



■ JANUARY 2019

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NATO Leadership at the NPT

Finding Stepping Stones in the Step-by-Step Approach

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2019

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BASIC has developed institutional expertise across a number of transatlantic issue areas, including the UK-US nuclear relationship, the UK's Trident programme, the politics of disarmament and arms control in the UK Parliament, NATO nuclear weapons in Europe, the Middle East, the evolving role of responsibility in nuclear governance, and expanding technological threats to SSBN platforms



NATO, Vit Selinger, <https://www.flickr.com/photos/vitanse/140221339/>.

Introduction

On the 20 December 2018, BASIC hosted a roundtable at NATO with the support of the Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs to discuss NATO leadership in the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) review cycle. The roundtable assessed the general health of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), the state of nuclear disarmament and arms control, and what leadership means in creating a cooperative approach at the 2020 NPT Review Conference. It then considered practical, modest, short-term achievable steps NATO and its member states could take in providing such leadership.

The workshop was attended by 16 governmental and non-governmental participants under Chatham House rules.

The NPT and NATO

The NPT is a crucial pillar of European and global security but it, along with other arms control, disarmament and non-proliferation efforts, is in a precarious position.

- The strategic environment has deteriorated significantly, the current crisis over the INF Treaty illustrates the perilous state of US - Russia relations and the risks of a re-emerging nuclear arms race.
- A number of other issues could easily derail discussions at the NPT, such as the WMD Free Zone in the Middle East (WMDFZME).
- The enduring frustration with blocks to nuclear disarmament has manifested in the 2017 Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, more commonly known as the Ban Treaty.

Participants agreed on the need for a realistic approach seeking steady steps of modest collaborative improvements that contribute to a collaborative diplomatic culture. The current established steps, such as universalisation of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), negotiation of a Fissile Material Cut-Off Treaty (FMCT) and universal Negative Security Assurances (NSAs) appear out of reach, and continued reference to them only highlights the lack of progress and discredits the step-by-step approach. However, smaller *stepping stones* towards these and other measures could be more realistic in today's environment, attract more support and build the confidence and trust necessary for further progress. Such an approach to disarmament by NATO could be framed within the 'Creating the Conditions for Nuclear Disarmament' (CCND) approach announced by the US State Department in 2018.

In building a cooperative approach for the NPT, participants noted that proposals should be practical and credible, should garner the support of large groupings of states, build bridges between Nuclear Weapon States (NWS) and Non-Nuclear Weapon States (NNWS), and address common ground issues such as risk reduction, transparency, disarmament and verification. It was suggested that success will need political will and sustained engagement in the NPT process.

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What does success look like?

The traditional metric for success is a consensus document. Yet the 1995 Review Conference had no final document whilst being deemed a success, and states reached agreement on a number of key initiatives whilst extending the Treaty indefinitely. Indeed, the 13 steps agreed at the 2000 Review Conference were the

result of last-minute negotiations. And yet... it is difficult to imagine success at the 2020 Review Conference without one.

2019 is a pivotal year for disarmament diplomacy. Efforts to find a common narrative or joint initiatives between states on NPT issues appear to have declined, and the US and Russia, in particular, appear so trapped in their own strategic struggle they are paying little attention to the need for progress to save the NPT. States have highlighted increased polarisation over the Ban Treaty and NWS have contributed to this polarisation in their strong and hostile response to it. Yet there now appears to be widespread recognition of the need to move beyond positions on the Ban Treaty; indeed, it did not dominate at the 2018 NPT Preparatory Committee as it was expected to.

NATO members have an opportunity to introduce new ideas related to fissile material control, verification, the global test ban, declaratory policy and a Middle East WMD Free Zone. It was suggested the P5, the New Agenda Coalition and the EU could provide some leadership in bridge building. There needs to be better communication between the deterrence, verification and disarmament communities, and in celebrating the successes of the NPT, despite the current challenges. One participant suggested that if states offered 'gift-baskets' of proposals beforehand this would focus NPT discussion on specific proposals rather than political posturing. Despite the risks of states giving away measures preemptively, it was felt that the urgency of the arms control and non-proliferation crisis demands such risks from engagement.

The INF Treaty crisis and bilateral arms control

The demise of the INF Treaty could have profound knock-on effects for wider strategic arms control. If the United States and Russia failed to extend New START, both countries would have no mutually agreed limits on their nuclear arsenals for the first time since 1972. The trend towards this outcome could deeply exacerbate tensions within the NPT.

Participants discussed steps European allies could take to preserve the Treaty or prepare for a post-INF world. It was suggested that the Alliance needed to be patient in resolving the crisis, with participants noting that the original Euro-missile crisis continued for ten years before the INF Treaty was concluded. The importance of NATO unity and consensus was emphasised, but such unity can be difficult given the varying threat perception towards Russia within the Alliance.

One participant suggested that Russia no longer believed the INF Treaty is in its strategic interest and would not move to save it, so any discussion on creating a post-INF order needs to acknowledge that Russian and NATO strategic imperatives on the value of arms control appear no longer to align. Several participants agreed that in their opinion Russia was not interested in cooperative security and appeared content to live with a level of risk unacceptable to European Allies. It was suggested that, whilst it is very difficult to change states' strategic interests, technical work could be conducted to explore what a multilateral INF Treaty or subsequent Treaty could look like. In doing so, states could examine how future roadblocks may be overcome, if political will were to change.

The INF Treaty explicitly refers to NPT Article VI in the preamble, and has been seen as a disarmament step, so it could be inevitable that the demise of the INF Treaty could have a significant negative impact on confidence within the NPT. As such, it is appropriate that discussions within the NPT might explore wider multilateral initiatives on banning intermediate range ground-launched missiles and cruise missiles in other regions (10 countries have or are developing missiles within INF range). For example, some participants noted that the NPT could be a helpful forum to engage China and the Non-aligned Movement in discussions on INF related issues. While a multilateral ban may be overly ambitious right now, a more productive approach may be to consider the wider issues within the US State Department's CCND initiative.



NATO Summit Brussels 2018, NATO, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/photos_156726.htm.

NATO states' leadership on disarmament

The second session discussed practical steps for NATO leadership within the NPT review cycle. NATO has a history of arms control, and the potential to bridge the deterrence and disarmament community. However, one participant questioned whether NATO *itself* had the instruments required to show leadership at the NPT. Rather, NATO could be a forum to test proposals that individual member states may lead on, and to garner the support of a larger grouping of states. Participants discussed example initiatives and smaller *stepping stones* to more ambitious disarmament measures.

Arms control

New START: one participant suggested that the UK and France could show support by unilaterally adopting some of New START's transparency and verification measures. This could help create normative support for the Treaty's mechanisms, show a gesture of goodwill to the wider international community and help develop further transparency amongst NWS.

Discussions on Deterrence and Doctrine

Participants agreed nuclear deterrence and disarmament are both tools of security with the goal of preventing the risk of nuclear use, and that wider cross-cutting discussions on deterrence and disarmament would benefit the NPT. It was generally agreed that the polarisation between the two ‘communities’ had damaged the NPT. Greater transparency by NWS on nuclear modernisation and doctrine could reduce nuclear risks, build better understanding between NWS and NNWS and contribute towards the conditions for future disarmament.

It was suggested that NATO could play a role in promoting further discussions on nuclear deterrence in the context of the NPT. NATO could engage in further outreach to the UN in Geneva and New York. Whilst there are inevitable ambiguities in nuclear doctrines, and some risks in engaging states in this sort of discussion, a number of participants suggested it would be possible to host an open discussion on nuclear doctrines between the NWS. The US side-event at the 2018 NPT Preparatory Committee and UN First Committee explaining changes to US nuclear doctrine and modernisation, was seen as a model here. Similarly, NNWS could better prepare to constructively engage in such discussions.

Transparency should be seen as serving a process of continual informed engagement on nuclear issues amongst states and their populations. It was generally noted that there was a ‘knowledge’ and ‘language’ gap in having discussions on nuclear deterrence and that there was a need for further transparency and dialogue on this issue would benefit the NPT. There was agreement that states need to better acknowledge and hear the concerns of others at the Review Conference and that states should resist using polarising language that could alienate others in discussions on deterrence and disarmament. It was suggested that even a high-level statement by NATO member states reaffirming the NPT and their commitment to nuclear disarmament would be beneficial in today’s strategic environment.

Declaratory Policy

Participants reflected on whether NATO member states could make changes to their declaratory policy, and whether NATO itself could discuss having one itself. Declarations are important in signaling and have an impact on training and military thought, thus reducing the risks of unintended nuclear use in certain scenarios. They convey beliefs, intentions and threat perception.

One participant suggested that a NATO declaratory policy could offer stronger reassurances to NNWS through unconditional NSAs, and this could be a gesture of goodwill to NNWS. Concern was expressed that declaratory policy is unverifiable, and that a separate NATO declaratory policy could signal or deepen disunity within the Alliance.

States need to better acknowledge and hear the concerns of others should resist using polarising language that could alienate others in discussions on deterrence and disarmament.

Risk Reduction

Whilst the benefits for minimising nuclear risks are obvious, the methods of doing so, along with unintended consequences, are highly contested. There are some inherent tensions between risk reduction, transparency and nuclear deterrence. For example, some measures intended to reduce nuclear risks could undermine the credibility of nuclear deterrence postures and thereby increase nuclear risks, and some approaches to transparency might also increase nuclear risk. Some greater acknowledgment from all perspectives of the ambiguity of impact and the complexity of these issues would be beneficial.

It was suggested that NWS could work on pledges not to target particular critical infrastructure and command and control systems to reduce the incentives for pre-emptive strike. It was also suggested that NWS and Allies reliant on extended deterrence could explore measures to mitigate the humanitarian impact of nuclear weapon use. States could establish regional and global risk reduction centres, to set up a common operating system for reporting on treaty implementation and information sharing. These could reduce the risk of unintentional conflict caused through misperception and miscalculation.

Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty

It was accepted that entry into force of the CTBT remains a flagship issue for the NPT, even with the current challenges of ratification and entry into force. Continual progress on the International Monitoring System (IMS) has been an important stepping stone, and confidence in the IMS will be an important dimension in achieving further progress and support for the norm against testing. Conversely, it would be detrimental if progress on the IMS was held hostage by general stalemate on the CTBT.

The CTBT represents an important opportunity to engage North Korea, locking them into the international community and non-proliferation regime.

Safeguards and Verification

As with previous roundtables, participants acknowledged the importance of disarmament verification work, such as the Quad Verification Partnership and the International Partnership for Disarmament Verification (IPNDV), and stringent safeguards on the use of nuclear material for peaceful purposes. One participant suggested that the NPT Review Conference could be used to reinvigorate safeguards by exploring how the Iran Deal's safeguards regime could be universalised. States working on verification measures could publically dismantle single warheads to test developing verification concept against real-world conditions.

Missile Control

Missiles are the principal delivery system for nuclear weapons, and the effort to control missile technology is an important part of the non-proliferation effort. Unfortunately, whilst the Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR) attempts this, it has limited success. The Hague Code of Conduct is a valiant attempt at exploring voluntary action to limit the military exploitation of the technology, but is woefully inadequate, not least as it is a voluntary and largely unimplemented norm. It was suggested that states need to consider how to control the proliferation of missile technology through a variety of means.

Conclusion

While this roundtable was just the start of a conversation on possible pragmatic stepping stones that NATO and its member states could propose to reinvigorate the NPT, there was agreement on some of the core challenges and issues to be approached.

Participants acknowledged that NATO and its member states could do more to uphold the NPT, and the wider disarmament, arms control, and non-proliferation regime given its current challenges. There are a number of issues that could derail the Review Conference, with bilateral arms control in a precarious state and states divided over approaches to disarmament. States need to take a cooperative approach, to work on specific policy proposals and refrain from political posturing.

Alliance members could play a positive role at the NPT in several ways. First, they could take action to strengthen existing arms control efforts. Second, states could promote and demonstrate greater transparency over nuclear issues, starting perhaps with more cross-cutting discussions of nuclear deterrence and disarmament. And third, states could lead on nuclear risk reduction measures.

Alliance members could play a positive role at the NPT by strengthening existing arms control efforts, promoting greater transparency over nuclear issues, and leading on nuclear risk reduction measures.

Endnotes

- 1 Christopher Ford, 'Creating the Conditions for Nuclear Disarmament: A New Approach', *U.S. Department of State*, March 2018, <https://www.state.gov/t/isn/rls/rm/2018/279386.htm>, George Perkovich, 'Will You Listen? A Dialogue on Creating the Conditions for Nuclear Disarmament', *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, November 2018, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2018/11/02/will-you-listen-dialogue-on-creating-conditions-for-nuclear-disarmament-pub-77614>.
- 2 '1995 Review and Extension Conference of the parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons', *UNODA*, <https://www.un.org/disarmament/wmd/nuclear/npt1995/>
- 3 'Treaty Between the United States of America and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics on the Elimination of their Intermediate-Range and Shorter Range Missiles (INF Treaty)', *U.S. Department of State*, <https://www.state.gov/t/avc/trty/102360.htm>
- 4 'Briefing on the 2018 U.S. Nuclear Posture Review', *UNODA*, October 2018, <https://www.un.org/disarmament/update/briefing-on-the-2018-u-s-nuclear-posture-review/>

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