



THE ALL-PARTY PARLIAMENTARY GROUP
Global Security
and Non-Proliferation

Summary of APPG Meeting: Does Britain's Deterrent Policy Need Updating?

Written by Anahita Parsa, BASIC, on behalf of the APPG on Global Security and Non-Proliferation.

On Wednesday 22nd November 2023, the APPG on Global Security and Non-Proliferation hosted an APPG meeting, 'Does Britain's deterrent policy need updating?' The meeting was chaired by Lord David Hannay, joined by speakers Lord James Arbuthnot, Chairman of Electricity Resilience of the Advisory Board of Thales (UK) and of the Nuffield Trust for the Forces of the Crown, the Information Assurance Advisory Council and the Airey Neave Trust; Dr Marion Messmer, Senior Research Fellow, International Security Programme, Chatham House; and Sir Graham Stacey KBE CB, Senior Consulting Fellow at the European Leadership Network.

As a possessor of nuclear weapons, the UK is directly affected by emerging technologies that can disrupt the practice of nuclear deterrence. Whilst nuclear ambiguity remains long-held in UK policies and practises, important questions are emerging on whether the findings and assessments of the UK National Risk Register, warrant a re-evaluation of the UK deterrence policy and statements in the Integrated Review and Refresh. Emerging and disruptive technologies have the potential to reshape our national security landscape, and political decisions related to these have far-reaching consequences. Understanding how they may affect the UK's defence and deterrence strategies is crucial. This APPG meeting reflected on this, asking – is enough being done to strengthen UK resilience?

Three themes emerged from the remarks of the speakers and the responses from attendees. Ambiguity may be undermining the UK's deterrence effect; there is an urgent need to develop a more robust conventional deterrent; and, the character of warfare is changing with the introduction of new technologies and combinations thereof.

Ambiguity with respect to the UK's deterrence posture may in fact be undermining the deterrent effect of its nuclear weapons. Problems with the positive attribution of the use of chemical and biological weapons on UK soil, as well as computer network operations, make the threat of nuclear weapons use weaker due to the enormous consequences entailed in retribitional deterrence in such a circumstance. There was broad consensus amongst the speakers that moving away from nuclear responses to non-nuclear attacks within the UK's declaratory policy would actually enhance the deterrent effect.



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The cost of maintaining an effective conventional deterrent has been largely avoided over the past two decades through reliance upon the continuous at sea deterrent. Stockpiles of shells – which have been shown to be critical to large scale military operations in Ukraine – have dropped to very low levels, as well as self-propelled howitzers, which have mostly been diverted as military aid. The speakers felt that ensuring that the UK has a flexible and credible conventional response to non-nuclear threats would alleviate some of the burden on the nuclear deterrent and allow for the shifting of stance away from ambiguity.

Novel technological capabilities are changing the character of warfare, and will continue to do so as new use cases for AI, computation, and mass manufacturing of high-volume, low-cost systems – such as FPV drones – emerge. The speakers and attendees noted that the UK must become resilient in the face of a dynamic, unstable world, subject to rapid technological change, particularly as it pertains to the AI and computational domains. One of the problems facing the UK in this regard is that resilience involves stockpiling questions, non-technological resources that can withstand and continue to operate after an attack, and only pays off politically in the instance that an attack plays out.

Finland served as a useful example- the state has heavily invested in strengthening its resilience, through a ‘whole of society’ approach. Whilst it is a model tailored specifically to Finnish society, it demonstrates a desirable example of thorough investment and long-term strategy. For the UK, it would require building an extensive understanding of UK society, to identify what resilience would look like for us. A key priority area identified was the need to encourage public debate, and to strengthen local UK resilience, particularly in light of developing challenges such as the rise of deepfakes, concerns around the security of democratic processes, to name a few. Building resilience must begin early within local communities, through education in schools, teaching analytical and critical discernment as part of the curriculum. Similarly, reflecting on how the UK’s legal frameworks are able to respond to emerging challenges.

It was noted that the quality and nature of debates on this subject within parliament are generally outdated, and amongst the citizens of the UK, there has been little to no coherent public debate, particularly around their tolerance for risk in this respect. While in a broader context, this is reflected in the lack of progress on multilateral disarmament within recent years in international fora.