

Recent progress in nuclear disarmament and security: Britain's key role

The UK is at the heart of two recent critical initiatives to strengthen the global nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament regime. Noon this Wednesday 13 July is the deadline for tabling Foreign Affairs questions for 19 July, an opportunity for MPs to encourage the government to take further constructive leads in these matters. This briefing gives background information and poses some key questions.

The 'P5' and Global Disarmament

Two weeks ago in Paris the five NPT-defined nuclear-weapon states (NWS: US, UK, France, Russia and China) had their first follow-up meeting to the 2010 NPT Review Conference, the final text of which included commitments for the NWS:

“the NWS commit to undertake further efforts to reduce and ultimately eliminate all types of nuclear weapons, deployed and non-deployed, including through unilateral, bilateral, regional and multilateral measures.”

The five, known as the "P5" because of their other role as permanent members of the UN Security Council, are looking to report concrete progress at the next NPT Review Conference in 2015. In their official joint press statement (July 1), the Nuclear Weapons States (NWS) reported that they:

“met with the determination to work together in pursuit of their shared goal of nuclear disarmament under article VI of the NPT.”

This forum is a welcome addition to the bilateral nuclear arms reduction negotiations between the US and Russia, which delivered the New-START treaty and is now entering a further phase of high-level talks. In recognition of previous NPT commitments that underscored that all the NWS have national as well as multilateral responsibilities for nuclear disarmament, the Paris meeting committed to further P5 talks next year. Whilst still a long way from formal multilateral negotiations, the Paris meeting was widely viewed as constructive. In particular, according to their Press Statement:

“The P5 continued their previous discussions on the issues of transparency and mutual confidence, including nuclear doctrine and capabilities, and of verification, recognizing such measures are important for establishing a firm foundation for further disarmament efforts.”

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During the 2010 NPT review cycle, a number of states sought inclusion of commitments from the NWS not to modernise or build new or replacement nuclear forces, pending achievement of the NPT's disarmament obligations. The final consensus text, accepted by the NWS, read:

“The Conference recognizes the legitimate interests of NNWS in the constraining by the NWS of the development and qualitative improvement of nuclear weapons and ending the development of advanced new types of nuclear weapons.”

2012 Conference on a Middle East WMD Free Zone

In addition, last week the UK was engaged in consultations with Russia, the United States, the UN Secretary-General and a number of key governments over preparations for a "Conference on a Middle East WMD Free Zone (MEW MDFZ) in 2012". Agreement on such a conference was integral to the success of the NPT Review Conference last May. So far preparations for this groundbreaking agreement have been bogged down by lack of agreement on a facilitator and host country for the conference.

The UK, alongside the US and Russia, has institutional responsibilities for carrying forward this intergovernmental conference, which was agreed as part of the essential bargain that secured a successful conclusion to last year's NPT Review Conference (and indeed the NPT's extension in 1995). The initiative is crucial for three key reasons:

- The legitimacy and effectiveness of the NPT may depend upon the Conference, and regional confidence in a subsequent process leading to a MEW MDFZ;
- It could be a healthy game-changer in a region beset with instability and possible nuclear proliferation; and
- It can engage two key problem states for nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament - Israel and Iran - both of which were represented at the high level conference on the issue held under EU auspices in Brussels last week.

If taken forward constructively, the 2012 Conference could establish a process or regional security forum to take discussions further. It could help build confidence, reassure states in the region, give them a stronger stake in non-proliferation and disarmament, and potentially reframe how to deal with the Iranian and Israeli nuclear programmes.

Key Questions

- What is the Government's assessment of progress after the Paris meeting of the P5 on ways to fulfil the 2012 NPT Review Conference action plans, and how best they can overcome the difficulties faced in achieving progress?
- What particular contribution can the UK offer to further drive the multilateral nuclear disarmament process?
- How is the Government preparing for future disarmament negotiations so that it has something to offer on the table? Is this an explicit consideration for the current Cabinet Office study into the options for Trident replacement?
- What is the Government's current outlook for the 2012 Conference on a Middle East WMD Free Zone (MEW MDFZ) in 2012? How is the Government providing leadership in taking this initiative forwards?