East WMD free zone.

Proliferation in Iran

- The group expressed concern at Iran's resistance to UNSC resolutions.²⁶

Securing nuclear material and export controls

²² U.S. Mission to the International Organizations in Vienna, 'Statement by Ambassador Susan F. Burk to 2012 NPT PrepCom', 3 May 2012, para 4
<http://vienna.usmission.gov/120503p5.html>

²³ U.S. Mission to the United Nations, 'Statement by John A. Bravaco, U.S. Representative UN Disarmament Commission', 4 April 2012
<http://usun.state.gov/briefing/statements/187495.htm>

²⁴ U.S. Mission to the International Organizations in Vienna, 'Statement by Ambassador Susan F. Burk to 2012 NPT PrepCom', 3 May 2012 para 5
<http://vienna.usmission.gov/120503p5.html>

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*

- The group committed to full implementation of [UN Security Council Resolution 1540](#) as well as the International Convention for the Suppression of Acts of Nuclear Terrorism.
- It urged states to accelerate their domestic approval of the 2005 Amendment to the Convention on the Physical Protection of Nuclear Material.
- It encouraged all states to apply the IAEA recommendations on the Physical Protection of Nuclear Material and Nuclear Facilities.

Washington 2012: Implementing NPT

Confidence Building and Cooperation Measures

- The group discussed proposals for a standard reporting form for their briefings to 2014 NPT Preparatory Committee.²⁷
- It agreed on a work plan for the glossary of terms working group.
- It shared experiences around verification.

Advancing International Treaties

- The group shared views on how to discourage abuse of the NPT's withdrawal provision (Article X) and discussed modalities under which NPT states should respond to such future notifications.
- It reaffirmed the need for the swift entry into force of the CTBT.
- It explored options around completing the CTBT's verification regime.
- It discussed ways to advance a global ban on the production of fissile materials.

Proliferation

- The group discussed how to support a successful conference on a WMD free zone in the Middle East.

²⁷ U.S. Department of State, 'Joint Statement on the P5 Conference in implementing the Nuclear treaty', 29 June 2012 <http://geneva.usmission.gov/2012/06/29/third-p5-conference/>

- It expressed concern about the challenges facing the non-proliferation regime.

Securing nuclear materials and export controls

- The group discussed strengthening IAEA safeguards and the universal promotion of the Additional Protocol.

Geneva 2013: Looking Ahead

It is hard to pin-point progress since the NWS signed up to the Action Plan in 2010: whilst we have seen the ratification of New START, critical qualitative shifts in nuclear posture and the attachment to nuclear weapons more generally are notoriously hard to quantify. It may be that great strides are being made behind closed doors, but if so, how can this be communicated in a credible way to those on the other side of those doors?

The NWS still see themselves as being in the early stages of this process, but there is insufficient patience amongst other states to allow this process free rein. In the approaching PrepCom and RevCon discussions, non-nuclear weapon NPT states are likely to focus more on the fact that much work remains in order to fully implement the NPT Action Plan, and less on the incremental progress that the NPT nuclear weapon states assure them is happening through the closed P5 process. Come the 2015 NPT Review Conference, there is a danger that many states will see all of this as cynical manipulation, agreements made originally in 2010 in bad faith, and that there is no intention to make real steps toward disarmament. If this becomes a prevailing attitude, it does not bode well for the broader regime. Demand is rising for significant qualitative disarmament steps away from nuclear deterrence, rather than marginal quantitative reductions that leave intact the foundations of nuclear posture.

Recommendations

Advancing International Treaties

- The UK and France could pursue a formal regional Fissile Material Cut off Treaty in Europe as a precursor for renewed discussion at the CD on a global FMCT.
- Other NWS should explore with the United States and China how best to encourage them to ratify the CTBT.

Arms Reductions

- The group could start serious pre-negotiation discussions on approaches towards a multilateral agreement that would include verifiably limiting the five states' nuclear arsenals at levels significantly below those today, and at other means to demonstrate genuine will to move away from dependence on retaining nuclear weapons indefinitely.
- It could urge the United States and Russia to start formal negotiations to further reduce overall arsenals of all nuclear weapons to bring them closer to the UK, French and Chinese numbers. This would open the door for substantive common reduction targets for all NWS.

Confidence Building and Transparency

- The group could develop a flexible NWS transparency and verification regime, including theatre nuclear weapons.
- The UK and France could voluntarily adopt similar transparency and verification measures as Russia and the United States under the new START Treaty.
- It could establish a parallel 'track two' NWS nuclear dialogue process involving think tanks and NGOs

Non-Proliferation & Disarmament

- The group should re-affirm commitments to hold a Conference in the very near future on a WMD-free zone in the Middle East, and to give credible commitments on this timeline.

- It could reassess the position on the international efforts to recognize humanitarian concerns as a dimension of the issue.
- It needs to consider effective ways to involving all nuclear armed states in the negotiations with the ultimate aim of bringing India, Pakistan, and Israel into the NPT as NNWS.
- It will no doubt jointly condemn recent threats of nuclear attack coming from North Korea, and agree to work together to resolve the solution collectively and diplomatically, and call for North Korea to rejoin the NPT.

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