Cristina Varriale, Research Fellow – Proliferation and Nuclear Policy, Royal United Services Institute and Tom Plant, Director – Proliferation and Nuclear Policy, Royal United Services Institute – Written evidence (NPT0037)

Summary

- In October 2018, RUSI ran a workshop focused on European perspectives on the UK’s role as a leader in the NPT, attended by disarmament and non-proliferation experts from across Europe. This evidence summarises the output of that workshop.¹

- The workshop found that the UK’s role in the NPT and disarmament initiatives was viewed favourably across many European states. The UK was commended for its work on disarmament verification, the small scale of its nuclear forces, and its past efforts to engage with the other NPT Nuclear Weapons States through the P5 Process.

- The group nevertheless recommended that the UK could improve the quality of its communications, especially in relation to efforts on disarmament verification and non-proliferation initiatives. The UK is also well-placed to step outside traditional groupings and encourage and support coalitions of the willing - as it has done for example in the Quad verification partnership – and share this experience to help other states do the same.

- The workshop also identified that a lack of transparency by the UK in relation to its nuclear weapons programme – especially in relation to warhead modernisation, spending on the Dreadnought programme, nuclear doctrine, and the threat perceptions that drive nuclear decisions – counted against it diplomatically, and were a net negative to the global non-proliferation regime.

Detail

1. RUSI’s October 2018 workshop found that the UK’s role as a leader in the NPT process is looked upon favourably by many European states, for four key reasons:

   a. The UK maintains a small nuclear arsenal and single delivery system;

   b. The UK has in the past initiated additional engagement activities outside the NPT framework but contributing to it, such as the P5 process on disarmament and arms control, which it established in 2009;

¹ The full report can be found at https://rusi.org/publication/conference-reports/european-views-leadership-nuclear-non-proliferation-treaty-and
c. The UK has been proactive in leading efforts on disarmament verification, through its work with the US, Norway, Sweden, and its leadership in the International Partnership for Disarmament Verification; and

d. The UK has made, and continues to make, important contributions to the non-proliferation pillar of the NPT, through stringent national export controls, its support for strong export controls for nuclear-related goods and technologies globally, and its enduring commitment to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action on the Iranian nuclear programme.

2. Although workshop participants recognised the UK’s efforts to make unilateral reductions to its nuclear weapons stockpile, participants acknowledged that leadership within the NPT needs more than this. As a result of the fracturing and frictions between NPT member states, participants identified group action as a core component of NPT leadership, involving a range of different perspectives. Understanding leadership as anything but collective will likely to hinder progress in the NPT process, and perpetuate the perception of fragmentation between NPT states. Without collective activity, leadership efforts are unlikely to produce results that are deemed feasible to the NPT Nuclear Weapons States (NWS) or satisfactory to Non-Nuclear Weapons States (NNWS). The Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) was recognised as a leadership failure in this regard. Therefore, workshop participants highlighted that in order to generate progress within the NPT process, inclusive collaboration and improved transparency will be necessary.

3. The UK’s role in initiating the P5 Process was welcomed by workshop participants. The process was valued because it provides a channel of engagement for the NWS that offers them the opportunity to better understand other’s policies and postures. This was seen as helpful in that it might help to promote disarmament steps, and because it contributes to reducing the likelihood of misinterpretation leading to nuclear weapons use in a crisis.

4. However, the P5 Process was also viewed as unnecessarily opaque. NNWS were felt to be too broadly excluded from the process and moreover saw little concrete benefit from it, especially for disarmament. While the workshop recognised that some of the P5 Process must remain behind closed doors, it was felt important that it not become a cabal. The P5 Process could engage more regularly with NNWS, and be more open on matters of agenda and process at least. It could prioritise reaching out to those states which do not fall under a nuclear umbrella and therefore might have less insight into the threat perceptions that drive continued possession of nuclear weapons. The substance of this engagement should include explanations of how the P5’s private discussions are contributing the goals of the NPT.

5. Despite the UK’s contributions to the NPT and the leadership it has demonstrated, workshop participants felt that the UK has not communicated these efforts particularly well. Nor was it felt to have effectively explained their value to the
broader NPT community, especially in relation to its work on disarmament verification. Participants noted that much of the UK’s work on these issues is conducted behind the scenes, and therefore often goes unacknowledged.

6. The UK does not help itself in this regard. Its use of the government website to communicate information on these issues is particularly poor. For example, at present there is very little detailed information available about the UK’s work on disarmament verification or its involvement in the Proliferation Security Initiative, and much less explaining why these are important and how they fit into broader efforts to support the NPT. Communicating some of these details can be difficult because they are technical and complex, but there is clearly scope for better organisation and centralisation of NPT-related information – of a greater quantity and quality than currently exists – on the UK government website. A simple further step would be for the UK to produce NPT-related fact sheets, as it has done for the nuclear deterrent\(^2\), on each of these issues, and to keep them up-to-date.

7. Workshop attendees felt that the UK was not particularly convincing in explaining its rationale for continued nuclear weapons possession, and nor had it credibly laid out the circumstances under which it might consider renouncing them. These issues were felt to arise in part from reliance on generic, vague “lines to take”, and in part also from a deficit in serious thought – or at least in serious thought, well communicated – on these matters. This implies that improvement in the detail and quality of communication is required, and possibly also further effort within government to work through these issues more seriously. In any case, the situation as it stands is that the UK is not seen as particularly transparent on nuclear weapons issues, to the detriment both of its international standing and of the non-proliferation regime.

8. There are two key areas in which the UK could act to address this. First, it could better explain the threat perceptions and security environment in which it perceives itself to operate; this could help those NNWS that are particularly critical of nuclear weapons possession better understand the hurdles the UK perceives in further reducing its nuclear capability. Improving this understanding would allow greater opportunity for states to move beyond criticising each other and work collaboratively to find ways to uphold all NPT commitments. Second, it could be more transparent about its nuclear modernisation efforts, particularly in relation to its nuclear warhead programme. This might involve working with others to find practical ways it can assure them that its modernisation efforts are not attempts to introduce new nuclear capabilities by stealth, and to demonstrate where possible how these efforts might reduce nuclear risks by increasing safety or reducing the risks of accidental use or of malfunction. Taking steps in this regard would demonstrate a shared commitment to ensuring nuclear weapons are never used, thus developing trust that will be vital to disarmament progress.

**Recommendations**

9. **Improving Communications** - The UK government should collate and organise the information it makes available online about its nuclear weapons, related policies and commitments. This information could be bolstered by access to related policy statements, press releases, and speeches from ministers, and could all be made available on a central web portal on the UK in the NPT. An additional low-cost measure would be to increase the reference to the UK’s NPT commitments in ministerial statements, to help sustain and demonstrate a high-level political interest in these issues.

10. **Transparency** – The UK should do more to explain its policies to others in the NPT community, clarify its nuclear posture, and increase information about its nuclear deterrent modernisation efforts, particularly in relation to the warhead. The UK should also encourage the rest of the P5 to take similar steps, but it should not co-ordinate with them. This would risk the UK being held to the pace of the least open of the five, and to being perceived no better than them. The UK could however encourage the other P5 states to utilise existing templates for transparency reporting, as a common framework across the NWS.

11. **Coalitions of the Willing** – The UK should support and encourage other states in taking leadership roles where appropriate, and to spread this burden by establishing coalitions of the willing to address specific areas. Areas for attention could be based on the actions points from the 2010 Action Plan, to ensure implementation of pre-agreed steps. Efforts to actively participate in multiple groups would likely be a strain on resources, but the UK could offer advice on how to establish and coordinate coalitions. Verification initiatives such as the UK-Norway Initiative and the Quad (UK, US, Norway and Sweden) could serve as a useful model of how to structure coalition groups. Not only does this help spread the resource burden, but could contribute to addressing the challenge of fracturing in the NPT through joint ownership and shared endeavour.

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