



THE P-5 BEIJING CONFERENCE

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On 14-15 April 2014, the permanent members of the UN Security Council who are also nuclear weapon states (NWS) under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) held a conference on nuclear non-proliferation. This was the fifth in the series of such conferences regularly held by the P-5 since the last Review Conference in 2010. This year the P-5 focused on the theme of “*Enhancing Strategic Confidence and Working Together to Implement the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Review Outcomes*”. Interestingly, the venue of the conference was Beijing; the only P-5 member that does not have a moratorium on nuclear testing and continues to expand its nuclear capability, while maintaining complete opacity on the size and composition of its nuclear forces. There has been widespread speculation on the status of China’s No First Use (NFU) since its latest Defense white paper does not make a mention of this aspect of its nuclear strategy.

The Chinese role among the P-5 also stands out for its robust expansion of its nuclear energy programme and its likely continuity in further exporting the dual use technology (with or without enrichment and reprocessing rights). It is noteworthy that in his opening remarks Vice Foreign Minister Li Baodong acknowledged the interconnectedness of nuclear disarmament, non-proliferation and peaceful use of nuclear energy as having a direct bearing on global peace and stability. The Chinese intent in enhancing ‘global nuclear governance’ was brought forward through his reiteration of faith in existing multilateral forum like the CD, IAEA, as central to maintaining global nuclear governance.

The foreign minister also stated that P-5 should play a leading role in maintaining this global nuclear governance and legitimate security concerns of all countries be fully respected and strategic mutual trust be strengthened. To strengthen nuclear non-proliferation, he suggested not only countries but NGOs and civil society should also be mobilized.ⁱ

The joint statement from the Beijing Conference reiterated these sentiments, especially those in favour of strengthening the IAEA safeguards system, the NPT, reaffirmation of faith in CD starting with an immediate negotiation of the FMCT and to take steps to ensure universalization of the CTBT. In addition, the P-5 also exchanged views on each other's doctrines and complimented China's leadership of the Working Group on the Glossary of key nuclear terms held in September 2013.ⁱⁱ

The Beijing P-5 conference could be viewed as significant in terms of ensuring continuity in addressing nuclear issues till the NPT Rev Con (2015) is held. It is indeed a good initiative to have the P-5 come together to declare the flashpoints on which work may be expected in 2015.

However, the Conference missed out on few issues. It seems to have operated on the principle of the lowest common denominator by steering clear of all contentious issues. For instance, none of these conferences have brought forth a joint perspective on nuclear doctrines. In fact, it is not even known whether the P-5 have discussed doctrines in these meetings. Doing so, would obviously enhance strategic trust amongst them as also in the international community. The revelation of views exchanged on nuclear doctrines becomes more meaningful as it directly relates to role nuclear weapons would likely to play in the P-5's security perspective.

This further relates to P-5's commitment toward the implementation of CTBT as put forward in the Beijing P-5 Joint Statement. Recollect that, the United States as one of the P-5 is yet to ratify the treaty. The Obama Administration is still to deliver on what was once projected as a core component of its arms control agenda.

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A curious mention of ‘respect for legitimate security concerns of all countries, in the Chinese Foreign Minister’s opening remarks also, raises questions on the feasibility of the pursuit of disarmament that the P-5 Joint Statement itself mentions. It is also not clear as to whether security concerns of ‘all’ implies only the P-5.

As of 2013 the total number of nuclear warheads in all eight states (P-5+ 3) including operational, spares, inactive etc still remains at 17,270.ⁱⁱⁱ Modernization of nuclear arsenal continues in all five. France and UK have also declared bilateral cooperation on maintaining nuclear weapons stockpile. The Lancaster House Treaties (2010) signed between the UK and France are aimed at supporting one other’s independent nuclear deterrent capabilities, this includes a joint development of some of the equipments and technologies for the next generation of nuclear submarines.^{iv} It is obvious that the P-5 plan to remain the possessors of nuclear weapons in the future.

The purpose of the P-5 Beijing Conference was to enhance discussion on issues strategic stability, nuclear disarmament, nuclear nonproliferation and peaceful use of nuclear energy, among themselves before the NPT-RevCon 2015. This implies a leading role of the P-5 in maintaining the ‘global nuclear governance’ as mentioned by the Chinese Foreign Minister in his opening remarks. It is thus expected that NPT RevCon 2015 would be largely aimed at achieving non-proliferation commitments from the countries outside the P-5.

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies CAPS)

End Notes

ⁱ Opening Remarks by Vice Foreign Minister Li Baodong (14 April 2014) at Beijing P5 Conference, Available at http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjbxw/t1146732.shtml, Accessed on 25 April 2014.

ⁱⁱ Joint Statement on the P5 Beijing Conference: Enhancing Strategic Confidence and Working Together to Implement the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Review Outcomes, Available at <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2014/04/224867.htm>, Accessed on 25 April 2014.

ⁱⁱⁱ SIPRI YearBook (2013) , Armaments, Disarmament and International Security,” *World Nuclear Forces*”, pp.149

^{iv} Robert Golan-Vilella, UK, France Sign Nuclear Collaboration Treaty, Available at, https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2010_12/UK_France, Accessed on 25 April 2014.