

Evidence to the Trident Commission

Summary

The UK should keep in mind its commitments under the Non-proliferation Treaty. On the one hand it wants to retain nuclear weapons: on the other hand it wants to strengthen the prohibition on others acquiring them. In the past this contradiction was partly offset by our long held belief that the world would be better off free of nuclear weapons, and our commitment to disarm as soon as this could be internationally agreed. That commitment seems to have weakened over the years, along with our belief in the rule of law, and judging by the Trident debate so far, we now seem to have concluded that nuclear weapons are here to stay; that they provide security in a dangerous world; and that they are essential to maintaining our power and influence. If this is now our attitude, we can scarcely be surprised if others reach the same conclusion. It is time for a rethink.

Detail

The UK acquired nuclear weapons in historical circumstances that no longer exist. In justifying the renewal of Trident in today's changed world, the UK should take care that its policies and pronouncements do not conflict with its obligations under the Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT), and it should avoid any action that might undermine the treaty or contribute to proliferation.

The central dilemma is that the UK wishes to retain nuclear weapons while maintaining a treaty that provides that others should not acquire them. The treaty is the essential underpinning of the IAEA's efforts to police the non-proliferation regime. Without it we could face a nuclear free-for-all.

The NPT enshrines a bargain that allowed the original 5 nuclear weapon states to keep their weapons as long as they agreed to negotiate in good faith on disarmament. The interpretation of the relevant article (Article 6) has always been contentious, but the UK has in the past been the most forward of the 5 in committing to multilateral disarmament as soon as the time is ripe. Recently, however, the weakening of the UK's commitment to the rule of law and the subsequent decision to renew Trident have both cast doubt on the credibility of past promises.

Therefore, in the interests of strengthening the international consensus against nuclear proliferation the UK should re-emphasise its commitment to multilateral nuclear disarmament and should take practical steps to show that it means what it says.

Article 6 does not mean that the UK should disarm unilaterally. It does mean that the UK should try hard to bring the other nuclear weapon states to the negotiating table. It should also seek ways to include those who are outside the treaty. Of course our powers to influence others are limited, but we have to try. Fortunately the present US administration appears to be pointing in the same direction. It would be ironic indeed if the UK should become reluctant to disarm just as the US appears to embrace the idea.

Whether and in what circumstances the UK should reduce or give up its nuclear weapons should be a matter for negotiations, and these may be some way off, but there are things the UK could do now that would be beneficial in their own right and that might encourage negotiations to start. It could announce the conditions under which Trident renewal might be indefinitely postponed. It could try to build understanding with other states of how the salience of nuclear weapons in the international

security balance could be further de-emphasised without weakening international security. It could continue its efforts to stop covert nuclear proliferation under cover of the NPT.

The UK should reconsider its position relating to a treaty banning the production of fissile material for weapons – a so-called cut-off treaty. These negotiations have been stalled for many years because of a disagreement about whether they should include existing stocks of fissile material. The UK has been reluctant to move on this point and could perhaps consider adjusting its position. It could also respond to the point sometimes made by other nuclear weapons states that nuclear disarmament could only be envisaged as part of general and complete disarmament. This could be addressed by considering nuclear security issues in the round, along with other weapons systems capable of causing mass destruction, including conventional weapons. There could be a case for revisiting the military uses of outer space. Progress could no doubt be enhanced by parallel work on reducing the tensions that fuel nuclear threats at a regional level.

The UK should not base Trident renewal on the argument that nuclear weapons are essential insurance in a dangerous world. This may play well in domestic politics, but it is likely to be misunderstood in those countries that live in the same dangerous world but have nevertheless chosen not to acquire or retain nuclear weapons, and especially by the large sub-group of those countries that does not benefit from another state's nuclear umbrella. It is likely to be all too well understood in those countries that have covert or avowed nuclear weapons programmes in contravention of the NPT or outside it, and those in other countries who have similar ambitions. They can hide behind the UK's policies.

The UK should also avoid any suggestion that nuclear weapons are here to stay. It is certainly the case that they cannot be dis-invented, but this does not mean that they will always have to be deployed. Many countries are latent nuclear weapon states, because they have mastered the fuel cycle and so can enrich uranium and separate plutonium, yet they choose not to take the final step towards a weapons capability. Rather they choose to implement IAEA safeguards to reassure their neighbours and the wider international community of their good intentions. The UK should reward and reinforce this virtuous behaviour by working to emulate it as soon as we safely can. Claiming that we are exceptional weakens the international consensus against nuclear weapons.

The UK should not argue that international status or membership of the UN Security Council depend on keeping nuclear weapons. If we believe this, we are condemning ourselves to live in a world that equates international influence with deployed weaponry; and we shall be encouraging others to follow our example. If the UK still wants to be an international leader, it should resume the position of leadership it once held in arms control and disarmament.

David Broucher

Former UK Ambassador and Head of the UK NPT Delegation

The author is expressing his personal opinion.