



Report on Wilton Park Conference WP978

MANAGING NUCLEAR WEAPONS: REDUCTIONS, DRAWDOWN AND ELIMINATION: WHAT MAKES SENSE?

Thursday 18 – Sunday 21 June 2009

Organised in partnership with the Defense Threat Reduction Agency, Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, and the USAF Institute for National Security Studies.

Summary

- The priorities of arms control, deterrence and disarmament are often at odds with each other, producing tensions in overall security policy. It will be necessary to begin a process of recalibration of the role and salience of nuclear weapons, followed by one of transformation to create and sustain momentum towards elimination, something widely acknowledged to be a very long process. Three key questions require understanding in order to think about how this momentum might nonetheless be created.
- The first is: what are the true objectives of the dominant nuclear actors, the P5? The prime objective here should be the universalisation of restraint among these states, something that is a task for arms control. However, it will be necessary to somehow make arms control into a catalytic process of transformation, rather than a reactive process of freezing.
- The second question is what is the relationship between global and regional contexts? Of the four regions in the world where nuclear weapons loom large (US-Russia, East Asia, South Asia, Middle East), the first has a recalibration agenda as the US and Russia work towards a new nuclear agreement and recalibrate the role of nuclear weapons in relations between them. In the second, neither recalibration nor transformation appears to be taking place, but the key

question is the behaviour of China. In the third, the main pattern is one of consolidation of deterrent relationships; and in the fourth transformation is taking place but it is one of movement towards containment at this stage.

- The third question concerns whether the universalist approach implicit in the idea of global elimination fits the purpose: the end result if supposed to be universal disarmament, but an approach that insists all move in that direction at the same time is fraught with problems. The process will require a collective managerial approach, involving 8-10 states with different cultures, and strategic contexts. The 'abolition of the mind' will be vital; a successful process will require the delegitimisation of nuclear weapons and a deepening of nuclear taboo.

1. The arrival of the Obama Administration was greeted with high expectations, probably unrealistically high. Although Iraq and Afghanistan were often regarded as the most serious of the international security challenges confronting the new team, it may be that these are in fact outweighed by others. In particular, the avoidance of four potential catastrophes – environmental, financial, geopolitical and nuclear – may well turn out to be more pressing. Moreover, none of them are amenable to unilateral action.

2. Perhaps the most pressing form of nuclear catastrophe is that of a terrorist group possessing nuclear weapons, since there is a significantly greater possibility that such groups would use the weapons; a state may want nuclear weapons for deterrent purposes, and arguably most do, but a non-state actor has comparatively little use for such a strategy. This adds even greater urgency to the need to curb proliferation, but also to the question of eventual nuclear elimination.

3. The recent revived interest in elimination reflects this growing urgency. The 2006 workshop at Stanford University, known as Reykjavik II after the breakthrough summit in 1986 between the US and the Soviet Union, identified 7 key steps towards the goal of elimination while conceding that this goal was at present a distant prospect. The workshop emphasised that the process of moving towards elimination

was as important as the eventual goal, if that goal was to become anything more than an ambition.

4. The Reykjavik II workshop was in fact coterminous with a revitalised interest in elimination on both sides of the Atlantic. Problems and obstacles remain concerning the technical verification of disarmament; the political dimensions of disarmament such as extended deterrence and how to resolve difficulties that issues that arise during and after a process of disarmament. Debate continues on the tricky issue of whether to develop strategies for overcoming these problems before embarking on that process, or whether to press ahead on the grounds that the goal is what counts and that overcoming the obstacles is part of the process of attaining it.

5. Certainly it seems that elimination will remain a distant prospect without substantial change in the current geopolitical situation, and for some the debate over the practicalities of elimination is valued more as an exercise in thinking than a concerted effort to start the process. States such as Japan, Turkey and several European states also place great store by the nuclear element of extended deterrence, and a mismanaged process of elimination by the US might in fact drive them towards nuclear programmes of their own; a paradoxical case in which disarmament risks stimulating proliferation. Thus a process of elimination will be multilateral in more ways than the obvious: it will need to involve closely non-nuclear states as well as nuclear ones. This is only one reason why it will be important to consider how to re-conceptualise multilateral arms control.

6. The arrival of the Obama Administration was regarded as an opportunity to revive the process of nuclear reductions, after what advocates regard as the missed opportunities of Strategic Arms Reduction Talks (START) II and III and the 2002 agreement between the US and Russia. The latter has shown interest in further reductions, but the Bush Administration rejected deeper reductions beyond the lower end of the Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty (SORT) levels.

7. The question is how deep reductions ought to go. US Congress appears to support a reduction treaty. Advocates of further reductions argue that there is a need

for action now. Maintaining the nuclear status quo is not a wise option, and it is time to update the legal framework that regulates the US/Russian arsenals; The Obama Administration has said that the US will pursue reductions in deployed strategic warheads beyond the lower end of the SORT limit (1700) and lower ceilings for strategic nuclear delivery systems.

8. If an agreement is not signed before December 2009, when START expires, then mutually acceptable means, such as exchange of diplomatic notes or a six month extension, may be possible. Agreeing a long-run extension of START is unlikely to find favour: the Russian Ministry of Defence wants to ensure that new ballistic missiles that do not conform to START requirement can begin to replace ageing Cold War missile systems; the Pentagon does not think it is in US longer-term interests to keep in place certain START limitations on US strategic forces.

9. Allowing expiration of START, however, does not look like a prudent option. The Treaty's extensive monitoring and verification provisions provide the necessary transparency, and are invaluable in allowing the US and Russia to predict the size and location of each other's nuclear forces. Moreover, from a global perspective, if no agreement is concluded, then 95% of global nuclear stockpiles will exist outside governing limitations.

10. Obama administration officials have stated they will seek deep, verifiable reductions in all US & Russian nuclear weapons, whether deployed or non-deployed, strategic or non-strategic. This is the first step towards a legally binding agreement to replace START. The Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) will not be completed until end of 2009, however, and the Administration may therefore not seek a START follow-on that significantly reduced the number of US strategic deployed warheads dramatically below the lower end of the SORT limit. Officials have indicated that Obama's revised approach to US nuclear weapons policy may not take shape until the NPR is completed, however negotiations on the next step in the arms reduction process (replacing the START treaty) can begin even while the posture review is under way.

11. It appears unlikely that the new agreement will be concluded soon enough for signature and ratification by the US Senate before START expires. The START follow-on will probably involve a hybrid approach, limiting operationally deployed strategic warheads and strategic nuclear delivery systems; establishing new warhead accounting formulas and limits on the number of warheads permitted on specific strategic delivery systems to reduce the potential for uploading of non-deployed warheads. It will probably not limit strategic missile interceptors and will not cover non-strategic warheads. Monitoring and verification of the START follow-on should be based on existing START practices and principles, but could involve some new verification concepts and procedures, including monitoring of deployed strategic warheads and declarations of total warhead holdings.

12. In Russia, nuclear weapons continue to have a strong and prominent role in security strategy. Large-scale conflict with US is ruled out, but conventional conflict on a limited scale, along the lines of the Kosovo war, is not. Russian strategists emphasise the threat of limited nuclear use as a way to deter the US from using force; targets for such use have been part of large-scale exercises since 1999.

13. The preferred model for the post-START agreement may be one that gives more flexibility than START I but is more restrictive than SORT. A simplified verification/data exchange system from START I, combined with elements of US and Russian proposals for START III. Some major hurdles remain, however. Missile defence is one: Russians do not believe the recent US justification (Iran, North Korea), and therefore tend to search for reasons they regard as more plausible. The widespread conclusion is that Russia is the main target; current US plans do not present a significant problem, but future modernization and an increase in number of interceptors, coupled with enhanced detection and targeting capability may change that picture. Since strategic deterrence is still regarded as the foundation for a stable political relationship, this is a concern. Russia will have to have some linkage to this issue in negotiations on an agreement.

14. Tactical nuclear weapons will also be tricky. It is most likely that this issue will be postponed for the time being; at a subsequent stage they could be included into

an aggregate limit on the number of warheads on stockpile. Looking further ahead, Russia has insisted that the stage subsequent to START I replacement should include other nuclear weapon states, especially China. This means that the post-START agreement would be a three- or five-party process. It may involve a freeze on Chinese, British, and French nuclear arsenals; data exchange on nuclear arsenals (delivery vehicles, modernisation, production); notifications about test launches of long-range missiles; a No-First-Use Treaty that includes the obligation to refrain from using conventional weapons against nuclear assets and measures that limit the basing of nuclear forces to national territories.

15. The work towards reducing nuclear numbers has been coterminous with revitalised interest in elimination. Many prominent individuals have associated themselves with this prospect who previously could have been expected to argue against it. These new advocates tend to emphasise multilateral, rather than unilateral, disarmament; and argue that elimination must be a multilateral process or else it is unlikely to happen at all.

16. Nuclear weapons in this perspective have always been a danger; the issue was the extent to which states were willing to accept that danger. Realpolitik dictated that Cold War threats to national security required nuclear deterrence to offset them, and this overrode the attendant dangers of nuclear exchange.

17. If a process leading to elimination is to be successful, it will need to be staged. In particular, at the end of the process, it becomes qualitatively different. The possibility of cheating, for example, looms very large indeed at low numbers or zero. At these low levels states become vulnerable to first strike and the difference between a state with one nuclear weapon or and one with none is absolute rather than marginal. Therefore, as we approach low numbers we need a verification and inspection system which is much more intrusive than that which exists now.

18. The downward process will also need to find ways to resolve existing security problems and attitudes that have driven nuclear weapons development, if it is not to produce a resurgence and start of a conventional arms race. Sophisticated

conventional arsenals could potentially pose equally dramatic dangers. It is therefore likely that the goal of zero won't be reached until political changes have taken place. This will require, in addition to resolution or at least amelioration of real conflicts, a kind of 'abolition in the mind'; (a reduction of reliance on nuclear weapons). This in turn necessitates dialogue on what nuclear weapons are *for*, as well as, or perhaps rather than, strategic dialogue on numbers.

19. The technical aspects of the process cannot be separated from the political. In particular, the issue of stockpiles of fissile material is vital: propositions for low numbers are meaningless without control of fissile material production. Only declassified stockpiles are deployed, with the total stockpile classified; thus there is no way to distinguish strategic or non-strategic weapons or non-deployed stockpiles. It is sometimes assumed that the stockpile can be depended on for the foreseeable future as a minimal deterrent, sustainable without testing. This may not be the case, and this raises questions of deterrent sustainability.

20. Verification is therefore at the heart of reduction and elimination. Having a treaty base is important for verification, since this sets out expectations, rights and responsibilities that are managed through a clear framework. If zero is the goal, the verification system will need to be carefully calibrated from the beginning; the requirements change as numbers decrease. It should be recognised that it is impossible to be completely rid of nuclear materials; nuclear zero will not mean zero fissile material. Thus monitoring the amount of existent fissile material is going to be the most difficult challenge of all.

21. What work needs to be done? In the first place, international nuclear reductions will require international collaboration and standards. The criteria for certainty (how much verification is necessary) will need to be established; choke points where greater verification is necessary identified; the technology for verification will need further development and experiments carried out. The US and Russia can build upon and expand their long-standing experience, but collaboration between nuclear weapon states and non-nuclear weapon states, such as the UK-Norway-VERTIC exercise will also need to be pursued.

22. Many argue that accountability through verification is important but will be meaningless without some enforcement capability: what happens if non-compliance is uncovered? Moreover, as we head along a trajectory towards zero, voices will be raised to point to growing risk of breakout. Supporters of such a process point out that risks of proliferation exist now, and that we already live in a world plagued by nuclear threat and risks of proliferation.

23. That said, it may be the case that as we approach very low nuclear numbers, cheating becomes a more significant issue, and there can be less tolerance to cheating than at higher numbers. This means that, at those lower numbers, more technological capacity to detect cheating is required to provide the necessary reassurance.

24. In the UK, the government has pledged to publish a credible disarmament roadmap for all nuclear weapon states. Successive British governments have debated the nuclear forces issues, under politically sensitive conditions in the 1950s and 1960s. In the 1997 Strategic Defence Review it decided to abandon an air launched nuclear force, and clearly stated that this was a contribution to nuclear disarmament. London has had to balance two narratives in its nuclear policy: its commitment to a nuclear weapon programme and its publicly stated commitment to elimination. Both reached turning points recently, with the decision to retain nuclear weapon status via Trident and Margaret Beckett's speech to the Carnegie Endowment in 2007. The difficult balancing act will therefore continue, despite the decision to limit to 12 missile tubes per boat in the successor system, making this possibly the smallest arsenal of the P5 (China refuses to declare how big its arsenal is).

25. France has sometimes been accused of being a 'nuclear addict', lonely in considering nuclear weapons as strategically and politically useful. There is currently a strong nuclear consensus in France; with nothing comparable to the Trident debate in the UK. Nuclear policy and posture has developed and evolved, but has not changed much since de Gaulle in the 1960s.

26. Despite being the last of the de jure nuclear weapon states to join the NPT, France has been a strong supporter of the regime, and this can arguably be extended to disarmament. Its arsenal is believed to have decreased by 50% since the end of the Cold War, with less than 300 weapons, and the renunciation of all ground-based systems.

27. Policy is sometimes opaque: while the US has its Nuclear Posture Review to set out its strategy, France has presidential statements and speeches. President Sarkozy gave a speech on nuclear order in February 2008, which included a French proposal for disarmament putting forward an action plan for the P5. Despite this, the political subtext in France remains conservative despite this breakthrough.

28. In East Asia, Japan has something of a dual identity in its nuclear posture: it is a confirmed non-nuclear weapon state which has a strong stake in continued extended nuclear deterrence by the US. Its strategic environment has been changing considerably: significant developments include deeper cuts envisaged by the Obama administration; the second North Korean nuclear test; and China's nuclear modernisation may signal a shift away from minimal deterrence. The central concern in Japan is whether President Obama's plans would have a negative effect on US extended nuclear deterrent. Japan may not want US dominance over China, but equally it does not want to increase its vulnerability with China. It is not always possible to identify a unified and coherent view in Japan on disarmament. The arms control community often favours abolition, and stresses Japan's historical experience of nuclear attack; within the Foreign Ministry the wording is very much along the lines of traditional deterrence.

29. States in Europe, particularly new NATO members, also are under an extended deterrence guarantee. Nuclear disarmament issue is not always amongst top priorities in these states. Rather, priorities include strengthening transatlantic links and provision of extended deterrence to all US allies. Extended deterrence is very much part of the Article V package, with NATO the instrument of ensuring extended deterrence. The states are often far from being dogmatic about nuclear

guarantees and are willing to view the issue in a wider context, provided any adjustments made do not weaken alliance and security assurances.

30. A cooperative relationship between NATO and Russia is essential. In 2009 three Polish former leaders published an article giving a positive reaction to the Obama Administration's reduction commitments. It is therefore possible for East European states to imagine a non-nuclear NATO equipped with some strong and credible security guarantees. The fundamental purpose and value of the guarantee is political and as such not automatically dependent on a particular weapon system.

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November 2009

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