

# **A Shared Road to Zero? Towards a Common Language of Nuclear Diplomacy**

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## **Abstract**

Nuclear diplomacy is evidencing a growing polarization between nuclear armed states and abolition advocates. This results in a negotiation gridlock particularly affecting multilateral cooperation towards disarmament in a nuclear order under stress. Finding ways to bridge the divisions between nuclear armed states and abolitionists in multilateral forums is necessary to cap polarization, increase understanding across nations and create the conditions for discussions to further nuclear disarmament.

Highlighting the role of language in negotiation, this report provides a comparison of the language currently used by different states, identifying potential areas of misunderstanding, areas

of commonality, and amplification of alternative vocabulary to provide policy recommendations to help bridge gaps between polarized groups. Through textual analysis and interviews with government officials covering the period 2015-2020, the report focuses on the United States and Russia as nuclear armed states; Costa Rica and South Africa as abolitionist states; and Sweden as a bridge state.

## **1. Introduction**

Nuclear diplomacy has entered a state of talking at cross purposes. Over the years, positions, interests and understandings have drifted further and further apart between nuclear weapon states, states under extended deterrence agreements, and non-nuclear weapon states, particularly those that are advocating the abolition of nuclear weapons. Discourse about nuclear weapons and disarmament has become increasingly polarized, leading to stagnation in global efforts to address the threat of nuclear weapons. Overcoming this deadlock is particularly crucial in times of declining multilateralism, shifting political orders, and rising tensions which might result in escalation and miscalculation.

The international community has pursued nuclear disarmament efforts ever since the creation of the United Nations, and a number of multilateral and bilateral treaties have been signed promoting this objective. Most notably, the 1968 Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), the cornerstone of the global nuclear regime, establishes in its Article VI the commitment to *“pursue negotiations in good faith on effective measures relating to cessation of the nuclear arms race at an early date and to nuclear disarmament, and on a treaty on general and complete disarmament under strict and effective international control”*.

Despite successful bilateral reductions of nuclear weapon stockpiles between the United States and Russia, progress stalled towards the end of the 20th Century as the bipolar balance between super powers shifted, the nuclear global order of the Cold War was disrupted, and considerations of deterrence and restraint became unbalanced<sup>1</sup>. In recent years, nuclear weapons states have increased their budgets for nuclear modernization and new technologies that disrupt the strategic stability in which deterrence systems are said to be based. Non-nuclear weapon states unsatisfied with the degrading status quo decided to reclaim agency to promote the disarmament imperative

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<sup>1</sup> Walker, W. (2000). Nuclear Order and Disorder. *International Affairs*, 76(4), 703-724.

through an addition to the nuclear regime: the 2017 Treaty for the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW). Though it entered into force in January 2021, none of the nuclear weapon states or states relying on extended deterrence have become party to the TPNW.

This negotiation process for the TPNW was defined by the polarization between opponents and supporters of the treaty<sup>2</sup>. On the one side, states that believed nuclear weapons are still necessary argued that nuclear weapons were essential to maintaining national security through their ability to use or threaten to use nuclear weapons. For these states, disarmament should be at most as a gradual step-by-step reduction of arsenals to manage strategic stability; or at the least disarmament cannot not be addressed until underlying security conditions are resolved. On the other side, nuclear weapon abolitionists believe that human security is only assured through the complete elimination of the threat of nuclear weapons. Disarmament is at most an urgent imperative resulting from the stigmatization of nuclear weapons; or at least as measures of concrete, verifiable and substantive reductions that will improve the security of all people on the Earth.

Both sides of the disarmament debate couch their arguments in appeals to the unthinkable horror of the use of nuclear weapons. Considine argues that the frame for both sides are similar, as

Both the deterrence and humanitarian discourses, though oppositional in their content, are nonetheless based on the same foundation of nuclear politics as the politics of the unthinkable and propose responses of containment based on similar claims to universality and continuity, whether through the perceived universal rationality of deterrence or the perceived universality of an appeal to humanitarian law.<sup>3</sup>

This shared perspective on the unthinkable aspects of nuclear weapons use and parallel, but importantly differing, claims to universality and continuity. Framing nuclear weapons in similar ways but with different ends confuses discourse about disarmament, since both sides are using similar words with different meanings to express very different positions.

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<sup>2</sup> Heather Williams (2018) A nuclear babel: narratives around the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, *The Nonproliferation Review*, 25:1-2, 51-63, DOI: 10.1080/10736700.2018.1477453

<sup>3</sup> Considine, L. (2016). The 'standardization of catastrophe': Nuclear disarmament, the Humanitarian Initiative and the politics of the unthinkable. *European Journal of International Relations*, 23(3), 691.

The increasing distance in positions on disarmament, coupled with overlapping and sometimes confounding discourse on how to address the issue against a backdrop of growing disorder and unrest around the world, is making nuclear negotiations and cooperation increasingly difficult. As the world prepares for the next NPT Review Conference, untangling disarmament and security discourse will be important to arrive at a successful outcome.

## **2. Discourse, vocabulary, and negotiation**

Successful international negotiations require skillful communication between parties, moving from divergent positions at the start to a convergence upon agreement. Effective communication includes mutual understanding and use of vocabulary that all parties can agree upon. At times, words can take on different meanings in different discourses, which can lead to important misunderstandings between parties. Understanding the discourse of various parties around the table can be critical to success. This is particularly pertinent in discussions about nuclear weapons, disarmament, and nonproliferation as different countries may use similar words, but their discursive frame renders different meanings for those same words. Understanding discursive differences, therefore, may help unstick disarmament discussions.

The field of discourse analysis is rich and extensive. This paper does not propose to enter into that field of study, but rather takes a practitioners approach to look at discourse around disarmament to identify potential areas of misunderstanding and opportunity for future cooperation. Discourse can be broadly defined as a system of social values and rules which gives meaning to words and determines ways in which words are used within society.<sup>4</sup> Schmidt defines discourse in a political context as “constituting both a set of policy ideas and values and an interactive process of policy construction and communication”, and observes that “it can be shown in some instances to exert a causal influence over and above the interplay of interests, institutions, and culture.”<sup>5</sup> The ability of discourse to influence political interests, national institutions, and even culture indicates its importance in communication. While discourse does not create policy, it is an important frame in which to understand how policy is created, not just domestically but on the international stage.

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<sup>4</sup> Larsen, H. (1997) *Foreign Policy and Discourse Analysis: France, Britain and Europe*. New York: Routledge, 14.

<sup>5</sup> Schmidt, V.A. (2001) The politics of economic adjustment in France and Britain: when does discourse matter?, *Journal of European Public Policy*, 8:2, 247-264, DOI: 10.1080/13501760110041578

Discourse is also not monolithic, but varies significantly from country to country and even group to group. As Larsen observes, “a [single] discourse can never, therefore, dominate a society completely..[or] fix all meaning...”<sup>6</sup> This observation is crucial to keep in mind when looking discourse on disarmament. While nuclear weapon states have long driven discussions about disarmament, the non-nuclear weapon states are asserting themselves and taking ownership of conversations about disarmament and developing new discourses. The TPNW is a clear example of this growing agency and is a marker of these divergent discourses on disarmament.

Multiplicity of discourses on the same topic can provide opportunities for movement on previously intractable issues, however it can also complicate negotiations as different parties use similar words that take on different meanings in different, and often opposing, discourses.

Discourse can point us to frameworks used by countries, leaders and negotiators that influence what they will or will not accept in negotiations. While they are not perfect predictors of outcomes, understanding the discourse of counterparts around the table can facilitate successful negotiations. The objective of this paper is to start unpacking some of the key concepts in nuclear disarmament discourse, in order to find areas of commonality, of misunderstanding, and alternatives that could help reduce polarization and bridge gaps to move the disarmament negotiation forward. This could be particularly useful for new diplomats and others preparing for the next NPT Review Conference or other future negotiations that touch on disarmament.

### **3. Analytic Method**

The process for investigating discourse around disarmament took place in two stages. The first stage was a qualitative textual analysis of official statements and documents from diplomatic fora representing that express positions on the role of nuclear weapons and views on nuclear disarmament. The second stage consisted of synthesizing and distilling down key terms and ideas into four thematic areas that cut across all the statements analyzed earlier. These four thematic areas are some of the ones that appear to have the most overlap in vocabulary but take on different discursive meanings.

The scope of analysis comprises five states. These states were chosen based on the criteria of relevance in the nuclear disarmament debate, diversity of perspectives on disarmament, and

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<sup>6</sup> Larsen, H. (1997) *Foreign Policy and Discourse Analysis: France, Britain and Europe*. New York: Routledge, 19.

broad geographical representation. The United States and the Russian Federation were chosen to represent “nuclear weapon states”, as they were the first nuclear armed states and currently hold the largest nuclear arsenals. Sweden was chosen as a “bridge builder” state, one that benefits from extended nuclear deterrence but has also expressed its commitment to nuclear disarmament. Finally, Costa Rica and South Africa were chosen as “abolitionist states”. Costa Rica was chosen because of its prominent disarmament foreign policy, including its role as chair of the TPNW process; and South Africa was chosen as the only state to have through nuclear disarmament in its entirety, from development of nuclear weapons to the complete dismantlement of their nuclear weapons program. The analysis cover the six-year period from 2015 to 2020, inclusive. This allowed not only for a current analysis of trends but also for the inclusion of postures for and against the TPNW that reflect the states’ positions and conception of nuclear weapons, security and disarmament.

#### *A. First Phase*

In the first stage, publicly available policy documents and statements from each state were analyzed. These included nuclear posture reviews or doctrines, press releases and statements in relevant forums such as the United Nations General Assembly, the First Committee, the Non-Proliferation Treaty Review Conference and Preparatory Commissions, the TPNW meetings or other relevant initiatives. The documents were retrieved using keywords such as “nuclear” and “disarmament” (or their equivalent in the corresponding language) from official national websites or from the online archive of Reaching Critical Will, the disarmament program of the NGO Women’s League for International Peace and Freedom (WILPF). Original language versions were used in English, Spanish and Russian, and other documents were retrieved in English for to facilitate textual comparison.<sup>7</sup>

After retrieval and an initial selection for relevancy, the documents were analyzed through coding technique using a simple open source software.<sup>8</sup> Each document was analyzed for key words, associations (i.e. A is true because of B), and tone to identify reasons in favor or against

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<sup>7</sup> Quotes in this work are the Author’s translation checked against official English translation when available.

<sup>8</sup> Taguette 0.9.2

the possession of nuclear weapons, as well as what they considered to be the main obstacles in negotiation and possible ways forward in disarmament.

Document collection →	Read through →	Selection and preparation →	Coding Data-driven + Theory-driven		
Statements, press releases, posture documents, etc	Gain general sense of the data	Discard non-relevant documents. Transcription when necessary into suitable format	Identify critical segments in response to the research questions	Create and assign code labels	Create clusters / themes
<----- Iterative process ----->					

Table 1. Textual analysis process

### *B. Second Phase*

During the second of phase of analysis, the previous textual documentation was collated and cross referenced to find similar concepts, phrases, and ideas expressed in each of the national discourses. These were then assessed to identify the commonalities and differences between the discourse. The subsequent analysis is described in part 5 of paper.

## **4. Understanding the different discourses of nuclear diplomacy**

### *A. Nuclear weapon states*

The discourse used by the United States and Russia in their statements and documents share a common stance rooted in “traditional security”. This includes references to state security, strategic stability, balance of power, deterrence, modernization and verification measures. These countries also share a common “slow” approach towards disarmament efforts, emphasizing the need for a change in the overarching security environment before further reductions can be made.

#### *i. United States*

The United States was the first state to develop a nuclear weapon and was the first and thus far only state to use a nuclear weapon. The effort to develop a nuclear weapon was driven out of fear that Nazi Germany would develop a bomb, and concern that the only way to prevent the use of

such a weapon was to possess one first. Therefore, since the beginning nuclear deterrence in some form has been at the heart of the US nuclear weapons program.

Since 1945, attitudes within the US government toward nuclear weapons have ranged from reliance upon mutual assured destruction to an openness to discuss the elimination of nuclear weapons entirely at the 1986 Reykjavik meeting between President Ronald Regan and Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev. In 1994, the US Department of Defense issued the first Nuclear Posture Reviews (NPR) that provided a comprehensive overview of the US nuclear deterrent. Since then, each presidential administration has issued its own NPR, in 2002 under George W. Bush, in 2010 under Barak Obama, and in 2018 under Donald Trump.

Each NPR provides valuable insight to the attitude of each administration. It also provides a way in which changes in the role of nuclear weapons in US defense posture remains the same or changes. The differences between the 2010 NPR and the 2018 NPR also demonstrates the influence that differing administration philosophies and priorities have on US nuclear policy. The 2010 NPR “outlines the Administration’s approach to promoting the President’s agenda for reducing nuclear dangers and pursuing a goal of a world without nuclear weapons”,<sup>9</sup> reflecting the sentiments President Obama expressed in his 2009 Prague Speech when he declared “...today, I state clearly and with conviction America's commitment to seek the peace and security of a world without nuclear weapons.”<sup>10</sup> In 2018, however, the NPR’s purpose is to “ensure a safe, secure and effective nuclear deterrent that protects the homeland, assures allies and above all, deters adversaries.”<sup>11</sup> The significant change in the language of the NPRs reflects differences in the policy agendas pursued by different presidents. As the US changes administrations in 2021, the US governments policy on nuclear disarmament may likewise undergo a transition to a position closer to the 2010 NPR under President Obama.

The US has opposed the TPNW from the beginning of the negotiation phase through the ratification process. A senior official at the US Department of State characterized the treaty as

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<sup>9</sup> Nuclear posture review report. (2010). Washington, DC: U.S. Dept. of Defense, iii.

<sup>10</sup> Remarks By President Barack Obama In Prague As Delivered. (n.d.). Retrieved January 07, 2021, from <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-barack-obama-prague-delivered>

<sup>11</sup> Nuclear posture review report. (2018). Washington, DC: U.S. Dept. of Defense, I.

harmful to international peace and security, endangering to signatories' security, and unhelpful to future disarmament efforts.<sup>12</sup> While it is unlikely that under a new administration the US will change its position to support the TPNW, it is likely that the target points for the US in regards to disarmament will change, and possible that new policy priorities will shift the zone of possible agreement for the US.

ii. Russia

Russia is a powerful nuclear state with a diversified arsenal and advanced technologies in this area. Meanwhile, the existence and development of these forces in this country is in strict compliance with the obligations assumed arising from the supported legally binding and voluntary treaties and guidelines of associations and forums to which it is a party (in particular, the NPT, CTBT, the Conference on Disarmament, the UN Disarmament Commission, Nuclear Suppliers Group, Zangger Committee, etc.). Regularly emphasizing the importance of maintaining strategic stability and the role of the nuclear weapons complex in supporting this goal, the Russian Federation continues to take steps towards gradual and balanced nuclear disarmament. In pursuing this course the Russian Federation has taken successive steps to reduce and limit nuclear weapons, resulting in a more than 85 percent reduction in the Russian nuclear arsenal over the last 30 years<sup>13</sup>.

In recent years, the Russian Federation has undergone an update of the regulatory framework in the field of basic security and maintaining stability. Thus, in the Russian Military Doctrine, the role and place of nuclear weapons have been significantly reduced. The possibility of its use is limited by two extreme cases: an attack on Russia and its allies with the use of weapons of mass destruction and aggression against the country with the use of conventional weapons, when the very existence of the state is threatened. These provisions are exclusively defensive in nature. In addition, the Russian Military Doctrine contains the concept of “non-nuclear deterrence”. The

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<sup>12</sup> The Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons: A Well-Intentioned Mistake - United States Department of State. (2020, December 01). Retrieved January 07, 2021, from <https://www.state.gov/remarks-and-releases-bureau-of-international-security-and-nonproliferation/the-treaty-on-the-prohibition-of-nuclear-weapons-a-well-intentioned-mistake/>

<sup>13</sup> Preparatory Committee for the 2020 Review Conference of the Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons. (2019, March 15). Retrieved January 07, 2021, from <https://undocs.org/en/NPT/CONF.2020/PC.III/WP.6>

defensive nature of Russian nuclear policy is also confirmed in the new strategic planning document "*Fundamentals of the State Policy of the Russian Federation in the Field of Nuclear Deterrence*", which was approved by Decree of the President of the Russian Federation No. 355 of June 2, 2020.

Russia expresses further preparation for consideration of future steps in the field of nuclear disarmament. In this context, the consistent formation of prerequisites that would facilitate progress along this path is of priority importance.

The official position of the representatives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russia is to regard the elaboration of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons as a mistake. This agreement is viewed as an artificial and unprepared forcing of nuclear disarmament. One of the reasons for mistrust in the Treaty is considered to be that it was being developed without the participation of Russia, like other nuclear powers. At the same time, the Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Mr S.Lavrov stressed that Russia is committed to the idea of building a nuclear-free world. However, in his opinion, this world should be built not in such one-sided and arrogant ways. In a sense, the adoption of such a TPNW creates a number of problems for the nuclear powers in relations with states that have signed and ratified the Treaty. For example, it will be necessary to negotiate bilaterally with transit countries, or with countries that have previously concluded agreements on the maintenance and repair of warships, the use of "leased" ballistic missile test sites, etc. Moreover, the complete elimination of nuclear weapons is possible only if there is general and complete disarmament.

#### *B. Abolitionist states*

The language utilized by Costa Rica and South Africa focuses on "human security" as a way to oppose nuclear weapons, including mainly references to collective security, ethics/morals, development, democracy, sustainability, victims, threat, catastrophe, arms race and possession fueling proliferation.

The main obstacle these countries see to the advancement of disarmament negotiations is the "deception" of nuclear armed states regarding their intentions to disarm, including references to inaction, slow pace, compliance disequilibrium, lack of credibility, as well as denial, reinterpretation and imposition of conditionalities to their obligations.

It is natural then that their positions on what they would like to see to move disarmament negotiations forward revolve around a “concrete plan”, including benchmarks, timelines, verification and abiding by previous agreements. However, details of what this plan might look like are not put forward. There are also allusions to the importance of multilateralism, considering the views of the majority of countries. The inclusion of civil society, academia and women in this process is also mentioned, though with a minor role. Overall, these countries share a common “fast” approach to disarmament negotiations.

With negotiations on a deadlock, no common ground for possible agreements in sight and the best alternative for nuclear armed states being the status quo, abolitionist states show a shift strategy to regain agency and influence the process. Mainly, they created for themselves a better non-agreement alternative that would, at the same time, weaken the position of nuclear armed states: this is the TPNW.

Costa Rica and South Africa present the Humanitarian Initiative talks as a way to innovate, revitalize and diversify a discussion that was stagnated, as well as providing evidence by experts on the implications of the use of nuclear weapons. They see the TPNW as filling a legal void, but mainly as a way to shift the narrative and delegitimize nuclear weapons, hoping to make a political and legal impact in the debate. In the long term, nuclear armed states would be left with less room to maneuver in their stance to stick to the status quo, which would increase the zone of possible agreement and move negotiations forward. It is yet to be seen if this is to happen. It will require demystifying some beliefs about the TPNW that, for the time being, seem to be deepening the polarization and driving positions further apart<sup>14</sup>.

i. Costa Rica

Costa Rica presents the particularity of being one of the few demilitarized countries in the world, having abolished its armed forces in 1948. This fact has led the state to focus on diplomacy, dialogue, and multilateralism as the sole ways to deal with other countries, solve problems, and

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<sup>14</sup> Heather Williams (2018) A nuclear babel: narratives around the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, *The Nonproliferation Review*, 25:1-2, 51-63, DOI: 10.1080/10736700.2018.1477453

deal with conflicts. Among these efforts, Costa Rica has adopted a leading role in international diplomacy for peace.<sup>15</sup>

As a Latin American country, Costa Rica is part of the 1967 Tlatelolco Treaty, which established the world's first nuclear weapon free zone in a populated area. In multilateral forums discussing nuclear issues, Costa Rica is part and shares statements with the Community of Latin America and Caribbean States (CELAC) and the Central American Integration System (SICA).

Focusing on the nuclear disarmament efforts spearheaded by Costa Rica, two highlights are worth mentioning: the Nuclear Weapons Convention and the TPNW. Regarding the first one, in 1997 Costa Rica proposed a model Nuclear Weapons Convention (NWC) to the United Nations as a discussion document, which had been drafted by international experts. Ten years later, an updated version by ICAN was again submitted by Costa Rica to the 2007 NPT Preparatory Commission and the UN General Assembly. This Convention, similarly to the Chemical and Biological Conventions, would ban nuclear weapons, as well as mandate the destruction of the nuclear arsenals in a series of phases. To verify and assure compliance, as well as to provide a forum for decision making, an Agency for the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons would be created.

The opposition of some nuclear armed countries did not allow for the adoption of the treaty. Years later, the focus of disarmament efforts from non-nuclear weapons states and activists was shifted to another option that - in principle - would not require nuclear armed states to join in order to be adopted: proclaiming a ban without including disarmament verification measures. The efforts towards this resulted in the TPNW, leaving aside consideration for the NWC since then. Costa Rica had a prominent involvement in the TPNW. The country led the first Open-Ended Working Group on nuclear disarmament in 2013 and the TPNW negotiation conference. Costa Rica was part of the seven Core Group nations that promoted the treaty, together with Austria, Brazil, Ireland, Mexico, New Zealand, and South Africa.

## ii. South Africa

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<sup>15</sup> Innecken Zúñiga, P. J. (2018). Costa Rica y el desarme nuclear, 2006 – 2017: Un valioso ejercicio del soft power. San José, Costa Rica: MREC, Instituto Manuel María d: MREC, Instituto Manuel María: MREC, Instituto Manuel María de Peralta de Peraltae Peralta.

South Africa is the only country in the world to have given up nuclear weapons voluntarily, positioning itself as a champion in disarmament, non-proliferation, and peaceful uses of nuclear energy.

After the country's participation in the program Atoms for Peace and peaceful cooperation agreements with the United States, South Africa's nuclear weapons program started in the 1970s and achieved six devices. In 1988, the country reached out to the IAEA expressing a willingness to accede to the NPT and two years later it had completely dismantled and destroyed its arsenal, joining the treaty as a non-nuclear weapon state in 1991.

Subsequently, South Africa integrated itself into the nuclear order. Notably, it played a key role in building consensus among the non-nuclear weapon states of the Non-Aligned Movement to achieve the indefinite extension of the NPT at its 1995 Review Conference. It also negotiated and signed the 1996 Treaty of Pelindaba, establishing the African nuclear weapon free zone, and joined the CTBT.

South Africa achieved mastery of the whole fuel cycle and possesses a considerable quantity of highly enriched uranium. It is a producer, possessor, and exporter of nuclear materials and technologies and as such it is part of the Nuclear Suppliers Group. Proliferation concerns have risen in the past given that South African companies and individuals were suppliers in the illicit A.Q. Khan network.

In international forums, South Africa is part of and shares statements with the African Group, the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) and the New Agenda Coalition (NAC). The NAM is a broad movement of 120 members that traditionally share a background of colonization, are preoccupied with interventionism and hegemonic strategies, looking to preserve their sovereignty and strengthen south-south relations; collectively, they put forward a conception of disarmament linked to development. Even though the group emerged during the Cold War, the idea about uniting to speak with a unified voice against the powerful keeps influencing policy integration and coherence despite material, ideological and even interest divergence. As mentioned before, South Africa's leading position within the NAM was critical to act as a bridge-builder between proponents and opposers of the indefinite extension of the NPT in 1995:

it proposed the first draft of the document which became the Decision on Principles and Objectives.

As a response to the divide in 1995, South Africa founded the NAC together with Brazil, Egypt, Ireland, Mexico, New Zealand, Sweden and Slovenia (the last two have afterwards left the group). The NAC has been working within the NPT ever since. In the 2000 NPT Conference, the NAC put forward and managed to get passed by consensus the “13 Steps” declaration. The document outlines actions towards swift, verifiable, and irreversible nuclear disarmament, including early entry into force of the CTBT, negotiation of a fissile material treaty, reductions in nonstrategic nuclear weapons, diminishing the role of nuclear weapons in security doctrines, rejecting the development of new kinds of nuclear weapons, establishing a subsidiary body on nuclear disarmament in the Conference on Disarmament, and ensuring the principles of transparency and irreversibility in disarmament measures.

### *C. Bridge states*

The language of bridge states, or in this case Sweden, is more in line with the language utilized by abolitionist states than the language used by nuclear weapon states. Similar with Costa Rica and South Africa the main arguments opposing nuclear weapons are based on “human security” referencing ethics/morals, victims, environment and humanitarianism. However, the so-called stepping stone approach introduced by Sweden in 2019 puts great emphasis on trust. *“The purpose of each stepping stone, in addition to the value in its own right, would be to rebuild the trust and confidence lacking today. Such an approach could help to unlock current diplomatic blockages, and, in the process, making the more substantial disarmament steps already on the diplomatic agenda a more realistic future possibility.”*

#### *i. Sweden*

The Swedish government has in recent years stated that nuclear disarmament is a key priority of the government’s foreign and security policy.<sup>16</sup> The Swedish government has worked for a ban on nuclear weapons through Sweden’s participation as an observer at the TPNW. In 2019 the Swedish government launched a disarmament initiative at an international ministerial meeting in

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<sup>16</sup> E.g. government.se. 2019. *“The Government's continued work for nuclear disarmament.”*  
<https://www.government.se/articles/2019/07/the-governments-continued-work-for-nuclear-disarmament/>

Stockholm to bring like-minded countries together on the issue ahead of the NPT Review Conference 2020.<sup>17</sup> Further, the Swedish delegation introduced its own approach to disarmament at the 2019 Preparatory Committee for the 2020 NPT Review Conference. The so-called “steppingstone” approach.<sup>18</sup>

## 5. Key Discourse Terms

From the textual analysis conducted during the research phase, a number of key terms were identified that carry a variety of meanings in different national discourses.

### *Collective responsibility*

The idea of collective responsibility was expressed in several of the national discourses. For the nuclear weapons states, the concept of collective responsibility applied to the responsibility for creating a more secure world that will enable disarmament. In the US statement to the NPT Preparatory Committee in 2017, the speaker asserted that “All parties to the Non-Proliferation Treaty bear responsibility for working together to improve the geopolitical environment and create the conditions for nuclear disarmament”. The US views eliminating nuclear weapons as a responsibility of the nuclear weapons states, but creating the conditions for disarmament is the collective responsibility of the international community. Since the object of the responsibility is strategic security and the geopolitical environment, nuclear weapon states, and US in particular during the chosen research timeframe, also link it to “great power competition” and therefore disarmament and arms control make sense to be limited to a bilateral or reduced-party format.

For bridge-building states, collective responsibility is moving toward a world without nuclear weapons. Sweden, for example, asserts that non-nuclear weapon states have an important role to play in nuclear disarmament, but also recognizes that nuclear weapons states security will play a large role in that process. As such, Sweden has been advocating for a “stepping stone” approach to build toward a world without nuclear weapon. One Swedish diplomat noted that “the Stepping Stone Approach is based on the collective responsibility of all states to signal credible intent

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<sup>17</sup>Government.se. 2019. “*The Stockholm Ministerial Meeting on Nuclear Disarmament and the Non-Proliferation Treaty.*” <https://www.government.se/statements/2019/06/the-stockholm-ministerial-meeting-on-nuclear-disarmament-and-the-non-proliferation-treaty/>

<sup>18</sup>[https://s3.amazonaws.com/unoda-web/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/NPT\\_CONF.2020\\_PC.III\\_WP.33-WP.33-FINAL-Sweden-working-paper-FINAL.pdf](https://s3.amazonaws.com/unoda-web/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/NPT_CONF.2020_PC.III_WP.33-WP.33-FINAL-Sweden-working-paper-FINAL.pdf)

towards agreeing further steps to lower nuclear salience, risk or tensions in order to create the environment for nuclear disarmament.”

For abolitionist states, there is a higher degree of ambiguity in their statements. On one side, they stress the special responsibility that only relies on NWS given their capacity to influence strategic security and the geopolitical environment. As South Africa noted during the NPT Review Conference in 2015, “we would not just like the two major NWS to discuss reductions, but we would like all five NWS to engage each other, so as to create a greater balance in the global community(...)The five have a supreme responsibility to address this matter on behalf of humanity.” This distinct responsibility pointed out is, however, not directly reflected in the main text of the NPT. On the other side, they also reclaim involvement in equal standing. “Whilst we recognise that there are some countries outside of the NPT that possess nuclear weapons, this does not reduce the responsibility of the five to work with all of us that are members of the NPT” was another South African assertion. This, when coupled with the statement “It is extremely important to recognise that all of us have a share in what comes out” of disarmament, emphasizes that more than just the disarming states are affected by the disarmament process. Multilateral nuclear disarmament verification proposals are sustained in this line of thought, as well as the conviction from many states that non-nuclear weapon states are equally responsible in taking steps to reach a global zero.

A key component of both the bridge state discourse and the abolitionist discourse is the issue of trust. The main obstacle these countries see to the advancement of disarmament negotiations is the “deception” discourse of nuclear armed states regarding their intentions to disarm, including references to inaction, slow pace, compliance disequilibrium, lack of credibility, as well as denial, reinterpretation and imposition of conditionalities to their obligations. Deadlocked multilateral frameworks have become victims of entrenched severe lack of mutual trust. Just like in any other negotiations, trust unites parties to work together in mutually beneficial ways. Given these differences is how states talk about collective responsibility, more work is needed to build agreement around respective roles in the disarmament process. There may also be opportunities to rebuild mutual trust through future negotiations.

## *Security*

How states discuss security varies significantly as well. For nuclear weapon states, security is connected to maintaining power while deterring potential threats to territorial integrity.

Historically they have needed to deter military threats because they are threats to each other.

During the January meeting of the Arms Control Negotiation Academy, a senior Russian diplomat argued that all issues regarding US and Russia are strategic by nature. The relationship between these two countries also affect relationships around the world. Even how the US and Russia discuss security varies, however. When speaking about nuclear issues, the US uses the term “strategic security”, while Russia uses the term “strategic stability”. This complicates bilateral negotiations, then, as negotiators have to spend time defining what is “strategic” or not. This becomes particularly salient in the context of limitations of strategic weapons in bilateral arms controls as even the two states holding the largest nuclear arsenals have to navigate different discourses to find agreements on arms control and disarmament.

Non-nuclear weapons states, however, face a much different security environment. While they may face security threats from specific states, it is more often from their geographical placement or position in the international order rather than threat to other states. Non-nuclear weapons states are also concerned about more generalized threats, such as the effects of climate change or economic disruptions and political unrest of neighbors. Borrowing from securitization theory, the referent object to be protected is no longer Westphalian. Given that these states are forced to take a more holistic view of security, it is unsurprising that their discourses focus more on the humanitarian impacts of nuclear weapons and how nuclear weapons are part of a system of insecurity, rather than a response to insecurity. These states refer to “collective security” and “human security” as a way to oppose nuclear weapons, including mainly references to ethics/morals, development, democracy, sustainability, victims, threat, catastrophe, arms race and possession fueling proliferation. And the difference between this position and the nuclear weapons states position is growing. In 2016 Costa Rica’s statement in the First Committee acknowledged the “legitimate concerns regarding security and defense that other countries may harbor”, as well as the “the need for many of them to incur military expenses that are justifiable in the light of proportionality and reasonability,” however such language has not been used in a Costa Rican statement since. As a South African diplomat observed, “security is an evolving and

subjective perception...[but] ultimately, the security considerations of the five are unilateral and imposed on all of us.” These diverging views complicate negotiation efforts centered around building security, particularly in a multilateral setting.

### *Disarmament*

One of the challenges of talking about disarmament is that one word contains a vast range of concepts within it. Ever since the negotiation of the NPT, all states parties have committed to “nuclear disarmament, and on a treaty on general and complete disarmament under strict and effective international control.”<sup>19</sup> Disarmament has long been understood as a process, but what that process entails can vary significantly. For nuclear weapon states, disarmament is viewed as only possible when other security concerns are addressed. During the 2015 NPT Review Conference, the US observed that each step must be carefully taken to ensure that the security of all is increased along the way. Later, the US asserted that “[the] concept of easing tension between and among States, including through effective measures that build trust and confidence, is the necessary starting point for fostering the conditions for nuclear disarmament.” Under the Trump administration, much emphasis was put on resolving underlying conditions, leading to the creation of the Creating an Environment for Nuclear Disarmament (CEND) initiative. Sweden, as a bridge state, shares some views with the nuclear weapon states in characterizing disarmament as “based on incremental moves”. Their discourse recognizes that nuclear disarmament results in vulnerabilities that need to be managed.

For abolitionist states, disarmament means the total elimination of nuclear weapons. Increasingly, these states have left aside references to acknowledging security concerns and vulnerabilities that might arise from this process. Instead, they maintain that a swift process of disarmament is necessary to improve global security since nuclear weapons are the greatest source of insecurity. Abolitionist states view the prohibition of nuclear weapons under the TPNW as the missing legal framework for disarmament that was lacking in the NPT. Their positions on what they would like to see to move disarmament negotiations forward revolve around a “concrete plan”, including benchmarks, timelines, verification and abiding by previous agreements. However, details of what this plan might look like are still unclear. There are also

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<sup>19</sup> NPT, Article VI.

allusions to the importance of multilateral disarmament initiatives, considering the views of the majority of countries. Even if policies of nuclear weapon states of “no-use” or “restraint” are welcomed, they are not considered sufficient indicators of a disarmament commitment. Rather, abolitionist states interpret such commitments as indicators of the will of nuclear weapon states to retain their nuclear weapons indefinitely. Step-by-step approaches are considered vague and deceptive rather than a legitimate process of disarmament. A South African diplomat asserted “Reductions and nuclear disarmament are two different concepts. Reduction means that we do not need so many and therefore we will reduce some. Nuclear disarmament means that we must carve out a path for the total elimination of nuclear weapons.” These different understandings make it easier to speak at cross purposes during negotiations. At the same time, there may be opportunities to use differences in understandings to find zones of mutual agreement that allow different states to define success within their national discourse.

### *Policy recommendations*

Based upon the above analysis, the following policy recommendations should be considered:

- The next round of arms control and/or disarmament negotiators, particularly in multilateral settings, should be cognizant and engaged with differing discourses around these issues. They should:
  - Be sufficiently familiar with the field to distinguish between differing discourses, able to understand the range of potential wordings that can either open or close windows of opportunity where ZOPA and target points overlap.
  - Work to avoid discourse traps, rather approach negotiations with flexible thinking about what agreement might entail.
  - Recognize when common wording masks different positions and when different wording masks potential for agreement.
- New diplomats need to be educated not just on the substance of policy issues, but also on the differences in discourses between nuclear and non-nuclear states.
  - The next generation of diplomats benefit from informal knowledge passed on from senior diplomats, but they should also be given the enough leeway to develop innovative approaches to difficult problems.

- International institutions should include in their efforts on disarmament education a chapter on the role of discourse and meaning. To this end, a briefing paper adapted from this work could be incorporated into the curriculums of, for example, the UNODA-UNIDIR Disarmament Orientation Course or the VCNDP Short Course on Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament.
- States need to rebuild cultures of cooperation in multilateral nuclear negotiations, particularly within the NPT context. Building trust through interpersonal engagement, particularly post-pandemic, and providing more transparency on policy commitments are essential to building international trust and confidence, as well as clarity in signaling and communication.