

British nuclear policy and the NPT: Room for improvement

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Since the NPT's entry into force in 1970, the United Kingdom has been one of the most active supporters of the treaty. In July 2000 the UN under-secretary general for disarmament affairs, Jayantha Dhanapala, praised Britain's "leadership, and its determination to ensure that the noble words of the NPT and the Final Document of its last Review Conference are translated into concrete deeds." [i] In February, Foreign Secretary Jack Straw reaffirmed the government's commitment to the NPT and cited arms control as one of the "outstanding successes of international policy for over 50 years". [ii]

The United Kingdom values the NPT and is committed to the treaty's long-term health, but the government is also intent on retaining its nuclear capability for the indefinite future, and will strongly resist any further reductions to its "minimum possible" nuclear arsenal. Britain's progressive stance masks this essential contradiction at the heart of UK policy, one that was made clear in the immediate aftermath of the 2000 NPT review conference. While Peter Hain, minister of state at the Foreign Office, proclaimed that the 2000 NPT final document contained the "most explicit pledge ever made by the Nuclear Weapons States to work for complete global nuclear disarmament," [iii] Defense Secretary Geoff Hoon caustically noted, "I think realistically it is unlikely to lead to action tomorrow, next week or next month". [iv]

The UK government's position offers the potential for both conflict and progress. This can best be seen when evaluating Britain's progress on parts of the 13-step programme of action to advance nuclear arms control and disarmament that was agreed at the 2000 NPT review conference.

Increased transparency by the nuclear weapon states...

Britain is considerably more open with details of its nuclear arsenal than the other nuclear powers; for example, it published details of its nuclear arsenal and fissile material holdings in 1998. However, government efforts to restrict parliamentary scrutiny of its nuclear policy have increased in recent years. Following the 1997 elections, the UK government abandoned the system of annual inquiries on 'Progress of the Trident Programme' and the annual Statements on the Defence Estimates in favour of a range of documents that collectively contain less information on nuclear policy than the previous statements.

In addition, the fact that Britain is not party to any arms reduction treaties means that all cuts to its nuclear arsenal have been unilateral, unverified and potentially reversible. While the government has been open about the general size of its nuclear arsenal, it remains wary of stating exact force levels. The British nuclear arsenal is based on a stockpile of "less than 200 operationally available warheads," [v] but these figures are not open to independent assessment.

While Britain has led the way in many areas of transparency, there is still more that the government could do. With major changes now taking place in US nuclear policy, and deliberation at Aldermaston about the future of the British nuclear force, regular and detailed government reporting to Parliament, together with effective parliamentary scrutiny, should be restored.

Engagement... of all the nuclear-weapon states in the process leading to the total elimination of their nuclear weapons.

The UK Government strongly resists any further reductions to its existing nuclear arsenal. The UK Trident system represents "the minimum necessary to provide for our security for the foreseeable future and very much smaller than those of the major nuclear powers. Considerable further reductions in the latter would be needed before further British reductions could become feasible". [vi]

Both Russia and the United States have committed to nuclear arsenal reductions over the next ten years. At present the two countries are engaged in detailed negotiations

regarding how to verify and implement these reductions. As possibly the most progressive of the five nuclear powers in the field of arms control, the UK government is uniquely placed to take a decisive role in widening and institutionalising this process. One way to further this process would be for Britain to support President Putin's proposal for talks among the five nuclear weapon states on nuclear disarmament. This offer was made most recently in July 2001, but so far the only nuclear power to express any interest has been France.

An unequivocal undertaking by the nuclear-weapon states to accomplish the total elimination of their nuclear arsenals leading to nuclear disarmament to which all States Parties are committed under Article VI.

Britain's commitment to retaining the Trident system will inevitably clash with its commitment to accomplish the total elimination of its nuclear arsenal. This was demonstrated most recently by Britain's decision in February to participate in Washington's sub-critical nuclear testing programme. The test did not violate the CTBT, but experts note that the data gathered could be used not only to ensure the safety and reliability of the existing nuclear stockpile, but also to develop new warhead designs.[vii]

The British government has acknowledged that it has received briefings on the scope and outcome of US sub-critical experiments since 1995; however, February's test marked the first time that UK personnel participated in a test. The increased level of UK involvement in the US testing programme is also reflected by the number of British personnel visiting the Nevada Test Site, which has risen from nine people in 1999, to 40 in 2001.[viii]

Britain's increased involvement in the US sub-critical testing programme raises questions about its support for the most central of the 13 steps. One way to allay these fears would be for the prime minister to reaffirm Britain's commitment to the goal of eliminating nuclear weapons. A statement from Tony Blair regarding Britain's continued commitment to nuclear disarmament would go a long way to allaying the fears of non-nuclear weapon states and greatly strengthen the NPT.

Regular reports... by all States parties on the implementation of Article VI and paragraph 4 (c) of the 1995 Decision on 'Principles and Objectives for Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament'...

While the Programme of Action provides nuclear weapons states with a set of goals, its major failing is the lack of a concrete timetable against which to measure the progress of individual states. Britain has played an important role in the nuclear non-proliferation regime since the treaty's inception and negotiation in the 1960s. Since 1997, the UK has used NPT PrepComs as an opportunity to report on its progress in the field of nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament.

Terrorist threats, alleged stolen nuclear material, and a more belligerent US nuclear policy all cast an atmosphere of tension and uncertainty as the 2002 NPT PrepCom approaches. With the treaty under threat from these global security issues, the UK government should take the initiative to strengthen the agreement by outlining its own programme of action to implement the 2000 NPT nuclear disarmament plan. Such a programme of action would be a timely response to increased public awareness of the risks posed by proliferation, and would provide a valuable example to other NPT States Parties about the importance of addressing security and disarmament challenges.

Conclusion

As the 2005 NPT review conference approaches there is a danger that contradictions at the heart of UK government policy may weaken its commitment towards the NPT. The twin pressures of an increasingly unilateralist US arms control agenda and the need to

begin considering a replacement for Trident will make it harder for Britain to mask this difference and continue to exert a positive influence on arms control efforts.

In order to avert this possibility and allay these fears, the government must take strong action to reaffirm its commitment to the NPT, thus paving the way for progress over the next four years to implement the treaty's commitments on moving towards disarmament.

Endnotes

[i] 'Eliminating Nuclear Arsenals: The NPT Pledge And What It Means (Text of a speech, reproduced with kind permission of Under-Secretary-General Dhanapala, delivered to the UK All-Party Group on Global Security and Non-Proliferation, house of Commons, London, July 3, 2000)', Jayantha Dhanapala, Disarmament Diplomacy, June 2000.

[ii] Speech given by the foreign secretary, Jack Straw, at King's College, London, 6 February 2002 <http://www.fco.gov.uk/news/speechtext.asp?5869>

[iii] Official Report, 8 June 2000, col. 306w.

[iv] "Nuclear pledge 'only first step'", BBC News Online, 21 May, 2000 http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/english/uk/newsid_757000/757845.stm

[v] Strategic Defence Review, The Stationery Office, Cm 3999, July 1998, para 64.

[vi] "Ambitions for Britain - The Labour Party Election Manifesto 2001"

[vii] "Does the U.S. Science-Based Stockpile Stewardship Program Pose a Proliferation Threat?", Natural Resources Defense Council, 1998 <http://www.nrdc.org/nuclear/athreat.asp>

[viii] "Britain to Participate in US Nuclear Test", BASIC Press Release, 14 February 2002