

PAIS Nuclear Weapons Working Group

The Future of Nuclear Weapons: Between Disarmament and Proliferation

A conference report by Roberta Mulas, Nikita Shah and Tim Street

On 11th June, Warwick University's Politics and International Studies department (PAIS) hosted a meeting in collaboration with BASIC entitled '[The Future of Nuclear Weapons: Between Disarmament and Proliferation](#)'. The event consisted of two roundtable discussions, the first concerning the future of Trident and British nuclear weapons policy and the second investigating prospects for non-proliferation and disarmament in the Middle East.

Summary

All nine nuclear possessor states are investing heavily in modernising their nuclear arsenals and continue to highly value their nuclear weapons. At a time of austerity for many Western nations, it should therefore not surprise us that discussion of nuclear weapons policy arouses strong views. [British public opinion](#) shows a significant opposition to the need for billions to be spent on replacing Trident. For those who support maintaining Trident, particularly those occupying positions of power, the idea of doing away with it strikes a blow at their self-identity and conception of what it means to be British. In the face of an unpredictable future, Trident's supporters argue that it provides security and certainty. Yet nuclear weapons are not the currency of international status and power they once were and many other states have devalued them. Britain is in a good position to consider alternative security policies that don't rely on Trident and advance efforts for a nuclear weapons free world, relying on alternative means to be an influential force on the world stage.

The establishment of a Weapons of Mass Destruction Free Zone (WMDFZ) in the Middle East would give a substantial boost to the prospects of lifting the nuclear shadow globally. Yet talks remain at an impasse with key participants—including Israel, Iran and Egypt—yet to begin substantive discussions. Israel cites a need for security guarantees before it joins negotiations. Egypt, along with the Arab League, point to Israel's nuclear arsenal as a serious threat to regional security. Yet, if the three co-sponsors of the proposed conference on a WMDFZ – Russia, the UK and US – were to expend political capital on the venture, treating all sides fairly and in accordance with their international treaty obligations, a breakthrough could still be possible.

Trident and UK Nuclear Policy

Dr Nick Ritchie, Lecturer in International Security at York University, began this session by placing the UK government's current plans to go ahead with a like-for-like replacement of Trident in the context of the global nuclear weapons system, which is both dynamic and loaded with risk. This

system could, according to Ritchie, evolve in three possible ways. Firstly, a 'high salience but well managed nuclear world of 15-20 or more nuclear armed states' could emerge, whereby deterrence exerts a stabilising effect on nuclear powers and indefinitely contains nuclear conflict. Secondly, we could see an 'unstable high salience nuclear world' whereby nuclear armed states are thrown into conflict by the impact of resource competition, growing socio-economic inequality and climate change, leading to nuclear war in regional conflicts. Alternatively, the progressive delegitimisation of nuclear weapons and legal prohibition of use, resulting in a ban on possession through a Nuclear Weapons Convention - supported by strong verification measures - could lead to a world free of nuclear weapons. Ritchie proposed that the UK must act in ways that help realise the third scenario, by further reducing the salience of nuclear weapons (for example through ending 24/7 patrols of submarines armed with nuclear weapons, known as continuous-at-sea-deterrence 'CASD') so that the nation continues on its 'glide path' towards living without nuclear weapons.

Paul Ingram, Executive Director of BASIC, argued that, beyond nuclear weapon state's rhetorical commitment to their disarmament obligations, each of them is investing heavily in the modernisation of their arsenals. While the prospect for global nuclear disarmament therefore appears poor, a decision by the UK to reduce its dependence upon or relinquish its nuclear weapons entirely could have a positive impact on international non-proliferation diplomacy. The UK's possession of nuclear weapons undermines the nation's status amongst many non-nuclear weapon states. Steps by the UK to devalue nuclear weapons as a currency of power and prestige, building on the moves that have already been taken, could help shift perceptions globally. Domestically, while none of the three main political parties yet support scrapping nuclear weapons, the case for like-for-like replacement of Trident submarines is weakened by its high cost and the lack of public enthusiasm for nuclear weapons. This is particularly true in Scotland where Trident has, for independence campaigners, become a symbol of London's deafness to Scottish concerns. BASIC's Trident Commission report, due to for publication in the second half of 2013, will include an outline of possible ways the UK can contribute to creating the conditions for a nuclear weapons free world and consider what the transition to non-nuclear weapon state status would practically entail.

Tim Street, PAIS PhD student and BASIC researcher, began by outlining the disarmament obligations the UK and other nuclear weapon states have under the nuclear non-proliferation treaty (NPT). According to civil society observers, progress on these obligations has been disappointing and inadequate so that the nuclear powers 'appear determined to retain their nuclear arsenals indefinitely'. The UK must therefore carefully consider how it can act in good faith to live up to its NPT obligations and build trust amongst the international community that it will do so. In order to move further down the nuclear ladder towards zero the UK should adopt a policy of No First Use, so that Trident is unambiguously only for use in deterring a nuclear attack by another state. The UK should also consider examples of how other states have exercised nuclear restraint or transitioned to non-nuclear weapon state status. This is important, as the UK will have to undertake far-reaching legal, political and technical measures in order to convince the international community it is no longer a nuclear weapon state either in fact or identity. This may seem like a tall order, but the UK already has a long history of using economic, cultural, diplomatic and other non-military tools to exert its influence globally, significant experience in conventional and WMD disarmament and supports building a global coalition to achieve a world free of nuclear weapons.

Middle East Nuclear Non-proliferation and Disarmament

Mark Fitzpatrick, Director of the Non-Proliferation and Disarmament Programme at the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), began this session by challenging Kenneth Waltz's idea that more states possessing nuclear weapons might benefit regional and global security and that Iran should thus get the bomb. Proliferation of nuclear weapons in the Middle East would have knock on effects, he asserted, so that Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Egypt may reassess their strategic nuclear choices. The possibility of mistakes, miscalculation and mis-signalling associated with nuclear weapon systems - which brought the world to the brink of catastrophe during the Cold War - is another reason to worry about nuclear weapons proliferation.

Ideally, zero nuclear weapons in the Middle East is the best option, including for Israel, which is why a WMD-free zone (WMDFZ) in the region makes sense. But Israel could not be persuaded to give up its nuclear arsenal unless it had a better security deal. This requires lasting peace with its neighbours and strong verification and confidence-building measures on disarmament in the region, which have hitherto been lacking. Fitzpatrick concluded by arguing that the US has pressured Israel to join negotiations on a WMDFZ conference and persuaded its close ally to agree to engage in open-ended consultations, giving some hope for future plans for a conference on the subject, providing other states participate in the consultations.

Khaled Shaalan, Second Secretary of the Egyptian Embassy in London then argued that Egypt (along with other Arab League states) have shown a long-standing commitment to and full engagement in non-proliferation and proposals for a WMDFZ, yet the country feels deep frustration at the total lack of progress on these goals. The indefinite extension of the NPT agreed at the 1995 Review Conference was based on the establishment of a binding resolution, co-sponsored by the treaty's depository states, to create a Middle East WMDFZ, but this has not been fulfilled. Furthermore, the recent impetus towards a conference on a WMDFZ was dashed because of Israeli intransigence, backed by the United States. Shaalan argued that Israel is thus holding the will of the international community hostage, by its refusal to participate, while its nuclear weapons continue to threaten the existence of other states in the region. Egypt wants to tackle problems of disarmament verification but needs security assurances regarding Israeli intentions and capabilities. The proposed WMDFZ conference was agreed upon as part of the 2010 NPT Review Conference's final document and thus the co-convenors' responsibility to carry out the conference is based on a binding commitment arising from that document. Yet Russia, the UK and US have not shown the requisite political will to move discussions forward substantively on the WMDFZ so that the recent 'one-sided' postponement of the conference was a major disappointment.

Sandra Ionno Butcher, Senior Programme Coordinator for the Pugwash Conferences and Science and World Affairs international secretariat, emphasised Pugwash's mission to construct 'dialogue across divides' in areas where nuclear risks are present, and emphasised the importance of public discussion and participation in nuclear disarmament debates so that new voices and ideas can come to the fore. Track II dialogue and civil society's role can help push leaders beyond the current deadlock in negotiations. Action here is crucial and Sandra quoted the observation by former Norwegian leaders that ['the road is made by walking it'](#). With regard to the Middle East WMDFZ, Iran and Egypt took an early lead on this issue (going back to the 1970s) and many are disappointed in the failure to convene a conference in 2012. Political will is needed by the three NPT depository states (US, UK, Russia) and the UN Secretary General to move the process forward. On these matters, including on the Iranian nuclear issue, leaders are portraying trust and confidence as pre-requisites for achieving progress on nuclear disarmament. However, negotiations on arms control during the Cold War show that on-going and regular forums between nuclear rivals can help to mitigate mistrust and alleviate tension so that agreements are possible. Treating all sides with dignity is key to such processes so that each party feels respected.