

Oxford Research Group Consultation

Charney Manor, Charney Bassett, Oxfordshire

Tuesday 13th –Thursday 15th March 2007

An investigation into the:

“Regional and global security implications of a British decision on replacing its strategic nuclear weapon system”

Aide-Mémoire

This Aide-Mémoire sets out to identify key themes raised by participants during the intensive information exchange and dialogue that took place over two days. It is based on brief formal presentations made by invited speakers, and on notes made by recorders during extended informal discussion periods which followed these presentations. It therefore does not represent views or address issues which were not raised during the proceedings, nor does it embody a consensus of the views of all participants, except where indicated.

We invited all participants to comment on the first draft of this Aide-Mémoire, and have made every effort to accommodate comments received. The meeting was held under the Chatham House rule, which means that contributors are not identified by name. The final text is the sole responsibility of Oxford Research Group, and not a formal agreed communiqué from all participants.

The key questions, and particular points of interest that emerged from the subject areas covered in the programme are set out below. One of the recurrent themes that emerged throughout was the necessity for trust and confidence building and the importance of “stepping into the shoes” of an adversary, in order to view the security environment from a different perspective.

Three key questions arose out of the discussions:

- How can trust be built to positively affect confrontations over actual and suspected nuclear weapons programmes?
- How sustainable is the enduring double standard at the heart of the NPT as we approach the 2010 Review Conference?
- How can a future world of many latent nuclear weapon powers best be managed to reduce perceived security threats and destabilising responses?

Particular points raised:

1. Shift of perception needed:

What we need is to shift away from a purely local perception of security, and a mood which accepts conflict as inevitable and concentrates on building a “bristling rampart” around our own country.

We need to have a more co-operative approach, which asks how can we make the world a less frightening place to other nations by showing that we understand their fears and are genuinely willing to help them.

On the whole, deterrence based on scaring people has turned out not to work. Perhaps instead we might try reassuring them so that they don't feel they need to arm themselves against us in the first place.

2. British nuclear weapons

The discussion of British nuclear weapons and the decision by the government and parliament to modernise the Trident nuclear weapon system revolved around competing interpretations of the effect of this decision on:

- Nuclear proliferation.
- The NPT.
- Britain's international military and political 'status' (with emphasis on retention of a permanent seat on the UN Security Council).
- Britain's regional military and political 'status' vis-à-vis France and its commitment to the military defence of NATO.

Additional competing interpretations emerged on a range of issues, including:

- The role of nuclear weapons in providing British security.
- The potential war-fighting role of British nuclear weapons.
- The moral and legal legitimacy of the possession of nuclear weapons and the practice of nuclear deterrence.
- The extent to which British nuclear disarmament could only take place in the context of a multilateral nuclear disarmament process led by the USA and Russia.

It was noted that the British debate on Trident was characterised by two discrete sets of argument: the first comprising strategic security, deterrence and proliferation, and the second comprising domestic political factors such as cost, the industrial skills base, and the self-perception of the Labour Party and its difficult electoral history on nuclear weapons.

The effect on the NPT and nuclear proliferation was a key issue: A number of participants argued that Britain's decision to retain nuclear weapons would have a negative 'demonstrative' effect for nuclear proliferation by reinforcing the salience of nuclear weapons in international politics. This view sees the British decision as symptomatic of the lack of commitment by the nuclear weapon states to nuclear disarmament and was considered by some as non-compliance with the NPT.

Others argued that 'constructive non-renewal' could enable Britain to take a major role in developing momentum behind a major nuclear disarmament initiative at the 2010 NPT review conference.

Others argued that with less than 1% of the world's nuclear weapons a decision to relinquish nuclear weapons would have little or no effect on wider non-proliferation efforts.

Some noted that the British government has pointed to Iran's nuclear programme to justify Trident renewal and questioned the validity of this linkage.

It was also argued that in the context of the NPT and nuclear proliferation Britain has been by far the most progressive of the five recognised nuclear weapon states in reducing its arsenal and greatly improving transparency on its nuclear weapons programme.

A further important point was raised that domestic political opinion on this issue matters far more to the government than international opinion such that arguments about the negative effect on the NPT fall on deaf ears.

3. North Korea

It was pointed out that the DPRK had two major concerns, deterrence and energy shortage.

Discussion of DPRK's nuclear weapons programme centred on the process of reaching agreement at the Six Party Talks. One of the main themes of the consultation – trust building – emerged from this discussion. Other points of note were:

- The perhaps under-appreciated scale of destruction suffered by DPRK in the 1950-53 Korean War and the lasting impact on DPRK's view of security.
- Ultimate security for DPRK can only be provided by a positive relationship with America.
- Building trust and confidence is a long process, particularly after trust and confidence disintegrated in October 2002.
- The sense that nuclear disarmament of DPRK will be a long process rather than an event.
- The sense that security perceptions of DPRK must be recognised as valid and addressed if the process is to succeed.

It was argued that a successful engagement process could build trust and confidence, bring aid to DPRK, provide DPRK with security guarantees as it dismantles its nuclear weapons programme, see the emergence of cultural and economic opportunities that may further increase trust and confidence.

The failure of the process may bring a return to isolation by DPRK, much reduced leverage of DPRK actions, possible clandestine sale of nuclear materials to support a collapsing economy.

4. Iran

Discussion on Iran was characterised by conflicting interpretations of intentions, capabilities and 'relevant facts'.

Some argued that enrichment was Iran's right and that others should join Iran in a consortium to make sure that enrichment would not be diverted to other uses.

This view also tended to argue that it is imperative the major powers step in Iran's shoes and consider the issue from Iran's history of nuclear research and development, that Iran is not developing nuclear weapons or a nuclear weapons programme and that it is not in breach of its obligations to the IAEA under the NPT.

Others argued that a wealth of circumstantial evidence points to an Iranian nuclear weapons programme and that Iran is in breach of its obligations to the IAEA.

Trust and confidence building again emerged as a theme. It was argued that the language of threat by the major powers was disrespectful and counter productive.

Trust and confidence were difficult because of the perceived double standard over Israel's nuclear weapons programme and a body of powerful opinion in the US and the West in favour of regime change in Iran.

It was noted in this context that direct talks between DPRK and the US through the Six Party Talks process had been crucial in reaching agreement, but that this was not happening with Iran.

It was also noted that a growing perception of a nuclear threat from Iran was an important driver in the British debate on Trident modernisation since it appeared to justify the government's contention that a nuclear-armed 'rogue' state could emerge to threaten British interests and international stability.

It was widely accepted that a military attack on Iran's nuclear and military infrastructure would lead to widespread turmoil and lasting insecurity in the region. This could lead to:

- A renewed clandestine effort by Iran to build and deploy nuclear weapons.
- Retaliation and beginning of a long conflict.
- Increased Shia radicalism.
- Global reaction and protest by NAM countries.
- A volatile security situation with unpredictable reactions from Israel and Hezbollah.
- Rise in terrorism.
- Violence in the UK and USA.
- Humanitarian disaster.
- Damage to transatlantic relationship and NATO.
- Oil disruption.

It was argued that trust could be built through:

- Active US participation in multilateral talks.
- Active leadership to overcome US-Iran confrontation on many issues.
- Acceptance of common interests, such as regional stability and Iraq, and the benefits of rapprochement.
- US acceptance of the Islamic Republic as well as a less antagonistic Iranian position.
- Ending the 'demonisation' on both sides.
- Cultural interchange to shift perceptions on both sides
- Admissions of past errors.

Possible positive developments were seen to be a restoration of former amity; ongoing progress from successive governments in US and Iran; assumption of an India-type role by Iran in American eyes and perhaps even acceptance of a latent or actual nuclear weapons programme. Others argued strongly against this and expressed deep concern about the prospect of a fully fledged Iranian nuclear weapons programme and deployment of nuclear weapons.

5. The nuclear future

A scenario of proliferating civil nuclear power programmes and the consequent availability of fissile material for state and/or terrorist group nuclear weapons programmes, and the difficulty of detecting and verifying clandestine nuclear weapons activities were discussed.

The potential 'ripple' effect of Iran's and DPRK's actual or suspected nuclear weapons programmes was discussed. The potential for Japanese, South Korean and perhaps Taiwanese

nuclearisation in North East Asia and the renewed interest in civil nuclear power capabilities in the Middle East, particularly the Gulf States as a possible hedge against a future nuclear-armed Iran were an issue here.

The 'domino effect' of nuclear proliferation was seemingly accepted as a valid tool for analysis, although the operation of this 'effect' is open to question.

Technological supply-side solutions to reduce the potential for weapons proliferation from civil nuclear power proliferation were discussed:

- From the perspective of limiting proliferation, some argued that non-nuclear weapon states (NNSW) should agree to forgo enrichment and reprocessing technologies and that these should instead be made available through international consortia.
- Proliferation-resistant technologies should be further developed to reduce the risks of civil-military nuclear cross over.
- From the perspective of the NPT's central bargain, others argued that further constraints on the NNWS could only come from much greater moves by the NWS to nuclear disarmament.
- Some argued that respect for others' views was central to addressing proliferation concerns.
- Some argued that the only way to address this problem in the long term was through multilateral verifiable nuclear disarmament.
- The sense of entitlement to nuclear power technologies was strongly voiced.

Two important questions emerged here:

- Can technological solutions effectively address international political problems and perceived threats and insecurities?
- How can current weapons states persuade others not to develop nuclear weapons without making significant advance towards nuclear disarmament themselves?

6. Nuclear proliferation

Some argued that there was a widespread perception that the NWS were doing nothing on nuclear disarmament and that if nothing positive happened at the 2010 NPT review conference the treaty would unravel.

Some argued that responsible democratic states should possess nuclear weapons as a hedge against the emergence of another Hitler or comparably 'evil' threat to international security. The question of who decides which states qualify as responsible and 'good' was discussed.

It was suggested that a major problem at the heart of confrontations over suspected nuclear weapons programmes is an inability or reluctance to accept other peoples' belief systems.

Others argued that any sense that the ranks of nuclear weapon states would stay at eight or nine was ahistorical and that the further spread of nuclear weapons was inevitable unless steps towards disarmament were taken.

Others suggested that the NPT needed to be reworked into a regime for managing nuclear proliferation rather than attempting to roll it back.

It was argued that an enduring double standard at the heart of the NPT was untenable. Some questioned this, stating that the NWS think that it is tenable and that any adverse consequences from an enduring double standard can be managed to minimise the impact on international security.

Future uncertainty was often cited to justify the need for NWS to retain nuclear weapons as a necessary response to an uncertain future strategic security environment.

In Britain's case it was argued that the government was 'irrationally' placing too much emphasis on unpredictable aspects of future uncertainty instead of some of the more predictable aspects of future uncertainty, argued to be the further erosion of the NPT.

In attempting to further constrain nuclear proliferation by further limiting access to nuclear technology, the question arises whether 'future uncertainty' is something only powerful and 'responsible' states are entitled to concern themselves with.

7. Trust and confidence building

It was argued that the absence of security is a primary driver of nuclear weapons programmes. Consequently engagement with adversaries to build security and trust were put forward as an alternative to the language of threat and military action.

A number of questions and points were raised on this issue, including:

- There is no trust in the NPT because the NWS refuse to move towards nuclear disarmament.

- The question was asked as to whether trust could be built to a level allowing nuclear weapons to be abolished, or at least gradually reduced.
- It was argued that a prevailing sense of distrust in international relations makes it difficult to reach the opposite position of trust.
- It was accepted that uncertainty cannot be eliminated because one cannot fully know the collective mind of another government, but that the negative effects of security competition could be ameliorated.
- Some argued again that mutual respect and stepping into the others' shoes allows opportunities for progress to be created, based on the argument that others do not see you as you see yourself.
- It was argued that trust-building needs recognition of past failures which leave a 'confidence deficit', and a cessation of the language of threat which further erodes trust.
- Powerful states are unwilling to take risks to build trust but are willing to take risks to protect themselves from mistrust, even when there is a relatively large margin of safety.
- It was argued that fears and suspicions in international relations are not always groundless. Occasionally a Hitler appears bringing genuine, incompatible differences and threats exist for which military force may be the only solution.

The USA was often singled out (bordering on vilification) as unwilling to take account of other countries' views, although this criticism can usually be applied to both sides of a confrontation, albeit to differing degrees.

The lack of appreciation of other countries' perspectives was raised in the context of the grindingly slow pace of work on nuclear disarmament issues at the Conference on Disarmament. It was noted that positive steps had been taken recently to coordinate and address different countries concerns and opposing viewpoints.

A major theme to emerge from the discussion on trust was the question of productive processes for dealing with international confrontation, conflict, negotiations, hostile leadership mindsets and domestic opinion, and the deliberate or inadvertent construction of threats.

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