



www.rusi.org | Think Tank of the Year

Memorandum of Evidence from Malcolm Chalmers¹

Foreign Affairs Committee Inquiry:

Global Security: Non-Proliferation

¹ Professorial Fellow, Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies.

Nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation: strengthening the links

Recent developments

1. The last two years have seen a revival of interest in nuclear disarmament in the US, most notably through the initiative led by distinguished statesmen George Shultz, Bill Perry, Sam Nunn and Henry Kissinger. Both John McCain and Barack Obama have made clear their commitment to give a higher priority to non-proliferation than the current administration, and have confirmed their support for the 'vision' of a world free of nuclear weapons.
2. The UK Government has welcomed these developments. Its announcement of a programme to replace Trident submarines and missiles was accompanied by a reaffirmation of its commitment to the goal of global nuclear disarmament, a commitment that was subsequently highlighted in Foreign Secretary Margaret Beckett's speech in Washington DC in June 2007. In March 2008, the National Security Strategy committed the Government to 'lead the international effort to accelerate disarmament among possessor states, in pursuit of our objective of a negotiated elimination of all nuclear weapons.'
3. As in the US, there is growing cross-party agreement on the need for progress in this area. In June 2008, former Foreign Secretaries Douglas Hurd, David Owen and Malcolm Rifkind, together with former NATO Secretary-General George Robertson, called for the UK to support the campaign in America for a nuclear weapon free world. Subsequently, Shadow Foreign Secretary William Hague, in a major speech in July 2008, welcomed the renewed debate, and made it clear that 'showing that we take our disarmament commitments seriously is a vital part of winning the moral argument against nuclear proliferation.'
4. It remains to be seen whether these recent developments in the discourse on nuclear disarmament, on both sides of the Atlantic, is carried through into policy in the run up to the 2010 NPT Review Conference. An early indicator will be whether a new US administration is confident in its ability to obtain Senate ratification for the CTBT, a

step which would require a significant degree of cross-party support. The US will also come under considerable pressure to promise further deep reductions in its nuclear stockpile, beyond those currently planned. The prospects for developing a political consensus behind such reductions, however, could become hostage to the wider state of relations between the US and Russia.

Language matters

5. While nuclear disarmament has risen up the political agenda over the last two years, there is still a tendency to view it as being largely subordinate to the problem of proliferation. This is reflected in the FCO's policy goal of 'tackling nuclear proliferation and countering terrorism', the first part of which is the subject of this Inquiry. It may be time to revisit this nomenclature. The result of labelling proliferation as the primary problem is that it focuses attention on those who have not yet acquired nuclear weapons (or other WMD), while devoting less effort to those who have already done so. A more appropriate goal might be 'countering the threats of nuclear weapons and terrorism'.
6. A primary focus on proliferation tends to assume that existing nuclear-armed states have developed stable deterrent relationships, and are therefore not of primary concern. Some go further, distinguishing the 'trustee' role that existing nuclear weapons states allegedly provide for the international order from the destabilisation that acquisition by other states would bring. Such an argument underestimates the danger that existing nuclear arsenals might be at risk of use or diversion. Over the next two decades, the possibility of political instability in Pakistan and Russia, in particular, make their arsenals as significant a source of concern as those of North Korea or (potentially) Iran are today. The possibility of future arms racing between existing nuclear-armed states (especially China, Pakistan, India and the US) also poses real risks to international peace and stability.
7. The 'double standards argument' – that existing nuclear weapons states must support the vision of nuclear disarmament in order to fulfil their NPT obligation to do so, and in order to address the accusation that the regime is a discriminatory one – is a powerful one. But it should not be the only reason for promoting nuclear

disarmament. There are good reasons why the UK and its allies do not want particular regimes to acquire nuclear weapons. There are also particular risks involved in the transition to nuclear-armed status for states in regions of tension, not least that their weapons programmes might trigger pre-emptive attacks by other powers (as is the case for Iran). But such risks are case-specific and time-limited, rather than generic. By contrast, the argument for non-discriminatory norms for constraining, and eventually eliminating, nuclear weapons is based on an assessment that both current and possible future arsenals are a source of concern.

Politics matters

8. The prospects for nuclear disarmament cannot be viewed in isolation from wider strategic and political circumstances. Of all the nuclear-armed states, the US and its European allies have the greatest structural incentives to support nuclear disarmament. The removal of nuclear weapons from world politics would reinforce the advantages derived from US strength in conventional forces, while removing one of the few ways in which other states could pose credible threats to US or European territory. Similarly, India might view nuclear disarmament positively, given the conventional superiority that it would give it over Pakistan, and the lack of a credible threat of invasion from other states.
9. For the four other nuclear-armed states, by contrast, support for disarmament is likely to be dependent on significant amelioration to current strategic vulnerabilities. Israel will not disarm in the absence of a peace settlement with the other states of the region, some of whom (notably Iran) continue to contest its very existence. Renunciation of nuclear weapons by Pakistan is difficult to envisage without a transformation of its relationship with India, including a settlement of the Kashmir dispute. Similarly, preventing proliferation in potential candidates for acquiring nuclear weapons will require continuing attention being given to their strategic vulnerabilities and concerns. The central success of the current non-proliferation regime is that far fewer states have acquired nuclear weapons than have had programmes to do so. But the remaining cases are the most difficult ones.

10. The strategic vulnerabilities of both Russia and China pose more fundamental problems for the prospects of nuclear disarmament. Both are seeking to maintain status and autonomy in a world where the US will remain the dominant military power for at least the next two decades. Both are powerful enough to exert an effective veto on wider moves towards nuclear disarmament.
11. As its economic and soft power increases, China may become less reliant on military strength for its security. Moreover, the conventional military balance with other Asian states seems likely to shift in its favour over time, giving it additional reasons to favour nuclear disarmament. On the other hand, there are growing signs of armament competition between the US and China, which could limit the extent to which China (or, in future, the US) is prepared to reduce its nuclear arsenal. Without a broader process of military confidence-building and détente between the two countries, arms racing between the US and China could develop into a central feature of the world's strategic landscape a decade from now.
12. Russia's nuclear posture is a more immediate issue. The collapse of the Soviet Union has left Russia's leadership concerned at their country's vulnerability (political and military) to NATO members' efforts to extend their sphere of influence eastwards. In recent years, it has given a high priority to modernising its nuclear force, reflecting the continuing centrality that conflict with NATO plays in its strategic thinking. Given the extent of 'overkill' in the arsenals of both states, Russia may be prepared to agree some further reductions in strategic forces with the US in coming years. But much more fundamental change in Russian perceptions of its strategic vulnerabilities – both to NATO and, increasingly, to China – would be required for it to be willing to support a world free of nuclear weapons.

Iran: the next crisis?

13. The Iranian nuclear programme is the biggest current threat to the global non-proliferation regime. Current E3+3 efforts to persuade Iran to freeze or suspend its enrichment programme have failed to produce any sign of movement from Iran. As a result, military action against Iran's nuclear facilities is a real possibility in the near term, despite all the risks for regional security and global energy markets that this

would involve. Yet even large scale military strikes may not be sufficient to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons if it remains determined to do so. It may have the opposite effect, as bombing of Iraq's Osirak nuclear facility in 1980 (by Israel) and Israel (in 1981) probably did in the past. Whether or not an attack takes place, therefore, there is a real possibility that Iran will become the world's ninth (or tenth) nuclear weapons states within the next decade.

14. Optimists argue that, if Iran does acquire nuclear weapons, it will quickly learn the risk-averse and stability-enhancing behaviour that, it is claimed, existing nuclear-armed states (including India and Pakistan) already exhibit. It is perhaps just as likely that Iranian armament will lead to an extended period of instability, testing deterrence theory as never before.
15. Diplomatic possibilities for preventing Iranian nuclearisation still remain. The Iranian government has already been offered substantial economic and political concessions in return for suspending its programme. It could gain more, consolidating its strategic gains in Iraq and lessening the risk of US-inspired regime change.
16. Although the current focus of attention is on the risk of Iran acquiring nuclear weapons, the UK and its allies should also be considering how to prevent further proliferation in the region. Even if Iran does become a nuclear-armed power, it is far from inevitable that other regional states (notably Saudi Arabia and Egypt) will follow in its path. Nor would it be in the wider interests of regional or global stability that they do so. Although both states are currently US allies, medium-term diversion risks would be as high, and probably higher, than for Iran. East Asian experience suggests that it is possible to halt regional proliferation to less powerful states (South Korea, Taiwan) even when the region's largest state (China) goes nuclear. The US and its European allies need to be thinking now about how to contain proliferation in the Middle East in the event of Iran being successful in its current efforts. The provision of security guarantees to Iran's neighbours could play an important role in this effort.

Missile defences and nuclear umbrellas

17. Since its origins in the 1960's, nuclear arms control has had to consider the interaction between offensive and defensive strategic systems. For much of this period, the

symbolic importance which the US and the Soviet Union (and now Russia) have attached to defensive systems has not been matched by technical effectiveness. Nevertheless, notably in relation to President Reagan's Strategic Defense Initiative, the prospect of defensive deployments has had considerable political impact.

18. Current controversies over the planned deployment of ten US missile interceptors in Poland by 2011 illustrate the continuing political sensitivity of this issue for US / Russia relations. Yet, at least in the early phase of the decision-making process, US military leaders do not appear to have considered how a deployment intended primarily to counter threats from the Middle East might be perceived by Russia. The current assumption that deployment could proceed before Iran has tested missiles capable of reaching central Europe, far less the US, does little to dampen speculation on the purposes of the deployment.
19. It would therefore be a welcome recognition of Russian concerns if the US were to refrain from interceptor deployment until Iran tests missiles capable of reaching the region that they are intended to protect. If Iran does acquire nuclear-armed missiles capable of reaching central Europe and/or the US, the political pressure for missile defence deployment (at or in excess of currently planned levels) is likely to become irresistible. This possibility makes it all the more important that the US should also continue to seek ways of providing verifiable assurances to Russia that the interceptors are not configured against its strategic forces.
20. Even if Iran fails to deploy longer-range missiles, its acquisition of nuclear weapons is likely to increase pressure from its neighbours for the provision of external security guarantees, including the deployment of US missile defence systems and troops in the western Gulf. In the Cold War, the provision of 'extended deterrence' to the US's non-nuclear allies in Asia and Europe was widely taken to require a credible threat of nuclear retaliation against threats to their security. In the case of a nuclear-armed Iran, however, the threat of regime change would be a more credible, and morally justifiable, deterrent. Far from driving the US out of the region, one of the many consequences of an Iranian nuclear capability could be the consolidation of its military presence there.

Taking the high ground

21. The immediate prospects for rapid progress on the nuclear disarmament agenda are not good. Negotiations with Iran show few signs of producing a change of heart in that country's drive to develop a military nuclear capability. Military action against its known nuclear sites could further deepen, rather than resolve, this impasse. At the same time, the recent deterioration in US / Russia relations is narrowing the ability of leaders, in both countries, to make progress on bilateral arms control.

22. Despite these problems, commitment to the NPT as the centre piece of efforts to contain the threat of nuclear weapons remains strong. The most encouraging recent development has been the US policy establishment's recognition of the need for a more active approach towards fulfilling the disarmament part of the NPT bargain. If translated into Government policy, this can help put the US and Europe on the front foot in discussions leading up to the 2010 NPT, as well as providing additional legitimacy to its opposition to Iran's nuclear ambitions.