



A BASIC introduction to the Stepping Stones Approach to Nuclear Disarmament

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Context

The international community faces supreme threats caused by deteriorating strategic relations, increasing nuclear dangers and a re-energised arms race involving disruptive emerging technologies. The United States and Russia appear to be walking away from their arms control agreements, and faith in global disarmament regimes has weakened considerably. We need to see progress before and at the next NPT Review Conference in May 2020.

Many states recognise the dangers, but it is unclear what they can do when most of the key decisions are taken in a handful of capitals in which the belief in the value of nuclear weapons to deliver status, deterrence, and even compellence appears to be on the rise. Advocating specific disarmament steps, introducing new bans on nuclear weapons and blaming other states has had very limited effect.

The international agenda of disarmament steps agreed at previous NPT Review Conferences, such as entry into force of the test ban treaty, a ban on fissile materials or achieving major reductions in arsenals, has been stymied by hold-out states. Each step, seen by some as weakening their security or strategic position, is one too far for them. Difficult in their own right, these steps are easily damaged by disagreements, failure to understand sensitivities, projection of malevolent intent onto other states, or simply ideological attachment to opposing strategies. We need steps within these steps.

The Approach

The dynamic, adaptive, systemic Stepping Stones Approach to Nuclear Disarmament (SSA) seeks to address these challenges, and has four distinguishing features.

1. An Approach, not a Strategy

It would be a mistake to see the SSA as a middle-of-the-road *position* or strategy. Rather, it is seeking a broad approach, focusing on a pragmatic implementation *process* with momentum. The SSA requires agreement on the direction (towards restraint and ultimately disarmament, away from arms racing), but is open, inclusive and flexible. We face a chaotic, complex system in which individual governments do not have the control they would like. The details of future disarmament steps are shrouded in uncertainty, and the international community has to be highly adaptable in achieving concrete progress. If we hold on *tightly* to the shared vision, but *lightly* to our particular proposals knowing that they will evolve in contact with others' perspectives, we stand a better chance of success.

2. Inclusive

The objective is to reduce nuclear dangers, ultimately through nuclear disarmament. This ought to attract an international consensus, and we all have a right to demand high priority commitment from NWS and other states to the objective. How we get there and when is a different matter. This involves a wide variety of perspectives, from those committed to achieving radical and fast-tracked disarmament to those reluctantly attached to nuclear deterrence as a practice they see as necessary

for strategic stability and international peace. An inclusive process is a sustainable one, and is more likely to avoid unintended consequences.

3. Modest speed to retain consensus and build trust

To achieve a sustainable process, we have to go at a speed that accommodates many of the cautious, particularly those that hold most power in the system. It involves respecting the concerns of all crucial stakeholders and talks their language, including political and military leaderships. The five NWS will discuss their nuclear doctrines at a 2020 NPT side event for the first time, and the Non-Nuclear Weapon States could use this opportunity to highlight the threats arising from these doctrines and to test their SSA proposals against them.

4. Contributing to CEND but not requiring it

The US State Department has launched an initiative, *Creating the Environment for Nuclear Disarmament (CEND)*. It assumes we do not have a favourable strategic context. The SSA proposed here does not require an improvement in strategic relationships and does not demand strategic sacrifice from the Nuclear Weapons States (NWS). It is designed to improve trust and the strategic context and so contributes to CEND but does not require it. Each SAA proposal signals intent towards agreeing further (undefined or adaptive) stepping stones on the journey in the right direction.

Areas for Prospective SSA Proposals

1. Reduce the Salience of Nuclear Weapons

The promise of discussion on nuclear doctrines amongst the NWS and with other NPT members is to be welcomed. This will offer the chance to better explain why ambiguity is necessary and to acknowledge the costs of this to international diplomacy and the security of other partners within the international community. In particular, it ought to be possible to reduce ambiguity over Negative Security Assurances, and to expand the NSAs given to members of Nuclear Weapon Free Zones. There may also be a chance to update the Reagan-Gorbachev declaration that a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought.

5. Rebuild Habits of Cooperation

Cooperative approaches require a deepening of transparency and confidence-building between states parties. The recent injection of energy into the P5 Process is welcome, but some level of openness with non-nuclear weapon states is also necessary. Signals of positive intent from NWS towards the NPT agenda and respect for past commitments, even whilst there remain challenges of implementation, are important. NWS statements to the 2020 NPT Review Conference will play a crucial role in establishing cooperation.

6. Reduce Nuclear Risks

Nuclear risk reduction has become an important focus within the NPT. There are many ideas for how risks might be reduced, though for them to work states need to discuss more openly the relationship between nuclear deterrence and risk. This may require avoiding dual-capable systems, shoring up vulnerabilities to cyber-attack, shared understandings on the threat of emerging disruptive technologies on stability, and extending decision-times.

7. Enhance transparency, control fissile materials and weapon-related technologies

Opacity over arsenals harms trust and confidence in good intentions. NWS could improve their reporting on numbers, modernisation plans, force structure and on stocks of fissile materials. There has been some progress on disarmament verification and the establishment of an international monitoring system supporting the test moratorium.

This is a summary of the BASIC report: *Stepping Stones to Disarmament: making progress in a polarised international climate*, Paul Ingram and Maxwell Downman, April 2019. This is available on:
www.basicint.org