

# Nuclear Diplomacy Crossroads

What Future for the Stockholm Initiative in the Eleventh NPT Review Cycle?

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## Introduction

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has triggered a seismic shift in strategic relations and alignments across Europe and the wider international milieu. It is possible that the world will be polarised for some years, as European states have announced massive increases in defence spending. While cohesion appears stronger amongst US allies than it was, many states in the Global South, often suspicious of Western narratives, have resisted calls to isolate Russia.<sup>1</sup>

Since invading Ukraine, Russia's implied willingness to use nuclear weapons to achieve war aims has seemingly overturned decades-long deterrence practices, where nuclear weapons functioned to prevent escalation. In the current strategic environment, nuclear weapons increasingly appear to serve war's purpose. Since the outbreak of the Ukraine War, Russia's nuclear signalling has been difficult to decipher, as it remains difficult to distinguish between Russia's implied threats of use and warnings. Notwithstanding Putin's reaffirmation of the Reagan-Gorbachev statement – both bilaterally with President Biden last June at a summit in Geneva, with President Xi at the extension ceremony for the Friendship Treaty in June 2021, and then as part of a P5 statement reaffirming the same commitment on 3 January 2022, Russia's threat to use nuclear weapons is understood as an abrogation from this commitment by many states, though Russian

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<sup>1</sup> For further reading, see: Timothy Garton Ash, Ivan Krastev and Mark Leonard, 'United West, Divided From the Rest: Global Public Opinion One Year into Russia's War on Ukraine', *European Council on Foreign Relations*, Policy Brief, 22nd February 2023  
<https://ecfr.eu/publication/united-west-divided-from-the-rest-global-public-opinion-one-year-into-russias-war-on-ukraine/>

officials claim it was not intended as such. The P5 pledge represented a watershed moment and tangible stepping stone to disarmament, but is now increasingly viewed as a meaningless 'bumper sticker.'

Taken together, talk of potential nuclear use and rhetoric in the Ukraine War has heightened the salience that nuclear weapons have in Nuclear Weapon States' (NWS)' postures, along with concerns about increasing short-term escalation risks and longer term proliferation over the coming years. Given this ominous outlook, Conference President Gustavo Zlauvinen reminded delegates at the opening of the 2022 NPT conference, 'we live in a time when the unthinkable – the use of nuclear weapons – is no longer unthinkable.'<sup>2</sup>

The need for cool heads and bridge-building is as high as it has been for some decades. The practice of pragmatic and measured nuclear disarmament diplomacy remains paramount to maintaining a semblance of a stable international system. To this end, the Stepping Stones Approach (SSA) can be used to nudge the Nuclear Weapon States (NWS) in a constructive direction and rebuild a sense of possibility. Its pragmatic, broad, and inclusive nature builds collaboration between diverse parties, from those committed to achieving radical and fast-tracked disarmament, to those reluctantly attached to nuclear deterrence as a practice seen as necessary to achieve strategic stability. By seeking early incremental stepping stones on the established disarmament agenda, it attempts to break the current deadlock frequently characterised by positional statements that fail to fully engage with the concerns of other states.

BASIC and Emergent Change facilitated three roundtables on the SSA between May 2022 and January 2023. These focused attention on:

1. The implications of the Russia-Ukraine war on the RevCon;
2. Which Stepping Stones still held promise given a waning appetite around nuclear disarmament;
3. The prospects for the Stockholm Initiative making a constructive impact at the RevCon; and
4. What role(s) it could play beyond August 2022.

The workshops were held under the Chatham House rule. Their findings inform the content of this report, alongside observations and opinions arising from numerous direct engagements with officials in the development of the Stockholm Initiative.

This report will begin by looking at the Stockholm Initiative's impact on the extended run-up to the Tenth NPT Review Conference and on the meeting itself, and will then assess the draft Final Document that was not adopted, but nevertheless is the best evidence we have for where consensus may lie within the international community. The report concludes by assessing the most promising avenues for future progress on the Stepping Stones agenda.

## Taking Stock: Reflecting on the Stockholm Initiative's Impact on the 10<sup>th</sup> NPT Review Conference

The Stockholm Initiative has played a significant role in injecting a sense of positive energy in the midst of what was otherwise a Review Cycle with little optimism. The 2015 Review Conference had failed to reach a consensus agreement and there was little indication that the rifts exposed would be sufficiently healed in advance of the subsequent review.

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<sup>2</sup> Gabriela Rosa Hernández and Daryl G. Kimball, 'Russia Blocks NPT Conference Consensus Over Ukraine', *Arms Control Today*, *Arms Control Association*, September 2022

Pessimism was so pervasive that when the decision was taken to delay the 2020 Review Conference as a result of the global Covid crisis, there was some relief. Some participants at each of the roundtables had felt that perhaps the extra time would give an opportunity to build some kind of consensus.

When launched in 2019, the Stockholm Initiative was broadly welcomed within the international community; reflected in official statements at international meetings. Some within the political and disarmament community were sceptical of its genesis and intention, seeing it as a distraction from the newly-minted Treaty for the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW), that had been agreed in July 2017 and had entered into force in January 2021. They perceived attempts to engage the NWS in dialogue on apparently modest objectives as a betrayal of the ambition from previous agreements in 2000 and 2010. Some were also sceptical that the Initiative could add anything new, when there were already others such as the New Agenda Coalition (NAC) that had played a critical role in 2000, and the Non-Proliferation and Disarmament Initiative (NPDI) that had been driving some of the more technical engagement.

The two things that marked the Stockholm Initiative out – that it operated at the level of Foreign Minister and that it used the SSA for engagement – became apparent over the months subsequent to its establishment. The Stockholm Initiative, built upon flexible possibilities with the endorsement and engagement of Foreign Ministers, and the optimism of bridge-building, showed great promise. In particular, the paper on risk reduction led by the Swiss Ministry of Foreign Affairs was seen as a significant concrete contribution that successfully linked the binaries of risk reduction and disarmament.<sup>3</sup>

The adoption of the Stepping Stones Initiative, involving open-ended approaches to the NWS with proposals for inclusive and respectful dialogue, appeared generally to be successful at least with some of the NWS. Representatives of the NWS at one of the roundtables said that the Initiative played an important role in re-establishing an atmosphere of open cooperation. This helped to draw the sting from the ongoing dispute around the emergence of the TPNW, which the NWS had reacted badly to, not only asserting that it had no application to states that did not sign, but implying naivety amongst those that promoted it.<sup>4</sup> The intensity of these criticisms waned by the time of the 2022 Review Conference, in part thanks to the patient diplomacy of Stockholm Initiative members, restoring the sense that nuclear diplomacy could still be effective.

When the Review Conference eventually took place some 27 months late, some of the original stresses on the NPT system appeared to have lessened. The sense of collaborative progress on the General Assembly process on the Weapons of Mass Destruction Free Zone in the Middle East, for instance, appeared to take some pressure off. Whilst Arab states were insistent that the NPT track remained critical to the process, there appeared to be an acknowledgement that it served no one's agenda to threaten the outcome of the Review Conference over lack of progress on the 1995 Resolution, which had triggered so much conflict in previous NPT meetings.

The election of President Biden also brought a sense of US commitment to multilateralism and to the NPT itself. It was rumoured that the new administration might also commit the US to a policy of Sole Purpose or even No First Use (NFU) in the upcoming Nuclear Posture Review.<sup>5</sup> Whilst this hope was dashed by the time the Review Conference was held, and relations the Administration had with Moscow and Beijing had deteriorated early on in Biden's term of office, much of the international community appeared willing to engage constructively on the Review Conference agenda. As the August

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<sup>3</sup> Working Paper 9: A Risk Reduction Package, *United Nations*, 12th August 2022

<https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N22/461/42/PDF/N2246142.pdf?OpenElement>

<sup>4</sup> See, for example: Chris Ford, US Assistant Secretary of State remarks, 'The Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons: A Well-Intentioned Mistake', 30th October 2018 <https://2017-2021.state.gov/remarks-and-releases-bureau-of-international-security-and-nonproliferation/the-treaty-on-the-prohibition-of-nuclear-weapons-a-well-intentioned-mistake/index.html>

<sup>5</sup> Demetri Sevastopulo and Henry Foy, 'Allies lobby Biden to prevent shift to 'no first use' of nuclear arms', *Financial Times*, 30th October 2021

Review Conference unfolded, and the last week opened the possibility that there could be a final document agreed, albeit one with modest ambition, there was a sense that the international community might just end up with a work plan.

In the end, it was the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the underlying conflict with the United States and Europe that blocked agreement. There were several factors at play, in particular:

- The perilous state of security for the Ukrainian nuclear power plants in the middle of the war, with both sides accused of indiscriminate shelling and power cuts raising fears of the nuclear hazard.
- Political pressure on states to condemn Russia and its actions in Ukraine at every opportunity, leading to isolation of the Russian delegation and a poor negotiating environment.
- Russia's decision to send a junior team unable to negotiate substantively at the conference, so that there was insufficient prior warning of their position on the Final text on the final day.

The war in Ukraine has been deeply problematic for the Stockholm Initiative and threatens to remain a challenge for the foreseeable future. Most of its members were committed to including a condemnation of Russia's invasion in the Opening Statement of the Review Conference, but this was an insurmountable problem for three members - Indonesia, Ethiopia, and particularly Kazakhstan, given its close security and economic ties with Russia - who felt that this represented a departure from the neutrality required between nuclear weapon states for constructive engagement on the nuclear disarmament file. The three opted to allow it to go forward without their names attached.<sup>6</sup>

This dilemma was discussed in the January 2023 roundtable. The outcome was probably unavoidable in the circumstances, but participants felt that it may have three troubling implications for the Stockholm Initiative's future that could usefully be addressed by dialogue between its members going forward:

- There is a tension between the political need to take a position and condemn Russia, and the commitment to taking a Stepping Stones Approach. The political need on this occasion prevailed, and it was this approach adopted by a majority of states that in part torpedoed the draft Final Document. A few felt on one hand that the inclusion of paragraphs in the draft Final Document, demanding that nuclear reactors in Ukraine be handed back to Ukraine (Energoatom) ensured the Russians would veto it. Alternatively, a number of participants also pointed out that the Russians had departed so far from international laws and norms, that they had damaged trust and needed to be confronted, for the integrity of the international legal system. They referred specifically to the use of nuclear warnings by the Kremlin as a cover for aggressive invasion.
- Some participants also felt that the war in Ukraine is presenting a direct major obstacle to progress on the NPT agenda arising in large part from this tension, and is likely to continue for some time yet. The Stockholm Initiative will need to adjust to this reality and its implications for disarmament diplomacy going forward. Russia will need to be drawn into strategic dialogue if the non-proliferation and disarmament regime has any chance of progressing in this current review cycle. However, a few participants also suggested that the Stockholm Initiative may not now be in a position to play a significant role in this regard, because of the choice made by most of its members to prioritise confronting Russia in response to its invasion, and because the Swedes have chosen to join NATO. This particular belief does not appear to be shared by Stockholm Initiative states members, including some unwilling to support the opening declaration in August, as they are keen now to see the Initiative succeed going forward.<sup>7</sup>
- Making the opening statement without three members in support could set a precedent. Participants in the second roundtable felt that if the Initiative is to operate as a less defined group of states on a flexible 'coalition of

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<sup>6</sup> Based upon discussions with some of the officials involved in August 2022

<sup>7</sup> Based upon discussions with some of the officials involved in March 2023

the willing' basis, this could undermine the Stockholm Initiative's future cohesion. Rather, they supported the idea of the Initiative retaining the principle of cohesion, and moving forward with additional states from the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) or TPNW affiliation in order to strengthen its global legitimacy. If the group moves forward without consensus from within its members when communicating to the rest of the international community, and in particular with the NWS, then this could simply deepen divisions within the broader international community. There probably needs to be particular attention given to those states who were unable to support the Opening Statement in August.

- In addition, participants felt that the decision by two members of the Initiative - Sweden and Finland (particularly Sweden as the initiating state) - to join NATO, a nuclear alliance ranged against at least one other nuclear weapon state, has been seen by some as an unbalancing of the Initiative, harming its credibility with Russia and China, and with many NAM states. The Initiative will need to address this challenge moving forward, both in terms of its membership and in terms of the nature of its leadership.

## Assessment of the Draft Final Document

The draft Final Document was not agreed. Given this document holds no formal legal or political status, it cannot be used to imply agreement by any participating state. Whilst it appeared that it was the paragraphs pertaining to the Ukrainian nuclear facilities that blocked agreement, there could have been other dimensions that would have resulted in the same negative outcome. Nevertheless, the draft Final Document is the best resource we have at our disposal, as a point of departure for those within the Stockholm Initiative seeking indicators of potential productive stepping stones as we move into the next Review Cycle.

At several points, it reaffirms continued 'validity of all existing commitments undertaken' from 2000 and 2010, especially Action 5 from the 2010 Plan.<sup>8</sup> This is in spite of prior suggestions that previous declarations were of their time and had no legal or political obligation to them. This shared understanding of the importance of past commitments was reinforced in our workshops by representatives of the NWS. It represents a significant step forward in reinforcing the importance and sustainability of NPT agreements, and was an explicit objective of the Stockholm Initiative. Our participants agreed that without the universal recognition of the lasting nature of agreements, the value of the NPT Review process was called into question.

Also, other important objectives of the Stockholm Initiative were reaffirmed at the roundtables, including early entry into force of the CTBT and a negotiation of a fissile material treaty. But perhaps the most notable references in the draft Final Document around the Initiative's agenda was extensive reference to Negative Security Assurances (NSAs), welcoming their reaffirmation, but regretting the lack of progress on effective universal NSAs (Para. 145). Some participants to our workshops felt that the references to achieving more universal adherence amongst the NWS to the NWFZ additional protocols in an unconditional manner was very relevant to progress and ought to be a focus. Their legal status was particularly important given the recent experience with the security assurances contained within the Budapest Memorandum. This would reflect some degree of justice and recognition of the double-commitment to non-proliferation by NWFZ members, and thereby strengthen confidence in the regime.

There were also explicit calls within the draft Final Document on the NWS to diminish the role and significance of nuclear weapons in concepts, doctrines and policies.<sup>9</sup> This was an agenda item in the Stockholm Initiative's annex of Stepping Stones that attracted the biggest push-back from the NWS in consultations prior to the Review Conference, and to ensure

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<sup>8</sup> 2020 Review Conference of the Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, *Draft Final Document*, 25 August 2022 [https://reachingcriticalwill.org/images/documents/Disarmament-fora/npt/revcon2022/documents/CRP1\\_Rev2.pdf](https://reachingcriticalwill.org/images/documents/Disarmament-fora/npt/revcon2022/documents/CRP1_Rev2.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> *ibid*

that it featured in the draft Final Document was an important concession from them. The NWS were also on the verge of committing to dialogue with non-nuclear weapon states (NNWS) on their expansion and quality improvements to nuclear forces and new delivery systems, and intensify dialogue on their doctrines and arsenals.<sup>10</sup> The text also included substantive specific commitments to risk reduction measures providing the Stockholm Initiative with an unofficial mandate to build upon them.<sup>11</sup>

All this would have added up to a substantial success that could, at least in part, be chalked up to the Stockholm Initiative if the draft text had been adopted.

## Challenges Leading into the Next Review Cycle: Which are the Most Relevant Stepping Stones?

Given the current hostile political climate, which has harmed the ability of states to identify the practical steps to achieve sustainable nuclear disarmament, participants in our roundtables felt that deteriorating trust between all the NWS and their relationship with the NNWS is at the lowest ebb since the end of the Cold War.

There is some alarm at the ongoing and systematic unravelling of arms control treaties between the US and Russia, which has prevented further progress in achieving practical steps to disarmament. The withdrawal from decades-old US-Russia arms-control treaties such as the Treaty on the Limitation of Anti-Ballistic Missile Systems (ABM Treaty) and the Intermediate Nuclear Forces (INF Treaty) well before the invasion of Ukraine, intensified mistrust between the two. The more recent formal suspension by Russia of its implementation of New START is only the latest damaging act towards the global arms control architecture.<sup>12</sup> It underscores the need to account for vital security interests and avoid actions that undermine stability. Some participants highlighted the need for the NWS to look beyond their traditional approaches to near and medium security concerns, and take a more common security approach.

Some expressed the fear that declarations by leaders in Washington and Moscow over the last six years appear to be normalising nuclear threats, deeply undermining the NPT. It must be an issue of high priority to explore how best to reverse this trend and establish stronger effective restraint on the nuclear rhetoric of leaderships. This could be some kind of regulation, or establishing a common understanding and norm on what is unacceptable behaviour. There was general agreement that developing unilateral and multilateral restraints within declaratory policy more generally should be a high priority in this review cycle. It was suggested that allied states under extended deterrence relationships had a special responsibility to advance No First Use (NFU) proposals and move away from alert status.

It was suggested that the widespread belief that the war re-enforces the salience of nuclear weapons should be challenged.<sup>13</sup> In particular, a working paper issued on 29th July by representatives from France, the UK, and the US, along with their NATO allies, wanted the conference to condemn Russia's 'irresponsible rhetoric concerning potential nuclear use intended for military coercion, intimidation, or blackmail' but not nuclear threats that 'serve defensive purposes, deter

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<sup>10</sup> 2020 Review Conference of the Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, *Draft Final Document*, 25 August 2022 [https://reachingcriticalwill.org/images/documents/Disarmament-fora/npt/revcon2022/documents/CRP1\\_Rev2.pdf](https://reachingcriticalwill.org/images/documents/Disarmament-fora/npt/revcon2022/documents/CRP1_Rev2.pdf)

<sup>11</sup> *ibid*

<sup>12</sup> Paul Ingram, 'What are the potential consequences of Russia's suspension of the New START treaty?' *TRT report and debate*, 27th February 2023 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H8enVfCTLy8>

<sup>13</sup> A recent opinion poll across Europe strongly suggests that the support for nuclear deterrence has strengthened since the beginning of the war: Michal Onderco, Michal Smetana, Tom W. Etienne, 'Hawks in the making? European public views on nuclear weapons post-Ukraine', *Global Policy*, 13th February 2023



aggression and prevent war'.<sup>14</sup> While Russia is attempting to leverage the fear of nuclear use, even some of their own propagandists are pointing out that nuclear weapons have no military value. A few participants felt that much of the analysis from Russia suggests that the Russians recognise that any use would severely backfire against them and would likely fail to re-enforce their weak position. One experienced former diplomat suggested that the withdrawal of non-strategic nuclear weapons from Europe in the early 1990s implied that leaderships saw little value for them in the cold light of day after an end to the very contextual hostilities in Europe in 1989.

This leads onto a review of NSAs, a critical issue in light of the war. Security assurances have received negative press since the invasion, with some even suggesting that Ukraine would have been better off developing their own nuclear weapons rather than trusting the era-specific promises within the 1994 Budapest Memorandum. One of our participants asked what a credible guarantee would have looked like in 1994. As the events of history unfold, participants pondered that perhaps future historians might conclude that the assurances made in 1994 played an important role in galvanising much of the international community, facilitating the conclusive support for Ukraine in 2022-23, and strengthening the resolve to reverse the invasion. Ukrainians themselves do not appear to be deterred from fighting a conventional war by the threat of nuclear attack, and their sponsors appear to be supplying cutting-edge offensive hardware worth tens of billions.

It was suggested that some of the current obstacles to progress linked to the war could fall away with its resolution. Participants urged that significant collective thought be given to pioneering a new global security architecture that goes beyond the limited focus of the NPT. This would need to place nuclear weapons in their broader context, and link them to emerging non-nuclear offensive strike capabilities and other disruptive technologies that destabilise strategic stability and relations. Others felt that non-nuclear systems should remain distinct from the NPT regime and form part of the stalled Strategic Stability talks between the US and Russia.

A salient obstacle to achieving further progress on disarmament circled back to mistrust and in particular, to the intentions of the NWS in pursuing nuclear modernisation and the lack of transparency around nuclear doctrines, as well as recent threatening nuclear signalling. The commitments to dialogue in these areas within the draft Final Document would be a useful reference for the Stockholm Initiative in this regard.

## Possible Direction of Travel: Focussing on Nuclear Disarmament as a Policy Agenda

Some participants felt the need to inject fresh momentum behind implementing the 2010 64-Point Action Plan to safeguard against collapse, and renew confidence in the NPT as the cornerstone of the non-proliferation and disarmament regime.

As an agenda of the Stockholm Initiative listed in the Annex agreed by Foreign Ministers at their meeting in Berlin in February 2020, rekindling the 64-Point Action Plan would encourage the nuclear possessors to look beyond their narrow security focus and engage in strengthening global security.<sup>15</sup>

To this need, the draft Final Document to the 2022 NPT Review Conference states that:

'The States parties underscore that nuclear risks will persist as long as nuclear weapons exist, and reaffirm that the total elimination of nuclear weapons is the only way to eliminate all risks associated with these weapons.'

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<sup>14</sup> Gabriela Rosa Hernández and Daryl G. Kimball, 'Russia Blocks NPT Conference Consensus Over Ukraine' *Arms Control Today*, *Arms Control Association*, September 2022

<sup>15</sup> Embassy of Sweden, 'Ministerial meeting of the Stockholm Initiative for Nuclear Disarmament', 27 February, 2020, <https://www.swedenabroad.se/en/embassies/un-geneva/current/news/stockholm-initiative-for-nuclear-disarmament/>

States parties reaffirm that nuclear risk reduction is neither a substitute nor a prerequisite for nuclear disarmament and efforts in this area should contribute to forward movement in and complement the implementation of Article VI obligations and related nuclear disarmament commitments.<sup>16</sup>

One participant pointed out that there must be something deeply dysfunctional about the NPT, given that there will have been no agreement for 16 years by the time the next Review Conference meets. There was a feeling that there is in any case, no point in renegotiating existing commitments - that linen simply gets lighter each time it goes through the washing machine. The critical dimension now is in implementation. This leads to two thoughts that were both raised in the last roundtable.

First, there may be some advantage to a focus on implementation of the 2010 64-Point Action Plan for the Stockholm Initiative's 2026 NPT Review Cycle. Representatives of NWS present agreed that because this was the last action plan agreed, it retained its salience. Second, whether the NPT is the right venue to even discuss these matters, as it is too unwieldy for substantive negotiations beyond the already-agreed agenda. It was suggested that perhaps it was time to reconvene a Special Session on Disarmament to regulate the strategic environment and address the emergence of new disruptive technologies.

## Conclusion

The Stockholm Initiative is an important asset for the international community that is clearly valued across the spectrum of perspectives within disarmament diplomacy. It offers important opportunities for positive influence at a time when hope is needed more than ever, both because of the rising threat of nuclear use and because the capacity of the international community to manage these risks is weakened. But this is not an easy path, and there have already been difficult moments triggered in particular by tensions within the Stockholm Initiative. This is particularly true in relation to the condemnation of Russia's illegal invasion and behaviour within Ukraine. The war is set to continue for some time to come, and its effects upon the collective capacity for diplomacy likely far longer. Treading the tightrope between traditional declaratory politics and the Stepping Stones Approach will remain a tough challenge. But it is important that advocates for the SSA continue to find ways to educate colleagues in the need for its development if disarmament diplomacy is to have a future.

The workshops we convened surfaced some important interpretations of developments in the last Review cycle and ideas that could be built upon in this one. There was strong consensus that the 2010 Action Plan remains highly relevant, reflected explicitly in the 2022 draft Final Document, as well as in its many items that developed the 2010 themes. The optimism for progress in the current environment is low, and the agenda for action is full. But we have been here before, in the Cold War, when some of the boldest and most effective arms control agreements were negotiated. The need for the qualities of the SSA are stronger than ever. There appears to be confidence that the Stockholm Initiative retains its promise as one of the most important contributions to diplomacy between the nuclear weapon and non-nuclear weapon states.

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<sup>16</sup> 2020 Review Conference of the Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, Draft Final Document, 25 August 2022, [https://reachingcriticalwill.org/images/documents/Disarmament-fora/npt/revcon2022/documents/CRP1\\_Rev2.pdf](https://reachingcriticalwill.org/images/documents/Disarmament-fora/npt/revcon2022/documents/CRP1_Rev2.pdf)



## Policy Recommendations

- The rise of nuclear rhetoric must be an issue of high priority, and the NWS should be encouraged to explore how best to reverse the trend we have witnessed in which implied but active nuclear threats are used to gain strategic advantage. This could include the development of agreed restraint or some kind of UN regulation, or perhaps establishing a dialogue aimed at developing a common understanding and norms on what is unacceptable or destabilising language and behaviour. This objective raises significant challenges, but even the effort to consider the possibilities will help to develop some kind of understanding of the desirability for restraint, even if formal arrangements fall short.
- The war in Ukraine has fuelled increased speculation around Russia's thresholds for nuclear use, which is reinforcing a perception of nuclear weapons as instruments designed to achieve war prosecuting aims. The NWS need to constrain this tendency through statements and declarations that categorically refute the use of nuclear threats of this purpose, as well as committing to resume the Strategic Stability Talks as a platform for dialogue.
- The intentions of the NWS in pursuing nuclear modernisation and the lack of transparency around nuclear doctrines, as well as recent threatening nuclear signalling elevates the perception that the NWS are increasingly reliant on nuclear weapons. The commitments to dialogue in these areas within the draft Final Document would be a useful reference for the Stockholm Initiative, to reinforce the norm against the proliferation of nuclear weapons, as well as reverse the credibility deficit of the NPT on Article IV, on disarmament.
- There are gains to be made in focussing on implementation of the 2010 64-Point Action Plan for the Stockholm Initiative's 2026 NPT Review Cycle. As the last action plan agreed by the NPT, the 64-Point Action Plan remains valid and is an agenda of the Stockholm Initiative listed in the Annex agreed by Foreign Ministers of the Stockholm Initiative at their meeting in Berlin in February 2020.
- Substantive discussions and negotiations around regulating the strategic environment and emergence of new disruptive technologies are not necessarily ideal for the NPT, with its pre-set agenda. The NNWS and NWS should reconvene a Special Session on Disarmament as the venue for such discussions, and to also include nuclear threats within other UN fora such as the Conference on Disarmament and the UN Security Council.
- The Stepping Stones Approach requires an open initiative to all stakeholders to engage in collaborative exploration of proposals that achieve benefits for all. This requires a balanced and neutral approach that sits more in the realm of political-technical cooperation rather than a legal-negotiation strategy.
- Given that Sweden and Finland now have the status of applicant country (invitee) to NATO, the pressing need to re-establish a sense of balance is crucial for cohesion and the future success of the Initiative. The Stockholm Initiative would therefore benefit from considering an expansion within their ranks to include some of the NAM states, possibly Malaysia or another Southeast Asian state, a North African and Central American state. It would also be beneficial to consider means of empowering states within the Initiative from outside of Europe and NATO's nuclear umbrella to play leadership roles within the Initiative.

## Authors

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