

PROSPECTS OF ENGAGING THE UNITED KINGDOM AND FRANCE IN NUCLEAR ARMS CONTROL

ALEXEI ARBATOV, JAMES M. ACTON, VLADIMIR DVORKIN | APRIL 2014

At a meeting with the students and faculty of the National Research Nuclear University, an elite Russian college, on January 22, 2014, Russian President Vladimir Putin made an unexpected statement on nuclear weapons that contradicted most of his earlier declarations on the subject. Responding to a question posed by Artem Bekerev, a third-year cybernetics student, Putin said, “My personal position is that at some point, humanity must renounce nuclear arms. But for now, we are far from this, in the sense that other nations aside from Russia have nuclear arms as well—and many of them—and they are not going to renounce this means of armed combat. Such a step by the Russian Federation would be very strange in these conditions, and could lead to some fairly serious, grave consequences for our nation and our people.”¹

Since his return to the Kremlin in 2012, Putin has encouraged Russia to emphasize and modernize its nuclear weapons in order to enhance nuclear deterrence. But, aside from this speech, he has never said that the reason for doing so is the fact that other nations also have these weapons. Instead, he has repeatedly underlined that nuclear potential is Russia’s means to both deter aggression from abroad aimed at taking away its natural resources and make up for U.S. attempts to gain decisive superiority by developing a ballistic missile defense system and a Conventional Prompt Global Strike capability.²

It is quite possible that Putin’s statement at the college was just an improvisation suited to the audience’s level of

knowledge on the subject, which he obviously did not estimate as very high. It is also possible that his words reflected only a fragment of his own thinking on the issue at that particular moment. Be that as it may, Russia’s leadership has recently been emphasizing the impact of nuclear arsenals belonging to countries other than the United States and Russia on the global strategic balance and the prospects for U.S.-Russian nuclear arms control.

On the eve of the 2012 Russian presidential elections, Putin expressed his views on the subject. According to Putin, “we [allegedly Russia and the United States] will not disarm unilaterally. As for further steps in nuclear disarmament, those steps should be comprehensive in nature, and all nuclear

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Alexei Arbatov is a scholar in residence with the Carnegie Moscow Center’s Nonproliferation Program. Formerly, he was a member of the State Duma, vice chairman of the Russian United Democratic Party (Yabloko), and deputy chairman of the Duma Defense Committee.

James M. Acton is a senior associate in the Nuclear Policy Program at the Carnegie Endowment. A physicist by training, Acton specializes in deterrence, disarmament, nonproliferation, and nuclear energy.

Vladimir Dvorkin, major general (retired), is chief researcher at the Center for International Security at the Russian Academy of Sciences’ Institute of World Economy and International Relations.

powers should participate in the process. We cannot disarm while other nuclear powers are increasing their arms.”³

Apparently this idea has risen to the highest political level in Russia, and it may translate into Moscow’s official position as a precondition for further nuclear arms reductions and limitations following the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START), the U.S.-Russian nuclear arms reduction agreement expected to expire in 2021. However, neither the politicians nor the experts have yet come out with practical proposals on multilateral nuclear arms reduction. In addition, no military or political incentives have been developed that would be attractive for third nuclear states and that could induce them to join the existing dialogue on nuclear arms control between Moscow and Washington.

LOOKING TO LONDON AND PARIS

For several reasons, it is worthwhile to start with the United Kingdom and France when investigating how—and whether—a multilateral framework for nuclear arms control would work. First, in parallel to the United States and Russia and in contrast to other nuclear-armed states, these two nations have recently been reducing their nuclear forces unilaterally.

Second, both countries are quite transparent as to their existing nuclear forces and modernization programs.

Third, their national security is better assured than that of all other nuclear states because they are located in Western Europe—one of the most secure areas in the world—and they are protected by North Atlantic Treaty Organization and European Union security guarantees.

Fourth, official circles in the UK have repeatedly expressed their general support for the concept of a nuclear-free world. This notion tangibly affected public debates over a British nuclear modernization program and UK-French cooperation on some nuclear-weapons activities.

Fifth, the nuclear forces of these two nations are technically most similar to some elements of the U.S. and Russian strategic triads consisting of land-based delivery systems, intercontinental ballistic missiles, and submarine-launched ballistic missiles. They would thus be relatively easy to integrate into

the tested U.S.-Russian methods of strategic arms control. Last but not least, both British and French political and expert elites have been involved for many decades in intelligent discussions about the theoretical and practical issues involved in nuclear arms control, and there are no historical, cultural, or linguistic obstacles to expanding this narrative to their own nuclear arsenals.

Engaging the UK and France in the process of nuclear arms control currently implemented by Russia and the United States in a strictly bilateral format will not be an easy process. It will require a thorough assessment of the problems, prospects, and possible methods of creating such a multilateral nuclear arms reduction framework, including the context in which such an agreement would take place, the existing nuclear policies of the United Kingdom and France, and the plausible next steps.

EXPLORING POTENTIAL MULTILATERAL ARMS CONTROL ARRANGEMENTS

Alexei Arbatov

If the task of deterring nuclear aggression were the only reason for states to have nuclear weapons (a so-called sole-purpose concept), then in theory all nuclear-armed states could agree to limit their arsenals at present levels. The nuclear assets these states possess, due to the absolutely horrendous destructive power of these weapons, are quite sufficient for the purposes of “pure” (or finite) deterrence.

However, nations assign other purposes to nuclear arms, such as the deterrence of overwhelming conventional aggression, of attacks using other kinds of weapons of mass destruction, of aggression against their allies, and of several possible nuclear aggressors. Nuclear arms are also valued for their ability to penetrate ballistic missile defense systems and survive and retaliate against nuclear or conventional counterforce (disarming) enemy strikes. In addition, many nuclear-armed states leverage their weapons to help them sustain global or regional status and prestige or to serve as bargaining chips in negotiations on arms control and other issues.

Hence, even bilateral nuclear arms control has periodically experienced serious difficulties in finding a mutually acceptable formula for an agreement—as evidenced by the present

state of U.S.-Russian dialogue, which is stalled due to differences over missile defense and other obstacles. Such problems would be much more complex in the context of multilateral arms control arrangements or in applying arms control methods at regional levels.

Some experts believe that, at least at the initial stage, it would be possible to start multilateral nuclear arms control by engaging the members of the “nuclear club,” the five nuclear-weapon countries currently recognized by the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT)—Russia, the United States, the United Kingdom, France, and China. These states are party to the NPT and have declared their commitment to nuclear disarmament under its Article VI. According to this view, an attempt could then be made to engage nuclear-weapon countries not recognized by the NPT, beginning with India, Pakistan, and Israel, in the process. Having accomplished this, it would seem reasonable to negotiate an agreement for all nine nuclear-armed states, including North Korea.

In contrast, some experts believe that formally involving other nuclear-weapon states in arms limitation and reduction processes is neither feasible nor necessary. These experts contend that such engagement will not work in any format, be it between three or all five NPT nuclear-weapon states, between three NPT nuclear-weapon countries plus the four nuclear-armed nations not recognized by the NPT, or between all nine nuclear-weapon states. They claim that negotiations and agreements are only possible between countries that have relations of mutual nuclear deterrence. In this case, provided there are favorable political conditions, symmetric or asymmetric limitations may be possible, depending on the ratio of the countries’ nuclear assets.

Thus, in practice multilateral disarmament might be implemented not through third states jumping on the U.S.-Russia bandwagon but through Washington and Moscow coordinating dialogue in several, primarily bilateral fora: the UK and France on one side and Russia on the other; the United States and China; Russia and China; China and India; and India and Pakistan.

These formats and fora would vary in sequence and geographical scope as necessary. However, taking into consideration the

complex interaction of strategic and political relations among nuclear-weapon states (and non-nuclear-weapon states), coordinating the talks between various parties would be the highest achievement of Moscow’s and Washington’s diplomacy.

NUCLEAR POLICIES OF FRANCE AND THE UNITED KINGDOM

James M. Acton

Focusing on France and the United Kingdom, it is hardly surprising that, in discussions about nuclear weapons, the two states are often mentioned together. They have arsenals that are similar in both size and structure. However, these physical similarities should not obscure important differences in the two countries’ thinking about nuclear weapons and, in particular, nuclear disarmament.

Among the British public, there has always been a degree of discomfort about the United Kingdom’s possession of nuclear weapons. For much of the Cold War, this discomfort translated into a popular movement for unilateral disarmament. While this policy was never adopted by any government, it was advocated by the Labour Party in the 1980s during its long stint in opposition—and, indeed, was one of the reasons why the party remained in opposition.

Since the end of the Cold War, as nuclear weapons have moved further to the background of public awareness, discussion in the UK about unilateral disarmament has ebbed, although cross-party support for multilateral disarmament efforts is strong. There is also a serious public debate about what kind of nuclear force the United Kingdom should have. Indeed, one of the biggest fault lines within the current coalition government is whether to replace the UK’s current fleet of four Vanguard-class ballistic missile submarines on a “like-for-like” basis. The Conservative Party, the senior coalition member, says yes; the Liberal Democrats, the junior partners, say no and justify their position, in part, by citing the importance of demonstrating a British commitment to work toward a world without nuclear weapons.

In France, by contrast, there has always been a much broader and deeper consensus regarding the utility of nuclear deterrence. Today, not only are calls for unilateral disarmament virtually unheard, but there is also very little debate about

interim steps in that direction, such as the possibility of France's abandoning its nuclear-armed, air-launched missiles (which it possesses in addition to sea-launched ballistic missiles). While the French government does not overtly renounce the goal of a world without nuclear weapons and occasionally lends the idea lukewarm support, French officials generally do not try hard to hide their skepticism.

The difference in British and French attitudes stems primarily from history. The United Kingdom has not been invaded or occupied for almost a thousand years. By contrast, France has suffered repeated invasions and occupations—in the case of World War II, within living memory. In fact, French views on nuclear disarmament are probably closer to Russian than Anglo-Saxon thinking.

One important commonality between the United Kingdom and France is a lack of serious thinking by either government about multilateral nuclear disarmament. If asked about their role in such a process, British and French officials tend to point to a respectable list of past accomplishments (including both states' ratification of the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty) and reiterate their governments' support for negotiations on a Fissile Material Cut-Off Treaty, which would not exactly be onerous given that neither state has any interest in producing more fissile material. However, neither the United Kingdom nor France has a clear position on when in the disarmament process it would be willing to negotiate treaty-based limitations or reductions or what such a treaty should seek to accomplish.

Moreover, what limited thinking there has been leads London and Paris to appear to take very different positions from Moscow and Washington. Russia's current position is that the next round of strategic arms control should be multilateral. Senior U.S. officials have said that the arms control process should be multilateralized after one more bilateral agreement. By contrast, it is not entirely clear what then UK foreign secretary Margaret Beckett had in mind when she said in 2007 that "when it will be useful to include in any negotiations the 1 percent of the world's nuclear weapons that belong to the UK, we will willingly do so"⁴—but it almost certainly was not being a party to the next arms control treaty or the one after that. Meanwhile, in private, some French officials say they see

no role for France in any limitation or reduction agreement short of an abolition treaty (which they believe is not achievable anyway).

One way forward would be to pursue the suggestion made by then French president Nicolas Sarkozy on March 21, 2008, to develop multilateral transparency measures.⁵ France and the United Kingdom could potentially participate in a multilateral data exchange about their nuclear forces with the United States, Russia, and, ideally, China. Both London and Paris have already revealed—on an ad hoc basis—a fair quantity of information. Under a formalized transparency arrangement, they would agree to do so regularly on the basis of reciprocity by all participating states. Information could be exchanged publicly or, more likely, privately.

Initially, France and the United Kingdom could provide data that is not particularly sensitive, such as aggregate numbers of delivery systems and warheads (much of which they have already made public).⁶ Over time, they could provide progressively more detailed information by disaggregating total numbers according to deployed or nondeployed status, type, and basing location. Eventually, they might even exchange data on the number of warheads deployed on individual missiles (as Russia and the United States do during New START inspections).

The data exchanges developed for U.S.-Russian treaties would form a useful starting point. However, extensive discussions would be needed to adapt this framework to France and the United Kingdom. For instance, should French air-launched missiles, which Paris describes as "strategic" but are too short-range to be considered as such by the United States and Russia, be included? Moreover, new definitions would be required if the transparency regime went further than previous treaties by, for example, including nondeployed warheads.

A transparency regime might go some way toward alleviating Russian concerns about the United Kingdom's and France's nuclear arsenals and could, therefore, help enable further U.S.-Russian arms control. However, London and Paris appear to have little appetite for greater transparency at present. In particular, British and French officials tend to point out—not unreasonably—that their states are much more transparent than China and that they see little value in an

arrangement that does not include Beijing.

However, the truth is that neither the United Kingdom nor France has given the idea serious thought. For this reason, the American and Russian governments should formally propose a multilateral transparency arrangement and induce London and Paris to at least consider it. In making such a proposal, Washington and Moscow should stress certain potential advantages for France and the United Kingdom, namely reciprocity and a delay in American and Russian demands for the formal arms control process to be multilateralized.

NEXT STEPS: INCREASE TRANSPARENCY, NOT NUCLEAR ARSENALS

Vladimir Dvorkin

For many years there have been calls for multilateral agreements on nuclear arms reduction, most often following each START agreement signed by Russia (or, previously, the Soviet Union) and the United States. However, no major progress has been made in this respect for a number of reasons. The common and general rationale voiced by official representatives and experts of third nuclear powers has been that multilateral agreements on nuclear arms will only be possible when the numbers of such weapons in Russia and the United States have been reduced to levels comparable to those of other nuclear-weapon states.

This requirement is not feasible in the foreseeable future. It appears that the most Russia and the United States can do—provided they resume negotiations on further reducing their nuclear weapons—is to set the ceiling for strategic offensive arms at around 1,000 warheads.

Meanwhile, there is vast uncertainty over the prospects of the two states' nonstrategic nuclear arms limitation. This is a matter of utmost importance in regard to multilateral arrangements because all or most of third states' nuclear arms (except those of Britain and France) fall into the categories of medium-range and tactical weapon systems, which are considered nonstrategic. The path toward multilateral agreements would also be hampered by significant obstacles related to verifiable limitations of stored nonstrategic and strategic weapons. And the accumulated experience in U.S.-Russian strategic arms control is irrelevant for nonstrategic nuclear weapons.

Given these challenges, a first step toward multilateral nuclear arms agreements could reasonably be to suggest that the United Kingdom and France come out with official statements declaring that they will not build up their nuclear arsenals beyond current levels. This step would not affect the modernization of the two states' nuclear forces.

Second, the UK and France could assume a limited part of the transparency system that is currently used by Russia and the United States under New START. London and Paris could adopt some or all of this system's transparency measures in a unilateral or a bilateral format, including annual notifications on the composition, quantity, and types of their nuclear weapons and on planned changes to the composition and quantity of their deployed nuclear weapons. These measures may also include notifications of

- the location of nuclear arms production facilities;
- the start and completion of nuclear arms production;
- the commissioning and decommissioning of nuclear weapons;
- the conversion of nuclear-weapon delivery vehicles for use in non-nuclear missions and vice versa;
- the start and completion of flight tests of new types of nuclear weapons;
- the elimination of nuclear-weapons-related facilities;
- accidents at such sites; and
- the decommissioning of these facilities for repair and modernization.

In addition, London and Paris could regularly invite observers to their nuclear-weapons facilities to verify the data provided in the notifications.

This tentative list of measures may be expanded or shortened according to the parties' proposals. In any case, implementing such measures will in no way affect the national security of the two nuclear-weapon states given the transparency of their nuclear policies and nuclear weapons.

CONCLUSIONS

Alexei Arbatov

The balance of nuclear forces between third countries and the United States and Russia implies that presently there is no obvious or urgent need from the military perspective (in contrast to the political one) for involving third nuclear-weapon states in arms reductions. This is true not only as Washington and Moscow implement New START but also if and when they conclude a hypothetical follow-up treaty to limit their strategic offensive arms to approximately 1,000 operationally deployed warheads.

There is only one exception to this conclusion—China. Beijing's nuclear forces and programs are completely opaque, and there is significant uncertainty about the size of its arsenal due to the unexplained existence of large underground tunnels that may contain many mobile missiles and warheads. In addition, China is the only state that has the economic and technical capacity to implement a crash buildup of its nuclear forces in the next ten to fifteen years and to catch up to the United States and Russia.

If Washington and Moscow move forward with creating a multilateral nuclear arms reduction dialogue, they should look first to France and the United Kingdom. Paris and London have pursued a robust policy aimed at retaining their respective deterrent capabilities. At the same time, both European nuclear powers give unequivocal support to nuclear arms control and in most cases back either proposed or implemented relevant international initiatives.

It is unlikely that France and the UK will consent to engaging in nuclear disarmament in the near future. However, they could adopt transparency and confidence-building mechanisms approved (or negotiated) by Moscow and Washington. This may be the most realistic option for connecting Paris and London to U.S. and Russian efforts to make nuclear arms control a multilateral endeavor.

Should Russia and the United States pursue a responsible nuclear disarmament policy, in the longer run, the British and French nuclear forces could be engaged in a legally binding arms limitation and reduction regime. For now, British and

French consent to adopt confidence-building and transparency measures as well as inspection activities like those provided for in New START would send a positive message and might set a precedent for other countries, primarily China.

NOTES

- 1 Vladimir Putin, Excerpts from transcript of meeting with National Research Nuclear University (MEPhI) students, January 22, 2014, <http://eng.kremlin.ru/transcripts/6562>.
- 2 Vladimir Putin, "Rossiya Budet Narashchivat' Vozmozhnosti VKO [Russia Will Develop Its Air-Space Defense Capabilities]," *Natsional'naya Oborona [National Defense]*, no. 7 (July 2013): 22.
- 3 Vladimir Putin, Transcript from meeting with experts in the city of Sarov to discuss global threats to national security, strengthening Russia's defenses and enhancing the combat readiness of its armed forces, February 24, 2012, <http://archive.premier.gov.ru/eng/events/news/18248/>. One of the editors and authors of this article, Alexei Arbatov, participated in this meeting.
- 4 Margaret Beckett, "A World Free of Nuclear Weapons?," (keynote address, Carnegie International Nonproliferation Conference, Washington, DC, June 25–26, 2007), www.carnegieendowment.org/events/?fa=eventDetail&id=1004.
- 5 Nicolas Sarkozy, "Presentation of SSBM 'Le Terrible'" (speech, Cherbourg, March 21, 2008), www.ambafrance-uk.org/President-Sarkozy-s-speech-at,10430.html.
- 6 For a more detailed description of such an arrangement see James M. Acton, *Low Numbers? A Practical Path to Deep Nuclear Reductions* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2011), http://carnegieendowment.org/files/low_numbers.pdf.

CARNEGIE MOSCOW CENTER

Founded in 1994, the Carnegie Moscow Center brings together senior researchers from across the Russian political spectrum and Carnegie's global centers to provide a free and open forum for the discussion and debate of critical national, regional, and global issues.

CARNEGIE ENDOWMENT FOR INTERNATIONAL PEACE

The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace is the oldest international affairs think tank in the United States and the first global think tank.

© 2014 Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. All rights reserved.

The Carnegie Moscow Center and the Carnegie Endowment do not take institutional positions on public policy issues; the views represented here are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Endowment, its staff, or its trustees.



@CarnegieRussia



facebook.com/CarnegieMoscow