

British Pugwash Group

Ground Floor Flat, 63A Great Russell Street, London WC1B 3BJ
Tel.020.7405 6661 Fax.020.7831 5651 Email: pugwash@mac.com
Website: <http://www.pugwash.org/uk>

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RESPONSE TO THE DECEMBER 2003 DEFENCE WHITE PAPER BY THE BRITISH PUGWASH GROUP

The Defence White Paper “Delivering security in a changing world” is of great concern to the British Pugwash Group, who wish to make the following comments:

Nuclear Weapons.

In the 2000 Review Conference on the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty the UK, along with the other declared nuclear weapon states, made an unequivocal undertaking to accomplish the total elimination of their nuclear weapons. The Government has frequently reiterated its intention to do so, but in practice has moved only slowly in that direction. The UK still has four nuclear submarines, each of which can carry up to 16 missiles (Hansard 5 Feb. 2004).

We are greatly concerned because statements in the Defence White Paper amount to a reversal of the Government’s stated policy on this issue. The Government’s undertaking is diluted to “We are committed to working towards a safer world in which there is no requirement for nuclear weapons”, but announces the Government’s intention to maintain nuclear weapons for at least 30 years, and possibly longer.

1. The White Paper pleads that our “minimum nuclear deterrent capability” is likely to remain necessary for our security because there is a continuing risk from the proliferation of nuclear weapons and the certainty that a number of other countries will retain them. This argument can, of course, be turned on its head: other countries will retain or acquire them if the UK and other declared nuclear powers retain theirs. The White Paper makes no reference to the obligation under the Nuclear Proliferation Treaty for the declared nuclear powers to proceed to complete nuclear disarmament. Someone must take the lead.

Chairman:	Prof. R.A. Hinde CBE, FRS, FBA	St. John’s College, Cambridge CB2 1TP. tel: 01223.339.356 fax: 01223.337.720 e-mail: rah15@hermes.cam.ac.uk
Secretary:	Dr. C.R. Hill	Stoney Bridge House, Castle Hill, Axminster, Devon, EX13 5RL tel/fax: 01297.33003 e-mail: kit.hill@eclipse.co.uk
Treasurer:	Prof. John Finney	Dept.of Physics and Astronomy, University College, Gower Street, London. WC1E 6BT tel: 020.7679.7850 fax: 020.7679 1360 e-mail: j.finney@ucl.ac.uk

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2. The White Paper also implies that nuclear deterrence is necessary for countering the threat of an attack by nuclear missiles. However the nature of the threat of a nuclear attack is not specified. As the White Paper states, there are no conventional military threats to either the UK or NATO. The possibility that any of the states known to possess nuclear weapons will use them to threaten the UK is remote either for political reasons or for the technical problem of delivering them over long distances. If at some point we were to initiate their use, the consequences of retaliation on the UK would be catastrophic. Moreover the possession of nuclear weapons will not serve as a deterrent against a terrorist attack.
3. Policies of nuclear deterrence have long been recognised as ineffective and dangerous. The possession of nuclear weapons results in an escalation in nuclear weaponry; the supposition that they would act as a deterrent rests on the improbable assumption that any enemy will act rationally; and their presence enhances the risk of widespread destruction through accidental discharge or the acquisition of nuclear material by terrorist groups. It is extremely improbable that they would ever be used: indeed, when pressed the Minister of Defence has declined to specify the circumstances in which they would be used on the tenuous excuse of confusing the enemy (Hansard, January 30, 2004).
4. By failing to fulfil its obligations under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, the UK is undermining the validity and utility of international treaties. The Government attaches much importance to the prevention of nuclear proliferation: the appropriate policy response is surely multilateral nuclear disarmament, a process that the UK could lead. We acknowledge that the abolition of nuclear weapons poses problems, but the proper place for those problems to be solved is the Conference on Disarmament in Geneva, where the UK has so far failed to put the issue on the agenda.

The “Special Relationship”.

The Agreement for Cooperation on the uses of Atomic Energy for Mutual Defense Purposes (Mutual Defence Agreement) with the USA covers cooperation on nuclear weapons systems. It is due for renewal this year, a matter not mentioned in the White Paper. However its renewal is implied by the intention to maintain Trident in service. The Government has apparently already agreed to allow Fylingdales to be used in the US Missile Defence scheme and has done so without full discussion in

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Parliament (Statement by the Defence Minister, December 18, 2003). This is a matter of public concern and should be debated because, apart from anything else, the use of Fylingdales in this way may make us more prone to be a target ourselves.

In addition the White Paper implies that we shall continue to follow where the US leads in matters of Defence. It argues that “the most demanding expeditionary operations, involving intervention against state adversaries can only plausibly be conducted if US forces are engaged either leading a coalition or in NATO”. It even assumes that that will be the case: “...in the most demanding military operations we will be operating alongside the US and other allies”. And it seems to give that priority over operations with other allies: “...a major focus will be on furthering interoperability (*sic*) with US forces”, though adding: “we will continue to improve our capacity to operate with our European allies”. Thus the Government apparently intends continued close cooperation with the USA on defence matters for the foreseeable future.

The implication that we should follow the USA in a coalition that does not involve NATO and does not have the support of the UN is unacceptable. The USA appears to be embarking on the development of new types of nuclear weapons, in direct contravention to its international undertakings. It is extremely questionable whether the UK should be so closely associated with a state that fails to honour international agreements and whose current foreign policies many perceive to be undesirable.

United Nations

While the White Paper professes that the UK will support the UN, it also indicates an intention to act independently with such phrases as the “need to be realistic about the limitations of the UN”. In the long run, the only guardian of world peace must be the UN, and the UK should do all in its power to support and improve it.

Conclusion

The British Pugwash Group therefore:

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- (a) Urges the UK Government to abide by its international obligations under the Non-Proliferation Treaty and discard all its nuclear weapons.
- (b) Believes that UK Defence Policy should not be based on the assumption of close cooperation with the USA.
- (c) Urges the UK Government to support the UN as the best long-term policy for world peace, seeking reform of that body as seems necessary. In the first instance the Government should call for a discussion on the nuclear issue by the UN body set up for this purpose, the Geneva Disarmament Conference.

Finally, the British Pugwash Group understands that the MOD has stated that the White Paper will not be debated. This is a serious matter, contrary to custom, but in keeping with the Government's authoritarian style. We urge that the White Paper and the renewal of the Mutual Defence Agreement should be both subject to public discussion and debated in Parliament.

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