Conference Report

European Views on Leadership in the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and Recommendations for the UK

Cristina Varriale
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Royal United Services Institute
for Defence and Security Studies
Whitehall
London SW1A 2ET
United Kingdom
+44 (0)20 7747 2600
www.rusi.org

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On 18 October 2018, RUSI ran a workshop, supported by the Kingdom of the Netherlands, to discuss leadership in the context of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), and how the UK could best contribute to its initiation or implementation. Specifically, the workshop focused on various European perspectives, and was aimed at developing an understanding of what leadership means for the NPT process, assessing the role of the UK as a leader in this framework, and suggesting steps the UK could take to improve its leadership role in this area.

The NPT process is currently under significant pressure. As the 2020 Review Conference draws closer, achieving consensus on a final document remains unlikely. There are frustrations over the slow progress of nuclear disarmament and deep divisions within the NPT community, which have been entrenched by the negotiation of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW), or Ban Treaty, in 2017. The absence of leadership, particularly by the NPT-designated nuclear weapons states, is often cited as a reason for the limited progress on disarmament that has strained the NPT. Failure to reach consensus in 2020 would mark the first time that two consecutive Review Conferences end without a final document.

The workshop was divided into three sections. The first section focused on developing an understanding of what constitutes leadership in the NPT process, and was guided by three main questions: what does leadership mean in the context of the NPT?; what are the priorities for leadership in the NPT process from around Europe?; and how can leadership be demonstrated within the NPT process?

The second section of the workshop focused specifically on understanding the UK as a leader within the NPT. Again, it was guided by three questions: is the UK an appropriate leader in the NPT process?; what action could the UK take to contribute to leadership?; and what could hinder the UK from taking a leadership role?

The final part of the workshop was used to discuss recommendations and action points for the UK and its engagement with the NPT process. This discussion was informed by the points raised in the previous two sections, and tried to find practical steps that could be taken to support the UK and its engagement with the NPT.

The workshop was attended by 17 governmental and non-governmental participants and was held on a not-for-attribution basis. The discussions are reflected in this report.
Leadership in the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty

To initiate discussion, reflections on recent demonstrations of leadership in relation to nuclear issues were shared. On the one hand, a group of states came together to initiate the Humanitarian Initiative, which started the movement that has since led to the creation of the TPNW. This treaty instigated the creation of a counter-group, led by the US and sustained by its lobbying efforts among allies to refute the Ban Treaty. Both efforts were considered to be polarising and not constructive. Participants recognised that as a result of this, action to overcome divisions present among the signatories to the NPT should form a key feature of leadership. Failure to reach consensus on a final document at the 2015 Review Conference was acknowledged as having contributed to a loss of confidence in the process and the perception that commitment to the goals of the NPT is waning. A similar failure in 2020 will likely critically undermine any remaining confidence in the NPT. As such, a leader should focus on reducing the likelihood of this happening.

Some participants noted that because of this entrenched polarisation, the NPT is in need of a third leadership group or initiative to enhance cooperation between advocates of the TPNW and those who reject the Ban Treaty. The first step should be identifying where leadership is required and what the goals are, before deciding who would be an appropriate leader. This will help to ensure that efforts are correctly targeted and will avoid perpetuating present divisions.

It was noted that while these divisions should be acknowledged, in reality the picture is much more complex. There are differing perspectives within the broad grouping of states considered to be Ban Treaty supporters, adding to the challenges to building bridges. It may also be the case that at the time of its signing, the NPT lumped countries into appropriate and mutually-exclusive groups – the nuclear weapons states (NWS) and the non-nuclear weapons states. But these groupings make less sense now, and the bridges that need to be built are multiple, not just across two camps. This is an artificial characterisation that the Ban Treaty was deemed to have helped perpetuate.

In considering how leadership efforts could move beyond disconnected clusters of states, one participant offered three qualities for consideration: long-term vision; stamina, defined as the ability to remain committed to the long-term vision; and self-awareness, understood to be how this vision relates to the current context and the perceptions of others. Discussions around these three qualities highlighted that stamina issues were important for the NPT, as a result of the slow progress and long lead times for change, especially under the pillar of disarmament. Due to the pressures created by the Ban Treaty and the impact this has had on bringing nuclear issues to the forefront of domestic populations in some European states, NWS particularly need to show initiative and demonstrate that they remain committed to all goals of the NPT, irrespective of their views of the Ban Treaty.

Another major challenge to understanding leadership is that any action thought to be demonstrative of leadership by a single state or group may be seen as unhelpful by others, with the Ban Treaty being cited as a key example. However, there are shared goals within the
NPT, and leadership within this framework will necessitate acknowledging and enforcing them. Even if the goal is a distant one, participants noted that states should be vocal in outlining their support for these goals.

Many participants noted, however, that words alone are not enough. Although verbal commitment should not be seen as unimportant, an acknowledgement that leadership will also require action is necessary. Former US President Barack Obama’s 2009 Prague speech was cited as an example here, demonstrating that senior officials’ commitment to long-term goals contributes to leadership through an apparent prioritisation of the relevant issues. However, without supporting action, statements and speeches remain mere words that will quickly lose their credibility.

The shortfall between words and actions represents a gap in the current process and framework. Current practices were characterised as not working to support rhetorical commitments, so states need to begin to think more creatively about ways to work together.

Given the complexity of preferences and differing perceptions of outputs that could be characterised as leadership initiatives, coalitions of the willing were cited as a possible option for multifaceted leadership. Participants recognised that there would be a major challenge in knowing where to start with bridge-building and taking forward concrete action, given the range of viewpoints and preferences. Making leadership a collective activity could help address this challenge.

However, if such an approach to leadership is to overcome the current shortcomings and negativity associated with the NPT process, it will likely need to embody both coalitions of the willing and engagement between entrenched groups, to overcome the issue of divisions that will likely be perpetuated as groups become siloed.

Participants recognised the need to reflect on what progress has already been made under all three pillars of the NPT. Disarmament is only one pillar and must not be prioritised at the cost of reduced focus on non-proliferation efforts and access to the peaceful use of nuclear energy. This is a challenge that has become starker as a result of the TPNW. Thus, leadership in the NPT process will also require a rebalancing of relative importance of the pillars and how they are addressed. It was widely acknowledged that progress is not rapid in the NPT framework, but appreciation of achievements made thus far should be a key part of improving the situation. In this context, leadership should entail an appreciation of what has been achieved while also understanding the frustrations of states in relation to limited progress, especially concerning disarmament.

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Leadership within the NPT process was not considered to be synonymous with having the responsibility to bring deliverables unilaterally. Identifying areas of common interest and bringing groups together to talk could demonstrate leadership. In this sense, leadership comes from identifying and initiating partnerships to establish new dialogues that can facilitate collectively developed and implemented action points.

In the current NPT process, the Review Conferences have rigid working methods, whereby states read prepared statements. Although the Preparatory Committee (PrepCom) meetings feature more flexibility, with the inclusion of side events, participants noted that this format makes it hard for the 189 states parties to have constructive discussions. This raised questions among participants about how NPT states can act outside these traditional formats to benefit the NPT process.

It was acknowledged that leadership efforts could take place outside the NPT process and framework, but for the benefit of the NPT. For example, addressing issues such as Russia’s compliance with the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, or providing assurances that the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) will be extended beyond 2021, could help demonstrate action to underpin commitment to the goals of the NPT. Participants noted that arms control agreements directly link to the NPT because of their contribution to the broader security environment, which is often cited as a hurdle for nuclear disarmament. However, concern was expressed about explicitly linking these agreements and the associated challenges to progress in the NPT process, because they are also currently in a state of fragility; Russia has violated the INF treaty and an extension of New START is uncertain because of a deterioration in relations between the US and Russia.

In considering the role of issues related to but outside the NPT framework, it was acknowledged that an honouring of commitments elsewhere is important. Participants recognised that many states strongly in favour of the TPNW and critical of the NWS for dismissing their disarmament commitments voted against the UK’s motion at the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) Special Conference of States Parties in June 2018 to strengthen the powers of the OPCW following the use of Novichok on UK soil in March 2018. It was noted that many non-nuclear weapons states accuse the NWS of failing to deliver on their NPT disarmament commitments, while, at the same time, abdicate their responsibilities in other security-related forums. This illustrated the need to consider how leadership could be used to encourage countries to speak out about these discrepancies, although no clear answers emerged.

2. This workshop was held prior to US President Donald Trump’s announcement that he is considering withdrawal from the INF Treaty. However, this further demonstrates the issue of fragility of these agreements that was raised in the discussion.
UK Leadership in the NPT Process

This section of the workshop considered UK leadership in the NPT process. Participants acknowledged that the UK has taken on a leadership role in the NPT process in the past, and would be suitable to continue in that role given the country’s low number of nuclear warheads and sole delivery platform.

In addition to the UK’s nuclear capability, its work on disarmament verification was strongly regarded, having taken a leading role in the UK–Norway Initiative (UKNI), the Quad Verification Partnership and the International Partnership for Disarmament Verification (IPNDV). It was highlighted that this support is not just international, but also domestic. The UKNI was started under a Labour government in 2007 and has since benefitted from continuous cross-party support.

It was also noted that the UK makes important contributions in the other pillars of the NPT. The UK was highlighted as a prominent leader in non-proliferation efforts that continuously supports the sharing of peaceful nuclear energy through the International Atomic Energy Agency. One participant acknowledged that it is important to continue to recognise the UK’s ongoing work on non-proliferation, for example through stringent export controls, as other states do not want to see these efforts diminished.

Despite this, participants agreed that the NPT regime needs positive action. One participant articulated that the Ban Treaty has put the NWS on the defensive, requiring them to dedicate time and resources reacting to the TPNW and its proponents’ criticisms of the slow pace of disarmament, rather than focus efforts on making progress in the NPT process. An effort to demonstrate pro-activity, possibly through the suggestion of new efforts or initiatives, on behalf of the NWS and their allies, was deemed necessary, as this is where the leadership gap exists.

Some participants noted that the UK risks being perceived as acting unilaterally if the reservations of allies are not considered. UK leadership therefore must have a collective element. This does not necessitate coordination among the P5 or even the P3, but support from close allies in Europe would be beneficial. While some noted that the P5 Process could be a useful tool for continuing engagement with the other NWS and promote best practice, others expressed concern that this would leave all NWS vulnerable to criticism. The P5 Process was widely recognised as having value because it provides a channel of engagement for the NWS. It was also noted that it is important that the P5 engage regularly with non-nuclear weapons states, especially those who do not fall under a nuclear umbrella and therefore might have less insight into the threat perceptions that drive continued possession of nuclear weapons.

Much of the political capital in London right now is being spent on negotiations ahead of the UK’s departure from the EU, and in this context the UK has decided to pursue an internationally focused foreign policy labelled ‘Global Britain’. Despite the limited time and resources available for activities not immediately associated with the EU withdrawal, participants cited Global Britain as a useful platform for the UK to promote its work on disarmament verification and promotion of its commitment to non-proliferation and the longevity of the NPT.

It was also recognised, however, that while the Global Britain initiative provides an opportunity for the UK to publicise its commitment to the NPT and its work on disarmament verification, it also poses a challenge; issues that are not immediately associated with the EU withdrawal are difficult to put on the agenda at this time. This political context, along with reduced budgets and a nuclear arsenal already deemed to be a minimum deterrent, was understood as a challenge for the UK in being pro-active within the NPT.

Despite the UK’s actions in these areas and the leadership it has demonstrated, participants questioned whether the UK has sufficiently communicated these efforts and explained their value and agreed that the UK could do more to communicate this, especially concerning disarmament verification. It was also noted that the UK should improve its ability to explain the threat perceptions and security environment in which it operates. By increasing communications, the UK would also be able to improve transparency around its nuclear weapons policy, beginning to address a criticism often faced by the NWS. For many participants, this again highlighted the need to bridge a gap between those in support of the TPNW and other NPT signatories.

Most participants agreed that the UK needs to improve its communication around the initiatives it leads and participates in. This is applicable not just to disarmament verification efforts in the UKNI, Quad Verification Partnership or the IPNDV, but also to non-proliferation efforts through, for example, the Proliferation Security Initiative. It was noted that much of the UK’s work on these issues is conducted behind the scenes, and therefore often lacks comprehensive public acknowledgement and discussion. One participant noted that improving communications will require clarity, especially in relation to efforts on verification and the UK’s security environment. The slowing progress on disarmament should be acknowledged in these communication efforts, but the UK should work to improve communication around why initiatives such as the Quad Verification Partnership and IPNDV are important and how they contribute to progress.

As part of improving communication, some participants suggested that the UK could take the opportunity to reflect on what has been achieved so far and any lessons learned. Asking what has and has not worked well could be used as an opportunity to open a broader discussion with other states under the NPT. It was acknowledged that in negotiating the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty and establishing its verification regime, technical work was pursued prior to political negotiations. Therefore, improving communication around the progress on the technical aspects of nuclear disarmament verification could help demonstrate that the UK is committed to the NPT and actively contributing to support the goal of disarmament.
It was understood, however, that developing a strategy of improved communications for the UK’s work in disarmament verification would be challenging. The technical and scientific work that takes place can extremely difficult to explain in simple and easily accessible terms, and this would need to be considered.

Some participants expressed that the TPNW had taken the focus away from other practical initiatives, such as disarmament verification work, by monopolising time in discussions related to the NPT and day-to-day resources. This has been perpetuated by the format of the NPT process whereby states deliver prepared statements and rehearsed positions, without much opportunity for nuanced debate or constructive conversations. States have a responsibility to make sure that the Ban Treaty does not distract from the NPT process and that constructive dialogue can occur.

Framing was also highlighted as important for communication and transparency. Participants acknowledge that if bridges between differing communities within the NPT need to be built, engagement needs to move beyond states parties defending their existing positions. It was noted that the NWS’s position of defending deterrence to counter proponents of the TPNW, for example, contributes to increasing polarisation. To achieve progress, engagement needs to improve beyond this back and forth.

In this context, ongoing state-to-state engagement was highlighted as important. Such engagement would not necessarily have to be output-focused, but should provide open and lucid discussion of key issues. This approach should include states that chose to ratify the TPNW, and any engagement should have a strong element of transparency. Modernisation was highlighted as an area that would benefit particularly from this engagement, to improve understanding of how these efforts relate to risk-reduction measures and improve the security of nuclear weapons systems to reduce nuclear risks, such as accidental use or malfunctions. One participant noted that this could also include an explanation of threat perceptions and that in this context, it could be considered irresponsible to unilaterally reduce nuclear capacity in NATO.

In improving communication and transparency, the UK and other NWS should be conscious of the language used. One participant suggested that a change in language could contribute to improving the constructive atmosphere of the NPT process. Language should be action-focused, not politically expedient. For example, referring to ‘dismantlement’ rather than ‘disarmament’ would be beneficial, as this reflects steps taken to achieve an overall goal. It was noted that within this it could be challenging to explain dismantlement efforts, given the complex technical nature and long timelines of the activity. Communication and transparency around disarmament verification could be prioritised to demonstrate that despite the slow pace, action is being taken.
Recommendations and Steps Forward

The final session of the workshop reflected on the key points that emerged from discussions in the two preceding sessions, with a view to identifying recommendations for the UK to advance its role within the NPT. Positively, it was acknowledged that new initiatives or grand gestures were not necessary for the UK to continue to be a leader within the NPT. Three key recommendations emerged:

- improving communication
- improving transparency
- encourage coalitions of the willing

Improving Communication

Given the positive reception of the UK’s activities and the limited resources available, London should focus on better communicating its work, especially in the disarmament verification space.

An improvement in housekeeping in relation to the documents and information that is made publicly available online was encouraged by participants. It was noted that when visiting the UK government webpages, it is difficult to find information related to the UK’s involvement in initiatives that span all aspects of the NPT (including support for peaceful uses, disarmament and non-proliferation). The website presents a factsheet explaining why the UK maintains a continuous at-sea nuclear deterrent, but there is no equivalent that details why the UK is part of the NPT, and how it is supporting its implementation. It was noted that at present there is very little information about the UK’s work on disarmament verification, why it is important and how it fits into broader efforts to support the NPT. Communicating some of these details can be difficult because of their technical and complex nature, but irrespective of this, more can and should be done to improve the information available on the webpages. This information could be bolstered by access to related policy statements, press releases, and speeches from ministers.

In addition to online communication efforts, the UK should provide further detail in its statements at the NPT PrepCom meetings and intersessional statements. This uplift in effort to explain the purpose and progress of the UK’s disarmament verification work, and explicitly how it links to achieving the goals of the NPT, was noted as improving the UK’s visibility in this space and supports the recognition it deserves for these efforts.

Participants discussed other low-cost opportunities for the UK to improve its communication of these efforts. For example, increasing reference to the NPT and the UK’s commitment to all three pillars in ministerial statements could help demonstrate a sustained high-level political interest in the issues. Participants noted that inclusion of the NPT in statements could also support ministers in advancing the Global Britain foreign policy initiative.
This communication effort should also span more than disarmament efforts, and the UK can do more to communicate its leadership role under all pillars of the NPT. One participant raised the point that this will be challenging as much of the debate within the NPT has been entrenched in discussions related to the TPNW. It was also noted that efforts to highlight achievements in other areas of the NPT, aside from disarmament, could be interpreted as a way to excuse the lack of progress in this area.

Participants noted that while this is a challenge, it provides the NPT with an opportunity to be creative, especially in relation to communications and engagement. Others suggested that a strategic communications plan is required, which would include engagement across a number of different platforms and a tailoring of messages for varying audiences.

**Transparency**

The second recommendation that was discussed focused on improving the transparency of the NWS. It was highlighted that transparency will mean different things for different interested parties, and therefore efforts should be as broad as possible, covering not just modernisation programmes and capabilities, but also declaratory policy and posture.

It was acknowledged that efforts on the part of the NWS to explain their policies to others in the NPT community, providing clarifications on their nuclear postures and policy, could be a way of achieving this. One participant suggested that this could come in the form of a side event at the next NPT PrepCom in 2019, similar to the event hosted by the US in 2018 to explain their Nuclear Posture Review.

Participants noted that the P3 at least, and P5 where possible, should collectively improve transparency around their nuclear arsenals. In discussing transparency efforts, participants noted that it might be more constructive and productive to limit such efforts to the P3, rather than expand it to the P5 and having less positive results. This would then result in all P5 states being criticised and reduced to the lowest common denominator in terms of perceived transparency. A definitive conclusion on how to take transparency forward was not achieved, but there was agreement that this should continue to be explored.

**Coalitions of the Willing**

The third opportunity for leadership in the NPT process encourages the UK to support others in taking leadership roles where appropriate. Efforts across all three pillars of the NPT will require resources that are not available. Working to establish coalitions of the willing to lead in areas where gaps remain could help to share the burden. Participants also recognised the value of such an approach in developing joint ownership over new initiatives, which could contribute to addressing the challenge of fracturing in the NPT.
Efforts to actively participate in multiple groups would likely be a strain on resources, but the UK could play the role of host, or find ways to coordinate multiple smaller groups and avoid the formation of silos. Given the experience of other countries in coordinating outreach efforts among multiple working groups, such as the Netherlands and Poland, the UK could seek advice from and work with others to manage this.

In addition to the three areas of leadership highlighted, a fourth, broader action point emerged from discussions around the upcoming 2020 Review Conference. The questions were raised as to what success would look like in 2020, and what the priorities for the Review Conference are. Many participants noted that success is often referred to as achieving consensus on a final document, but achieving that in 2020 looks unlikely. Participants noted that it will be important to not weaken the NPT process and where possible highlight and strengthen its successes. Given this, it was suggested that states parties should explore the option of forgoing a single consensus document and investigate ways in which a final document from the Review Conference could be broken down. This could be done based on the three pillars of the NPT, which might allow for consensus in some areas over others. Participants noted that this idea was also suggested at the most recent PrepCom and that there was interest in taking this approach forward.

These discussions show that while there is a need and an interest in leadership to improve engagement with the NPT process for 2020 and beyond, there is much uncertainty as to what this should look like. Partly, this stems from the complex nature of the NPT forum and the range of states parties’ interests and priorities. The Proliferation and Nuclear Policy team at RUSI will continue to explore these areas through research, workshops and dialogue, with the aim of providing policy recommendations to support the longevity of the NPT process and achieve the goals of the treaty.

_Cristina Varriale_ is a Research Fellow with the Proliferation and Nuclear Policy Programme at RUSI, where she focuses on North Korea’s WMD programmes, North/South Korea relations, US extended deterrence in East Asia, and disarmament diplomacy in the NPT.