

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

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Transparency and Nuclear Disarmament

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

Introduction

1. Transparency is widely recognized as one of the fundamental principles underpinning nuclear disarmament, alongside verification and irreversibility. The present working paper aims to set out some understandings of what “transparency” means in the context of nuclear disarmament and why it matters, from the perspective of a nuclear-weapon State, and to suggest some possible recommendations on transparency and nuclear disarmament for the tenth Review Conference of the Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons.

2. Action 2 of the conclusions and recommendations for follow-on actions adopted by consensus at the 2010 Review Conference¹ committed all States Parties “to apply the principles of irreversibility, verifiability and transparency in relation to the implementation of their treaty obligations”. With particular respect to nuclear disarmament, action 5 called on the nuclear-weapon States to “further enhance transparency and increase mutual confidence” (action 5 (g)) and “to report on the above undertakings”. Further, in the preamble to section F (“Other measures in support of nuclear disarmament”), the Conference recognized “that nuclear disarmament and achieving the peace and security of a world without nuclear weapons will require openness and cooperation” and affirmed “the importance of enhanced confidence through increased transparency and effective verification”. This set the context for actions 19, 20 and 21, all aimed at improving transparency, particularly through national reports.

3. Step 9 of the “13 practical steps” agreed at the 2000 Review Conference² called for “increased transparency by the nuclear-weapon States with regard to the nuclear weapons capabilities and the implementation of agreements pursuant to article VI and as a voluntary confidence-building measure to support further progress on nuclear disarmament”. Step 12 concerned regular reporting by all States parties.

¹ NPT/CONF.2010/50 (Vol.I).

² NPT/CONF.2000/28 (Parts I and II).



4. It can be inferred from these commitments that transparency in the context of nuclear disarmament has two aims: first, to increase mutual confidence among the nuclear-weapon States and enable practical disarmament steps; and second, to provide accountability as to the implementation of Treaty obligations and other commitments and undertakings. Furthermore, as pointed out in the 2019 working paper by the members of the Non-Proliferation and Disarmament Initiative,³ “the principle of transparency – like those of irreversibility and verifiability – is indispensable for nuclear disarmament. Indeed, the principle of transparency underpins the other two principles.” The United Kingdom’s long-standing commitment to transparency with regard to its nuclear doctrines, policies and capabilities, and to its implementation of its Treaty obligations and other associated commitments, speaks to both aims.

Increasing mutual confidence

5. Misunderstandings about military capability developments, doctrines and the intentions underlying specific military activities are a common risk in security relations. They can be mitigated through transparency and formalized communication and dialogue, both multilateral and bilateral, involving relevant diplomatic and military officials. On the other hand, a lack of transparency between nuclear-weapon States can be dangerous. The absence of reliable and clear information either on doctrines and capabilities can give rise to suspicion and mistrust, and “hedging” on the part of other nuclear-weapon States. A sustained process of deep exchanges amongst nuclear-weapon States on their respective nuclear doctrines and policies is therefore essential for avoiding misunderstanding and miscalculation, which could lead to escalation of tensions and conflict.

6. An example of transparency as a starting point for dialogue is the P5 Process workstream on nuclear doctrines and policies, which the United Kingdom has led since the Beijing Conference of January 2019. The information and insights gained through this work and through bilateral channels can establish baseline facts, prompt questions and provide a sound basis for an exploration of other’s doctrines, policies, capabilities and actions. This is important both for strategic risk reduction efforts, and for negotiating effectively verifiable arms control agreements.

7. It is therefore crucial for nuclear-weapon States to be as transparent as possible about their nuclear capabilities, doctrines and policies. Elements of transparency might include:

- An indication of the size of their overall nuclear warhead stockpile
- Information on the types of delivery systems employed
- Details of a State’s nuclear doctrine and policy, including the role played by nuclear weapons in that State’s overall security policy, the circumstances in which that State would contemplate the use of nuclear weapons, the chain of decision-making in the potential use of nuclear weapons and the precise terms of any security assurances

Accountability

8. It is widely agreed that States parties should be held accountable for the implementation of their Treaty obligations and other commitments entered into, in the context of the strengthened review process agreed in 1995. Transparency, therefore, is important for other States parties and international civil society to be able to

³ “Enhancing national reporting as a key transparency and confidence-building measure” (NPT/CONF.2020/PC.III/WP.24).

monitor progress against past commitments, and for parliaments and publics to inform challenge, debate and discussion in the domestic political process.

9. The primary means of accountability in the Treaty is the national implementation reports provided by States parties. In the present review cycle, the United Kingdom tabled a draft of its national implementation report at the third session of the Preparatory Committee,⁴ and conducted an extensive consultation exercise involving the other nuclear-weapon States, non-nuclear weapon States and civil society as it prepared the final version that has been published ahead of the Review Conference.⁵ It is a comprehensive statement of the United Kingdom's national measures on disarmament, non-proliferation and the peaceful uses of nuclear energy. It was the product of a cross-government exercise, involving officials from the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, the Ministry of Defence and the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, as well as nuclear regulators and other agencies.

10. Like the reports of the other nuclear-weapon States, the United Kingdom uses the standard reporting form agreed by the nuclear-weapon States in 2013, pursuant to action 21 of the 2010 action plan. While some shortcomings of this standard reporting form have been pointed out, there is a benefit in having a stable comparative framework between the nuclear-weapon States' reports in a given year, and across each State's reporting in different years.

11. It is time-consuming both to prepare and to read and analyse transparency reports. States parties should therefore be clear on the value this investment of time and resource represents. At the same time, it is important that the reports serve as the basis for deeper discussion, both to clarify differing interpretations and understandings, and to improve the content of reporting in the future. For both of these reasons, the United Kingdom supports calls for specific time to be set aside during the meetings of the Preparatory Committee and Review Conference to examine and discuss these reports. States parties, and particularly the nuclear-weapon States, should also be encouraged to hold informal discussions on their national reports with interested States parties and civil society.

Limits of transparency

12. It is important to emphasize that there are limits to transparency. In all cases, transparency must not extend to sharing information that is proliferation-sensitive. There are also important national security reasons for not exposing information that would be valuable to State or non-State adversaries. In addition, many nuclear-weapon States, including the United Kingdom, incorporate a degree of deliberate ambiguity into their nuclear doctrines, which enhances deterrence and contributes to strategic stability. In those cases, increasing transparency could paradoxically reduce security and stability. It is important, though, that those elements are clearly signalled and explained; deliberate ambiguity cannot be an excuse for a lack of transparency or accountability.

Conclusions and recommendations

13. It seems clear that the various aspects of transparency in the context of nuclear disarmament, and the benefits, potential and risks associated with them, are not fully understood, and in some instances may even be contested. The Review Conference could usefully call for greater efforts to resolve this question, in the interests of fostering greater understanding of the role transparency can play in progressing

⁴ [NPT/CONF.2020/PC.III/7](#).

⁵ [NPT/CONF.2020/33](#).

nuclear disarmament, taking into account that that role might vary at different stages of the disarmament process.

14. The tenth Review Conference could then make the following conclusions regarding transparency and nuclear disarmament:

- (a) Reaffirm that transparency, along with verification and irreversibility, is one of the fundamental principles of nuclear disarmament;
 - (b) Call on all States parties to submit regular reports on their implementation of the Treaty and of commitments made at previous Review Conferences, in line with action 20 of the 2010 action plan, and decide to set aside time in the forthcoming review cycle for examination and discussion of those reports;
 - (c) Call on the nuclear-weapon States in particular to continue to report regularly on their national measures relating to disarmament, using the standard reporting form agreed in 2013, in line with actions 5, 20 and 21 of the 2010 action plan;
 - (d) In addition, urge the nuclear-weapon States to publish details of their nuclear weapons capabilities, doctrines and policies, and to continue and to deepen their exchanges on nuclear doctrines and policies, bilaterally and as part of the P5 Process, in order to enhance trust and confidence and to provide the basis for further reductions in the global stockpile of nuclear weapons;
 - (e) Encourage States parties to deepen their consideration of the nature and role of transparency in progressing nuclear disarmament.
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