

# 2020 Review Conference of the Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons

10 December 2021

Original: English

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New York, 4–28 January 2022

## **Getting to a world without nuclear weapons: a food-for-thought paper**

### **Working paper submitted by the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland**

#### **Introduction**

1. The Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons created the platform to ease international tensions and create conditions of stability, security and trust among nations. It has provided the framework within which nuclear-weapon States have achieved dramatic reductions in their nuclear arms stockpiles. But not enough progress has been made.
2. Many countries consider that the total elimination of nuclear weapons would improve global stability and security. But those who base their national security on nuclear deterrence – whether provided by their own or others' nuclear arsenals – are equally concerned that the reverse could be the case. While they accept and reaffirm their obligation under article VI, and their unequivocal undertaking to achieve the elimination of their nuclear arsenals, they will need to be convinced either that the threats that they face have been eliminated or that that global security and stability can be best assured by other means. Nonetheless, most of these States take proactive action in the meantime by taking practical steps towards disarmament and inviting collaboration and discussion to advance our common goal. Without the total commitment of all nuclear-weapon States, short-term prospects for disarmament are limited. Pursuing disarmament will therefore need to consider the political, military, legal, institutional, technical and other elements which will give such States confidence that a world without nuclear weapons will be more stable and secure.
3. This paper attempts to describe some of the factors that need to be considered in order to make that step to a world without nuclear weapons a reality. It sets out how some of the near-term steps – many of which are familiar ideas – support that process. It also posits some ideas for the next phase in that process, when a world without nuclear weapons is within reach.
4. Establishing this environment cannot be done unilaterally or in a single leap; it requires a series of incremental, mutually reinforcing steps. Building this framework requires the active participation of the entire international community. Rallying their



many disparate interests presents a massive diplomatic challenge, but it is one in which the United Kingdom has already played a leading role.

#### **Achievable short-term progress**

5. Coherent with the proposals outlined in the Stockholm Initiative on Nuclear Disarmament, the Non-Proliferation and Disarmament Initiative and the Creating an Environment for Nuclear Disarmament initiative, we consider there to be a number of meaningful and achievable measures that should be pursued now to make progress on the road towards a world free of nuclear weapons. Although the challenges are considerable, at least seven concrete steps on this journey are potentially attainable within the foreseeable future:

(a) United States-Russia negotiations and agreement on substantial further reductions in their total nuclear arsenals, complemented by efforts by other States with nuclear weapons to keep their own forces to an absolute minimum;

(b) Bringing the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty into force, banning all nuclear weapon test explosions and thereby constraining the qualitative development of nuclear weapons;

(c) Starting negotiations without preconditions and making progress on a fissile material cut-off treaty in the Conference on Disarmament. This is vital to help make reductions in nuclear weapons and to establish many of the mechanisms that would constitute the core of an eventual regime to oversee a world without nuclear weapons;

(d) Establishing further nuclear-weapon-free zones and, where possible, weapon-of-mass-destruction-free zones. The treaties establishing these zones provide the best way for the nuclear-weapon States to give effect to the stated desire of non-nuclear-weapon States for treaty-based “negative security assurances” that nuclear weapons will not be used against them;

(e) Exploring the many complex political, military and technical issues which will need to be resolved if the States which possess nuclear weapons are to reduce and ultimately eliminate their arsenals securely and to prevent nuclear weapons from ever re-emerging;

(f) Stopping further proliferation and securing agreement among all the States parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons that the way forward must include tougher measures to prevent proliferation and enhance global nuclear security and the vigorous implementation of such measures, including practical help to States which need it;

(g) Working with the International Atomic Energy Agency to help States which want to develop a civil nuclear energy industry to do so in ways which are safe and secure, and which minimize the risks of nuclear weapons spreading or re-emerging.

6. Reducing the risk of nuclear conflict remains a priority and an area where short-term progress is achievable. Improving trust and confidence among nuclear-weapon States, and between the nuclear-weapon States and the non-nuclear-weapon States, will be necessary to enable future disarmament agreements and arrangements. We should seek to foster dialogue among States possessing nuclear weapons, and between States possessing nuclear weapons and non-nuclear-weapon States, to increase understanding and reduce the risk of misinterpretation and miscalculation. Existing initiatives are making welcome and constructive contributions to this issue. The Permanent Five States recognize their special responsibility to reduce the risk of nuclear conflict and are engaged in discussions to build trust and confidence. While

we recognize that work on risk reduction does not replace disarmament obligations, we see this as a complementary and necessary step to reduce the risk of nuclear conflict and enhance mutual trust and security.

### **Addressing the longer-term issues**

7. For negotiations on final disarmament to commence, it is likely that we will need to create an environment where there are:

(a) Minimal arsenals and an international legal framework which puts tight, verified constraints on nuclear weapons;

(b) Solutions to the technical, political, military and institutional challenges of moving from small numbers of nuclear weapons to zero in ways which enhance national and international security;

(c) Watertight means of preventing nuclear weapons from spreading to more States at the same time that the use of nuclear energy is expanding.

8. Long-standing political tensions and the risk that new and unforeseeable issues might arise in the future is one of the main reasons that States possess nuclear weapons or are allies of those who do. Permanently reducing or eliminating those tensions would reduce or nullify the requirement for nuclear weapons. The Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons fully recognizes this – the preamble records the desire of the parties to “further the easing of international tension and the strengthening of trust between States in order to facilitate ... the elimination... of nuclear weapons”. A world without nuclear weapons will need to be preceded or accompanied by developments in political and military relationships which no longer rely on nuclear weapons to deter conflict. For example, some States rely on nuclear weapons to counterbalance the superior conventional forces of others. A fundamental priority must be to promote ever-closer trust and understanding between the major nuclear powers.

9. Reducing and eliminating nuclear weapons without also addressing the balance of power in other respects could be dangerously destabilizing. Discussions among the nuclear-weapon States will need to reflect the role of their nuclear forces in deterring an increasingly complex multi-polar world with the increasing entanglement of nuclear and non-nuclear capabilities. United States-Russia bilateral agreements have tended to assume that the two sides should have broadly equal numbers of weapons. Discussions will become more complex when there are more States around the table and as the numbers of weapons decrease and the balance becomes more delicate. Thought also needs to be given to when and how to involve other States which have or may have nuclear weapons, without legitimizing their status.

10. Building the confidence needed for a world without nuclear weapons will also involve ensuring that their absence does not provoke arms races in other forms – chemical, biological or conventional. While improvements in political relations could go a long way towards reducing the dangers of such arms races, they are likely to need to be reinforced by effective international controls on other weapons before a world without nuclear weapons could be achieved.

11. A world without nuclear weapons will require an extremely robust multilateral framework or set of agreements and arrangements. As part of this, we should continue to strive for the universalization of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons. It is difficult today to define what all the elements of this eventual framework will look like, but there is scope to lay the groundwork by increasing transparency and confidence, particularly through exploratory work on how to verify nuclear disarmament and how it could be made irreversible.

- **Transparency.** If we are to make progress on reducing and ultimately eliminating nuclear weapons, it will eventually be necessary for all possessors to be transparent – at least to one another – about their holdings of nuclear weapons. Transparency can be more difficult for those States with smaller arsenals, since ambiguity about their capabilities is a key part of their doctrine. Keeping adversaries guessing reduces vulnerability to a nuclear first strike. Opacity about numbers of operational weapons and fissile material also gives Governments flexibility to determine how much is enough to maintain an effective deterrent. The loss of ambiguity may lead States with smaller arsenals to change their posture. As part of our responsibilities, the nuclear-weapon States should identify actions to increase transparency in a way that improves understanding and trust.
- **Verification.** To achieve a world without nuclear weapons, we will need to verify that every relevant State has eliminated all its nuclear weapons and that any attempt by any State to reverse elimination or to retain a threshold nuclear-weapon capability would be detected in time and dealt with. This would probably have to involve each such State declaring all its nuclear warheads and relevant facilities and accepting verification arrangements for the dismantlement of its nuclear weapons, for storage and disposition of their component parts, for the destruction or conversion of relevant facilities and for ensuring that there are no clandestinely held weapons, materials or facilities. This would have to be backed by the tightest possible safeguards on all nuclear-related facilities throughout the world to insure against any diversion of materials for weapons purposes. The challenge is to create a robust, trusted, effective system which can provide that confidence while at the same time not giving away national security or proliferation-sensitive information. All States that possess nuclear weapons have a special responsibility to engage in efforts to understand and build verification mechanisms that will enable future disarmament.
- **Irreversibility.** Despite enjoying broad support among the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons community, there is no common definition or unified understanding of the principle of irreversibility. In developing an improved understanding of the principle, it will be useful to make a distinction between two equally important but different facets of the overarching principle of irreversibility in the disarmament context. These are “irreversible steps towards disarmament” and “irreversibility in a weapon-free world”. Both are clearly important, but they are not the same thing, and one does not necessarily lead to the other. Disarmament could be achieved without having irreversible steps, and individual irreversible steps do not necessarily lead to disarmament by themselves. The United Kingdom has co-authored a paper with Norway on the principle of irreversibility, on how it has been understood and on where further work can be taken forward. The United Kingdom invites all States to work with us to deepen our understanding of irreversibility and what it means in practice.

12. An alternative proposal to achieve a world without nuclear weapons is for the international community to agree a universal, verifiable and legally binding agreement to ban all nuclear weapons. This approach is championed by many of the non-nuclear-weapon States and non-governmental organizations. Most of the States with nuclear weapons, including the United Kingdom, accept that a form of such an agreement is likely to be necessary in due course to establish and maintain “Global Zero”. However, those States consider that it is premature and potentially counterproductive to focus efforts on it now when too few incremental steps have been taken on the journey to enable a world without nuclear weapons.

**Global responsibility**

13. Clearly, no single country will be able to deliver this all alone. Making progress will require building a broad coalition including States, international organizations, businesses and non-governmental organizations. While the nuclear-weapon States have a special responsibility to take the lead, eliminating nuclear weapons needs to be a cooperative project with the active engagement of the entire international community to create the political and security environment which will be necessary.

14. We need to build a global coalition around not only a shared vision of a world free of nuclear weapons but also of how we are going to work together to make it happen. We need to make a clean break from the current perceptions that in this field everything is a zero-sum game in this field and instead work to establish virtuous circles in which progress on non-proliferation, disarmament, and the political and security environment is mutually reinforcing, enabling breakthroughs in areas which for many years have seemed intractable. We must find common cause and move from a decade of deadlock to a decade of progress towards our shared goal of a world without nuclear weapons.

15. To enable this, we need discussions among nuclear-weapon States and between nuclear-weapon States and non-nuclear-weapon States on security, risk reduction and non-proliferation issues. We should all support inclusive dialogues incorporating both government officials and civil society to identify areas of common concern and interest, and press for joint approaches to the shared issues that we face. States must collaborate and engage in discussions on enabling a world without nuclear weapons underpinned by transparency, verification and irreversibility and with undiminished security and stability for all.

16. Multilateralism must underpin our approach, and we should work together to strengthen those institutions that are vital to the future functioning of the international order. The Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons must remain at the heart of the international nuclear architecture, complemented by the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty Organization, the International Atomic Energy Agency and the Conference on Disarmament.

**Conclusion**

17. We are resolved to understand and grapple with the challenges of a world without nuclear weapons so that we may better identify the steps required to get there. We invite all States to work with us on the short-term and long-term steps that are needed, including further understanding of transparency, verification and irreversibility and their role in achieving a world without nuclear weapons. The national implementation report of the United Kingdom details the actions that we are taking to make progress on this journey, and we welcome discussions on the role of the United Kingdom at the Review Conference.

18. By setting out this vision of where we think we need to go, we hope that it will provide food for thought to all concerned States and underlines the offer of the United Kingdom to work with all States to realize our common goal.