

# **The United Kingdom and weapons of mass destruction**

Dan Plesch

Basic Papers – occasional papers on international security policy, 9  
February 2000



British American Security  
Information Council

**Government policy towards nuclear proliferation is vital to the nation's security.**

This assumption is based upon the idea that the more nations possess nuclear weapons, the more likely nuclear war becomes and that such a war would either directly or indirectly have disastrous results for the UK.

**Modern proliferation policy was created in the 1960s.** At its heart is the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). The Treaty resulted from an initiative of the United States. This initiative in turn arose from an internal review of US policy towards nuclear proliferation. The US at that time rejected the view that extensive proliferation was acceptable and also rejected the idea of creating a considerable number of client nuclear powers. The result has been a policy of "Do as we say, but not as we do." For the West, nuclear weapons are regarded as a source of instability when in the possession of other states, but a source of stability when in the possession of Western states and their allies.

The 1999 NATO Summit made clear that nuclear weapons were not merely for use in response to a nuclear attack on the Alliance. Its Strategic Concept stated: 'Nuclear weapons make a unique contribution in rendering the risks of aggression against the Alliance incalculable and unacceptable. Thus they remain essential to preserve peace. [...] They demonstrate that aggression of any kind is not a rational option.' It also called the Alliance's strategic nuclear forces 'the supreme guarantee of the security of the Allies' and noted that 'Nuclear forces based in Europe and committed to NATO provide an essential political and military link between the European and North Atlantic members of the Alliance.' In the UK it is often asserted that without nuclear weapons the UK would no longer be able to claim any special reason for holding onto its permanent seat on the UN Security Council.

Almost every nation has now acceded to the NPT. Its value to non-nuclear states was recently described by John Holum (US Under-Secretary of State for Arms Control and International Security) as being the prevention of regional nuclear arms races (in a 13th January 2000 USIA Worldnet interview). The vast majority of the world's nations, as represented by the Non-Aligned Movement and the New Agenda Coalition, take the view that the NPT is a very different sort of bargain. In their opinion they have agreed never to obtain nuclear arms providing that the states with nuclear weapons agree to carry out nuclear disarmament (see Article VI of the NPT and the Principles and Objectives of the 1995 Review Conference). The question of linkage of non-proliferation with disarmament is one on which the Government should take a view. Is the 'Do as we say, not as we do' strategy sustainable?

Over several decades the application of political power has helped sustain the Western policy of denying access to nuclear weapons to new states. There have been failures - France, China, India, and, Pakistan were all pressured by the US not to go nuclear. A series of arrangements designed to control exports of dual use nuclear and chemical items has been created. For example, they prohibit missile transfers to specified states whilst permitting them between Western allies. These kinds of discriminatory arrangements are deeply resented by non-Western states, and this resentment contributes to demands for the nuclear-weapon states to fulfill their NPT Article VI obligations. A key element in US policy has also been to offer the threat of using its nuclear weapons on behalf of its Allies as a way of persuading them that they need not develop their own weapons. In the cases of Belgium, Germany, Greece, Italy, the Netherlands and Turkey this has been extended to arranging for them to use US nuclear weapons in wartime. This is an arrangement to which South Africa and many other states have taken exception. Russia and China, the other acknowledged nuclear powers, have, to varying degrees, participated in a process of denying others access to nuclear weapons.

**The structure of global non-proliferation and arms control is impressive.**The UK has helped create a framework of treaties, agreements and regimes. The NPT is

supported by the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) and the existence of Nuclear Weapons Free Zones (NWFZ)). Each of the NWFZ is further strengthened by its own treaty and set of protocols tying it into the broader non-proliferation regime. Bilateral reductions of the Russian and US arsenals have been brought about under the aegis of the SALT and START talks and this process is projected to continue for years. Many nuclear weapons states also participate in data-exchange and information-sharing arrangements. Four groups have been set up in order to regulate the transfer of sensitive technologies: the Zangger Committee, the Nuclear Suppliers Group, the Australia Group and the Missile Technology Control Regime. There are treaties denuclearising the seabed and outer space. There exists also a burgeoning list of regional and technical security regimes and secretariats, many of which contribute to the maintenance of strategic stability. The UK has played a constructive role in many of these processes and arrangements.

**The political foundations that underpin the structures of non-proliferation and disarmament are being destroyed. The adoption by the US, the UK and other states of the principle of military involvement in other states' internal affairs on the basis of evolving international humanitarian principles has removed the 'Westphalian principle' that has been the basis of inter-state relations for 350 years.** As the Prime Minister noted in a speech to the Economic Club of Chicago last year: 'The most pressing foreign policy problem we face is to identify the circumstances in which we should get actively involved in other people's conflicts.' A specific UN mandate for action is regarded as desirable but not essential. The application of the criteria for intervention is not consistent. It is argued that because we cannot prevent all evil we should still do what we can. Many powers regard this as a return to nineteenth century policy, where the moral authority of the 'White Man's Burden' legitimated military actions.

Whatever the benefits of this change in grand strategy; after Kosovo, states may now plan to resist attack by Western powers. Western conventional and nuclear supremacy may lead to a demand for new means of inducing fear into the minds of Western strategists and chemical and biological weapons are often referred to as having that effect.

The abandonment of the principal of state sovereignty by the UK is an attempt to move international politics to a higher moral level while its attempt to introduce 'an ethical dimension' in its own foreign policy appears weak. Abandoning the principle of non-intervention risks a return to anarchy in international relations. It is the military equivalent of abandoning fixed exchange rates for currencies in the 1970s.

The Government should consider whether the UK should also reassess its policy on military intervention in sovereign states and whether such action can only take place with the explicit authority of a UN mandate or not at all.

**US and allied policy no longer regards nuclear weapons as a singular phenomenon but now sees them as falling within a broader category of Weapons of Mass Destruction along with chemical and biological weapons.** Many other nations retain the traditional view that nuclear weapons are in a class of their own because their destructive capacity cannot be prevented by a vaccine; is uniquely reliable in its mass effects; and uniquely destroys inorganic material as well as organic life. A biological weapon may, in the right weather conditions, kill hundreds of thousands of people in a city; a shift in temperature or wind can nullify the intended effects. An attack on Washington DC is often given as an example of BW effects, although that city has notoriously unpredictable weather. Nuclear weapons work and destroy both people and property.

Many more states have biological and chemical capability than have nuclear weapons. **This greater number of 'WMD' capable states can lead to the view that we already live in a proliferated world and that non-proliferation can be discarded as a failed strategy.** The Government should consider whether the term 'Weapons of Mass

Destruction' is useful in shaping policy, and on whether it is correct to assume that we already live in an irrevocably proliferated world.

**Nuclear proliferation has accelerated since the end of the Cold War. During the 1970s and 1980s there was little change in the number of states having or thought to have nuclear weapons.** In the last decade two non-NPT states have become nuclear powers, India and Pakistan. The Indian position has been that its nuclear status has come after prolonged and failed attempts to engage the Nuclear Weapon States in nuclear disarmament talks. Western policy makers dismiss this, and often state that Western nuclear policy does not encourage proliferators. The similarity of Indian and Pakistani nuclear doctrines to NATO policy provides additional contrary evidence. Little action has been taken by the West or the broader international community to change these states policies. This fits the long-term pattern of US-led policy, opposing proliferation until it happens and then reaching an accommodation with the proliferator after the fact. Indian and Pakistani actions have neither resulted in new disarmament initiatives that would include them nor in significant penalties being imposed against them.

These two states adopted a nuclear status after the NPT was made permanent in 1995, India regarding this as an agreement in which the Nuclear Weapons States had permanent status. Their decision also came after the CTBT imposed upon them the responsibility of having to sign the Treaty for it to enter into force resulting in extra pressure on its political process. A treaty which they regard it as discriminatory as the existing Nuclear-Weapon States are pursuing new methods, simulation, above ground non-explosive tests, laser fusion etc. to continue the development of new weapons. These methods are not available to India and Pakistan. Israel is the other nuclear power outside the NPT. No attempt has been made to bring Israel into international regimes.

Two NPT members, Iraq and North Korea, have made partially successful attempts to become nuclear powers. The NPT has played an important role in providing the basis for constraining them. The experience with Iraq has strengthened the view of some that NBC proliferation cannot be controlled, and that there is no international will to do so. The early spectacular successes of UNSCOM (UN Special Commission) were based upon an unprecedented consensus in international affairs at the end of the Cold War. The early UNSCOM experience remains an example of the tangible security benefits that result from a political investment in achieving international consensus.

**The United States is no longer a reliable leader in the area of international legal controls on nuclear and other armaments.** The rejection of the CTBT by the US Senate and the wider desire to withdraw from the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty are not aberrations in US politics. Neither the US President nor his Secretaries of State and Defense exerted themselves to get the CTBT ratified. The political leaders who supported the Treaty in Congress and the Administration while its was being negotiated are no longer in office.

The Clinton Administration has shown little interest in strategic arms control with Russia. Whereas President Bush had concluded the START II Treaty before START I had been ratified, the present Administration and Congress have been content to wait on the lengthy ratification processes before moving to START III. This Administration did not continue the process of reciprocal unilateral actions pioneered by President Bush. It can only be hoped that this is changing. There is some political momentum behind the idea of mutual 'de-alerting' of strategic forces.

The growing rejection of arms control prevented US adherence to the anti-personnel landmines treaty and the International Criminal Court, created damaging amendments to the ratification of the Chemical Weapons Convention, and is currently leading the US to reject an effective verification protocol to the Biological Weapons Convention. The rejection of arms control is matched with a refusal to submit to international law, most notably the rejection of the International Criminal Court because it would have jurisdiction

over the actions of US soldiers abroad.

The 'anti-arms control view' in the US assumes that Russia has violated the Biological Weapons Convention and the START Treaty, that Iraq and North Korea have shown the uselessness of non-proliferation regimes and that controls only places limits on us. There is some truth in these views. However, arms control does not have to be perfect to be useful. Military force is a limited policy tool but these limitations do not result in abandoning military force altogether.

**There is a steadily strengthening view in the US against relying on mutual nuclear deterrence in national strategy.** The idea that Americans must not be threatened with any kind of missile has led the Administration to consider deployment of an National Missile Defence (NMD) system within five years and many within the Republican Party to reject the ABM Treaty out of hand. It is important to note that the rejection of mutual deterrence does not indicate any desire by US policy makers to attack any other state, merely that the US should not be inhibited in politico-military action that it may wish to take.

It should also be noted that there is considerable evidence that 'rogue' missile threats have been grossly exaggerated. The Government may wish to examine the nature of these threats and consider whether exaggerating threats only serves to strengthen the hand of potential adversaries.

The rationale for missile defences against 'Rogue States' rejects the idea that they should be permitted to threaten the US. The acceptance of such threats was the basis of the deterrence idea of 'Mutual Assured Destruction.' US policy makers reject the idea of being deterred by 'lesser' states such as Iraq or Libya. It is also thought that where an opponent is deemed irrational, a deterrence which relies on rationality and insight into one's opponent's mind-set is not a reliable tool. Some, such as General George Lee Butler (Commander-in-Chief, US Strategic Command 1992-1994) believe that deterrence was always a false basis for policy throughout the Cold War and was 'a conversation we had with ourselves'. The word 'deterrence' became an unassailable brand name that could sanctify any policy.

Less clearly stated by US policy makers is the rejection of mutual deterrence with respect to Russia and China. The combination of ready nuclear missiles and missile defences provides a counter-force or first strike capability. Limited missile defences have in this case only to manage a few forces which may survive after they have been attacked with precision conventional weapons and nuclear weapons. Today, land-based mobile missiles alone constitute a Russian assured 'second-strike' deterrent, under START II they will be confined to single warheads.

The US position in the present START III and ABM discussions with Russia provides a useful insight. The US will not, so far, go below a floor of 2,000-2,500 ready long-range warheads although Russia prefers a level of 1,500 or even less. Thus the US is prepared to see Russia retain twice as many warheads as it wishes to. One reason is that the US has little confidence that Russia will be able to field such a force. The other is that the US Single Integrated Operational Plan requires some 2,000 warheads to target Russian nuclear forces and national capabilities. China has a force of around a score of long-range missiles and is only very slowly increasing them. Against China, US missiles and defences offer an even more powerful combination. There have been some reports that nuclear weapons are also needed to target 'rogue states', however, even if there were any credible targets, the numbers involved are tiny.

Policy discussion about the value of nuclear weapons in mutual deterrence or counter-force rarely examines how they might be used. The failure to think through nuclear targeting may result in the UK basing its policy on an instrument which is in the end unusable. US Generals Butler, Horner, and Powell, who were responsible for nuclear planning in the Gulf War, all found no way they could be used effectively, and yet the

Gulf War is routinely cited by those who had no such responsibility as being the type of occasion when nuclear weapons are useful.

It may be argued that missile defences will not work, will create an arms race and are too expensive. These arguments are less and less influential in Washington. It can also be argued that eliminating the threat through arms control and disarmament is a far better option than last-ditch defence or relying on an unusable weapon. On one critical point disarmament advocates and missile defence advocates agree. Mutual Assured Destruction is not a rational policy. Ronald Reagan compared it to Russian roulette.

Key questions the Government should consider are whether it supports the UK's involvement in measures that would change or scrap the ABM Treaty including the use of UK facilities, and how the end of the Treaty would effect affect UK policy. The Government may also wish to reassess the value of the idea of mutual deterrence.

**What course of action is the UK likely to take?** The United Kingdom remains committed to the traditional arms control and non-proliferation agenda. The Prime Minister invested his personal reputation in the attempt to persuade the US Senate to ratify the CTBT. The multiple assaults on the foundations of traditional policy described above may be familiar to officials but they are regarded as adaptations of an existing pattern of controls rather than as indicators of fundamental change. As a US ally the UK is generally comfortable with America's global military supremacy. The lack of resolution of the UK's European allies over Iraq supports the assumption that in serious military situations the US is indispensable.

**Rebuilding the foundations of non-proliferation and disarmament policy. A business as usual approach to non-proliferation policy has been ineffective, and unchanged policy is unlikely to be any more effective.** Further nuclear proliferation in Asia and the increasing deployment of missile defences are the likely next phases of a familiar action-reaction cycle. The military axiom that defensive capabilities always develop more slowly than offensive ones will only fuel this new arms race. The relatively small number of states who have ratified the robust new safeguards protocols is another indicator of the need for policy renewal.

The disarmament approach may not be the only solution but it is clearly the Cinderella of international policy at the present time. If disarmament policies are thought to have any significant chance of improving national and international security, they need immediate and strong reinforcement. The UK should press for NATO to formally adopt this position. Such action will constrain UK action to prevent mass killings in other states but it is necessary to assure states that they will not be attacked arbitrarily.

UK non-proliferation and disarmament policy is being represented in a number of international negotiations. The Committee may wish to consider what policies the UK should be pursuing in these fora, and may wish to consider whether the options outlined below would enhance national and international security. In this context the Committee may wish to take account of possible adverse reactions from our Allies who may oppose new disarmament and non-proliferation initiatives.

The UK should reassess its own nuclear doctrine and state that British Nuclear Weapons will only be used if the UK is attacked with nuclear weapons. It may be that the United States regards support for its existing policies on this matter as necessary if it is to continue to provide essential parts of the UK's nuclear programme. The US is understood to have told some European Allies that it might withdraw its nuclear weapons from Europe if they voted for the new nuclear disarmament agenda at the UN last year.

The UK has under the previous government carried out a series of unilateral reductions in UK nuclear forces. These helped the arms control process at the end of the Cold War and helped ensure a permanent NPT. They should be continued by ceasing to keep Trident on patrol and by removing warheads from the submarines.

The world's foremost disarmament negotiating body is the **Conference on**

**Disarmament at Geneva.** The vast majority of nations support opening multilateral talks aimed at agreeing a Convention effectively banning nuclear weapons worldwide. The present position of the Government is that the UK will only enter into talks when US and Russian forces are reduced to the British level. UK support for such talks now would not require any action by the UK affecting British forces. A Nuclear Disarmament Convention will take many years to negotiate. A final agreement may involve a succession of stages. The verification regime and the need for military action against states breaking out of the Treaty are but two of the issues which need to be explored.

Many states have argued that the lack of progress in disarmament incites proliferation and reduces international political will to act against proliferation. The opening of nuclear disarmament talks would provide a useful test of this proposition. There is nothing to lose and much to gain from starting the process.

The Conference on Disarmament is attempting to begin talks on a Fissile Material Cut-off Treaty. The Treaty under consideration at present is far too limited in scope either to be effective or to receive sufficient political support. It must include all types of fissile material in all states. If the present logjam continues it should not be permitted to delay progress in other areas.

The process would be helped if the UK agreed to allow its existing stocks to be included in the regime. I think this is a misreading of the situation now. It is much worse than even a year ago. Practically the only thing that would help is for the P5 to move to sign a treaty amongst themselves on the lines they already agree on and then invite others to join, then in a second phase move to a treaty controlling stocks, tritium production and the other problems. Even this is no guarantee that anything would actually happen. The problem now is that the P5 are not prepared to move without India and Pakistan, and those to quite rightly believe that the P5 are trying to make it impossible for them to produce nuclear weapons. That's before we even get to Israel and the fact the US will block any pressure on them. The FMCT is a fantasy idea going absolutely nowhere fast. They need to walk away from it and find something else to do first, or prove they are willing to be constrained themselves before anyone else will join in - else it is just another piece of nuclear apartheid. **The NPT conference will discuss a new five year agenda of benchmarks and Objectives** for non-proliferation and disarmament. The Government may wish to examine the commitments made by the UK in 1995 to the Enhanced Review Process, the Principles and Objectives and the statement on the Middle East. The UK should, where possible in concert with its European partners, propose a number of new benchmarks and Objectives for implementing the Treaty which are already favoured by many states.

New benchmarks and Objectives might include:

1. Accepting as authoritative the Advisory Opinion of the International Court of Justice concerning Article VI, adopted unanimously, which states that: 'There exists an obligation to pursue in good faith and bring to a conclusion negotiations leading to nuclear disarmament in all its aspects under strict and effective international control;
2. Urging that the Russian Federation and the United States of America bring the Treaty on Further Reduction and Limitation of Strategic Offensive Arms (START II) into force without delay and to commence negotiations on START III with a view to its entry into force by 2005, further working with the P5 towards a statement at the Review Conference that these negotiations are an important step on the road to implementation of Article VI obligations;
3. Seeking a UN Security Council discussion of the nuclear weapons doctrine of its permanent members;
4. Reaffirming the central role of the CTBT as a disarmament treaty by stating that research and development on qualitative nuclear warhead improvements will not be undertaken, either alone or in partnership with other nuclear weapon states;
5. Affirming that NATO will never be the first to use a nuclear weapon in any

circumstances, that the Alliance will cease to prepare the wartime transfer of nuclear weapons to its non-nuclear members and nuclear weapons are no longer needed to link Europe and North America since this link is based upon shared values.

**NATO has begun a comprehensive policy review of confidence and security building measures, verification, arms control and disarmament.** The UK should consider proposing a range of measures, additional to those already mentioned, including:

1. Facilitating NATO-Russia negotiations on eliminating remaining tactical nuclear weapons since these weapons are a source of considerable concern to both parties.
2. Discussing measures to fully implement the NPT as described above. The Alliance successfully led the way in 1993 in calling for the NPT to be made permanent in 1995. It has a collective responsibility to implement the agreements that made the 1995 decision possible. A common Alliance position on implementing the NPT is needed.
3. Preventing the Alliance from being split by the United States over the issue of missile defences. The Alliance should not endorse changes to the ABM Treaty or become engaged in the use of facilities in NATO Europe for missile defence.

Little is currently taking place in this NATO internal discussion. The Government may wish to take a view on why the Alliance is less engaged in arms control of all kinds than during the Cold War. It may also wish to consider why there is so much more momentum in to the military aspects of countering proliferation.