

# Protecting global security norms for nuclear non-proliferation

## As well as curbing the spread of weapons, the G7 nuclear powers must fulfil their obligation to disarm

By David Shorr, foreign policy and international affairs analyst

**B**esides subverting the rights of Ukrainians to choose a course for their own country, Russian president Vladimir Putin's brazen machinations in another sovereign state show an alarming defiance of international norms. As leaders of the G7 and other countries decide how to respond, the underlying issue is about the preservation of norms. Does this sort of norm-violating behaviour bring meaningful costs and consequences? Is it a winning strategy for a political leader to flout commonly agreed standards? Putin's defection from global norms is a reminder that the rules-based international order cannot be taken for granted – to preserve it, the rules must be upheld.

The stakes go beyond the principles of citizens' rights of self-determination and nations' mutual respect for sovereignty. Russia's sabotage of Ukraine also has repercussions for nuclear non-proliferation. The crisis raises new questions about whether Putin will play a constructive role in the global non-proliferation effort, and how other key players might need to step in to fill any resulting leadership gap. Ironically for the Brussels Summit, the G8's big nuclear security initiative, the Global Partnership Against the Spread of Weapons and Materials of Mass Destruction – which is a useful technical cooperation project with Russia – is bound to be overshadowed by larger issues.

Another set of questions harks back to Ukraine's decision to give up its nuclear arms after gaining sovereignty in the early 1990s. By meddling in its neighbour's internal affairs, Russia has violated the so-called Budapest Memorandum of 1994. That agreement swapped Russia's commitment to respect Ukrainian sovereignty in exchange for Ukraine shedding the sizable remnant Soviet nuclear force based on its territory. Given this background, some have drawn their

lesson by flipping the scenario to imagine that for Ukraine, keeping a nuclear arsenal would have been a better guarantee of its sovereignty. There are several things wrong with this argument. First, it is a completely ahistorical view of the matter. Second, it blithely casts the most destructive weapons ever known as the basis for a peaceful regional neighbourhood. In reality, nuclear weapons are an international security problem rather than an answer.

As Tom Nichols of the United States Naval War College points out, the discussion in 1994 was entirely about denuclearising Ukraine's military. The post-Soviet republics

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were rather anarchic and uncertain to begin with; nukes would only multiply the potential nightmares. Writing on his blog, The War Room, Nichols remembers thinking at the time that "the Russian Federation was the Soviet successor state, and like most Westerners, I wanted to deal with one nuclear state, not three or four new ones".

According to the landmark 1970 agreement that set the rules and obligations for most of the world community, none of the 190 state parties to that agreement should ultimately have nuclear weapons. The Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) is a grand bargain aimed at minimising the role of nuclear arms in international relations. It requires the nuclear 'have-nots' to stay that way and, in return, obliges countries with

nuclear arsenals to eventually disarm. For the G7 leaders gathered in Brussels, the NPT's two-sided bargain frames the challenges they confront: trying to press forward on both the non-proliferation and disarmament fronts.

As the bastions of the post-Second World War international order, their leadership will be vital to shoring up the multilateral framework. The task is made more urgent, and complicated, amid uncertainty regarding Putin's intentions: will Russia play the role of status quo power or renegade? In terms of the G7 role, it is significant that the group includes three of the world's five nuclear-armed NPT signatory states as well as Western alliance relationships in which nuclear doctrines and deployments weigh heavily.

### **Implications for nuclear talks with Iran**

At the top of the agenda on the non-proliferation front are the ongoing talks about keeping Iran's nuclear programme on the civilian side of the line. That effort has gained a measure of positive momentum recently – spurred by a strong international consensus for holding Iran's feet to the fire and by newly flexible approaches from both the US and Iran. But will Russia use its seat at the negotiating table and in the United Nations Security Council to join in crafting a diplomatic solution or drive a wedge between the parties? The talks with Iran are nearing the expiry of a six-month interim deal meant to buy time for a final agreement to be hammered out. Here at a delicate moment, Putin could follow Russia's avowed shared interest in preventing a nuclear-armed Iran and instruct his foreign minister, Sergei Lavrov, to help reach a deal. Or he could revert to his government's previous policy of running interference for Iran. In whatever ways they can, G7 leaders should nudge Putin towards the first option rather than the second.

While it would be hard to achieve progress on non-proliferation by circumventing Russia, pushing ahead on disarmament without it is arguably the proper path forward. Throughout the nuclear era, agreements to limit or reduce nuclear arms have been a bilateral affair – strictly between the US and the Soviet Union or Russian Federation. Since the biggest two nuclear powers had vastly larger arsenals than the three other nuclear-armed NPT

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signatories (the United Kingdom, France and China), this had a certain logic. Now, however, with the US arsenal less than a fifth of its peak level, it is time for the other three countries to start fulfilling their obligation to disarm.

**New frameworks**

Devising new frameworks for disarmament by the three is a substantial project in itself, but US president Barack Obama, French president François Hollande, UK prime minister David

Cameron and their G7 colleagues can make a useful start in Brussels by acknowledging the ripeness of the issue.

The extent of the Russian leader's defection will become clearer in the months ahead. More optimistically, he could seize on nuclear non-proliferation issues as a chance to rejoin the world community's international-law-abiding majority. Either way, the big picture for international relations and the global diplomatic agenda is the challenge of

preserving a robust rules-based order. The two issues suggested above as items for the G7 are a mere fraction of the nuclear proliferation challenge, which also includes disarming North Korea, securing the world's vulnerable nuclear material, defusing the India-Pakistan standoff and establishing a Middle East free of nuclear weapons. But an agreement with Iran and an arms control regime for China, France and the UK would help pave the way for all the others. ■