

# Multilateral Steps to Reduce Nuclear Risks

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While the U.S.-Russia and U.S.-China relationships remain the most likely—and most potentially dangerous—friction points among the five recognized nuclear weapon states, some aspects of global efforts to reduce the risk of use of nuclear weapons and make progress on arms control and non-proliferation require a multilateral approach.

Multilateral efforts among the five recognized nuclear weapon states (China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States)—the so-called P5—cannot replace bilateral engagement between the United States and Russia and China, respectively, to reduce the risk of unintended escalation in those relationships. But the P5—and potentially other multilateral venues and approaches—can serve as a forum for dialogue, addressing issues that involve a broader range of states and advancing ideas for multilateral arms control and non-proliferation that will have to be a part of any long-term path toward nuclear disarmament.

Although the results of the “P5 process” have been disappointing in some respects since its inception in 2009, the process has successfully broadened the discussion of nuclear issues beyond the traditional U.S.-Russia arms control process. China, in particular, has played an increasingly active role and sought to portray itself as a champion of the P5 process, the one setting where it is most willing to engage in discussions of nuclear policy and posture.

Additionally, there are key areas where multilateral nuclear risk reduction, non-proliferation, and arms control efforts have already proven productive, and others where, despite impediments, they remain the best path forward. In the former category are the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), as well as the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT), which, though not in force, has been signed by 185 states and ratified by 170 states and has contributed to the widely accepted norm against explosive nuclear testing. Efforts to negotiate a Fissile Material Cutoff Treaty (FMCT) fall in the second category. These efforts have not yet borne fruit, but a multilateral approach remains the only viable avenue for pursuing such an agreement.

## Recommendations

The United States should seek to reenergize work in the P5 to strengthen the NPT and advance nuclear risk reduction and arms control objectives. This could include steps by the P5 to do the following:

- **Affirm their commitment to preventing the use of nuclear weapons.** This could be achieved through a joint declaration—or parallel unilateral declarations—reaffirming the Reagan-Gorbachev statement that “a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought.” The P5 were reportedly

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discussing a statement along these lines in early 2020; this effort should be continued, with the goal of adopting a clean reaffirmation of the Reagan-Gorbachev formulation. Such a statement would be more impactful if paired with sustained dialogue on reducing the risk of nuclear use, as described below.

- **Expand and deepen dialogue on nuclear issues.** Since 2016, the P5 have engaged in periodic exchanges on nuclear doctrine, and the group has made modest efforts on transparency, in particular through national reporting in the context of the NPT review process. Particularly given China's declared support for strengthening the P5 process, the P5 should seek to deepen established dialogues and initiate new discussions on key topics, including by these actions:
  - *Establishing a standing P5 working group dedicated to discussions of nuclear doctrine and posture.* Such a group should include interagency representation from all five P5 members and should agree on a workplan centered around regular discussions that would build on each other, rather than one-off annual events that generally fail to move beyond baseline talking points.
  - *Beginning a dedicated P5 dialogue on reducing the risk of use of nuclear weapons.* The P5 should lay out a risk reduction agenda that includes (a) surveying existing crisis prevention and crisis management mechanisms and procedures; (b) identifying gaps and shortcomings as well as potential pathways to conflict and escalation; and (c) developing ways to improve crisis management and reduce the risk of unintended escalation due to miscalculation and/or misperception. If successful, these efforts could serve as a foundation for discussions about possible P5 coordination in managing other potential crises, including from North Korea and/or the risk of a regional nuclear conflict in South Asia.
  - *Launching a P5 dialogue on strategic stability.* This work should be focused on establishing a baseline mutual understanding of each other's perceptions of strategic stability and the threats to building and maintaining such stability regionally and globally. This effort could build on the work the P5 have already done through their dialogue on doctrine as well as the P5 glossary of nuclear terms, which had a similar goal of establishing a shared foundation for further engagement. It will be important to define the scope and focus of this discussion to avoid duplicating bilateral discussions between the United States and Russia (and, eventually, the United States and China). But given the ways in which actions by any one of the P5 can affect the perceptions and thinking of other P5 states—particularly as new technologies introduce new uncertainty and complexity to the strategic landscape—a P5 discussion of strategic stability would be an important complement to bilateral efforts.
- **Increase transparency by publicly declaring their total warhead stockpiles and/or making unilateral political commitments not to exceed a specified numerical ceiling on total warhead numbers.** The P5 should commit to regular public declarations of their respective total warhead stockpiles, as the United States did as recently as 2018. An alternative or complementary step would be for the P5—including China, France, and the United Kingdom, which have significantly smaller stockpiles than the United States and Russia—to each publicly commit not to exceed specified numerical ceilings on their total warhead numbers (a step the United Kingdom has already taken). These would be unilateral or reciprocal political commitments, and the respective ceilings would differ for each country. All of these ceilings should be near or below each country's current numbers to discourage an arms build-up and facilitate further reductions by the United States and Russia.

- **Reaffirm their moratoria on nuclear testing and commit to work to bring the CTBT into force.** In addition to reaffirming the moratoria, the P5 should commit to consultations—and eventual transparency measures—aimed at addressing concerns about each other’s activities related to nuclear testing. At some future date—and as appropriate—these efforts could be expanded to include other nuclear-armed states that also are observing moratoria on nuclear testing.
  - *In this context, China and the United States should establish a bilateral working group that would identify specific parallel, sequenced steps toward completing the CTBT ratification processes in Washington and Beijing.* Although CTBT entry-into-force is a multilateral challenge, the United States and China are the only two members of the P5 that have not ratified the treaty, and China has made clear that its ratification is tied to U.S. action on ratification. While this likely would be a long-term effort, given the need to build support for ratification in the U.S. Senate, bilateral engagement on sustaining the testing moratoria and building toward CTBT entry-into-force would help to build trust and lay out a path forward.
- **Declare a moratorium on the production of fissile material for use in nuclear weapons or other nuclear explosive devices.** Among the P5, only China has not yet declared such a moratorium. A P5 declaration along these lines would increase pressure on other key states—in particular, Pakistan—to follow suit and would be a critical step toward efforts to launch multilateral negotiations on a Fissile Material Cutoff Treaty (FMCT). It also could serve as the basis for returning to the “P5 plus” format (i.e., the P5 plus India and Pakistan), which was used in the early 2010s, primarily to discuss FMCT.