



British American Security
Information Council

Analysis: The P5 Process

*If we want a nuclear weapons free world then we need
to change the rules of the game*

Tim Street

February 2015

Representatives from China, France, Russia, the US and UK (the five official nuclear weapon states under the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty), convened in London last week for a meeting of the so-called 'P5 process'. The main point of the meeting, which produced a joint statement outlining proceedings, was to discuss progress on the implementation of their nuclear disarmament obligations¹. At the 2010 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) Review Conference (RevCon), the nuclear weapon states agreed to an extensive action plan on nuclear disarmament, which included a commitment to a series of 'concrete steps for the total elimination of nuclear weapons'.² The next RevCon is in April-May this year, where non-nuclear weapon states, long frustrated by the lack of disarmament action, will be carefully scrutinizing the reports made by the nuclear powers.³ Despite relations between Russia and the US, which together possess 96% of the world's nuclear weapons, being at a dangerous new low, the London meeting presented an opportunity for the nuclear weapon states to get their story straight about what they have accomplished since 2010. The P5 have taken this approach in the past so as to 'limit the

damage' at RevCons, in the words of former US State Department advisor Robert Einhorn.⁴ Damage limitation is surely necessary now because, as Ray Acheson of Reaching Critical Will points out, P5 meetings hitherto have been 'extremely underwhelming'.⁵

The Politics of Nuclear Disarmament

The main reason for the disappointment has been that the creation of a nuclear weapons free world (NFWF) is an enormous challenge, yet those decision-makers responsible for the status quo have shown themselves to be far more interested in nuclear armament than disarmament.⁶ The principal obstacles that need to be overcome if meaningful progress towards a NFWF is to be made are inherently political, concerning nuclear possessor's core strategic power. In order to overcome these obstacles and implement a sustainable process to achieve a NFWF there needs to be a shared understanding that each nuclear weapon state has obligations to achieve both national nuclear disarmament and the creation of a NFWF. In addition, there needs to be agreement on the different degree to which each nuclear possessor is responsible for the

¹ UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office (2015), Joint statement from the Nuclear-Weapon States at the London P5 Conference, www.gov.uk, 6th February

² United Nations (2010), Final Document- Review Conference of the Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, www.un.org

³ Non Aligned Movement (2014), Statement to the 2014 NPT Preparatory Committee, www.reachingcriticalwill.org, 28th April

⁴ Wikileaks (2009), Day 3: US-South Africa Nonproliferation and Disarmament Dialogue: Upcoming Events, Concluding Remarks, and Next Steps, Cable Reference: 09STATE100252, 25th September

⁵ Acheson, Ray (2013), NWS labelled 'persistent underachievers' in the NPT yearbook, reachingcriticalwill.org, Vol. 11, No. 5

⁶ SIPRI (2014), SIPRI launches world nuclear forces data, www.sipri.org, 16th June

creation of a NFWF. The assignment of responsibility here will likely have to be based on a shared appreciation of each possessor's relative strategic power, across the qualitative and quantitative range of military capabilities and the doctrines that guide them and how these capabilities and doctrines interact and affect each possessor's security and threat perceptions.⁷ Put another way, China, France, Russia, the UK and US are all responsible for creating a NFWF but, crucially, not to the same extent because of the variance in their strategic power, something which is masked by the P5 process whereby each sits around the diplomatic table as equals because, under the NPT, each has national nuclear disarmament obligations.⁸

Whilst each of the nuclear powers has different reasons for possessing nuclear weapons, the idea of relinquishing such power, in an era defined by Washington's willingness to unilaterally use its overwhelming military might to achieve its strategic goals, is as much a non-starter for London and Paris as it is for Beijing and Moscow. As long as the US pursues its goal of military dominance underpinned by nuclear threats, there will be a conspicuous lack of space for political manoeuvre on this issue.⁹ All that's left for the architects of the 'P5 process' to negotiate on are thus largely technical subjects such as transparency, mutual confidence building and disarmament verification. The majority of the world recognizes that in the end this focus on the technical can only be a sideshow, and interpret the US's unwillingness to discuss, on mutually acceptable terms, how to manage and resolve the problems of world order as a signal that the threat and use of force will continue to be what shapes international relations for the foreseeable future. Recent events, such as the ongoing crisis in

⁷ Such assessments and negotiations will inevitably also need to include the nuclear armed-states not party to the NPT, namely, India, Israel, Pakistan and North Korea as well as the other nuclear-capable states if a NFWF is to be realised.

⁸ Arbatov, Alexey (2015), The P5 Process- Prospects for Enhancement, www.deepcuts.org, January

⁹ As President Obama stated in his Prague speech, 'as long as these weapons exist, the United States will maintain a safe, secure and effective arsenal to deter any adversary, and guarantee that defense to our allies', Obama, Barack (2009), Remarks by President Barack Obama, www.whitehouse.gov, 5th April

Ukraine and the US confrontation with China, whereby the latter is seeking to break out of the US 'arc of containment'¹⁰ in the Pacific, thus completely overshadow the P5's failed 'step-by-step' approach to nuclear disarmament.¹¹

The genesis of the P5 meetings is attributed to a proposal by then UK Defence Secretary Des Browne, who in 2008 announced that the UK was 'willing to host a technical conference of P5 nuclear laboratories on the verification of nuclear disarmament before the next NPT Review Conference in 2010'.¹² The UK has focused on developing verification mechanisms so that non-nuclear weapon states are convinced by the disarmament steps that nuclear weapon states may, perhaps, one day, at some unknown point, take.¹³ This reveals one of the problems for the British and French governments in their public diplomacy regarding nuclear matters. London and Paris like to point to reductions in the size of their relatively small nuclear forces as evidence of their commitment to disarmament and the success of the 'step by step' approach, yet, according to the NPT, disarmament must be transparent, verifiable and irreversible.¹⁴ Judged by these principles, not only are the UK and France in no sense of the word disarming, they have been going in the opposite direction, making their nuclear forces more accurate and effective, deepening their nuclear relationship and spending enormous sums modernizing their nuclear weapons

¹⁰ McNeill, David (2014), Noam Chomsky: Truth to power, www.japantimes.co.jp, 22nd February

¹¹ The step-by-step approach consists of negotiations on a series of initial steps towards nuclear disarmament, including, for example, further bilateral reductions in nuclear weapons stockpiles between the US and Russia, the agreement of a Fissile Material Cut-Off Treaty and a Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty. There is not space here to explore the background and politics of these two treaties. However, it is important to note that whilst President Obama pledged to reverse the previous administration's opposition to the CTBT and FMCT, the US has still yet to ratify either treaty, with both continuing to face strong Republican opposition.

¹² Browne, Des (2008), Speech by Des Browne to the Conference on Nuclear Disarmament, www2.labour.org.uk, 5th February

¹³ Wikileaks (2009), UK-Hosted P5 Conference on Confidence Building Measures Towards Nuclear Disarmament, <https://cablegatesearch.wikileaks.org>, September 3-4

¹⁴ United Nations (2010), Final Document- Review Conference of the Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, www.un.org

infrastructure.¹⁵ In the UK's case this has been to prepare for the planned successor to the Trident nuclear weapons system.

Yet what France and the UK are doing almost pales into insignificance when compared to the United States, which is far and away the biggest global spender on conventional and nuclear weapons.¹⁶ According to a recent report by the James Martin Center, the Department of Defense and the National Nuclear Security Administration plan to spend approximately \$1 trillion on nuclear weapons projects over the next 30 years.¹⁷ As William D. Hartung and Christine Anderson explain, this includes '\$68 billion to develop and purchase a new generation of nuclear bombers, \$347 billion to purchase and operate 12 new ballistic missile submarines and billions more on new nuclear weapons facilities.'¹⁸ The sweeping and much-vaunted rhetoric of Obama's 2009 Prague speech, in which he stated 'America's commitment to seek the peace and security of a world without nuclear weapons' thus evaporated against the never-ending demands for welfare from the arms dealers, bureaucrats and military officials running the US nuclear establishment.¹⁹

Who Sets the Agenda?

One of the benefits of the 'P5 process' to Washington is therefore the impression it gives that the five nuclear weapon states are similarly, if not equally, responsible for creating a NFWF and

¹⁵ Acheson, Ray (ed.) (2012), *Assuring Destruction Forever: Nuclear Weapon Modernization Around the World*, www.reachingcriticalwill.org; Burt, Peter (2010), *Anglo-French nuclear co-operation and the 'Teutates' programme* (Reading: Nuclear Information Service). Last year the UK and US also extended the Mutual Defence Agreement- the centrepiece of their nuclear relationship- for a further 10 years, which included plans for 'enhanced collaboration' on the design of nuclear warheads, see e.g. Norton-Taylor, Richard (2014), *Exclusive: UK to step up collaboration with US over nuclear warheads*, www.theguardian.com, 12th June

¹⁶ Perlo-Freeman, Sam and Solmirano, Carina (2013), *Trends in world military expenditure*, <http://books.sipri.org>

¹⁷ Wolfstahl, J.B, Lewis, J. & Quint, M. (2014), *The One Trillion Dollar Triad- US Strategic Nuclear Modernization over the Next Thirty Years* (Monterey: James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies)

¹⁸ Hartung, William D. with Anderson, Christine (2012), *Bombs versus Budgets: Inside the Nuclear Weapons Lobby*, www.ciponline.org, June

¹⁹ Obama, Barack (2009), *Remarks by President Barack Obama*, www.whitehouse.gov, 5th April

that the US is committed to achieving a NFWF on a multilateral basis, despite all the evidence to the contrary. Maintaining this facade is important if non-nuclear weapon states are not to lose faith in the NPT bargain, as their cooperation is essential to preventing nuclear proliferation and the loss of the exceptional influence that nuclear weapon states currently enjoy. The problem for Washington is that nuclear weapons as 'force equalizers' give weaker nations that feel threatened the potential ability to deter a possible US attack.²⁰ The US Department of Defense (DoD) has long been aware that it is creating the conditions for the proliferation of nuclear and other weapons of mass destruction (WMD) through its aggressive military campaigns- something it has referred to as the 'superpower paradox'.²¹ However, the DoD sees this as a management problem, concerning the need to prevent recalcitrant states from acquiring, threatening or using nuclear weapons and other WMD against the US, rather than something that necessitates a change in approach. Such a change might include the US following international law regarding the threat or use of force or stopping the development of ever more powerful and threatening conventional weaponry, options which the Pentagon rejects for obvious reasons.

Given the significant conventional superiority the United States currently possesses, a NFWF would not only end the threat of nuclear deterrence from weaker nations, but could only enhance the US's ability to maintain global military reach and dominance. This may explain why some of the West's military and political elite have warmed to the idea of nuclear disarmament.²² However, from a strategic point of view, China and Russia will not allow this to happen, and will not disarm unless the United States takes adequate steps to remove the threat of military attack. A 2010 article entitled '*Start a new disarmament plan*' by the Russian 'gang of four' Yevgeny Primakov, Mikhail Moiseyev, Igor Ivanov and Evgeny Velikhov, argued that a 'world without nuclear weapons is not our existing world minus

²⁰ Sterngold, James (2006), *Nuclear weapons no longer tools of the mightiest nations / North Korea, others want a few for strategic advantage*, www.sfgate.com, 22nd October

²¹ Cohen, William (2001), *Proliferation: Threat and Response* (Washington DC: Office of the Secretary of Defense)

²² Nuclear Security Project (2014), *Wall Street Journal Op-Eds*, www.nuclearsecurityproject.org

nuclear weapons' but that this endeavour necessitated 'a thorough overhaul of the entire international system' that included the construction of a 'reliable mechanism for peaceful settlement of major and local international and border conflicts'.²³

Returning to the origins of the 'P5 process', it is worth considering what might have resulted if an earlier proposal, tabled by Russia in 2001, 'to institute and commence a permanently operating consultation process on the problems of strategic stability within the Five' had been taken up.²⁴ As Eugene B. Rumer points out, from Russia's point of view these problems came to include NATO's eastward expansion and use of military force against Yugoslavia in 1999, US unilateral withdrawal from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty and planned deployment of ballistic missile defence to the Czech Republic and Poland, US and NATO involvement in former Soviet states and 'the new, flexible US approach to strategic arms control as laid out in the Moscow Treaty'.²⁵ Yet, Rumer argues, despite these being deep-seated Russian concerns, Western policymakers treated them as a hangover from Soviet times. Following the end of the Cold War, the West therefore expected that a weak Russia, still in the throes of a chaotic post-Soviet transition, would eventually fall in line with the US-led new world order. Yet Russian leaders, retaining an image of their nation as a great power, were not satisfied with becoming a subordinate to Washington and relied on their still massive nuclear arsenal as the only means of appearing as an equal with the United States on the world stage.²⁶ Moreover, given that Russia's nuclear force was gradually reducing in size anyway as a result of the fall of the Soviet Union, Moscow would only ever agree to additional cuts if its main security concerns

²³ Primakov, Yevgeny, Moiseyev, Mikhail, Ivanov, Igor and Velikhov, Evgeny (2010), Start a new disarmament plan, www.in.rbth.com, 22nd October

²⁴ Yakovenko, Alexander (2001), Russian P5 Initiative, www.acronym.org.uk, July-August

²⁵ Rumer, Eugene B. (2007), *Russian Foreign Policy Beyond Putin* (London: Routledge)

²⁶ Trenin, Dmitri (2009), 'Russian Perspective on the Global Elimination of Nuclear Weapons' in Russia and the United States, Blechman, Barry (ed.), (Washington: Henry L. Stimson Center)

were genuinely being addressed.²⁷

The P5 and the New Cold War

Whilst the 'P5' meetings have not been a place where such strategic discussions have taken place, they do contribute to the status and prestige Kremlin elites value. Appearing influential on the world stage, even when you are in reality quite weak, is important domestically for the Russian leadership. Russia's annexation of Crimea, support for separatists in eastern Ukraine and other military posturing, including an increase in nuclear-armed bombers flying close to NATO members, may give the appearance of strength. But Russia has, for several years, suffered from a stagnant economy that is over-reliant on arms and energy exports, a political system that is corrupt and unstable and a relatively weak military.²⁸ Moreover, Vladimir Putin's aggressive response to the Ukraine crisis rescued his public approval rating, which had previously fallen to its lowest level since he first became president in 2000.²⁹ The stakes have thus now significantly risen for Putin, leading him to rely on using crude nationalism to rally the Russian population behind him. Any hopes for progress on arms control or towards nuclear disarmament will therefore remain in jeopardy for as long as the Kremlin regime feels it has to cling to its nuclear weapons-which Putin recently referred to as the 'teeth and claws' that prevent the Russian bear from being 'chained up'- in order to survive.³⁰

The imperative now for the West is to patiently create the political conditions whereby a future Russian leadership will see more costs than benefits in maintaining such a huge and expensive nuclear force. This requires the US and

²⁷ Herspring, Dale R. (2011), 'Russian Nuclear and Conventional Weapons: The Broken Relationship'. in Blank, Stephen J. (ed.), *Russian Nuclear Weapons, Past, Present and Future* (Carlisle: Strategic Studies Institute)

²⁸ Pallin, Carolina Vendil ed. (2012), *Russian Military Capability in a Ten Year Perspective* (Stockholm: FOI, Swedish Defence Research Agency); Natural Resources Defence Council (2013), *From Mutual Assured Destruction to Mutual Assured Stability Exploring a New Comprehensive Framework for U.S. and Russian Nuclear Arms Reductions* (Washington DC: NRDC)

²⁹ Nechepurenko, Ivan (2014), *Crimean Boost for Putin's Ratings Expected to Fade by Year's End*, www.themoscowtimes.com, 13th August

³⁰ Parfitt, Tom (2014), *Putin signals he will not back down over Ukraine*, www.telegraph.co.uk, 18th December

Europe to address Russia's primary security concerns and take steps to delegitimize the threat or use of force as instruments of state policy. At present, powerful sections of the Western military and political establishment are going in the opposite direction and instead using the Ukraine crisis to shore up their domestic power bases at a time of budget cuts.³¹ The prevailing sense of fear and tension has presented an opportunity for hawks to call for high levels of defense spending to be maintained, further military support for the Kiev government and for the United States to flex its muscles by dispatching nuclear-capable bombers for exercises in Europe.³² At the same time, mutually beneficial schemes such as the Cooperative Threat Reduction program (securing and dismantling weapons of mass destruction and their associated infrastructure in the former Soviet states) have been scrapped and the 1987 Treaty on the Elimination of Intermediate-Range and Shorter-Range Missiles (INF Treaty), the first ever agreement to eliminate a whole class of nuclear weapons, is under threat with Russia and the US accusing each other of violations.³³ Furthermore, leaders from both sides persist in demonizing one another, bringing back the worst memories of the Cold War at a time when hundreds of each nation's nuclear missiles remain at high levels of alert, ready to launch within minutes.³⁴

In this atmosphere, NATO's nuclear weapons upgrade plan, whereby it will equip Belgian, Dutch, German, Italian and Turkish fighter-bombers with B61-12 bombs this year seems particularly ill-timed. The United States is the only nuclear weapon state deploying nuclear arms on

³¹ Scowcroft, Brent; Hadley, Stephen J. and Miller, Franklin (2014) NATO-based nuclear weapons are an advantage in a dangerous world, www.scowcroft.com, 17th August

³² Giannangeli, Marco (2015), Intercepted Russian bomber was carrying a nuclear missile over the Channel, www.express.co.uk 1st February; Keck, Zachary (2014), Nuclear Bombers in an A2/AD World, www.thediplomat.com, 11th June

³³ Borger, Julian (2015), US-Russian rift threatens security of nuclear material, www.guardian.com, 25th January; Gertz, Bill (2014), Russia Stonewalls U.S. on Charges of Nuclear Missile Treaty Breach, www.freebeacon.com, 16th September; Schwartz, Paul N. (2014), Russian INF Treaty Violations: Assessment and Response, www.csis.org, 16th October

³⁴ Press Association (2014), Ready-to-launch nuclear weapons pose grave risk, say former defence chiefs, www.theguardian.com, 8th December

foreign soil: two hundred across these five states. As Hans Kristensen explains, the B61-12 project represents 'the beginning of a significant enhancement of the military capability of NATO's nuclear posture in Europe' despite its claim in the last Strategic Concept of 2012 that 'it was working to create the conditions for a world without nuclear weapons'.³⁵ Kristensen therefore concludes that the increased military capabilities provided by the new bomb could signal to Russia that 'it is acceptable for it to enhance its non-strategic nuclear posture in Europe as well'.³⁶

In addition to seeking to maintain its political influence in Europe via nuclear weapons deployments, the United States is also seeking to shore up its position in North East Asia. One way this is achieved is through guaranteeing to Japan and South Korea that they are and will remain covered by the US nuclear arsenal and ballistic missile defense.³⁷ If the United States is to realize its NPT commitment to 'further diminish the role and significance of nuclear weapons in all military and security concepts, doctrines and policies' then such 'extended deterrence' arrangements will need to be scrapped.³⁸ As with Europe and Russia, the shadow cast by US nuclear forces in Asia impacts upon China's threat perceptions and is one of several factors that may provoke China into an expansion of its still small nuclear arsenal. More widely, Lora Saalman points to the fact that the United States has not sought fit to discuss with China 'arms sales to Taiwan, the arms embargo on China, reconnaissance missions near China's shores, ballistic missile defence, No First Use declarations, and advanced conventional capabilities'.³⁹ This exposes the urgent need for China and the United States to engage in and sustain a strategic dialogue to prevent both an arms race and conflict in the region.

³⁵ Kristensen, Hans (2014), B61-12 Nuclear Bomb Integration On NATO Aircraft To Start In 2015, www.fas.org, 13th March

³⁶ Kristensen, Hans (2014), General Confirms Enhanced Targeting Capabilities of B61-12 Nuclear Bomb, www.fas.org, 23rd January

³⁷ Roberts, Brad (2013), Extended Deterrence and Strategic Stability in Northeast Asia, www.nids.go.jp

³⁸ United Nations (2010), Final Document- Review Conference of the Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, www.un.org

³⁹ Saalman, Lora (2011), China and the US Nuclear Posture Review (Washington DC: Carnegie)

The 'P5 process' retains some value in this context as one of the few venues where China and the US discuss nuclear weapons issues. However, China's approach to this and other diplomatic gatherings has been extremely cautious because, in order to protect its nuclear arsenal from becoming vulnerable and to keep it relatively small in size, it resists calls for transparency.⁴⁰ China's main contribution in the process has been to head a working group to develop a common glossary of nuclear terms.⁴¹ This very limited basis for cooperation is unlikely to change so long as China believes that the United States is unwilling to engage in serious security dialogue and concessions regarding its military forces and presence in the Pacific region. Yet such high-level engagement between the major powers is vital if China is to maintain its policies of nuclear restraint and no first use and if there is to be any hope of moving away from destabilizing military build-ups and towards a nuclear weapons free world.

Conclusion

The conflict in the Ukraine, unless peacefully resolved, could have the most dire consequences. Nuclear-armed Russia and the US are locked in a face off over their political red-lines which neither side has yet shown a willingness to back down from. Yet resolving this conflict could, if responsibly handled, provide an opportunity for these two nations, with other European and regional powers, to embark upon a sustained strategic dialogue in order to agree mutually acceptable security arrangements. Such a process is surely vital if the calamity of a nuclear war is to be avoided and if the shared goals of nuclear disarmament and a nuclear weapons free world are to be realized.

⁴⁰ Hansell, Christina and Potter, William C. eds. (2009), *Engaging China and Russia on Nuclear Disarmament* (Monterey: James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies)

⁴¹ Berger, Andrea and Chalmers, Malcolm (2013), *Great Expectations- The P5 Process and the Non-Proliferation Treaty*, (London: RUSI)

Tim Street is a PhD candidate at the University of Warwick. His research focuses on the political obstacles to and opportunities for nuclear disarmament in and between the nuclear weapon states.

The views expressed in this briefing paper represent those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of BASIC.



British American Security
Information Council

<http://www.basicint.org>