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The G7 and the Nuclear Non-proliferation Regime: Between Idealism and Pragmatism

by Manuel Herrera

The 49th G7 Summit in Hiroshima produced notable outcomes pertaining to the Group's aspirations for the future of the international liberal order. The Summit addressed pressing challenges across various domains, including new and emerging technologies, international trade and development cooperation. Overall, however, the focus on matters of international security was dominant. This emphasis is likely to persist at the G20 summit in September, where security issues related to regional hotspots (especially in Eastern Europe and North-East Asia), economic security, non-proliferation and disarmament are expected to feature prominently. Notably, in Hiroshima, the Group aimed to transcend the conventional, vague rhetoric surrounding nuclear disarmament that often accompanies such gatherings, striving instead to formulate a coherent vision and approach to the broader non-proliferation regime. The aim is to enhance the political-security dimension of the G7 non-proliferation efforts, as a result of the current international environment. This, however, begets the problem of striking a balance between pragmatism and idealism.

The Hiroshima Vision on Nuclear Disarmament: Defending the status quo?

In the Hiroshima declaration of 19 May,[1] the G7 reaffirmed their call for a world devoid of nuclear weapons, based on the fundamental principles of arms control and reduction processes. These processes, which are primarily the result of confidence-building measures between nuclear powers, were emphasised, with particular attention to nuclear deterrence as an optimal mechanism for ensuring security. Such a stance should not come as a surprise, as the Group comprises both nuclear weapon states (NWS) and non-nuclear weapon states (NNWS) that support the

[1] *G7 Leaders' Hiroshima Vision on Nuclear Disarmament*, 19 May 2023, http://www.g7.utoronto.ca/summit/2023hiroshima/230519-disarmament.html.

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preservation of the *status quo* within the nuclear non-proliferation regime, an approach that has already informed previous joint statements.[2]

This position can be described as limited and ambiguous in the light of the pressing developments within the non-proliferation regime: above all, the increased legitimation gap between NWS and NNWS from the Global South, the ongoing modernisation and expansion of NWS nuclear arsenals, and the growing possibility for threshold states to become nuclear.[3] Indeed, the Hiroshima Vision only addresses abstract issues such as the need to negotiate a Fissile Material Cut-off Treaty (FMCT), promote the entry into force of the Comprehensive Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT) and support the development of peaceful uses of nuclear energy within a safe and secure framework, grounded in the principle of non-proliferation. Furthermore, the G7 maintain that the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG)[4] is the only legitimate forum for discussions on the commercial control of nuclear technology and reiterate the importance of strengthening the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) as the sole tool for disarmament, thus promoting the current regime structures (especially the NSG and NPT) favouring both the NWS and countries with developed nuclear industries.

These positions might intensify the dissatisfaction of NNWS in the Global South toward the current regime. Global South NNWS are indeed voicing their concerns about the growing constraints and difficulties in accessing nuclear materials and technology for peaceful uses, which will further foster their "nuclear dependency" from the developed North;[5] as well as the lack of progress on nuclear disarmament by the NWS, which may lead to greater support among Global South states for the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW).[6]

A new emphasis on the political-security dimension

While reasserting its preference for the *status quo*, the G7 simultaneously endeavoured to expand the political-security dimension of its position, which marks a break with the past. This is evident from the G7's framing of the West (including Japan) in opposition to Russia within the context of the Ukraine

[2] *G7 Statement on Non-Proliferation and Disarmament*, Lucca, 17 April 2017, http://www.g7.utoronto.ca/foreign/170411-nonproliferation.html.

[3] Andrew Futter and Benjamin Zala, "Strategic Non-nuclear Weapons and the Onset of a Third Nuclear Age", in *European Journal of International Security*, Vol. 6, No. 3 (August 2021), p. 257-277, https://doi.org/10.1017/eis.2021.2.

[4] The Nuclear Suppliers Group is a US-led multinational body that seeks to reduce nuclear proliferation by controlling exports and transfers of materials that could be used in the development of nuclear technology and by strengthening security measures for existing materials. More info in the official website: https://nuclearsuppliersgroup.org.

[5] Elena K. Sokova and Ingrid Kirsten (eds), *VCDNP Task Force on Peaceful Uses of Nuclear Science and Technology. Report and Recommendations*, Vienna, Vienna Center for Disarmament and Non-Proliferation, December 2021, p. 19-22, https://vcdnp.org/?p=9679.

[6] International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN), *Steady Increase in Support for the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons in 2022*, 8 January 2023, https://www.icanw.org/universalisation_2022.

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war, as well as the adoption of specific positions on nuclear arms control in the Hiroshima Vision. Most importantly, the Group deems it necessary to engage with Russia and involve China in future nuclear arms control agreements. In this regard, the G7 recognise the need for the NWS to take concrete steps to reduce strategic risks (in other words, to control and reduce nuclear arsenals), and therefore call on China and Russia to contribute substantively to the relevant multilateral and bilateral fora, in accordance with their obligations under the NPT, including Article VI. Additionally, the establishment of transparency mechanisms pertaining to the expansion and modernisation of nuclear arsenals is deemed essential.

Although these positions mostly reflect declaratory diplomacy, they also demonstrate the Group's effort to articulate a unified approach to a traditional security domain that has historically been beyond its purview.[7] This approach is driven by concerning developments in the international system, first and foremost the rhetoric surrounding nuclear weapons emanating from Russia. At the same time, the Group recognises China and Russia as indispensable stakeholders for a functional non-proliferation regime.

Here is the conundrum: as a result of mounting tensions in the international environment, the G7 have taken a step forward in an attempt to articulate a concerted position on nuclear non-proliferation – but this implies involving actors that are currently perceived as a threat to the Group itself. In this sense, the Hiroshima Vision refrains from taking a clear and forceful view of the conflict with Russia as a systemic antagonist, rather calling on Moscow to recommit itself to the non-proliferation regime, thus highlighting a contradiction between the Group's general statements vis-à-vis the war in Ukraine and the specific ones on nuclear non-proliferation. Overall, while signalling the G7's increased involvement in nuclear non-proliferation matters, this approach is fundamentally status-quoist, as it focuses on diplomacy between nuclear powers only, excluding, in principle, the NNWS from relevant negotiations.

Re-engaging Russia and China: A delicate balance

Towards Russia, the Hiroshima Vision lays bare an essential contradiction in the Western rhetoric about Russia's war against Ukraine. On the one hand, overall, the West is actively seeking to isolate Russia from relevant international fora and initiatives; on the other, however, it simultaneously acknowledges Russia as a fundamental and necessary actor for non-proliferation and disarmament. The Group's willingness to re-engage Russia on security and defence matters at both the European and international levels is consistent with the *status quo* approach that sees the US and Russia as the foremost players in this field. In this sense, the G7 is navigating a delicate balance between democratic idealism and the pragmatism inherent in foreign policy.

[7] *G7 Hiroshima Leaders' Communiqué*, 20 May 2023, http://www.g7.utoronto.ca/summit/2023hiroshima/230520-communique.html.

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Regarding China, the challenge lies in the mid-to-long term. Indeed, the Group is likely to wait for the expiration of New START between the US and Russia due in 2026 before engaging in a new trilateral arms control agreement. This points to a slightly revised version of the traditional agreements between the US and the USSR/Russia, now also including China. This is not due to quantitative considerations (in effect, Beijing's' nuclear arsenal is much smaller than Russia's and the US's),[8] but rather to the effort to prevent uncontrolled modernisation of Beijing and Moscow's arsenals and to manage emerging dual-use technologies. The challenge, however, will be to persuade Beijing of the necessity to participate in such processes, also vis-à-vis US-China rivalry and possible tensions with the Western bloc surrounding the issue of Taiwan.

To conclude, consistently with a status-quoist approach focusing on incumbent NWS states, the G7 openly recognise the need to engage Russia and China proactively in the nuclear non-proliferation regime, despite ongoing tension and competition in the international system. This will force a balance between idealism and pragmatism, wherein condemnation of Russia's invasion of Ukraine and Beijing's political support for Moscow must be complemented with efforts to involve them in the nuclear non-proliferation regime in order to ensure its functionality and the strategic stability of the international system at large.

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[8] The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists and the Federation of American Scientists estimated in 2023 that China has an arsenal of approximately 410 nuclear warheads. By comparison, the United States and Russia have 5,244 and 5,889 respectively. More info: Hans M. Kristensen et al., *Status of World Nuclear Forces*, Federation of American Scientists, 31 March 2023, https://fas.org/?p=3004; Hans M. Kristensen, Matt Korda and Eliana Reynolds, "Chinese Nuclear Weapons, 2023", in *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, Vol. 79, No. 2 (2023), p. 108-133, https://doi.org/10.1080/00963402.2023.2178713.

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