

New strategies for UK leadership on multilateral nuclear disarmament

Summary

MPs face a critical question on 18th July, closely related to the renewal of the UK's nuclear weapon system and its posture: **what can the UK do to promote multilateral nuclear disarmament?**

Britain's national security depends upon global stability, and in particular the nuclear nonproliferation and disarmament regime. Decisions on credible national defence capabilities need to be consistent with UK nuclear nonproliferation and multilateral disarmament objectives. As a P5 UN Security Council member and nuclear weapons state (NWS), the UK has a particular responsibility in facilitating talks (such as the 'P5 process') to build the foundations for multilateral negotiations. Whatever decision is taken on replacing the Vanguard submarines the government must set out its concrete plans for multilateral disarmament.

Pressure is building within the international community on the nuclear weapon states to take their disarmament responsibilities more seriously, and this pressure could result not only in a ban on nuclear weapons, but a draining away of support amongst non-nuclear weapon states for the essential NPT itself. To preserve its legitimacy as a responsible nuclear state and mitigate damage done by decisions to modernise its arsenal, the UK must step up with credible proposals.

UK Options

There remain options for UK posture and deployments that open greater flexibility on the nuclear ladder and that could demonstrate credible commitment to multilateral talks:

- adopt an explicit no first use posture (there are no credible scenarios for UK first use);
- consider a move to 'reduced readiness', and dropping the requirement for continuous patrolling in peacetime (see briefing 3);
- establish an official high level commission to develop offers the UK could make under certain circumstances in multilateral negotiations, and how these would affect national security; or
- reduce the ambiguities around use.

By refusing to declare the circumstances (the 'red line') for its use of nuclear weapons, a state can complicate the strategic planning of adversaries and gain a military advantage. But this ambiguity unavoidably heightens the insecurity for others and could lead to confusion or mistakes in crisis, and thus a failure of deterrence. A responsible nuclear armed state would have a tight declaratory policy - specifying the threats for which nuclear weapons might be appropriate and the circumstances of use, and issuing blanket guarantees to non-nuclear weapons states they would not be threatened with nuclear weapons.

UK international responsibility

International agreements on nuclear nonproliferation and disarmament form the basis of legitimacy for our actions to stop the spread of nuclear weapons or intervening abroad. If we neglect our obligations, other states will come to feel few constraints on their own actions.

Justifying our continued possession of nuclear weapons on the vague basis that we cannot predict the future is deeply irresponsible, and was condemned unanimously by the Trident Commission in 2014. Such an argument is applicable for all time and justifies proliferation by other states frustrated with the lack of disarmament process and already under strategic threat themselves.

P5 Process

The UK set up the annual dialogue between the five nuclear weapon states seven years ago. It has moved at a snail's pace. We must now challenge our partners to engage more ambitiously with the international disarmament agenda. The nuclear weapon states should discuss and agree:

- the responsibilities nuclear weapon possessors carry today;
- greater transparency in their nuclear doctrines;
- to engage non-nuclear weapon states in fora such as the UN Open Ended Working Group and the process focused on the humanitarian consequences of nuclear use;
- a common declaratory policy, such as a shared five-way no-first-use policy;
- to take nuclear weapons systems off high alert;
- to strengthen promises never to attack non-nuclear weapon states with nuclear weapons;
- to negotiate verifiable limits on modernisations programmes, destabilising technologies and other new multilateral disarmament agreements;
- to work with other nuclear states to reduce ambiguities around when nuclear weapons would be used, thereby helping all states simplify their strategic calculations; and
- to include all nuclear armed and capable states in broader negotiations.

The UK should commit to publishing an annual report on its own contributions to the 2010 NPT Review Conference Action Plan (that is still applicable), and on the progress internationally.

CTBT

The **Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT)** is an established step towards a world free of nuclear weapons, and is currently in a deadlock. The UK should seek to persuade the US to show leadership by ratifying the treaty, and invest itself heavily into working productively with the remaining small number of states that have either not signed or ratified. The UN Security Council should consider far clearer statements supporting the universal moratorium against nuclear testing, universal sanctions against all states that engage in testing, and stronger international action to bring the Treaty into force.

Develop the technology

The UK and Norway have led efforts to develop international methods to verify disarmament - this needs continued support and wider involvement. While the technology necessary to catch those that cheat in their future disarmament obligations could still be improved, the success of the Iran Deal last year demonstrates that states now believe that monitoring and verification technologies are sufficiently developed to form the basis of a major international disarmament treaty.

Multilateral disarmament today

The media portrays this is an argument of unilateralism versus multilateralism. Yet most concrete actions the UK has conducted so far has been unilateral, in response to assessments of the global and national security environment. Multilateral disarmament is stalled and needs big leadership and investment from states such as the UK. Actions to stem the deteriorating strategic situation and reduce nuclear dangers will need to be both unilateral and multilateral.

Attachments to Cold War rhetoric and postures are not limited to Russia. Equally, there have been constructive proposals that have emerged from all major states. If the UK continues to oppose emerging initiatives such as a process to negotiate a nuclear weapons ban treaty and yet seeks to retain its international legitimacy, it will need to make ambitious concrete proposals within the more traditional fora such as the P5 process, the NPT review process and the UN Conference on Disarmament.