

## The AUKUS Pact & Its Implications on Non-Proliferation: Interview with Sébastien Philippe



Sébastien Philippe is a research scholar and lecturer with Princeton University's Program on Science and Global Security. He is also an associate faculty with the Nuclear Knowledges program at Sciences-Po Paris Center for International Studies. His research focus on nuclear weapons and emerging technologies challenges to international peace and security. He was a Stanton nuclear security postdoctoral fellow at the Harvard Kennedy School and has served as a nuclear safety engineer for the French strategic nuclear submarine forces.

The Centre de Recherches Internationales of SciencePo is one of the main French research centers dedicated to the study of international and regional issues. Its research activities include a Nuclear Knowledge Program. What is the specific focus of this programme?

The *Nuclear Knowledges* program, founded by Benoît Pelopidas in 2017, is an interdisciplinary research program at the intersection of international history and International Relations, public opinion studies, and technical analysis of nuclear technology, focused on the scoping and justifications of nuclear weapons policy choices. It is unique among French research institutions working on nuclear weapons because it is embedded in an academic environment, must meet the criteria of peer-reviewed scholarly work, and is not funded by stakeholders of the nuclear weapons policy debate to avoid conflict of interests. Thanks to this independence and rigorous interdisciplinarity, the program has made a series of important scholarly contributions on [the role of luck](#) in nuclear crisis, on [the credibility of French nuclear forces](#), on [the legacy of French nuclear testing in the Pacific](#), on [public knowledge about and attitudes towards nuclear weapons](#) in Europe, the [nuclearization of NATO](#) or [the case for European nuclear weapons](#). It is a creative and supportive environment for scholars who wish to tackle fundamental research questions that cannot be addressed elsewhere.

On September 15, Australia, the UK and the USA announced the AUKUS trilateral security pact, which includes the transfer of naval nuclear-propulsion technology and, possibly, weapon-grade uranium to Australia from the US and UK. Is the pact in contrast with the commitments laid out by the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT)? Can it have negative implications for the non-proliferation regime? Can it set a dangerous precedent?

The AUKUS nuclear submarine only exists in press releases, nothing has yet been signed, and no vessel is likely to be launched before the next ten to twenty years – it is for now a paper submarine. Nevertheless, the [important non-proliferation implications of AUKUS are already materializing](#). The reason is twofold: the AUKUS deal is both a serious challenge to the non-proliferation safeguards regime and the reversal of decades of US efforts to minimize highly enriched uranium (HEU) stockpiles in

non-nuclear weapon states. The deal may involve the US or UK transferring 4 tons of weapon-grade uranium (or the material requirements for ~200 weapons) to fuel a fleet of 8 Australian nuclear attack submarines. Because Australia existing arrangements with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), Canberra is likely to invoke article 14 of its Comprehensive Safeguards Agreement to remove this HEU from standard IAEA monitoring. It will be the first time in the history of the NPT that such large amounts of weapon-grade fissile materials will end up outside of international safeguards in a non-nuclear weapon state. The director of the IAEA, Rafael Grossi, euphemistically called this situation “[very tricky](#).” No matter what arrangement is negotiated, the precedent will be set, and other states could invoke it to develop their own nuclear propulsion capability or legitimate indigenous HEU production with the possibility of having it end up in weapons.

The pact cancelled and replaced a contract between France and Australia for the sale of conventionally-powered attack submarines. Besides its economic implications, how can this replacement affect transatlantic, EU-UK and EU-AUS relations, and what stand should the EU take?

The submarine deal is first and foremost a blow to France military exports strategy. The sense of betrayal is genuine in French political and diplomatic circles. In the US, the urgent need to contain China is taking precedence over everything else – which explains why the nonproliferation implications of the deal were likely not given much thought prior to the announcement. Perhaps more interestingly, the episode lays bare the profound disconnect between [France's ambitions and means in the Indo-Pacific region](#). There is little doubt that France needs its European partners and the support of the United States if it wants to defend its interests in the region, no matter what they are. Therefore, I do not think that AUKUS alone will have any significant consequences on transatlantic relations. It simply confirms existing trends. With the withdrawal from Afghanistan, the US has now fully pivoted towards China. Unlike during the old cold war, Europe is no longer front and center. How to navigate this new reality is the question the European Union needs to answer.

## IT IS TIME TO ADOPT A NO FIRST USE POLICY

No head of state or government in his right mind would decide today to use nuclear weapons first, unleashing a catastrophic conflict. Yet, only a few nuclear weapons states have so far adopted the concept of No First Use (NFU) of nuclear weapons. China did so in 1964 and in 1994 submitted a draft “Treaty on the Mutual Non-Use of Nuclear Weapons” to the other nuclear-armed states. In 1998, Indian Prime Minister Vajpayee announced a NFU policy which was more recently confirmed by current Prime Minister Modi. During the Cold War even the Soviet Union adopted the NFU policy subsequently abandoned by the Russian Federation. Presently, the majority of nuclear states, including NATO members, prefer not to renounce their first use option, keeping their adversaries uncertain as to their response if victims of a non-nuclear first attack (conventional, chemical, biological). Such uncertainties have only increased with the more insidious appearance of cyber weapons.

The concept of NFU is hardly debated internationally and more efforts must be made to fill this void. No First Use Global, a network of organizations was launched on 15 July 2021, precisely to promote the NFU concept which is attracting increasing political, media and public attention. Over 1200 political, military and religious leaders, legislators, academics and scientists (around 200 from Europe) endorsed an Open Letter sent to Presidents Biden and Putin promoting NFU prior to their June 16 Summit in Geneva. Additional parliamentary initiatives on both sides of the Atlantic support NFU policies.

All eyes are now focused on the Biden administration which is reviewing the US nuclear posture. President Biden has, on various occasions, shown interest in the NFU concept. A possible US opening might pave the way towards a consensus even within NATO. The European Union does not speak with a single voice in NATO and has difficulty in reaching consensus on nuclear disarmament issues. However, it is hard to believe that any responsible European leader would endorse a nuclear first use decision. This includes European nuclear armed states. In fact, their nuclear arsenals are basically geared to a second-strike scenario. Nothing prevents the EU countries from addressing this issue in the framework of EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy. The independent think tanks belonging to the EU Non-Proliferation and Disarmament Consortium must also debate and study this subject.

A commitment in favour of the NFU will not solve all nuclear problems, but a nuclear war cannot break out if all countries possessing nuclear weapons agree not to use them first.

**Carlo Trezza**

Unione degli Scienziati Per Il Disarmo/ EU Non-Proliferation and Disarmament Network



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## Latest Publications

*Putting the Russian Hypersonic Threat in Perspective*, Sidharth Kaushal, The Royal United Services Institute (RUSI), 2021

*International Cyber Capacity Building: Global Trends And Scenarios*, Robert Collett, Nayia Barmaliou, Patryk Pawlak, The European Union Institute for Security Studies (EUISS), 2021

*Forensic Forays: Using X-ray Technology to Analyse Modified and Converted Firearms*, Hannah Smith, Katie Addinall, and Liam Blunt, Small Arms Survey, 2021

*European Space Summit 2022: What is at stake?*, The European Space Policy Institute, 2021

## CONSORTIUM NEWS

### The EU Non-Proliferation and Disarmament Papers Series

As part of its mandate, defined in Council Decision (CFSP) 2018/299 of 26 February 2018, the EU Non-Proliferation Consortium is publishing a new series of Non-Proliferation and Disarmament Policy Papers. One of the latest papers is co-authored by Mark Bromley and Kolja Brockmann, respectively Director and Researcher of the SIPRI's Dual-use and Arms Trade Control Programme.

*Implementing the 2021 recast of the EU dual-use regulation: challenges and opportunities*

#### Summary

In 2011, the European Union (EU) launched a review of its regulation establishing controls on exports of dual-use items. This began a process involving the European Commission, the European Parliament and the Council of the EU that led to a recast of the regulation which enters into force on 9 September 2021. This paper examines the main underlying concerns that drove the review and recast process: exporters' regulatory burden, uneven national implementation, exports of cybersurveillance items and advances in emerging technologies. It also analyses the key changes introduced by the recast, particularly a mechanism for coordinating enforcement, additional controls on exports of cybersurveillance items, new commitments on public transparency and an expanded mechanism to control unlisted items, including emerging technologies. The paper concludes by outlining the steps needed to ensure both effective implementation of the recast and greater coherence in the EU's wider efforts in the field of export controls and non-proliferation.

Read the full paper [here](#)

Previous papers can be found [here](#)

## Network Calls

### FULL-TIME RESEARCHER

Under the authority of the Director, the GRIP, an independent research center recognized as a continuing education organization by the Wallonia-Brussels Federation (Belgium), is recruiting a full-time researcher in the arms control field.

More information: [here](#)

Contact: [admi@grip.org](mailto:admi@grip.org)

### ONN SENIOR ANALYST

The Open Nuclear Network (ONN) is looking for a Senior Analyst responsible for the analysis of open-source information relevant to the nuclear conflict on the Korean Peninsula. The mission of ONN is to reduce the risk of unintentional nuclear weapons use through innovation, inclusion and dialogue supported by open-source data.

More information: [here](#)

Contact: [onn@oneearthfuture.org](mailto:onn@oneearthfuture.org)

## NETWORK NEWS

### HOW TO WORK AT AN INTERNATIONAL ORGANISATION: THE YWNGI's THIRD OUTREACH EVENT

On 6 September 2021, as part of the Young Women and Next Generation Initiative (YWNGI), l'Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) and the Vienna Center for Disarmament and Non-Proliferation (VCDNP), with the support of the EU Non-Proliferation and Disarmament Consortium, organized the third public outreach event focused on tips and insights to work at international organizations.

The webinar, intended for students and young specialists - particularly young women, featured representatives from three major international organizations in Vienna: the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) represented by Pedro Alvarez Cobacho, Acting Head of the Recruitment Unit, the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty Organization (CTBTO) represented by Maria Chepurina, External Relations Officer and CTBTO Youth Group Task Force Coordinator, and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) represented by Paul Henriksson, Associate Talent Acquisition Officer.

The event was opened by Elena Sokova, Executive Director of the VCDNP, and was attended by over 300 participants from different regions of the world.

More information can be found below:

[The YWNGI Third Outreach Event](#)

[Web Report](#)

[The Young Women and Next Generation Initiative \(YWNGI\)](#)

The full recording of the Outreach event can be found here: <https://youtu.be/Dt08IwXARnM>