

Remarks by Dr Nick Ritchie at the launch of his book, *A Nuclear Weapons-Free World? Britain, Trident and the Challenges Ahead*, hosted by British Pugwash, University College London, 12 March 2013.

The purpose of the book is three fold:

- First, to provide an account of the debate in this country over the past 5 years.
- Second, to expand our thinking about nuclear weapons policy beyond techno-strategic debates about nuclear deterrence to the range of pertinent issues that influence the debate, whether we like it or not.
- Third, to consider what the challenges of doing anything other than the continuation of the status quo mean for significant progress towards a world free of nuclear weapons.

It does so by organising the subject matter by factors enabling Trident replacement and resistances to Trident replacement, at least a like-for-like replacement, to give a sense of what's at stake in the Trident debate. The concluding chapter discusses the implications of all of this for the long process of working towards a world free of nuclear weapons, and that is what I will concentrate my remarks on now.

Nuclear futures

During the 1990s it was comforting to think that we could continue indefinitely in what the late Sir Michael Quinlan called a low salience nuclear world.

This was based on the contention that nuclear weapons are essential to prevent war between major industrialised powers, to maintain international order and stability, and to prevent the use of weapons of mass destruction.

The idea of a stable, benign low salience nuclear-armed world with a small number of 'responsible' nuclear powers between whom nuclear weapons performed a low key, background, stabilizing function looked increasingly unrealistic as the 1990s progressed and India, Pakistani, and North Korean programmes moved ahead and, with 9/11, the risk of nuclear terrorism.

It is now clear we live in global nuclear weapons *system*, one that is dynamic and loaded with risk. The reality is that we face three broad nuclear futures. First, a high salience but well managed nuclear world of 15-20 or more nuclear armed states or near-nuclear-armed states in which nuclear deterrence operates according to theory exerting a lasting stabilising effect on relations between nuclear powers, and the potential for multi-level, regional and global nuclear relations to spiral into nuclear conflict is forever held in check.

Or second, an unstable high salience nuclear world in which multiple forms of insecurity from the effects of climate change, growing socio-economic inequality, resource scarcity, nationalism and exclusivist ideologies combine to generate conflicts involving nuclear armed states and unsecured stockpiles of fissile material that some non-state actors will undoubtedly have their eyes on: a synergy of the global challenges we know we will face by mid-century with more and more nuclear armed states thrown into the mix leading to the breakdown of nuclear order and global nuclear governance and, eventually, the use of nuclear weapons in regional conflicts to devastating effect.

Or third, the progressive delegitimation of nuclear weapons, legal prohibition of use, leading to legal prohibition of possession through a Nuclear Weapons Convention, supported by mature and extensive verification technologies, leading to world free of nuclear weapons.

The first scenario of a well-managed HSNW is an extremely optimistic prognosis. The second, an unstable HSNW, is an extremely dangerous and worrisome scenario. A NFWW is the path, the only path, that minimises long-term nuclear risk.

Trident next steps

So where does this leave us on Trident replacement and UK NWP? Well, the next government will have to take the big spending decision in 2016 on whether and how to proceed with the replacement programme. Whether we like or not, none of the major political parties at Westminster are committed to nuclear disarmament, nor are they likely to in their manifesto's for the 2015 election.

So the question is what can and should we do to exercise some form of leadership towards a NFWW. The answer is to look at radically reduce the salience of our nuclear weapons.

This first step must be to acknowledge that we no longer require nuclear weapons permanently at sea (a posture known as continuous at sea deterrence) ready to fire up to 40 thermonuclear warheads within days or even hours of a decision to do so.

Let's not forget the legal and political commitments we have made about when we might consider using our nuclear weapons. We, as a country, have explicitly accepted the judgement of the 1996 International Court of Justice ICJ Advisory Opinion on the 'Legality of the Threat or Use of Nuclear Weapons' that 'the threat or use of nuclear weapons would generally be contrary to the rules of international law, and in particular the principles and rules of humanitarian law' and that the only circumstances in which nuclear use *might* be lawful is in 'an extreme circumstance of self-defence, in which the very survival of a State would be at stake'.

But successive governments have acknowledged in statements and official reports, including the SDR and SDSR and going back to the detargeting of our nuclear weapons in the early 1990s that we face no major military, let alone nuclear, threat to the survival of the country. That's nearly 20 years. That's a full third of the time we have been a nuclear power (we conducted our first nuclear test in 1952) in which we have faced no threat that might conceivably invoke serious consideration of nuclear use. That must give pause for thought.

If we can accept that the fate of the country does not depend upon nuclear forces at permanent readiness to fire, then we can begin to examine alternative nuclear postures that push nuclear weapons further into the background of national security planning.

This would entail thinking differently about how we understand nuclear deterrence. It is routinely asserted that exerting a credible and therefore effective nuclear deterrent threat is an either/or dichotomy. Either you do things to way we do them

now and have a credible nuclear deterrent threat or you don't. But it is false dichotomy. Nuclear deterrence is process and a relationship not an abstract objective condition. And history shows that conceptions of nuclear deterrence vary along a spectrum from maximum deterrence practiced by the US in the Cold War that still now insists credible nuclear deterrence rests on a triad of strategic nuclear forces, to the recessed form of nuclear deterrence practiced by India through the 1980s and 1990s based on non-weaponisation of its nascent nuclear weapons capability that was judged to exert sufficient a deterrent effect with Pakistan based on the mere possibility that major aggression could result in a nuclear encounter, and we go even further down to a latent form of nuclear deterrence arguably practiced by Japan that by most estimates could produce a basic deliverable nuclear weapons within 6-12 months in a crash programme.

So it behoves us to think seriously about reducing the salience, or marginalising nuclear weapons in our national security thinking whilst retaining a residual nuclear capability. What might that look like? A number are outlined in the book, but suffice to say there are examples that support the argument.

Leadership

So we have the *potential* to take important steps. The Labour and Coalition governments both declared their full commitment to the goal of a NFW and a desire to take an active *leadership* role.

We like to frame ourselves as the most 'progressive' of the Nuclear Weapon States, and we have taken a number of important steps to reduce the size and increase the transparency of our nuclear forces since the end of the Cold War. We have formally restricted the range of scenarios in which we might consider using nuclear weapons. We have ended nuclear testing, ratified the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, ended production of fissile materials for use in nuclear weapons, declared our full commitment to nuclear weapons-free world and supported a number of initiatives towards that end. We also agreed at the Review Conference of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty in May 2010 along with the other Nuclear Weapon States to 'further diminish the role and significance of nuclear weapons in all military and security concepts, doctrines and policies' and to 'commit to undertake further efforts to reduce and ultimately eliminate all types of nuclear weapons, deployed and non-deployed, including through unilateral, bilateral, regional and multilateral measures'.

An opportunity now exists for the UK to continue on this trajectory and demonstrate international leadership in new ways by taking concrete steps to further diminish the salience of UK nuclear weapons in national security policy by reducing the operational readiness and size of its nuclear arsenal. This is eminently plausible in an era of negligible military threats to the survival of the state. We are not even talking here of relinquishing nuclear weapons but of rethinking how we understand nuclear deterrence with a view to reducing their salience.

This would set important precedents for progress towards global zero by establishing new norms of nuclear deterrence for one of the original nuclear powers and one of the three depository states of the NPT. It would show quite clearly that we no longer

see a compelling reason to deploy nuclear weapons for immediate use, but that we were retaining nuclear weapons temporarily pending global elimination.

A nuclear posture that did not involve nuclear weapons permanently at sea on alert would all but eliminate any intention to use nuclear weapons first in a crisis at short notice thereby reinforcing political and legal commitments we have made to non-nuclear weapon states and providing a degree of strategic reassurance to other possessors of nuclear weapons. It would signify an important 'de-coupling' of nuclear weapons from the broad, day-to-day calculus of national security by demonstrating that the UK is prepared to learn to live without nuclear weapons operationally deployed at sea on a permanent basis as a precursor to learning to live without nuclear weapons at all.

Finally, it is important we understand the Trident debate in the context of *global* nuclear order. Much has been said about the risks associated with not replacing Trident, of somehow gambling with the nation's security if we choose to deviate in any way from the status quo. But there are no risk free nuclear futures. If we are to avoid a dangerous and uncertain HSNW then we must think carefully about the way in which a decision to stick with nuclear business as usual in the UK serves to reproduce the value of nuclear weapons as a currency of power in international politics and the signals that sends, serves to reproduce an unequal global nuclear order based on the appropriation of the logic of nuclear deterrence as an exclusive national security right for a small number of states based on historical circumstance that five states had detonated a nuclear device before the NPT was negotiated, and serves to take us further down the path towards a dangerous HSNW: 'sleepwalking to disaster' as former UNSG Kofi Annan warned in 2006.