

UK PARLIAMENTARY VISIT TO WASHINGTON, DC TO DISCUSS MULTILATERAL NUCLEAR DISARMAMENT AND NON-PROLIFERATION

8 – 11 SEPTEMBER 2009

The British American Security Information Council (BASIC), in cooperation with the All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Global Security and Non-Proliferation, arranged for a group of high-level British Parliamentarians to meet with US Senators and senior Administration officials on the prospects for nuclear disarmament and stronger non-proliferation. This visit (8-11 September 2009) came at an auspicious time. International progress towards reducing nuclear dangers could be determined by a number of important initiatives, events and debates happening within the next year, including: US and Russian negotiations over a follow-on agreement to the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START, which will expire on 5 December 2009); the US Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) due by the end of 2009; President Obama's nuclear summit in April 2010, specifically convened to consider securing nuclear materials and battling atomic smuggling; the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) Review Conference in May 2010; and, Senate wheels starting to move in relation to Comprehensive Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT) ratification, likely to reach the floor later in 2010.

PARLIAMENTARY DELEGATION

- Rt Hon Des Browne, MP, (Labour), former Defence Secretary
- Lord Hannay of Chiswick, GCMG (Crossbench), former UK Ambassador to the United Nations
- Dr David Lidington, MP (Conservative), Shadow Foreign Affairs Minister
- Tony Lloyd, MP, Chair of the Parliamentary Labour Party and former Foreign Office Minister
- Chloe Dalton, Advisor to Shadow Foreign Secretary, the Rt Hon William Hague, MP (Conservative)

KEY INSIGHTS

Nuclear Posture Review

The US Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) is seen as being the practical expression of President Obama's vision as articulated in Prague on 5 April 2009, but equally sits alongside other defence-related reviews (such as the Ballistic Missile Review) that all exist within the context of the Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR). The President has made clear that his nuclear posture must support the diplomatic non-proliferation agenda, and it seems likely that the NPR will include a declaratory policy that shifts away from considering differing roles for nuclear weapons, as the 2001 NPR did, and rather limit these roles. The Administration will also be sensitive to the NPR's impact on the credibility of its diplomatic agenda, acknowledging that disarmament requires a step-by-step reduction in the salience and role of nuclear weapons in a manner that does not expose security.

Relationships with Allies

The discussions around a new Strategic Concept for NATO are seen as complementing the NPR process, and will be an opportunity for allies to buy into a new nuclear posture. Public support for Obama's vision and approach on disarmament is much higher within allies than it is even in the United States. Allies need to consider how best to:

- Ensure the voice in support of the multilateralist disarmament agenda is heard in Washington;
- Explicitly support the three pillars of the Prague agenda – disarmament and a reduced role for nuclear weapons in US policy; a stronger nonproliferation regime centred around the NPT and access to nuclear technology; and preventing terrorists from acquiring fissile materials;
- Support the alliance and ensure it is based upon strong relationships and defence; and,
- Engage the public in informed debate about future deployment.

Iran/North Korea

There was a strong consensus among the UK delegation members and the policymakers with whom they met that Iran could greatly complicate the prospects for disarmament, as well as influencing how much countries are willing to engage in disarmament in order to strengthen the consensus on non-proliferation. Efforts to stem the spread of nuclear weapons capabilities have to be robust and effective if Iran is not to derail the disarmament agenda. Prospects for the Iranian nuclear file appeared bleak, which could mean a big blow to the NPT, as Iran and others seek to block progress on non-proliferation efforts in retaliation for sanctions, etc. At the same time, Iran presents a big incentive to disarmament in order to achieve consensus in strengthening non-proliferation capabilities. The handling of North Korea was seen as less central to the prospects for progress on the wider agenda.

START Follow-on Treaty

Although the START follow-on agreement will receive opposition and some attempt to link it with the modernisation of the US nuclear arsenal, the treaty should receive the two-thirds support required from the Senate. The negotiations for deeper cuts in the US and Russian arsenals, which the Administration wants to pursue once the START follow-on treaty is ratified, will be more contentious.

CTBT

Compared to the START follow-on, more Senators are skeptical of the CTBT. The Administration may seek help from allies, especially the United Kingdom, in explaining why they are comfortable with the CTBT regime, and that it is consistent with the maintenance of a credible nuclear deterrent. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates gave his opinion in November 2008 that the United States faced a choice between testing and modernisation. Many Republican Senators are likely to remind the Administration of this if and when the CTBT comes up for ratification. There remains a chance that the Senate will vote on the treaty before the NPT Review Conference in May 2010, but any expectations on the timing will have to be handled carefully.

Top Level Group

This delegation visit was the first discussion in public of the Top Level Group of UK Parliamentarians for Multilateral Nuclear Disarmament and Non-Proliferation, convened by Rt Hon Des Browne, MP, one member of the delegation.

Positions within the delegation

The delegation made clear that it was there to listen and to learn, but not to express a formal unified British view. However, it was striking just how much consensus there was around support for the vision and steps towards disarmament, which opens the possibility of unified statements within Britain on this agenda.

PUBLIC EVENT

The delegation shared their perspectives at a public event at Carnegie, held by BASIC and the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace on 9 September. Audio, video and a summary of the event may be found on Carnegie's website: <http://www.carnegieendowment.org/events/?fa=eventDetail&id=1393&prog=zru>

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