

US-Russia Nuclear Dialogue: the P5 Process

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As US-Russian disarmament efforts stalled and China resisted bilateral or trilateral arms control engagement, NPT parties increasingly looked to the P5 process as a mechanism for reducing nuclear dangers. But in my view, the P5 has significant limitations as a forum for dealing with the nuclear threat.

The original purpose of the P5 process, when it began in 2009, was more political than strategic. It was an opportunity for the five NPT nuclear weapon states (NWS), despite their differences, to show solidarity in demonstrating to NPT non-nuclear weapon states (NNWS) that they took seriously their Article VI obligation to pursue nuclear disarmament.

The main goal, at least at the outset, was not to develop practical measures to reduce nuclear dangers. It was to fend off criticism from NPT NNWS, especially at NPT Review Conferences. In recent years, the Five have showed greater interest in using the P5 process to make substantive progress on Article VI issues. But the motivation of mollifying NPT NNWS remains central to their mission.

Moreover, the multilateral character of the P5 process is far from ideal for addressing today's most pressing strategic challenges. Most of those challenges involve some, but not all five, members of the P5, whether it's:

- China's concerns about US regional and homeland missile defenses and conventional strike systems;
- US concerns about Chinese medium and intermediate-range missiles, counterspace systems, and efforts to tilt the conventional power balance in the Western Pacific;
- Russia's concerns about NATO forward deployments and possible US ground-based INF-range systems in Europe; or
- US concerns about Russia's nuclear doctrine, non-strategic nuclear systems, and enhanced conventional capabilities opposite NATO.

These concerns are best addressed bilaterally, not at a meeting of all five. And preventing escalation to the nuclear level from regional conventional conflicts – whether along the NATO-Russia border or in the South China Sea – involves key non-nuclear weapon states, not just NPT nuclear powers.

Moreover, bilateral strategic talks are a more promising setting for governments to engage in candid, detailed, interactive discussions on issues deemed too sensitive to address in a multilateral forum like the P5.

The Biden-Putin agreement to resurrect US-Russian strategic stability talks is a promising development. And hopefully, before long, a US-China dialogue will begin. Participating governments will give such bilateral dialogues top priority in efforts to promote strategic stability and reduce nuclear risks.

But a useful role can still be played by the P5 – as long as there are realistic expectations of what can be achieved in that forum.

With the 10th NPT Review Conference approaching, the P5 countries can play their traditional role of putting the best face on their implementation of Article VI in the interest of promoting a harmonious conference outcome. That will require the Five to set aside their differences, coordinate closely, and avoid the mutual recriminations that took place at preparatory meetings of the recent NPT review cycle, especially between the American and Russian delegations.

But given growing alarm among NPT parties about diminished prospects for nuclear disarmament and increased prospects for nuclear war, the P5 need to do more than simply adopt a united front to defend their records. They need to show that they're working collectively and purposefully to reduce nuclear dangers.

That has been the objective of the Chinese, British, and French chairs of the P5 in the last few years. Under their leadership, the Five have gone beyond the modest tasks of producing glossaries of nuclear terms and adopting common reporting templates to the more ambitious efforts of engaging one another on nuclear doctrine and exploring nuclear risk reduction measures. In the run-up to the Review Conference and beyond, the P5 need to pursue this expanded strategic agenda.

Although P5 discussions on nuclear doctrine and force structure will not be as frank or detailed as could take place bilaterally, they at least provide an opportunity to articulate and clarify national positions and to communicate those national perspectives transparently to other NPT parties – which they plan to do at a side meeting at the upcoming review conference.

Now that Presidents Biden and Putin have reaffirmed the Reagan-Gorbachev statement, the United States and Russia can promote a collective P5 affirmation of that 1985 statement – or perhaps a new and broader statement on the role of nuclear weapons.

While measures to reduce the risks of armed conflict escalating to the nuclear level are best pursued in a regional context, the Five can give their support to such regional measures and produce a detailed inventory and analysis of risk reduction and confidence-building measures that have been pursued to date, which could serve as a menu on which interested states might draw.

The Five might also reinforce their current individual moratoria on nuclear weapons testing, perhaps by pledging jointly that, at a minimum, their suspension of testing will continue for some length of time, such as 10 years or through the next NPT review cycle. In conjunction with such a pledge, they might seek to ensure, through experts discussions, that they have a common understanding of activities that would be prohibited or permitted under the moratoria.

Another role for the P5 could be to commission studies, either by government or non-governmental experts, on such subjects as the impact of emerging technologies on the future of arms control, disarmament, and nonproliferation.

The P5 would also be a good venue for making China more comfortable with the tools and requirements of arms control and disarmament agreements, especially their verification measures. Russia and the US could take the lead in sharing their vast experience, perhaps by inviting the other P5 members to observe inspection arrangements under New START or by encouraging greater transparency on strategic issues.

Of course, P5 collaboration should not be confined to Article VI. The P5 countries could work together to promote universal adherence to the IAEA Additional Protocol, to prevent abuse of the NPT's withdrawal provision, to adopt more common conditions for approving nuclear-related exports (including to such countries as Saudi Arabia), and to assist developing countries in the peaceful uses of nuclear energy.

All five P5 members will need to contribute to making the P5 the most useful forum it can be. But the United States and Russia, as the world's leading and most experienced nuclear powers, have a special role to play. It is hard to imagine any progress in the P5 in the absence of US-Russian leadership.

But US-Russian cooperation in the P5 format can't exist in isolation. It will depend on Washington and Moscow recognizing at the highest levels that, despite their highly competitive overall relationship, they have a common responsibility for overcoming today's nuclear challenges.

And if they come to that mutual recognition, it will be manifest primarily in constructive approaches to their bilateral strategic stability dialogue – but hopefully also in the P5 forum, which can play a complementary, supportive, but clearly modest role.