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BASIC

The Stepping Stones Approach to Nuclear Disarmament Diplomacy

Impact through Collaboration:
Summary paper

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The Stepping Stones Approach empowers non-nuclear weapon States to steer global collaboration on the nuclear disarmament agenda, for which there is an agreed but stalled programme of action.

It underpins a coalition of sixteen influential non-nuclear weapon States, the Stockholm Initiative for Nuclear Disarmament, formed in 2019. Their Foreign Ministers have met in person four times, in Stockholm, Berlin, Amman and Madrid.¹ Some of the nuclear weapon States have responded warmly to the Initiative and indicate they will engage on the agenda, even whilst some of the proposals are challenging at this point in time. This is a summary brief intended as an introduction to the Approach. A longer report goes into further detail and explains the genesis and background, and some of the ideas behind it.

The Approach directly addresses the current problems of inaction within nuclear diplomacy rooted in widespread limiting, entrenched beliefs, such as: we achieve peace by threatening war; power is synonymous with destructive capability; states can only ultimately rely on themselves for protection and collaboration is unreliable. It shifts these beliefs by drawing states into a process that develops an alternative paradigm of common security through collaboration. It grew out of a desire to see concrete improvement in nuclear disarmament diplomacy in the context of despondency after deterioration in strategic relations.

The Approach works with existing power structures and seeks to draw the nuclear weapon States into a progression of steps that implement existing obligations and move towards nuclear disarmament. Whilst respecting and valuing the perspectives of everyone involved, it encourages states to hold their positions less tightly as they see the broader context within which they and their neighbours sit.

The Approach is a five-step process of inclusive communication with a view to delivering transformed results.

Step 1: Visioning

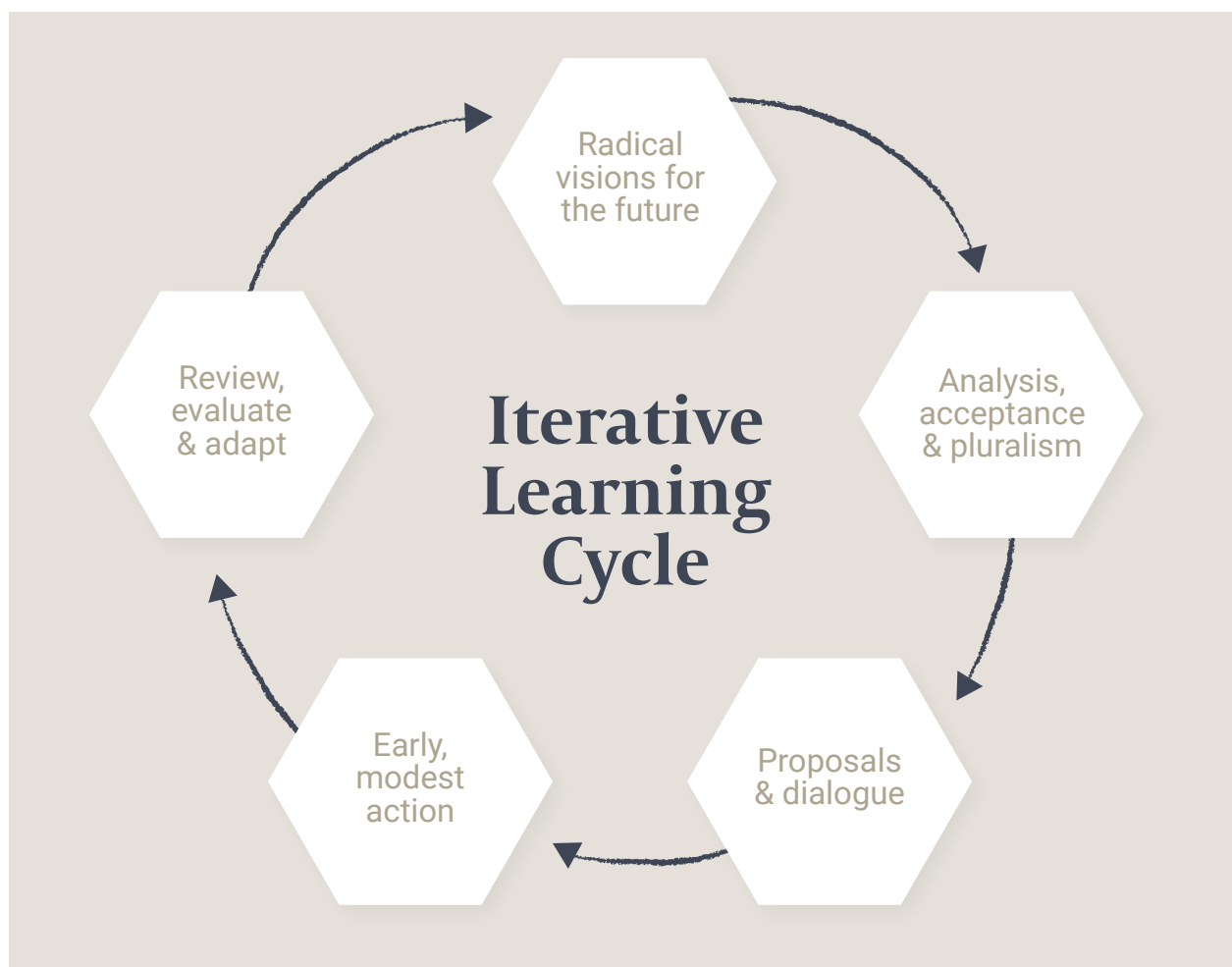
Collaborators work together to gain clarity on shared objectives that can be used not as a manifesto, but as intentions for disarmament diplomacy, guidestars for action, ideas that light up the direction of travel. The Approach facilitates radical visions by distinguishing them from the more modest immediate policy actions (step 3) that are to be implemented in the immediate term. We may never achieve the visions, and they may adapt to changing circumstances, but that is not to say that they failed: positive visions for the future play an important role as the drivers and motivation for action. One of the generic, foundational visions of the Approach is common security (understanding that security for all benefits everyone) and drives motivation to act in collaboration.

Step 2: Assessment and acceptance

We observe and understand as best we can the complexities involved as they are, as opposed to how we would like them to be. This demands a commitment to be led by the evidence. It also involves dialogue between a variety of perspectives and ideologies.

¹ At the time of writing there were plans to meet a fifth time in mid-December 2021.

The Stepping Stones Approach



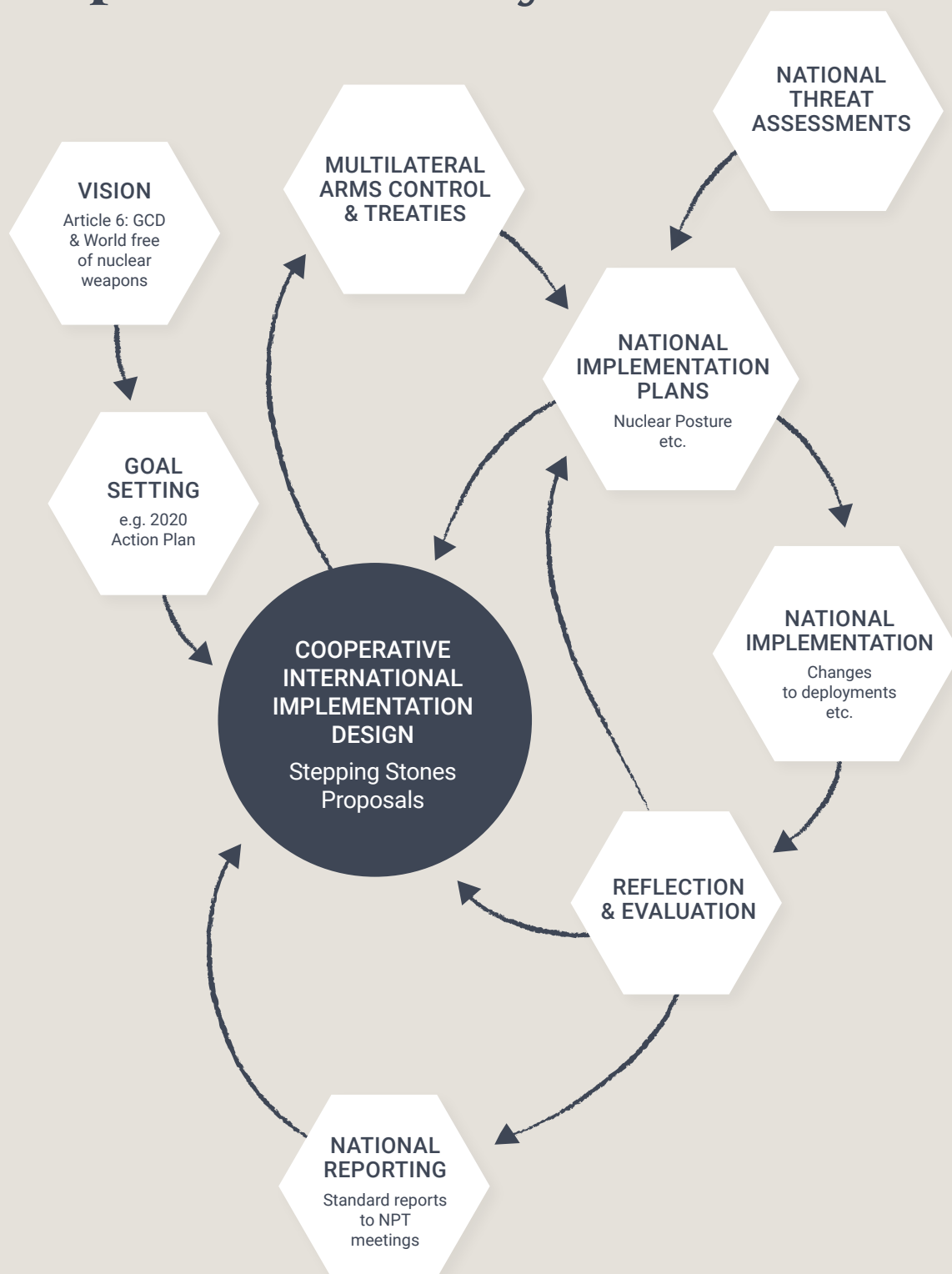
Step 3: Proposals and dialogue

Collaborating states develop practical immediate ideas for action, and to propose these to states with power and influence, with a view to encouraging them to improve upon those proposals *from their own perspective*. These proposals are invitations to dialogue with the intention of implementing those ideas first that can be implemented quickly. Individual stepping stones are valued for their own direct benefits and their contribution to sustained progress towards nuclear disarmament. They will require constructive and voluntary steps by the nuclear weapon States, taken in good faith and with confidence. Early disarmament proposals made in this context must be considered in relation to existing nuclear deterrence postures.

Step 4: Creating forward momentum through action

The international community has an agenda for action, last expressed at the 2010 NPT Review Conference and its 64-point Action Plan. Much of this is stymied, and needs some more incremental steps within steps in order to allow states to get from where they are to where they want to be. The Approach is focused upon building momentum behind incremental movement, on the basis that each shift, however modest, contributes to capacity for follow-on action. Each step is considered in its own right, but it will take implementing a series of them, likely in a number of areas, to achieve sustained progress towards nuclear disarmament. Usually this will be taken by the Nuclear Weapon States, but it has been clear for some time that other states, those in alliance and even those uninvolved in nuclear deterrence have responsibilities in these areas, as well as a role in the whole process.

A Disarmament Implementation Cycle



Step 5: Evaluation


Stakeholders will review results with a view to continuing the process and developing further improvements. It does not involve a conventional strategy. Steps are not planned out in advance and then executed as other actors within the system come on board. Instead, there is an expectation that the plans and steps and even the vision itself will adapt and evolve as the situation unfolds. It is a feature of the process that transformation emerges in a non-linear and unpredictable manner in a collective exploration of possibilities. We have to let go of the tendency to control and grip a situation. We cannot be attached to particular outcomes if this is to succeed.

One of the most common causes of unintended consequences and catastrophe in complex systems is the failure to appreciate the trade-offs between objectives in tension that mean simplistic solutions hold dire unintended consequences. Instead, we need to fully consider the benefits and risks from each dimension and how they interact. For example, there are major benefits arising from transparency to arms control, international stability and trust-building, as well as improving international understanding and signalling, but it sits uncomfortably with the practice of nuclear deterrence, and can expose vulnerabilities. The perceived benefits from secrecy and ambiguity are so strong they are the default behaviour of many governments, yet the costs to international cohesion are also considerable. Similarly, whilst the debate between deterrence and disarmament appears polarised, there are costs and benefits that arise from both, such that it could become more appropriate to talk about managing the polarity.

Managing the polarities of disarmament and deterrence

Deterrence	Disarmament & arms control
Positives	
<ul style="list-style-type: none">Containing worst excesses of aggressionStrategic stability and avoiding major conflict	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Mitigating/escaping the risks from and costs of nuclear deterrenceBuilding trust & international institutions
Negatives	
<ul style="list-style-type: none">Significant question over effectiveness of severe punishmentDriving arms racingDiverting scarce resourcesExistential risk	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Containing own capabilities to prevailCould unbalance strategic relations with disastrous effect

The Approach considers differing features arising from the nature of change. Immunities to change are inevitable, embedded in the nature of all systems, such that when driving change we have to consider the competing commitments and big assumptions that protect the status quo. This can activate a radical response from those looking for change because smaller reform steps trigger push-back and fail. It may be more helpful to consider systems in terms of positions of dynamic and stable equilibria, such that a series of controlled nudges can push them into a new stable equilibrium from which an additional set of proposals can aim at the next. This is the heart of the Approach.



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When engaging in dialogue it is critical to understand the different perspectives that determine behaviour. The Approach involves deliberative processes that are inclusive and respectful, valuing the diversity because it improves decisions over common vital interests. Stakeholders are drawn into a process of continual collective transformation, imagining futures, drawing out recommendations, implementing interventions and evaluating results. It incorporates radical perspectives by recognising that adaptable change can occur through adaptable steps in unfolding and unpredictable pathways and destinations.

The Approach promises a more effective, trusting and functional international community in which agreement is more likely and its goals are more effectively realised. But will it work?

- Key nuclear weapon States variously appear resistant to disarmament, and in turn experience the Non-nuclear Weapon States as unreasonable. Efforts to pressure them to change are counterproductive when nuclear strategies are seen as existential. Experience shows us that states are more likely to engage if they believe their concerns are fully accounted for *and* they have a credible incentive to do so.
- Some would say that the Approach demands deep compromise and therefore involves a dangerous lack of integrity. It certainly requires people to accept other mindsets, but it enables people to, at the same time, keep their own perspective. It facilitates a dialogue between viewpoints often marginalised or discounted and those more aligned with the status quo.

Contrary to the assumptions of some, particularly those that see disarmament diplomacy in black-and-white terms, the Approach is not in conflict with the Treaty of the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW). This is signalled clearly by virtue of the Stockholm Initiative including several TPNW member States. The TPNW can be seen as an inspiration to shift the imagination on what is possible. The Approach is about finding a practical means to draw States together in implementing the agreed disarmament agenda.



When opinions in the public sphere appear polarised, the Approach provides an opportunity for states to learn more about the nature of the nuclear order and its vulnerabilities and better understand one another's perspectives with the purpose of negotiating change towards a world without nuclear weapons. Pressure is a problematic tactic when power is so transparently concentrated in the hands of nuclear armed states and their allies, and nuclear weapons are seen as so central to national security and influence in the world.

The Approach is not about meekly and naively agreeing, but rather believing that people and States can always be open to engagement when their concerns are respected. It draws the Nuclear Weapon States into a collaborative process that expands upon the credible incentives for them to engage, reduces the risks arising from their nuclear postures and strengthens the chances of progress on nuclear disarmament. Success in this most challenging area will help build collective capacity to address other global existential challenges facing the international community.

The Stepping Stones Approach

The Approach is a pragmatic and adaptable political strategy. It has been formulated to raise the chances of successful implementation of policy in highly contested environments by actively involving diverse perspectives in the design, evolution and execution of policy. It puts the search for common ground across the international community at the heart of disarmament diplomacy. It involves an attempt to understand and empathise with others holding very different perspectives, seeing one's own within the broader ecosystem of viewpoints, and accepting that outcomes could look somewhat different to the original ideas we may have when starting the process.

By establishing room for incremental improvement without demanding radical change in the early stages, it builds trust and confidence, and changes the understanding and calculus of all parties over time. It does not need all stakeholders in the system to be signed up to the approach for it to achieve progress, but does require a cohesive and aligned core group to follow its adaptive method.

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