

CSIS European Trilateral Track 2 Nuclear Dialogues

2023 Consensus Statement

The European Trilateral Track 2 Nuclear Dialogues, organized by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) in partnership with the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) and the Fondation pour la Recherche Stratégique (FRS), have convened senior nuclear policy experts from the United Kingdom, France, and the United States (P3) since 2009 to discuss nuclear deterrence, arms control, and nonproliferation policy issues. By identifying issues of mutual concern and areas of consensus, the group seeks to improve collaboration and cooperation among the three nations across a range of challenging nuclear policy concerns. Most of the experts are former U.S., UK, and French senior officials; the others are well-known academics in the field. Since the dialogue's inception, currently serving senior officials from all three governments have routinely participated in the discussions.

The United States, the United Kingdom, and France hold common values and principles directed toward a shared purpose of sustaining global peace and security, as well as an understanding of their respective roles as responsible stewards of the nuclear order. While each of the three nations has unique perspectives and policies regarding nuclear issues and the nature of today's security environment, as the three nuclear weapons states in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) alliance they play a unique and enduring role in stewardship and international alliances and partnerships, especially in matters of nuclear deterrence, nonproliferation, and arms control.

Each year the Track 2 members of the group issue a consensus statement reflecting their discussions. All signatories agree to this statement in their personal capacities, which may not necessarily represent the views of their respective organizations. In 2023, the group's discussion addressed a range of emerging strategic challenges for the P3, including NATO's reaction to a changing security environment, proliferation issues, Chinese and Russian military dynamics, air and missile defense, and responsible nuclear state behavior. These discussions prompted the group's Track 2 participants to issue this consensus statement reflecting several key points of agreement following the 2023 round of meetings.

An Increasingly Interconnected Security Environment

Russia's war on Ukraine continues to serve as the most pressing strategic challenge to the P3. While Russian threats of nuclear use in Ukraine have lessened, Russia has suspended participation in New START and formally withdrawn from the Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE) treaty while also announcing that it is stationing nuclear weapons in Belarus. These moves not only degrade the European security environment further but also directly challenge the global nuclear order more broadly. The United States and NATO should now balance developing plans and capabilities to deter two nuclear-peer potential adversaries while simultaneously ensuring the survival of the global nuclear order, a whole-of-alliance task that will require even tighter coordination on multiple fronts—including acquisition and sustainment, planning, and messaging.

The P3 nations have tightened coordination among themselves as well as within the broader alliance network on issues in the Indo-Pacific; regional cooperation between the United Kingdom and France was a pillar of their March 2023 summit, a manifestation of growing interest in the two countries to maintain a more consistent presence in the region. To a similar end, the United States and South Korea signed the Washington Declaration in April 2023, a deepening of bilateral ties and consultations aimed at managing concern over Pyongyang's growing nuclear arsenal and intensifying rhetoric. These efforts follow a realization of the rapidly shifting security environment in a region with multiple potential flashpoints and a growing fear that one crisis would likely beget more.

The P3 governments recognize these interconnected challenges and have implemented or adapted security reviews and doctrines to meet the complex issues of the day. The **March 2023 UK Integrated Review Refresh** sharpened the United Kingdom's focus on Russia as an acute threat to European security, while identifying China as an “epoch-defining challenge” for the international order. France's new Military Programming Law too focused heavily on the strategic challenges posed by Russia and China. In the United States, the 2022 National Defense Strategy outlined a path to bolster the current global security order in light of Russia and China's ongoing challenges as well. Where possible and prudent, the P3 should continue to cooperate and communicate to achieve a high rate of readiness across the alliance to face future threats.

Preparing NATO for New Challenges

NATO expanded on progress made during the Madrid summit, **agreeing on** “significant measures to further enhance NATO's deterrence and defence posture in all domains” during the July 2023 Vilnius summit. Maintaining high alliance cohesion throughout the refresh of regional defense plans remained a priority task of the P3, with the introduction of updated planning aiming to improve NATO's collective capability to deter and defend against adversary aggression.

The implementation of the 2022 Strategic Concept has improved coherence and coordination at multiple levels of the alliance; China has been identified as a strategic competitor for NATO, and China's growing coordination with Russia on security issues primes NATO for a larger role in managing two-peer competition. While NATO remains focused first and foremost on the Euro-Atlantic, it has begun to increase its focus in the Indo-Pacific with the inclusion of Australia, New Zealand, Japan, and South Korea at the 2023 Vilnius summit. The enthusiastic participation of Asian partners, combined with the respective 2023 and 2024 accessions of Finland and Sweden to the alliance as well as the

unanimous decision within the alliance to suspend participation in the Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE) treaty considering Russian actions, demonstrate that unity within the alliance remains at a high-water mark.

At the same time, NATO will need to capitalize on this sense of unity to urgently ask serious and difficult questions regarding both its nuclear and conventional capabilities and whether they remain fit for purpose as it shifts to manage two-peer competition. This update to NATO's hard capabilities will be challenged by deficiencies in the defense industrial bases of the United States and Europe, forcing the alliance to prioritize certain capabilities rather than undertake a broader whole-of-capabilities refresh. The conflict in Ukraine has demonstrated the value of certain systems that NATO would do well to prioritize across the alliance force structure, including integrated air and missile defense and deep precision strike, both systems that would bolster NATO's ability to complicate adversary decisionmaking in regional confrontations.

Furthermore, as NATO seeks to refresh its capabilities for the task at hand, efforts should be made to better understand how conventional and nuclear systems integrate across the alliance, particularly with regard to escalation management in Europe and beyond. In times of crisis, the alliance will play a critical role in upholding deterrence. The P3, along with wider members of the alliance, will play key roles in altering the calculus of adversaries and needs to be prepared to face the two-peer problem with a coordinated mix of nuclear and conventional capabilities.

Responsible Nuclear Behaviors and Prospects for Arms Control

The current strategic landscape remains hostile to most arms control initiatives; however, the P3 remains ready should opportunities arise. The United States has engaged on issues of arms control and responsible nuclear behavior where possible, holding the first arms control talks with China since the Obama administration in 2023. Beyond preparing for openings for arms control progress, the P3 countries should focus on two major tasks: maintaining the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and the global nuclear order and continuing their leadership as responsible nuclear powers.

The NPT faces mounting pressure from nonnuclear weapons states who perceive the P5 (the United States, France, the United Kingdom, the People's Republic of China, and the Russian Federation) to have recently slowed on their Article VI commitments. The P5 process remains a critical venue for the P3 to demonstrate responsible nuclear behaviors and manage arms racing and crisis escalation pressures, as well as to model unity within the P3 and wider alliance networks on key issues of nuclear responsibility and global order. Several useful strands of work are ripe for consideration within the P5 process, including work toward crisis management guardrails, ensuring continued successful nonproliferation efforts, and ensuring a "human in the loop" in all nuclear decisionmaking. The P3 should continue to put forth proposals that benefit global security and demonstrate its continued desire to achieve tangible and beneficial outcomes for nuclear weapons states and nonnuclear weapons states alike. While there is little substitute for tangible progress within the P5 process, the P5 can engage with external stakeholders to ensure additional transparency and maintain the health of the broader NPT regime.

There remain additional mechanisms for demonstrating nuclear responsibility beyond the P5 process, and the P3 nations will continue to fulfill their obligations as responsible nuclear weapons states and should publicly hold Russia and China to the same standard. By identifying and articulating core

responsibilities as nuclear weapons states, the P3 has the opportunity to restate its role as one of the leaders of the global nuclear order. However, this task is complicated by adversary counternarratives, and P3 leaders need to coordinate both among themselves and with their broader alliance networks to ensure that Russia and China are not able to coopt diplomatic or public forums to spread false information. Several concrete steps can be taken in this regard, including deeper coordination between defense and diplomatic experts and broader engagement with civil society on responsible nuclear behaviors.

New Thinking on Air and Missile Defense

The current strategic environment has also promoted considerable discourse among the P3 on the issue of air and missile defense. While deficiencies in the defense industrial base will complicate short-term acquisition efforts, integrated air and missile defense efforts may provide alliance members with fruitful new ways to contribute to the greater European security architecture beyond participation in NATO's nuclear mission. Furthermore, intense coordination and role specialization among members of the alliance on air and missile defense may prove the most promising avenue for alleviating pressures on defense industries as they ramp up production. Vehicles for similar cooperative efforts already exist, including AUKUS Pillar Two; the alliance should consider how to capitalize on these existing resources to kickstart air and missile defense integration.

However, challenges remain in this domain beyond a lagging industrial capacity to deliver the desired systems. While providing accurate cost estimates for air and missile defense remains difficult, innovations that improve cost effectiveness are sorely needed, and lower-cost engagement options in contrast to more expensive interceptor missiles should be strongly considered. The alliance will also need to strike the right balance between saving costs and effectively complicating Russia's ability to send limited nuclear signals. The alliance needs to decide what critical infrastructure to defend, and a serious discussion of "how much missile defense is enough" is sorely needed. Despite these challenges, air and missile defense remains an area ripe for alliance coordination, and the group is looking forward to holding follow-on discussions in due course. ■

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