

Nuclear Disarmament and the 2010 NPT Review Conference

*The Position of
the Major
European Players*

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Some decisive negotiations in arms control and non-proliferation lie ahead. Not the least important will be the Review Conference of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in spring 2010. The preceding meeting in 2005 did not produce a concluding document with political content. This failure illustrates the growing rift between the states possessing nuclear weapons and technology, and those members who feel that constraining nuclear technology might impede their development.

On that occasion, France and to a degree Great Britain acted from their position as nuclear weapon states, blocking further commitments.¹ While obviously a lack of compliance by Iran and North Korea has damaged the treaty more than the reliance on nuclear weapons as a political tool has, many observers argue that the NPT's cohesion might suffer when the nuclear weapon states fail to fulfil their disarmament commitment in the treaty. The positions of the European nuclear 'haves', France and Britain, play an important role in determining the European Union's influence in non-proliferation. There has been a debate in both countries recently how to modernise and restructure their nuclear arsenals. What plans do Paris and London have – and is there a debate over nuclear deterrence in Germany? How might this affect the European positions and standing at upcoming NPT conferences?

The Relationship between Disarmament and Non-Proliferation

The disarmament commitment of the nuclear weapon states is one of the central elements in the NPT. The treaty's bargain is that the renunciation of nuclear weapons by most states is rewarded through access to technology and through nuclear disarmament.² Though the treaty asks for disarmament, it allows for the existence of nuclear weapons for an undetermined period and declares five states to be official nuclear weapon states. Yet it does demand

negotiations for disarmament. This commitment includes the aim of eliminating nuclear weapons. That reading was confirmed by a document on the principles of non-proliferation issued along with the indefinite extension of the treaty in 1995.³ The United States and Russia hold the vast majority of nuclear weapons on the globe.

Ironically, it seems that Article VI (disarmament) is now a greater problem than 30 years ago. During the Cold War, the two superpowers built up vast nuclear arsenals in clear violation of their NPT commitment. They also took care of non-proliferation in their sphere of influence, thus serving the non-proliferation purpose of the treaty and making it more reliable in that regard. At the same time, many non-nuclear weapon states based their security on the nuclear protection by and the military superiority of the respective superpower. Under these circumstances, the broken disarmament commitment did not damage the credibility of the treaty enough to dissolve the nuclear bargain.

After the demise of the eastern block, with new threshold states becoming nuclear proliferation candidates, with black markets for knowledge and technology, and with tighter restrictions on sensitive technologies, the calculus changed. Though the goal of ending the nuclear arms race has been achieved for the moment, the rationale for non-proliferation has to be redefined in the new and uncertain security environment. There must be no proliferation incentives



coming from the conviction that nuclear weapons increase a state's individual security. It is now more crucial for the overall balance of the NPT that nuclear weapons lose value, to signal that the political advantages based on nuclear capabilities are limited.

Nuclear disarmament is receiving more attention in the NPT context today than in earlier decades. The superpowers as well as the smaller nuclear weapon states have substantially reduced their nuclear arsenals, but there are still nearly 8,000 warheads for strategic use on the globe.⁴ At the Review Conference of the NPT in 2000, member states, and the nuclear weapon states as well, had agreed on a number of important commitments to rid the world of nuclear weapons. They outlined their agreement in the '13 Steps towards Nuclear Disarmament'. The NPT member states, among them the five official nuclear weapon states, affirmed in accordance with Article VI of the NPT that nuclear disarmament can and should proceed independently of general disarmament, that the nuclear powers have a responsibility to work together on "an unequivocal undertaking" to eliminate their arsenals. The NPT is now the only instrument by means of which the 'have-nots' can press the 'haves' to cut their arsenals.⁵

Since then, nuclear disarmament finds itself in a climate of stalemate. The U.S. and Russia agreed on further reductions to 1,700-2,200 warheads on each side, but failed to include intrusive verifi-

cation elements in their 2002 SORT (Treaty of Moscow) agreement. Also, the warheads do not need to be destroyed. A number of negotiations on further arms control, all yet to be concluded to implement the 13 Steps, are presently deadlocked. The U.S. has not ratified the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) and no mandate seems possible to negotiate the Fissile Material Cut-off Treaty (FMCT) in Geneva. At the 2005 Review Conference, the dispute as to what extent reference was to be made to the 13 Steps was one of the reasons the conference failed to produce viable results. Such a stalemate could be repeated at the Review Conference in 2010.

In this situation, there are some signs that even in the U.S., the reliance on nuclear superiority is not undisputed. In *The Wall Street Journal* (January 2007) security veterans such as Henry Kissinger and George P. Shultz demanded concrete steps under U.S. leadership to free the world of nuclear weapons, initiating a new debate concerning that vision.⁶ The U.S. Congress has partly blocked further research on new nuclear weapons design and has demanded negotiations on a follow-up to the START I (Strategic Arms Reduction Talks) agreement that will run out of force in December 2009. Even the Republican presidential candidate Senator John McCain has recently asked for new arms control accords with Russia, tactical nuclear weapons reductions, and a revival of the CTBT.⁷ Arms controllers hope for an opportunity to redefine the U.S. position when the new government in Washington takes office in 2009.

The major European players: from left French President Sarkozy, German Chancellor Merkel, and British Prime Minister Brown
(Photo: European Commission)

The Positions of the European 'Big Three'

While no government of a nuclear weapon state seriously contemplates to give up its nuclear capability, there is a challenge to legitimise its modernisation and convey signals of disarmament commitment at the same time. France and Great Britain have recently gone through decisions about the future of their nuclear arsenals. It is worth looking how these adaptations will affect European standing at the next Review Conference.

France

In March 2008, French President Nicolas Sarkozy announced to cut the number of French nuclear weapons to below 300 through a reduction of the airborne warheads (on airplanes and missiles) by a third. With a Defence White Book in the making, France is undertaking an audit of her military strategies and procurement programmes. Sarkozy announced his plans on the occasion of the commission of the fourth new submarine *La Terrible*. France has currently 348 warheads, most of them on four submarines with only one boat in operation. These weapons are not targeted, and it takes days to make them operable. While Sarkozy announced the reductions, he also renewed the commitment that nuclear weapons remain the backbone of French defence policy, the 'nation's life insurance'. He assured that the weapons would be targeted on no one, but pointed to the threat of new nuclear weapon states such as Iran.⁸ The reduction is partly driven by budgetary constraints, but also follows a reevaluation of what minimum capabilities France needs to uphold nuclear disarmament.

French and British credibility rests on their ability to see elimination of nuclear arms as an option

The French president presented the numbers openly – maybe to invite other nuclear weapon states to follow suit – and proposed to engage with interested European states in negotiations about joint deterrence. Most important for this article's topic is the way the reduction has been linked to new disarmament incentives. Sketching out an action plan until 2010, Sarkozy asked China to sign and the U.S. to ratify the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty and asked for transparency measures among the five permanent Security Council members (P5). He proposed a treaty to abolish short- and medium-range surface to surface missiles and also pressed for negotiations on the Fissile Material Cut-off Treaty that are currently blocked in Geneva, and the verifiable closure of fissile material production sites.⁹

However: there has not been a devaluation of nuclear weapons. The French position *vis-à-vis* nuclear weapons still builds upon a rather conservative nuclear doctrine that President Jacques Chirac had announced January 2006.¹⁰ Chirac understood deterrence as part of a preventive security strategy: in his view, deterrence could also be used against state sponsors of terrorism. France seeks the ability to attack the enemy's capacity to act and should seek to have more discriminate and controllable weapon employment options available to make deterrence credible. Remarkably, strategic resources such as energy lines would be seen as vital interests of France.

The new impetus for disarmament of 2008 attached to the reduction is part of a double strategy, to embed the unquestioned nuclear deterrence strategy into a more benevolent context of arms control. It aims to create legitimacy and diffuse criticism. It can be read as programmatic for France's position at the 2010 NPT Review Conference. This would be progress: France did not play a constructive role in the 2005 Conference. It was one of the staunchest nuclear weapon states next to the U.S., demanding removal of any reference to the 13 Steps from the concluding conference documents.

The United Kingdom

Last year, Britain went through a painful decision to refurbish its nuclear arsenal. Since 2003, when a Defence White Paper had envisaged considering the replacement of the existing Trident system during the coming parliamentary period, the value and the price of nuclear deterrence has been debated in the UK. Relying on submarines for deterrence, the United Kingdom has currently four nuclear powered Vanguard-class submarines, each carrying 12-16 Trident missiles with three warheads each. One vessel is patrolling at a time. Britain is leasing the missiles from the U.S.

The decision to extend the life cycle of the Trident system by 20 years into the 2040s was made on 4 December 2006. Prime Minister Tony Blair sought to finalise this difficult step during his tenure of office. The government decided to upgrade and renew the warheads and missiles, and to replace the submarines. Britain will reduce the number of warheads from 200 to 160 and the number of vessels from four to three. The budget for the replacement will total up to £ 20 billion.¹¹

When presenting the plans to develop a new generation of submarines for carrying Trident missiles, Tony Blair (prime minister at that time) told parliament in December 2006 that it would be "unwise and dangerous" for the United Kingdom to give up its nuclear arsenal. His line of argument was similar to that of his French counterpart. The UK "needed" nuclear weapons even long after the Cold War, since other nuclear threats could emerge in the

future.¹² On 14 March 2007, the Labour government won the support in the House of Commons for the plans to renew the submarine system. It found it hard to win a majority and had to rely on the support of the opposition Conservative party. Both large parties support the programme.

The expensive decision now needs to be implemented. In direct reactions critics debated the value of nuclear weapons in the 21st century, about the opportunity costs of nuclear modernisation, and the impact on arms control as a whole. Traditional protesters such as the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament or the churches raise moral concerns, pointing to the inhuman and indiscriminate character of the weapons.¹³ Military leaders in the Ministry of Defence and members of the House of Lords complain about the costs of £1-2 billion per year during the coming 15 years. The money could be better used, they argue, to equip the concrete military operations the UK is undertaking. The Liberal Democrats point to the dependence of the British nuclear weapons on the support of the United States. A leadership struggle keeps the Liberals from taking a joint position.¹⁴ The position of the Labour party is: let us seek to create a world in which nuclear weapons do not need to play a role, but until then, sustain a deterrence force available for a second strike. How does this connect to the disarmament commitment?

In a lecture at the Carnegie Foundation in Washington D.C., June 2007, then Foreign Secretary Margaret Beckett presented a commitment to the NPT, a resolve to make the Review Conference of 2010 a success.¹⁵ She pointed to the vision of a nuclear weapons free world, and compared this undertaking to the movement for the abolition of slavery. Beckett outlined a rationale for disarmament based on the overall balance of the regime, not on a direct impact on problem countries: it is not because Iran could be stopped from seeking the bomb, but because the allies and NPT partners “want us to do more”. Britain should be on the forefront of disarmament, a ‘disarmament laboratory’. When START runs out in 2009, Beckett said, it would be time to “move from a bilateral disarmament framework build by the U.S. and Russia to one more suited to our multipolar world.” Of course that would refer to the larger nuclear weapon states, but “when it becomes useful to include in any negotiation that one percent of the world’s nuclear weapons that belong to the UK, we will willingly do so”. The current Secretary of Defence, Des Browne, urged for progress in the stalled disarmament negotiations – not demanding more than the UK has already done.¹⁶

Germany

In Germany public debate over disarmament issues is not very vivid. There is an understanding among observers that Germany might have to clarify its position toward nuclear deterrence and the future of the 170 U.S. tactical nuclear weapons currently deployed on German soil. For a fraction of these, Germany commands the Tornado

fighters to bring them out. A decision on these arrangements is likely when the current Tornado fighters will be replaced by Eurofighters within the coming decade, which are not yet capable to carry nuclear bombs.¹⁷ The federal government has not been eager to debate these issues. Opposition against these arrangements is likely in an electorate mostly poised against nuclear weapons.

Between the Ministry of Defence, run by a conservative (CDU), and the parliament fractions of the social democrats (SPD), the issue was contentious during the debate over the German Defence White Paper of 2006, which states: “The Allies’ common commitment to preventing war and the credible demonstration of Alliance solidarity, as well as the fair sharing of burdens, require Germany to make a contribution towards nuclear participation commensurate with its role in the Alliance and the principles laid down in the Strategic Concept of 1999.”¹⁸ NATO must reevaluate nuclear deterrence, says the White Paper, when the Allies negotiate a new strategic concept to adapt the Alliance to a new security environment.

The Alliance rationale is crucial for explaining the German nuclear participation. By withdrawing from the agreement to have German planes carry U.S. nuclear weapons, the argument goes, Germany would damage the mechanism of joint deterrence. The move would cut an important link between U.S. and European defence policies.

*Iran does not
try to achieve military
nuclear capability
because of a lack of
disarmament*

The nuclear weapons are also a more credible deterrent toward a conventional opponent. The previous, red-green government had made the reduction of tactical nuclear weapons in Europe a cornerstone of the preparation of the NPT Review Conference 2005. At that

time, the idea of withdrawal of U.S. tactical nuclear weapons from Europe circulated in Germany to incite a Russian disarmament response. The issue could come under scrutiny in 2009, following a NATO decision at the Strasbourg/Kehl summit to formulate a new strategic concept. There will also be German elections in summer 2009. The SPD might be tempted to demand the withdrawal of the tactical nuclear weapons from Europe, trying to win over an electorate in which anti-nuclear sentiments prevail. The CDU will not press too much, having higher esteem for NATO coherence.

To be sure: while it is unclear whether there will be any changes in the nuclear participation arrangements, there is no openness in Germany for French attempts to include its western neighbour in



joint nuclear decision-making. In 1995, after Chirac's first attempts, at least the Germans engaged in talks over the issue. In 2006, there was a strong rebuff of Chirac's idea of an extended French nuclear doctrine from the security community across the board (not as outspoken from Chancellor Merkel, though). In 2008, Germany issued a friendly "no" to Sarkozy's nuclear embrace. A concerted deterrence is not yet in accordance with the German idea of a common European Security and Defence Policy, which would be much more directed toward crisis management and capacity building in weak states.

Repercussions on Nuclear Arms Control and Non-Proliferation

For the time being, the European nuclear weapon states hold the view that nuclear weapons are indispensable. The French president, in outlining the nuclear future, did not refer to the abolition of nuclear weapons, as British government officials have. This difference might prove crucial. French and British diplomats support new disarmament and arms control negotiations. This might help to put pressure on the American ally. But their disarmament credibility also rests on their ability to see the elimination of nuclear arms as a future option. Here is the dilemma: creating legitimacy for nuclear weapons expenditures to a domestic audience will create an image of nuclear weapons dependency to the outside world.

To be sure: the future of the NPT lies not only in the responsibility of the nuclear weapon states. Nuclear disarmament of the Europeans will not lead a determined proliferation candidate to stop its programmes. Iran or North Korea try to achieve a military nuclear capability not because of a lack of disarmament, but act according to regional strategic considerations or to achieve prestige. If one calls for complete nuclear disarmament as an incentive for proliferation candidates to stop their efforts, one would require the nuclear weapon states to forego their options exactly at a time when the threat from new nuclear states is most urgent.

However, since even a perception of sluggish disarmament efforts along the lines of the 13 Steps can be fatal for the regime's stability, devaluing and dismantling nuclear weapons has an effect to the overall framework of non-proliferation. Reliance on nuclear weapons is the soft spot of any western non-proliferation approach.

At the 2008 Preparatory Committee (PrepCom) meeting preparing the NPT Review Conference, the old conflicts emerged anew. The Non-Aligned Movement and the New Agenda Coalition, all critical of nuclear weapons, issued concerns about the renewed orientation toward nuclear deterrence and the modernisation programmes of France and the UK. So did Iran. France countered with a reference to Sarkozy's arms control proposals.¹⁹

To meet such accusations, demanding disarmament is the right strategy for the nuclear weapon states in Europe. There is a problem of asymmetry, though. Since the UK or France have only a fraction of the warhead capabilities of the U.S. and Russia, the UK and France cannot issue demands of equal standing. Yet they can be front-runners for further arms control measures, such as new verification instruments or confidence building measures, in the UN Conference on Disarmament, among the P5 or in the context of the G8. In that, EU consultations are a helpful tool. For France and the UK, the political value of a joint position is high. In 2005 already, they tried to avoid being singled out from their fellow Europeans.

At the Review Conference of 2010, both states might be able to be more constructive than they were in 2005. There is reason to believe that the decision to reduce and modernise the arsenals has created a larger freedom of action, since a stronger disarmament stance might have curtailed options that Paris and London wanted to keep open. Whether the European nuclear weapon states will have more impact at the NPT conference depends not only on their willingness for a commitment on nuclear disarmament, but also on the attitude of the new U.S. government. In 2005, the Europeans could still hide behind the back of John R. Bolton, the hard-nosed Under Secretary for Arms Control in the U.S. State Department. Things might be different this time.

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