

A photograph of a space station in orbit above Earth. The station's complex structure, including solar panels and modules, is visible in the upper right corner. The Earth's surface, with blue oceans and white clouds, fills the rest of the frame.

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**BASIC**

# The Programme on Nuclear Responsibilities

Introduction to Phase 2.0

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## The Author

Sebastian Brixey-Williams is the Programme Director at BASIC, supporting the overall management and growth of the think tank and directing the Programme on Nuclear Responsibilities, a multi-year diplomatic initiative exploring the responsibilities of states around nuclear weapons. Sebastian has expertise across a breadth of multilateral disarmament and arms control issues, particularly in relation to the United Kingdom and Europe.

He has published in *Arms Control Work*, *The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, and the *World Economic Forum*, and his work has recently featured on *BBC News*, *BBC Radio 4*, *The Economist*, and *The Guardian*.

Sebastian is a member of the British Pugwash Executive Committee, and co-founder of the Gender, Think Tanks and International Affairs breakfast series with Chatham House and the Centre for Feminist Foreign Policy. He holds a BA from the University of York in English and Related Literature, and an MA in International Studies and Diplomacy from the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), where he received the Postgraduate School's Prize.

## BASIC

The British American Security Information Council (BASIC) is an independent think tank and registered charity based in Central London, promoting innovative ideas and international dialogue on nuclear disarmament, arms control, and nonproliferation. Since 1987, we've been at the forefront of global efforts to build trust and cooperation on some of the world's most progressive global peace and security initiatives, advising governments in the United States, United Kingdom, Europe, the Middle East and Russia. Through an approach based on active listening, understanding and empathy, the charity builds bridges across divides and lay new pathways to inclusive security.

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.

# The Programme on Nuclear Responsibilities

## The global order is under challenge

Crucial elements of the post-Cold War peace and security architecture are disintegrating, precipitated by the breakdown of trust between the major powers. Recent rhetoric and emerging capabilities lower the nuclear threshold and weaken vital norms like the nuclear taboo. This is exacerbated by the re-emergence of ideas within the US of strategic dominance over strategic parity, and the belief in Russia that they need to show steadfast resolve in developing new offensive systems. The collapse of a number of arms control agreements has raised questions about the remaining instruments' future ability to deliver stability or create the conditions for further reductions.

If we can no longer depend upon traditional arms control approaches, we need to step back and rethink the basis for international cooperation in addressing the common security challenges of the 21st century. One key aspect of this is the conception of state responsibilities to the global community, which include the responsibilities of states and state leaders around nuclear weapons – what we have entitled 'nuclear responsibilities.'

The Programme on Nuclear Responsibilities fosters innovative new research and dialogue on this agenda, by bringing together Nuclear Weapon States and Non-Nuclear Weapon States, including the other nuclear capable possessor states, to develop better understandings of nuclear responsibilities, facilitate exchange and debate, and strengthen the norms that support restraint and risk reduction during the longer-term process of multilateral disarmament.

## Where do we begin?

Let's begin with an observation. Every state possessing nuclear weapons has described itself as a 'responsible nuclear state' or something similar in recent years. To back up this claim, officials frequently draw attention to specific aspects of their country's nuclear programme that they consider to fit the criteria, such as policies aimed at minimising arsenals or promoting transparency. This kind of exercise has had some traction among allies, but in the absence of trust, they are often ignored or dismissed as cynical public relations exercises by the wider group of Non-Nuclear Weapon States.

Perhaps more problematically, self-identification as a responsible nuclear weapon state has frequently come hand-in-hand with an allegation that another state is irresponsible. The noble aspiration to be responsible – in this context – is lost amongst othering and blame, and serves only to deepen grievance and polarisation within the international community.

In an ideal world, we would already have a mature and widely shared set of values and beliefs about the responsibilities of states and state leaders around nuclear weapons. But unfortunately, despite the gravity of this topic, sincere understanding or dialogue on this remains in its infancy. The fundamental issue is that the judgement of responsibilities of states and state leaders around nuclear weapons is under-developed. Before we can have a serious conversation about responsibilities, this question needs to be faced and addressed. This is where the Programme on Nuclear Responsibilities has come in.

## How can nuclear responsibilities be agreed?

Although responsibilities around nuclear weapons may feel like 'common sense', there is no single agreed code of conduct or set of guiding principles on state responsibilities in this area. Responsibilities are subjective beliefs, and customarily they emerge from multiple arenas. They might be placed on two axes – national and international responsibilities on one axis, and legal and non-legal responsibilities on the other – under which a range of national security, domestic political, international diplomatic, and in the case of state leaders and officials, personal ethical, considerations may be placed. All of this complicates a process of identifying common ground and difference, but underlines the need for dialogue and clarity. Developing shared understandings of responsibility and respect for differing positions will take open-minded engagement and cooperation over a sustained period.

To do this, the Programme on Nuclear Responsibilities aims to build a genuine, inclusive, and non-judgemental international process that allows all states and experts who wish to participate to come together, to exchange views on the responsibilities of states in the possession, management, risk reduction and reductions of nuclear weapons.

To this end, we've identified the following steps:

**First, we need to understand how states see their responsibilities at present.** States already understand themselves to have (often conflicting) nuclear responsibilities, and they seek ways to balance these competing values all the time while pursuing their interests. They may not speak about these responsibilities openly, but these conceptions can be glimpsed in state security reviews, official statements and speeches, and expert commentary and analysis on nuclear policies. To understand this better, researchers in the Programme are collating hundreds of sources to map out these understandings of responsibility for the first time for researchers and officials. In March 2019, we'll be publishing the preliminary results in an interactive online Nuclear Responsibilities Almanac.

**Second, we are fostering meaningful dialogue on responsibilities within national nuclear policy communities, fostering what we're calling 'cultures of responsibility.'** Since April 2018, the Programme has been engaging Nuclear Weapon States and Non-Nuclear Weapon States in national roundtables on nuclear responsibilities, to explore the rationales behind particular policies, and to support national discussion of nuclear responsibilities within states. We are ramping up this process in early 2019.

**Third, we are bringing states together for dialogue and exchange.** The results of these strategic dialogue meetings will feed back into the Nuclear Responsibilities Almanac, which will grow and develop over time, and vice versa. These discussions will help contextualise state behaviours and cultures in a manner than builds empathy, assurance and trust.

For this, we have devised a set of core research questions to guide our engagements. These include:

- ° What are the core responsibilities of all states around nuclear weapons?
- ° What are the 'special responsibilities' of the Nuclear Weapon States around nuclear weapons, not least in disarmament, and how are these differentiated from those of the Non-Nuclear Weapon States?
- ° What are the responsibilities of Non-Nuclear Weapon States in the nuclear non-proliferation regime?
- ° How can a process of identifying divergent understandings of responsibilities shape the agenda for dialogue going forward?

## What is this Programme not?

For the avoidance of confusion, it's worth clarifying what this programme is not. The Programme is designed to explore the 'responsibilities' that states have and understand, but does not support a discourse about 'responsible' behaviour with nuclear weapons, or 'responsible' possession. The Programme purposefully avoids phrases like a 'responsible nuclear weapon state,' or similar, and maintains that there is no such thing. Why? The reasons are threefold.

First, a nuclear doctrine is made up of numerous nuclear policies with numerous attendant 'nuclear responsibilities'. It is likely that a state is doing well in some areas of policy and less well in others, and it is for this reason that we speak of nuclear responsibilities, in the plural. To use the binary of responsible vs irresponsible nuclear weapon states is not only reductive, it fundamentally confuses an investigation into states' behaviours with an investigation into states' identities.

Second, the international community cannot afford to accidentally convince itself that there can be such a thing as responsible (and by implication) indefinite nuclear weapons possession. The stakes here are high, and imagining a 'responsible nuclear weapon state' runs the serious risk of reifying the notion that the world can hold onto nuclear weapons safely and securely forever, as long as it does so 'responsibly.' The history of nuclear accidents, fallibility of nuclear deterrence, potential of nuclear theft and terrorism, and the unstoppable rise of untold emerging technologies with strategic effects each alone offer sufficient evidence to know this belief should be viewed as mistaken. Moreover, the possession and justification of nuclear arsenals encourages proliferation in other states. Authentically rejecting the 'responsible nuclear weapon state' title is in the interests of our security and outweighs any political or diplomatic convenience that such a title might bring in the present day.

Third, there is a large segment of the international community – not least, the states of the Non-Aligned Movement – that will not accept the use of the 'responsible nuclear weapon state' moniker. Accordingly, to do so is inherently divisive and will likely provoke strong negative reactions ('there is no such thing as a responsible nuclear weapon state') that will rapidly stultify dialogue and pull states back into the old tit-for-tat impasse. This is diametrically opposed to the purpose of this Programme, which seeks to provide a forum for genuine collaborative discussion among Nuclear Weapon States and Non-Nuclear Weapon States to have a values-based discussion and build trust and assurance in the long-term disarmament process.

Without a doubt, attempts to outline 'responsible' nuclear policies and behaviours are underway, but should be treated with some caution. Beyond the extreme responsibilities upon which we should all be able to agree – such as the responsibility to avoid nuclear war – articulations of nuclear responsibilities today exist in a contested space, and preemptive attempts to lock these down without first engaging will likely drive potential partners in dialogue back to their entrenched positions. Nuclear Weapon States and Non-Nuclear Weapon States all have an interest in better understanding one another, and think tanks and NGOs can play a core role in facilitating these conversations, in a process of creating a more enlightened discourse on nuclear weapons that foregrounds nuclear responsibilities.

*The Programme would like to invite any expert or official interested in this type of work to contact the Programme Director, Sebastian Brixey-Williams on [sbrixeywilliams@basicint.org](mailto:sbrixeywilliams@basicint.org) to explore opportunities for collaboration.*

- BASIC is a small think tank taking a uniquely non-partisan, dialogue-based and inclusive approach. We look for ways to build constructive engagement between individuals from different geographical, political or cultural backgrounds on traditionally sensitive or complex issues. And we create space for new and diverse perspectives.

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