New technologies

1. To what extent will technological developments, both directly relating to nuclear weapons and in the wider defence and security sphere, affect nuclear diplomacy?

New technologies prospectively impacting nuclear stability are bound to complicate nuclear diplomacy. Nuclear Weapon States (the five NPT Treaty recognized states) and Nuclear-Armed States are all certain to be jealously protective of their expensively achieved second strike capabilities. The impact and interactions of hyper-sonic weapons, cyber capabilities, precision conventional strike of all kinds, including dual-capable systems, together with competitively evolving ballistic missile defences and counter-measures, potential loss or reduction of ocean opacity, space assets and anti-satellite weapons, and accelerated, unpredictably orchestrated, battle management by Artificial Intelligence (AI) are all hard to model and likely to lead to worst-case analysis and overreaction. The need for forward looking arms control that will embrace both the nuclear and non-nuclear realm is already urgent. It will grow in the years ahead. The scientific and technological problems are daunting, but the distrustfully competitive political relationships between the US, Russia, and China crucially blocks progress. Politico military distrust and antagonism obstructs shared scientific understandings which would be essential to the design of achievable arms control arrangements.

2. One desirable policy response would be to devise, propose, negotiate, and adhere to Confidence and Security Building Measures (CSBMs) that are aimed at ameliorating escalatory dynamics during nuclear crises, subject to the constraints of the nuclear technology deployed, especially SSBNs. A particularly important CSBM that could limit the growing distrust between the three major nuclear great powers would be space-based restraint in relation to attacking satellites and related Intelligence, Surveillance, Targeting, and Target Acquisition (ISTAR) systems.

The Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons

3. If it were to enter into force, how would the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (commonly referred to as the Ban Treaty) affect efforts to prevent the proliferation of nuclear weapons and bring about disarmament?

Because it was deliberately pushed through on a non-consensual basis without the active involvement of nuclear capable states, and has not yet been signed by any of the possessor states, and no possessor state has indicated that they will sign it, it is extremely unlikely to lead to the disarmament it claims to herald.
TPNW supporters insist, implausibly, that once the Treaty comes into force, it will have a normative transformational effect on publics, including in the nuclear possessor states, leading even to these states joining the TPNW bandwagon. However, we think it far more likely that only those states that want to disarm and stay disarmed will be persuaded. It is not realistic that signatory states comprising under 40 per cent of the world’s population, and even less of its production and communications capability, will be effectively able to ‘stigmatise’ the remainder who include enormous nuclear states such as China, Russia, India, and the US and all its allies. And it is anyway increasingly apparent that publicly unchallenged stigmatisation and criminalisation of biological and chemical weapons has not led to their reliable total disappearance, and that further action to achieve this seems decisively blocked.

4. The TPNW’s verification provisions are weaker than the NPT. The TPNW risks reducing the universality and moral authority of the NPT. It ignores fundamental features of the international environment such as the lack of an agreed consensus among the P5 even over the verification, adjudication, and enforcement of existing WMD treaties. There is no indication of how the ‘Competent International Authority’ that would be needed to monitor and police a disarmed nuclear world could be constituted in an international system that lacks an overarching world government. TPNW proponents display no conception of what we call ‘Treaty Regime Fragility Awareness’ (TRFA) and expect the most far-reaching international instruments to be somehow reliably and eternally self-policing. But nation-states cannot be forced to trust each other, and Treaties are weakening from unscrupulous behaviour and growing interstate competition. Nor have advocates of the TPNW begun to address how strategic relationships would be managed after the disappearance of nuclear weapons without risking new wars which, if serious enough, would rapidly lead to the reintroduction of nuclear weapons despite treaty promises (if countries like Iraq, Syria, and the DPRK developed or acquired illicit nuclear capabilities in peacetime, how can it be assumed that others would not do so in existential conflict?).

The P5

5 (Q.8) What are the policies of other P5 countries (China, France, Russia and the United States), and the UK’s other partners, on the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and on nuclear weapons more generally? Have these policies changed, and if so, why? How effective has the P5 process been, and what role will it have in the future?

The P5 process was an important UK diplomatic initiative and is now a necessary part of the global diplomatic architecture. It cannot by itself create the disposition among the P5/NWS, especially Russia and the US, to begin moving towards negotiated nuclear reductions, but it can promote a climate in which new opportunities for reducing distrust and building trust can be explored without commitment and the risk of leaks. It creates a space for senior diplomats and security officials to cultivate a greater awareness of their

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counterparts’ security fears, and above all, how their own plans and actions may be contributing to these fears. This has been called ‘security dilemma sensibility’\(^2\) and is a necessary condition for both the reduction of distrust and the development of trust.\(^3\) As security relationships become more complex, multi-layered, multi-domain, and global, it will be increasingly important to focus on the strategic and interpersonal interactions between the ‘five’, rather than relying on bilateral contacts. With a more positive climate, the P5 process could be a key institution to foster new initiatives for trust and cooperation, and, perhaps, in future, with new modalities, for crisis management. On the latter, it is worth exploring the possibilities for ultra-secure video-conferencing between national P5 representatives which would give the P5 a new channel for rapid response. That said, we recognize future nuclear crises may not be suited to a P5 crisis management mechanism, rather than new regional architectures.

6. We support the idea of a P5 nuclear code of conduct\(^4\) and would propose that this becomes a key agenda item at future P5 meetings. The principles behind any such code might flow from P5 recognition of the following immediate and continuous set of nuclear responsibilities: (i) avoidance of destabilising arms races capable of creating fears of pre-emptive nuclear strikes; (ii) maintaining survivable command, control, communications and intelligence systems that reduce temptations to pre-empt; and (iii) refraining from nuclear coercion against other NWS, especially formal and informal allies of NWSs, Nuclear-Armed States (NASs), and NNWSs, by unexplained qualitative improvement and threatening manoeuvres, deployments, menacing diplomatic signals and information warfare. Increasingly the assets involved here include non-nuclear systems that are ‘entangled’ with nuclear systems, and so risk lowering the nuclear threshold. The possibilities for consensual international progress in all these areas are being examined by BASIC and the ICCS in a joint project on ‘Nuclear Responsibilities’ supported by FCO funding. A key aspect of this work involves creating a web-based Nuclear Almanac mapping different national conceptions of nuclear responsibility, alongside other outputs to help prepare for a successful NPT RevCon.

7. Navigating this formidable double set of responsibilities will, above all, require constant awareness of how decisions may look to adversaries, and, crucially, a constant examination of how one’s own, and one’s allies’, actions may be contributing to adversaries’ security fears. The need for this awareness is doctrinally well-accepted, at least within relatively open societies, but it is inevitably hard to maintain continuously in practice. This empathic (not necessarily sympathetic) disposition to adversaries can be blunted whenever decision-makers operate with ‘“an inherent bad” faith model’\(^5\) of the adversary. Lack of prior personal contact, knowledge, and cultural understandings, together, with stress and uncertainty will also limit the capacity for security

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dilemma sensibility. One way of mitigating this, and potentially breaking down bad faith models, is increased face-to-face meetings at the top levels of diplomatic interaction. For this to be worthwhile, there does however have to be a mutual willingness to depart from implacably scripted exchanges.

8. Logically, such a code or codes of conduct should include a continuing imperative to review and foster possibilities for negotiated arrangements to lower nuclear numbers and improve the stability of nuclear configurations. In this context, a further special responsibility falls on the United States and Russia as the two most powerful nuclear states in the system to reduce their arsenals before the other three NWS, and the NASs, could join a process of nuclear disarmament. Conversely, it could not be responsible for the smaller NWSs to build up their arsenals, subject to the caveat that they do not judge themselves to be imperilled by the nuclear and conventional postures and capabilities of the other NWSs and NASs.

9. Refusal to consider negotiations might be explained and mitigated by the following factors: (i) the stated or genuinely assessed refusal of potential partners to negotiate reductions; (ii) well-grounded belief that proposals for reductions would unacceptably undermine core national security interests, and so could not currently be pursued in good faith, though this would have to be transparently explained to national electorates and international opinion; (iii) demonstrated untrustworthiness of potential negotiating partners over provision of accurate data, and their compliance record in similar agreements, (iv) the infeasibility of international verification, adjudication, and enforcement action when faced with national judgements of non-compliance. Here the NWS/P5 have a special responsibility not just to be aware of the fragility of treaty regimes to the pressures of cheating, but to also try and mitigate the problem by improving the reliability of international institutions, even in the face of great power partisanship. Without recognition of TFRA, coupled with sufficient willingness to diminish it, for all WMD-related treaties, the jungle of distrust and security competition will grow back and impenetrably impede progress towards nuclear disarmament.

The role of the UK

10 (Q.9) How effective a role has the UK played in global nuclear diplomacy in recent years? How could the UK more effectively engage on nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament? What should the UK Government’s priorities be ahead of the 2020 NPT Review Conference?

The UK has innovated and facilitated above its weight as the ‘most forward-leaning’ NWS in prioritising WMD arms control. It has an indispensable understanding of nuclear weapons and delivery technologies acquired over 80 years. And its diplomats and scientists are internationally acknowledged as second to none in their understanding of the technical and political issues surrounding arms control and disarmament. In any international comparison, its foreign ministry and defence ministry work unusually effectively together. And its electorate is probably more supportive of disarmament than any other NWS or NAS.
11. While the UK has therefore major domestic and international interests in resumed movement in arms control, it has to remain realistic about what it can to stimulate it. Britain has limited resources and power to shape the policies of the 'Big Nuclear Three'. So its contribution will have to be largely through influence and persuasion, often behind the scenes, concerted simultaneously within the P3, the wider Alliance, the P5, and the NPT as a whole. Britain’s foreseeable disarmament challenge is to identify possibilities for international movement, and then analyse, develop and agree them with expanding numbers of partners. Despite abolitionist ambitions, therefore, UK governments must resist grandiosity; anyone with experience of international nuclear negotiations and alliance consultations will realise that a country with perhaps 2 per cent of the world’s nuclear weapons is simply not going to overturn others’ calculations, either by proposing radical schemes for nuclear disarmament, or even unilaterally relinquishing long-standing national nuclear capabilities and exiting the nuclear game.

12. We recognize that any argument for Britain’s retention of its nuclear weapons opens the UK to others using this rationale to justify their own retention, and perhaps even development, of nuclear weapons. But national nuclear capabilities, legally recognized under the NPT, have become an inextricable part of the existing international order. Stubborn facts of widely distributed national nuclear possession and nuclear backed alliances in an anarchic international system underline the importance of the UK trying to take a lead in fostering a dialogue on responsibilities aimed at minimizing nuclear risks in the indefinite period before political relationships need no longer determined by the threat or use of extreme state violence.

13. In relation to the TPNW, the UK should try to engage with Ban Treaty advocates to look for common solutions to achievable improvements in nuclear order, especially in strengthening the NPT. But it must resist their deliberate and misguided efforts to damage Alliance cohesion in the nuclear field. Demolishing NATO’s complex, carefully evolved nuclear posture, without any equivalent Russian concessions, would be pointless and dangerous. It could not produce any movement towards global denuclearisation capable of offsetting the increased risks of nuclear confrontation and conflict from resultant instability in Europe. More generally, without despairing about progress, and as a spur to collective action, the UK should also try to understand more deeply and remind others of the persistent, intractable frequently unspoken untrustworthiness of critical international institutions, and to try to inspire a long-term collaborative effort by like-minded states on the huge systemic problem of a practical remedial agenda. This problem of collapsing respect for rules, treaties, and evidence can be seen throughout the history of WMD treaties. Despite intelligent, competent, and devoted staff in organisations like the IAEA and OPCW, and within the UN system, the state of compliance over chemical, biological, and nuclear weapon prohibitions is far than satisfactory. The scandalous and protracted Syrian Chemical Compliance Crisis and the sudden

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shocking appearance of Novichok, are the most obvious. But the underlying problems of partisan behaviour in the P5, ‘implausible denials’ of observable evidence, ‘direct assaults on factuality’,7 and wider international indifference to enforcing compliance, even where there is abundant evidence, go much deeper, and emphasise the urgency of building great power trust based on evidence of trustworthy behaviour.

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