

Britain's nuclear status upheld by NPT: A report on Douglas Hurd's evidence to the Foreign Affairs Committee

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In Budapest on 5 December 1994, Prime Minister John Major, in welcoming Ukraine's accession to the NPT, confirmed the British Government's support of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), reasoning that it is "the only internationally-agreed framework for negotiations on nuclear disarmament"¹. A more recent statement in London by Foreign Secretary, Douglas Hurd, however, indicates that the Government is reluctant to take advantage of this framework and honour its obligation, under Article VI of the Treaty, to "pursue negotiations in good faith on effective measures relating to cessation of the nuclear arms race at an early date and to nuclear disarmament, and on a treaty on general and complete disarmament under strict and effective international control". Mr Hurd does not see "any particular motive on our part to change [Britain's nuclear status]" which is "enshrined in the Treaty"².

The British Government's strong support for the "indefinite and unconditional extension of the NPT"³ appears to be based on an interpretation of the Treaty which dismisses its objective of a nuclear-weapon-free world. In the Foreign Affairs Committee on 18 January, the Foreign Secretary, Douglas Hurd, argued that the ubiquitous interpretation of nuclear disarmament being a major goal of the NPT was misplaced. He stated that the NPT is "a Non-Proliferation Treaty, not an abolition of nuclear weapons, but a Non-Proliferation Treaty, a treaty which distinguishes between nuclear and non-nuclear states". He also declared that "It is not necessary for this purpose to talk about the abolition of nuclear weapons. In fact, I think by setting that as a goal you actually make rather less likely the achievement of stability"⁴. In line with this analysis, the Foreign Secretary described the "basic structure of the NPT" as "accepting the existence of the five nuclear weapons states". He claimed that this structure was "a sound one... [which] for the foreseeable future at any rate we should concentrate on consolidating... rather than trying to move to the goal [of a nuclear-weapon-free world]. Moreover, Britain's nuclear weapons status was "enshrined in the Treaty", indicating, thereby, that an indefinite extension of the Treaty would also enshrine Britain's nuclear status indefinitely. Mr Hurd saw no "particular motive on our part to change that situation" nor did he "see any particular pressure from others, either other nuclear-weapon states or non-nuclear weapon states, to change it either"⁵.

It is unclear on what grounds the Foreign Secretary bases his judgement of the international mood. In contrast to his oral evidence, the indefinite possession of nuclear weapons finds little support from either nuclear, or non-nuclear-weapon states. The Russian Federation is "convinced that an unlimited and unconditional extension of the NPT is not a mandate for the nuclear powers to possess nuclear arms forever, but, on the contrary, a guarantee of the irreversibility of the nuclear disarmament process"⁶. Moreover, in his address to the UN General Assembly in September 1994, President Yeltsin spoke of "an urgent need for all nuclear states to participate in the process of reduction and limitation of nuclear weapons" (emphasis added) and proposed "that a treaty on nuclear security and strategic stability be elaborated by the nuclear five" which would include provisions for "the further elimination of nuclear munitions and reduction of strategic carriers"⁷. Similarly, the Chinese have proposed that all five nuclear-weapon states participate in "a convention on the prohibition of nuclear weapons"⁸ and the United States has recently reiterated its commitment to pursue nuclear disarmament.⁹

Most non-nuclear-weapon states parties to the NPT have recorded their disappointment at the lack of commitment to the Treaty obligation to discuss nuclear disarmament. For example, in a plenary statement to the Conference on Disarmament on 3 March 1995, Ambassador Hisami Kurokuchi of Japan called for further reductions from the US and Russia since "this will enable other nuclear-weapon states to move forward the process of nuclear disarmament and make yet another contribution to the establishment of a safer world". At the Third PrepCom in Geneva, the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) called for "the nuclear-weapon States [to] present, collectively or individually, their ideas regarding nuclear disarmament steps", and confirmed that "it would also be important that ... the

steps that China, France and the United Kingdom would be willing to take” were presented in light of further reductions by Russia and the US. 10 Similarly, Iran, a member of the NAM, has called for a “clear commitment for zero option by all nuclear weapon states. Whereas China and, to some extent, Russia have been forthcoming in this regard, the other three have yet to express themselves explicitly on this important issue. Such re-commitment needs to be coupled with a time-bound framework and a target date for nuclear disarmament”¹¹.

In a statement to the Fourth PrepCom Uganda argued that it “would be morally wrong to entrench discriminatory and selfish tendencies by conferring legitimacy to the indefinite possession of nuclear weapons by any party without commitments to ... a phased, and predictable and legally binding decision to eradicate such weapons”. In stark contrast to Mr Hurd’s belief that the goal of nuclear disarmament impedes stability, Uganda is “convinced that the continued possession of nuclear weapons by some countries without any conditions will remain a destabilizing factor”¹².

Ukraine also has stated that “We expect that the countries still possessing excessive nuclear arsenals will follow our example and will make on their part adequate effort in order to achieve the nuclear free world. In particular, we expect that ... the three other nuclear states will announce specific measures of substantial reduction of their nuclear arsenals and their means of their delivery”¹³.

Despite its Treaty obligations, invitations by both President Yeltsin and the UN Secretary General, Boutros Boutros-Ghali, and repeated calls for a framework for nuclear disarmament by non-nuclear-weapon states, the British Government gives no indication of being willing to enter British strategic nuclear forces into negotiations. On the contrary, the Government is in the process of replacing its existing Polaris submarines with a Trident fleet which may carry twice as many warheads and is capable of hitting many more targets over a far larger geographical area. Furthermore, Britain continues to contribute to the delay in concluding the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) - a treaty most non-nuclear-weapon states have insisted should be concluded rapidly as a measure of nuclear-weapon states commitment to their nuclear disarmament obligations. Mr Hurd indicated on 18 January that whilst Britain now supports a CTBT, it does so from a recognition of its anti-proliferation benefits, rather than as a route towards achieving nuclear disarmament. He also refused to give assurances that Britain would not revert to nuclear tests if it were given the opportunity to do so:

Mr Gapes (Labour MP): So can we have an assurance from you then that the Government is now not going to revert to its previous position?

Mr Hurd: No, I am simply saying that we have no current plans to test.

Mr Gapes: But you might in the future?

Mr Hurd: I am not going beyond that.

*Chairman: You will have to rest it there Mr Gapes.*¹⁴

Mr Hurd also repeated the Government’s insistence on maintaining a first-use option for Britain’s nuclear weapons because of “the uncertainties of the international arena”¹⁵ and, whilst stating that a common text for negative security assurances towards non-nuclear-weapon states by the five nuclear states would be desirable, he resisted proposals for making such assurances less ambiguous and less conditional than they stand at present because “we would have to provide against the possibility that a non-nuclear weapon state would get into bed with a nuclear state and threaten us”.¹⁶

Since most non-nuclear-weapon states regard the slow progress on nuclear disarmament measures and lack of commitment to negative security assurances as among the principal reasons for withholding their support from the indefinite extension of the NPT, the combination of complacency and over-cautiousness demonstrated in the British Government’s nuclear policy is ultimately self-defeating. As Mexico stated at the Fourth PrepCom, “the NPT’s extension would hardly be an issue if we already had

in place a CTBT, legally-binding negative security assurances to Non-Nuclear-Weapon States Parties to the NPT, an international convention banning any further production of fissile materials for weapons purposes and a specific post-START nuclear disarmament program. But none of this has happened and the only thing we hear are calls for an “indefinite and unconditional extension” of a Treaty which is far from perfect and is in need of a major overhaul”. 17

Endnotes

- 1 Prime Minister John Major on the occasion of Ukraine’s accession to the NPT, Budapest 5 December 1994.
- 2 Rt Hon Douglas Hurd CBE, MP, “Minutes of Evidence to the Foreign Affairs Committee on UK Policy on Weapons Proliferation and Control in the Post-Cold War Era, Wednesday 18 January 1995”, Published March 1995, London: HMSO, p 230.
- 3 Prime Minister John Major, op cit.
- 4 Rt Hon Douglas Hurd CBE, MP, op cit pp 234, 239.
- 5 ibid pp 229-231.
- 6 Statement by Ambassador Grigori Berdennikov, Permanent Representative for the Russian Federation, at the plenary meeting of the Conference on Disarmament, Geneva, 23 February 1995.
- 7 President Yeltsin’s address to the United Nations General Assembly, New York, 26 September 1994 in “Nuclear Proliferation News”, Volume 94, Issue No 12, 30 September 1994 pp 5-6 ISSN 1355-2295.
- 8 Statement by Ambassador Sha Zukang, Representative of China at the Fourth Non-Proliferation Treaty Preparatory Committee Meeting, 23 January 1995.
- 9 President Clinton reaffirmed his commitment the elimination of nuclear weapons in a joint communique with Indian Prime Minister Rao on 19 May 1994, as did Ambassador Stephen J Ledogar in a speech at the plenary session of the Conference on Disarmament on 23 March 1995.
- 10 Document submitted by Colombia, Egypt, Indonesia, Iran (Islamic Republic of), Mexico, Myanmar and Nigeria to the Third Meeting of the Preparatory Committee of the 1995 NPT Review and Extension Conference, Geneva 12-16 September 1994 (NPT/CONF.1995/PC.III/12 of 9 September 1994).
- 11 Statement by H.E. Dr. M. Javad Zarif, Deputy Foreign Minister and Head of the Delegation of the Islamic Republic of Iran at the Fourth PrepCom in New York 23-27 January 1995, 24 January 1995, p 2.
- 12 Statement by Mr Odyek Agona, Representative of Uganda, Fourth Meeting of the Preparatory Committee of the 1995 NPT Review and Extension Conference New York 23-27 January 1995, 24 January 1995, p 3.
- 13 Statement by Kostyantyn Hryshchenko, Head of the delegation of Ukraine at the Fourth PrepCom in New York 23-27 January 1995, 24 January 1995, p 2.
- 14 Rt Hon Douglas Hurd CBE, MP, op cit p 232. Britain had planned for three tests in Nevada between 1993 and 1996 but these were thwarted by President Clinton’s moratorium on nuclear testing.
- 15 ibid p 236.
- 16 ibid p 235.
- 17 Statement by Ambassador Miguel Marin-Bosch during the Exchange of Views at the Fourth Meeting of the Preparatory Committee of the 1995 NPT Review and Extension Conference New York 23-27 January 1995, 23 January 1995 p 1. Agreement for the negotiation of a mandate on a fissile materials cut-off convention was eventually agreed at the CD in Geneva on 23 March 1995.

