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Owen Greene

# Multilateralising the nuclear disarmament process

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# Briefing Paper

## Multilateralising the nuclear disarmament process: some next steps for the nuclear weapon states

■ Owen Greene

### 1. Introduction

Nuclear weapon states (NWS) have repeatedly committed themselves to work to achieve complete nuclear disarmament. For example, as part of the indefinite extension of the NPT agreed in 1995, the five declared NWS reaffirmed their commitment to 'the determined pursuit .... of systematic and progressive efforts to reduce nuclear weapons globally, with the ultimate goal of eliminating those weapons'.

It is important to recognise that much has been achieved since 1990. For example, the CTBT has been signed. Ukraine, Kazakhstan, Belarus and South Africa have successfully 'denuclearised'. The NPT regime and IAEA safeguards have been strengthened. Several Nuclear Weapon Free Zones have been established. There have been large reductions in the USA and Russian nuclear stockpiles built up during the Cold War. Tactical nuclear weapons have largely been withdrawn or marginalised. The combined arsenal of the USA and USSR/Russia is due to fall to 21,000 by 2003. START 3 treaty negotiations will aim to limit strategic warheads at 2,000 - 2,500 each by 2007, and will include precedent-setting warhead destruction and transparency measures.

However, these nuclear arms reduction talks remain bilateral between USA and Russia. The other NWS have indicated that they do not expect to join such negotiations until the nuclear arsenals of USA and Russia have come down to about 1,000 warheads; that is, closer to the size of their

own stockpiles. This could imply that China, France and the UK would not become seriously engaged in the process of multilateral nuclear arms control for over ten more years. This is unacceptable. All NWS have a responsibility to take opportunities to strengthen international control of nuclear weapons, and to further marginalise the role of nuclear weapons in national security policies. Existing opportunities for progress may disappear if they are not pursued soon.

This paper aims briefly to identify and discuss some realistic ways in which the nuclear disarmament process could be 'multilateralised' to include all five declared NWS in the near future. I argue that this is a priority. Efforts to dismantle the nuclear weapon programmes of India, Pakistan and Israel are also vital, and so is progress towards a UN convention to eliminate nuclear arms. However, these should not distract attention from opportunities for the P-5 states to take early cooperative steps towards nuclear disarmament on their own.

The development of a nuclear cooperation and disarmament process involving all five NWS is by no means assured. However, it does appear to be quite achievable in the near future. For example, the new British government has a policy of supporting steps towards multilateral nuclear disarmament. The immediate challenge is to identify ways in which this can be pursued in practice, and on a faster time-scale than appears possible through the UN Conference on Disarmament, which is presently blocked.

NPT Prepcom meetings provide a key framework in which progress by the declared NWS towards nuclear disarmament can be internationally reviewed and promoted. Although most of the initial measures discussed below would be most appropriately carried out through direct cooperation amongst the P-5 states themselves, all NPT members have a right to discuss and promote ways in which progress could be made.

The measures for P-5 states discussed below would in themselves contribute to international security and confidence-building. However, by building confidence, establishing cooperative procedures, and providing useful data and experience, they should also help to prepare for the time when all nuclear weapons states are ready engage in negotiations to reduce their nuclear arsenals below a few hundred warheads. The measures can be pursued through informal or political agreements as much as through legal treaties.

## 2. Pledges to cap and reduce nuclear arsenals

China, France and the UK will not join the strategic arms reduction talks process for the time being, while US and Russian strategic arsenals are so much larger than their own. Nevertheless, it is important for these smaller NWS to demonstrate restraint in their own nuclear weapon programmes. In the short term, this could best be done through unilateral pledges, preferably re-inforced by transparency and confidence-building measures such as those discussed below.

At the least, China, France and the UK could each declare that they will not expand the size of their own nuclear arsenals. There is no reasonable strategic justification for an expansion, and it would be an abdication of their responsibilities if any of these countries were to expand their arsenals for reasons of bureaucratic inertia or domestic political convenience. It could also undermine progress towards deep cuts in US or Russian arsenals.

Thus, an early step would be for the three 'medium' NWS to make a 'no-increase' commitment in the size of their nuclear warhead holdings, while the process of US-Russian arms reduction is underway.

The prospects for such a declaration appear relatively promising. The total number of French warheads has probably fallen from 540 to 450 since 1992 and, as

land-based missiles are withdrawn from service, this number will fall further to around 350 by 2005. In the UK, the new Labour government came into office committed to working for a freeze on nuclear warhead numbers. As a first step, its policy is to ensure that Trident carries no more warheads than Polaris. This implies that existing plans to deploy up to 288 strategic nuclear warheads would be scaled down to 96-144. Moreover, the UK's only other nuclear weapons, WE-177 free fall bombs, were withdrawn from service at the end of March 1998.

China's likely attitude to a 'no-increase' commitment remains unclear. It is the only NWS to endorse the start of negotiations at the CD for complete nuclear disarmament and to adopt a 'no-first use' policy. Yet there are some reports that it is continuing to expand and strengthen its nuclear forces, which are probably now larger than those of the UK and France. It would not be surprising if China was continuing to 'modernise' its nuclear missile forces; all NWS are continuing with some nuclear modernisation programmes. However, a declaration from China that (so long as US-Russia disarmament continues) it will not increase its nuclear arsenal would not only be important in its own right but also is also likely to stimulate reciprocal commitments from the UK and France.

In fact, pledges by all medium NWS to *reduce* deployed nuclear warheads to below 1990 levels by 2000 - 2005 appear practicable. The same is true of similar pledges by all NWS to stop production of separated plutonium and highly-enriched uranium and to rapidly and safely dispose of 'surplus' stocks of such materials.

## 3. Nuclear Weapon State Cooperation on 'De-alerting'

Proposals for 'de-alerting' nuclear forces are now widely discussed and supported. Moreover, they are reportedly being actively discussed bilaterally between the USA and Russia. Progress in this area can be achieved through a process of unilateral actions. However, it is important that all NWS become involved.

De-alerting nuclear forces can improve crisis stability and security, build mutual confidence, and save money. To secure these benefits, it is not enough for each country simply to carry-out measures to reduce alert levels. The NWS must also cooperate to develop the process, through

multilateral transparency, consultation and confidence-building arrangements. Some de-alerting measures are quite simple and transparent, such as reducing the alert levels of strategic bomber forces. In many areas, however, they are not straightforward or immediately transparent. This is the case, for example, with solid-fuelled ballistic missile forces in silos on land or in missile submarines. There are substantial technical challenges, and expert resources to develop practical de-alerting measures could usefully be pooled between the NWS.

Moreover, each of the five NWS's nuclear forces differs from those of the others. For example, a de-alerting measure will be more practical, cheap or rapidly reversible for some types of ballistic missiles than for others, as has become clear for US and Russian missile forces. Without detailed consultations between national experts, these asymmetries will remain unclear and could cause mis-understanding or suspicion.

Some US-Russian consultations on de-alerting appear to have been usefully established. The process should be rapidly extended to include all five NWS. Due to sensitive nature of technical discussions on this issue, some discussions will be held on a bilateral basis. However, they should be embedded within a multilateral process.

For this purpose, a P-5 forum or consultation process should be established on de-alerting and other related nuclear confidence-building measures. For the 'medium' NWS, there would be much of substance to discuss. For example, further studies are particularly needed on appropriate first steps towards de-alerting SLBM forces: an issue of particular importance for the UK and France.

## 4. Developing Multilateral Nuclear Transparency Arrangements

Each of the approaches discussed in other sections of this paper would involve development of multilateral consultation and transparency measures between the nuclear weapon states. However, it is also important to develop transparency arrangements outside the context of verifying treaty regimes and specifics of the de-alerting agenda. Such nuclear weapons transparency arrangements are useful confidence-building measures, but also contribute to the development of institutions, experience, and shared data that provide a necessary basis for future multilateral nuclear disarmament agreements. One of the

advantages of transparency measures for our purposes is that they can have substantial benefits and yet are flexible and relatively negotiable instruments.

There are many possible nuclear transparency arrangements that could be discussed. Here I focus on only a few, concentrating particularly on the development of a Nuclear Weapons Register.

### **A Nuclear Weapons Register**

The first proposals by governments for the establishment of a Nuclear Weapons Register were made in 1993-4. In December 1993, Germany proposed a Register in which the NWS would regularly report their stockpiles of nuclear warheads. However, in the face of objections from the then governments of the USA, UK and France, Germany did not pursue its proposal. In 1994 Argentina suggested a modest first step towards such a Register, requesting the NWS to provide the UN with copies of any status reports on nuclear forces or reductions that they produce nationally or as part of existing treaties such as START. Central to the concept of a Nuclear Weapons Register is that the information reported to it would be published and openly available.

Since 1994, the proposal for a Nuclear Weapons Register has faded into the background. However, the issue remains salient. Most prominently, Egypt and others have blocked the development of the UN Register of Conventional Arms because could not secure agreement that the Register should be expanded to cover nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction. In practice, transfers of weapons platforms and delivery vehicles covered by the Register (such as aircraft or missiles) should already be reported to the Register whether they are for nuclear or conventional purposes. However, the UN Register of Conventional Arms is not designed as a register of warheads or 'ammunition', and in my view is not the appropriate international instrument for promoting nuclear weapon transparency. A new and distinct transparency regime is needed for this purpose. The establishment of a Nuclear Weapons Register would help to unblock the development of the UN Register of Conventional Arms as well as bring its own benefits.

There are a number of fora within which a Nuclear Weapons Register could be developed, and there are good reasons for at least formally linking it with the UN system. However, participation in a Nu-

clear Weapons Register would clearly have a different character to that of the UN Register of Conventional Arms. Only five states in the world should have anything legitimately to report to a register of nuclear weapons. There is little point in requesting 'nil' reports from all other states each year, and it could even be counterproductive to request such information from undeclared or threshold nuclear weapon states. Although all countries have a legitimate interest in the establishment of such a nuclear weapons register, the process of establishing one should centre around discussions amongst the five NWS.

The dominant concept of a Nuclear Weapons Register is that each NWS should provide regular reports on its holdings of nuclear weapons, which would then be compiled and published. However, many aspects of the design of the Register, and the degree of transparency it would involve, remain open for debate. As with other transparency arrangements, it could begin relatively modestly and develop over time. For example, it could begin with NWS providing aggregate data on their total holdings of nuclear warheads. This could be supplemented with information on the numbers of warheads they had dismantled or withdrawn from service during the previous year. In later years the levels of detail reported could be increased, within the constraints of protecting national security and avoiding releases of information that could undermine non-proliferation efforts. For example, NWS could release disaggregated data showing distinguishing stored or deployed warheads and, preferably, numbers of each category of warheads. In addition, associated information relating to fissile material holdings, delivery vehicles, or dismantlement techniques or schedules, could also be submitted.

Such a Nuclear Weapons Register would be a valuable early step in developing multilateral mechanisms on nuclear weapons involving all NWS. It could also provide an important basis for discussions at NPT Prepcom and Review Conferences on progress towards nuclear disarmament. Furthermore, it would help to build a foundation of official data for future negotiations for complete nuclear disarmament.

### **P5 nuclear information exchange and verification arrangements**

In addition to the Nuclear Weapons Register, which is openly published, the NWS need to develop systems for more

confidential information exchanges on their nuclear forces between themselves. In general, governments are more willing to provide detailed military information confidentially to other governments, even if they are potential adversaries, than they are to provide it openly and officially to the international community and their own publics. Moreover, it is clear that there is much detailed information relating to nuclear weapons which could usefully be exchanged amongst the P-5 which it would be inappropriate to publish openly.

Such confidential P-5 information exchanges would provide a useful confidence-building measure, and would also provide an important preparation for a future multilateral nuclear disarmament regime. NWS can be expected to be very reluctant to reduce their nuclear arsenals to very low levels (tens of nuclear warheads) or to zero unless they have confidence that others have not retained secret stockpiles. This confidence can only be established over time, and on the basis of detailed information on warhead and fissile material stocks and nuclear weapon infrastructure.

The initial priority is to bring the UK, France and China firmly into such a process. While initiatives could usefully be taken bilaterally, the process should become multilateral as soon as possible. It would not be sufficient if it really boiled down to a linked set of bilateral relationships between the USA and the other four NWS, or to a P4 process with China on the outside. Initially, such a multilateral process could build on consultations on de-alerting and on exchanges to build confidence in the reliability to submissions to the Nuclear Weapons Register.

### **Getting started**

Rapid progress could be made on developing the P-5 nuclear transparency arrangements discussed above. The process should be stimulated by early additional unilateral transparency measures by the 'medium' NWS, such as official declarations on the size on nuclear weapon stocks. The recent statement by France providing numerical data on its nuclear warhead stocks should be reciprocated by the UK and China, helping to start a P-5 nuclear weapons register.

Initially, they could simply declare the size of their warhead stocks for a chosen 'baseline' year, linked with a 'no-increase' pledge, as discussed above. For example, the UK could declare the total

number of warheads it deployed on Polaris submarines in 1986, and pledge that its arsenal will remain below this level from now on. Similarly, China could announce the size of its nuclear arsenal in a convenient year in the 1990s, and make a similar no-increase commitment.

These steps could be importantly complemented by decisions by each of the NWS states to open as many of their nuclear facilities as possible to the IAEA, within the new IAEA 'model protocol' inspection regime. In addition, NWS could promote confidence and information-exchange by inviting inspection teams from other P-5 states to observe the withdrawal or destruction of their tactical nuclear warheads.

## 5. 'Multilateralising' existing bilateral agreements

One broad approach towards multilateralising the overall nuclear disarmament process, while also constraining aspects of further force development, is to extend or supplement existing US-Russian bilateral agreements with multilateral ones.

Such an approach would have benefits extending beyond those of 'multilateralisation' and of the particular agreements themselves. They would help to develop the experience in the UK, France and China of cooperation within nuclear arms control regimes, and would thus prepare the ground for future P-5 cooperation in strategic arms reduction talks. The development of institutions and practices of information exchange, consultation, verification between nuclear weapon states take a long time to develop. The USA and Russia now have long experience, which to varying degrees the 'medium' NWS lack. Multilateralising existing agreements could help greatly in this regard.

### Extending participation in the ABM treaty regime

The ABM Treaty was a landmark agreement of US-Soviet détente, and has contributed greatly to international security and crisis stability. However, it is no secret that its integrity is under great threat, particularly from the US TMD and space-based missile sensor development and testing programmes and from those in the USA who want to proceed with establishing a national BMD system.

The ABM treaty continues to contribute to US and Russian security, but it is also especially valued by 'medium' nuclear

weapon states. In addition to the benefits they share with the whole international community, they particularly benefit from the fact that the Treaty constrains the ability of the USA or Russia to develop ABM systems to intercept a relatively small-scale missile attack. The ABM Treaty provides re-assurance to medium nuclear powers that they can retain assured retaliatory capacity without investing in large missile forces or advanced re-entry vehicles.

France, UK and China thus have a special interest in the maintenance and strengthening of the ABM Treaty. One way to achieve this, at the same time as showing willing to become more involved in nuclear arms control agreements, is for these countries to propose that membership of the ABM Treaty is extended to include all five NWS. As a first step, all five NWS could participate in the Special Consultative Committee meetings where the interpretation and implementation of the ABM Treaty is reviewed. Such expansion would increase the capacity of UK, France and China to protect and strengthen the ABM regime.

### A Global Ban of Medium and Intermediate-Range Missile Forces

The INF Treaty was a major breakthrough in US-Soviet bilateral arms control, banning as it did a complete class of nuclear missiles from the arsenals of the USA and USSR/FSU. It appears to be a prime candidate for 'multilateralisation'.

Extending the INF Treaty to a global ban on medium and intermediate range missiles has been advocated in order to complement and re-inforce the constraints on missile proliferation provided by the Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR). An extending INF treaty would not cover the long-ranged strategic missile forces of the five declared NWS, and thus could be acceptable to the P-5 states in the near future.

The very fact that such a convention would not cover P5 strategic missile forces would be a focus for criticism, and would reduce the chance that other states, including India, Pakistan, and Iran, would endorse and join it. For this reason, some analysts have preferred to propose far more ambitious agreements, banning all land-based (or all) ballistic missiles above a range of about 300 km. However, although worthy of support in principle, such proposals are far from being acceptable to the five NWS, while at the same time they have failed to capture the interest of India

and the other states that they aimed to accommodate.

The focus of this paper is to find useful ways to multilateralise the nuclear disarmament process to include all P-5 states, not to propose ways of establishing a global convention to complement the MTCR (important though this task is). In this context, the relatively limited proposal for an agreement that effectively extends the INF Treaty to include all P-5 states seems well-adapted and relatively achievable. The agreement would be negotiated between all five states, and may differ from the INF treaty in some respects. It would be agreed by the P5, but there should be scope for other states such as India, Ukraine, Japan, Brazil and Germany to join later.

## 6. The role of the NPT review process

The NPT review process has developed substantially since 1995, when the indefinite extension of the NPT regime was agreed. NPT PrepComs and Review Conferences can now play a unique role in reviewing and promoting progress towards non-proliferation and multilateral nuclear disarmament. They have the flexibility to discuss, promote and review a wide range of possible measures and initiatives aimed at advancing these goals. They therefore provide an important opportunity for examining and promoting ways in which all five declared NWS can rapidly become involved in the multilateral nuclear disarmament process. Proposals for establishing a P-5 forum to pledge caps on their nuclear forces, advance de-alerting, nuclear transparency and information exchange, and multilateralise participation in existing bilateral nuclear treaties promise to provide useful ways for all nuclear weapon states to play a more active role in preparing for nuclear disarmament. NPT Prepcom meetings could play a key role in ensuring they are properly considered.

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*Prof. Dr. Owen GREENE* is a Senior Lecturer in International Relations & Security Studies at the Department of Peace Studies, University of Bradford. He trained and researched in theoretical physics for several years and has researched on a range of issues relating to arms control, disarmament and regional security over the last decade. His present research interests include: limiting missile proliferation and development of the MTCR, development and effectiveness of multilateral export controls on conventional arms, arms transparency measures, Asia-Pacific and European security after the Cold War, and verification and effectiveness of the NPT and CTBT.