

British Pugwash Discussion meeting, 23 September 2013

"Do 'proliferating nuclear threats' justify Trident renewal?"

The two guest speakers were:

Peter Jenkins, a former British diplomat who served twice in the UK Mission to the International Atomic Energy Agency, from 2001 to 2006 as Ambassador.

Shashank Joshi, a Research Fellow at the Royal United Services Institute and the author of a recent book 'Nuclear Iran: Engagement or Intervention?'

Peter Jenkins introduced his talk by noting that the title of the meeting was taken from a comment made by Defence Minister Philip Hammond on BBC Radio on 15 July 2013: "We do not believe that, with nuclear threats if anything proliferating, with more countries seeking to get nuclear weapons, this is the time to downgrade [the UK's nuclear deterrent]."

In his view, Philip Hammond's statement was at best an exaggeration. He would give three systemic reasons to dispute it, and several country-related reasons. Taking the systemic reasons first:

1. The nuclear non-proliferation regime is standing up well to the test of time. Since 1970 only three states have joined the nuclear-armed club: India, Pakistan, and North Korea. True, one -possibly two - NPT parties set about breaching their NPT article II obligations, or can reasonably be suspected of intending to do so (Iraq and possibly Syria) and they were brought back into compliance against their will. But to set in the balance against these two are:
 - Three NPT non-parties who voluntarily abandoned nuclear weapon programmes and acceded to the NPT: Brazil, Argentina and South Africa.
 - Four NPT parties who either voluntarily abandoned embryonic weapon programmes or allowed themselves to be persuaded to do so: South Korea, Taiwan, Romania and Libya.

Two more NPT parties (Algeria and Egypt) may have contemplated weapon acquisition but soon gave up the idea. Most recently, Myanmar, which is thought to have been trying to acquire know-how and possibly material from the DPRK, has been persuaded by the US to desist and has just signed an IAEA additional protocol.

All this suggests the NPT has become a very effective bulwark, and that the vast majority of states have no interest in proliferating as long as they can be confident

that others feel the same way, or are likely to be open to persuasion to desist if tempted to stray. From this can be inferred that the UK would be better advised to invest more in maintaining world-wide political support for the NPT than to invest in Trident renewal. Admittedly, there are serious grievances among NPT NNWS:

- The slow pace at which the NWS have moved towards disarmament;
- The failure of the NWS to put significant pressure on Israel (particularly), India and Pakistan to destroy their nuclear weapons and adhere to the NPT;
- The development of nuclear supplier group policies which are seen as discriminatory.

The longer these grievances remain unaddressed, the greater the risk of a slow erosion of support.

2. Reinforcing the NPT bulwark are nuclear-weapon free zones. These now cover Latin-America, Africa, Central Asia, South-east Asia and the Pacific. They are connected to the growing importance of regionalism as a force for peace and security in global affairs. Since 1945 states have become more conscious, not just of the case for peaceful coexistence with neighbours, but also of the benefits that can accrue from cross-border confidence-building. NWFZ parties take their commitment seriously.
3. A third reason for systemic optimism lies in the lessons that can be learnt from 68 years of nuclear weapon history. NWs are inherently defensive weapons. They only make sense for a state that needs to deter another state from mounting a large scale conventional offensive that would threaten the defender's survival, or that fears attack from a nuclear armed adversary. Looking round the world in 2013, one has real difficulty in identifying any state that fits into this category that is not already nuclear-armed or that cannot count on the umbrella of a NWS. Taiwan may well feel at risk of conventional or nuclear attack from China but can count on the US. South Korea and Japan may feel threatened by the DPRK's expanding programme, but they too can count on the US. Iran no longer has a large scale conventional or nuclear attack from Iraq to fear, and knows that Israel would never dare to make unprovoked use of its NWs, because that is one thing the US would not forgive.

Country-specific Reasons

1. The DPRK. It has already crossed the proliferation threshold, and probably bulks large in the minds of Mr Hammond's briefers. It may have enough plutonium for 10 devices and seems to be in the process of starting up its plutonium-producing reactor. It has acquired an enrichment capability, and may possibly already possess enough HEU for a few devices. Its three nuclear tests suggest that it can weaponise fissile material, though it probably has not mastered the production of missile-deliverable warheads.

Do these capabilities constitute a threat to the UK? No. The DPRK is years away from possessing an accurate ICBM. The passion that motivates the DPRK leadership is survival. DPRK leaders are rational actors. DPRK leaders cannot assume that China, on whom they depend, would look on complacently if China saw evidence that the DPRK was preparing to make offensive use of NWs. Finally, deterring the DPRK is a task for the US.

2. Iran. The US intelligence community believes Iran had a weapons programme up to 2003, but closed it down late that year. Whether prior to 2003 it was ever the intention to go all the way and cross the threshold is not known. It may be that after 1991, when Saddam's NW programme was dismantled, their goal was always to stop short of the threshold - at the acquisition of a latent capability. Anyway, just short of the threshold is where they are now.
Does a latent Iranian capability threaten the UK? No. Iranian missiles can reach Cyprus, but not Gibraltar or the British Isles. US intelligence judges that Iran's leaders are not decided to cross the threshold, and that their decision-making is determined by cost-benefit calculations. Israeli and Saudi claims that a nuclear Iran is a threat to peace and security are disingenuous, motivated by strategic political calculations. Were Iran to develop NWs, it would lose the support of its NWs patrons and the friendship of the many non-aligned states who have taken Iranian non-proliferation assurances at their word. Were Iran to develop NWs, it would be to deter, not to use them against the United Kingdom, unless provoked.
3. Is proliferation currently underway anywhere else? No. At least there is no indication that it is in US intelligence community reports to Congress, nor in any other publicly available source.
 - Iraq and Syria are in no state to resume their programmes. Their Ba'athist regimes have been dealt death blows, and Ba'athist NW programmes have been closed by the UN or Israel. New leaders are unlikely to see advantage or feasibility in resurrecting those programmes;
 - Turkey has no need of an independent nuclear force and knows full well that any programme would be unwelcome to the US, Russia and Israel;
 - Egypt can ill-afford the cost of a programme, cannot risk alienating the US and knows that Israel would intervene before it got far.
 - If Iran were to acquire NWs, Saudi Arabia might try to get some off the shelf from Pakistan. But would the US allow that to happen? And would a nuclear-armed Saudi-Arabia constitute a threat to the UK?
 - In the Far East, Taiwan, South Korea and Japan all enjoy a US nuclear umbrella. Taiwan and South Korea had their knuckles rapped for nuclear misdemeanours in the 1970s. There are signs that South Korea wants an enrichment capability which so far the US has opposed. It is more likely that South Korea wants to join Japan (and Iran and Brazil and Argentina) at the nuclear threshold than that they want to be nuclear armed. In any case, it is inconceivable that Taiwan, South Korea or Japan would ever wish to use NWs to attack or threaten the UK.

Shashank Joshi noted that he had been invited to play ‘devil’s advocate’ in response to Peter Jenkins’ paper, and his talk would be in that spirit, though he actually agreed with much of what Peter Jenkins had said. Certainly, Philip Hammond was wrong to suggest that more countries were currently seeking to acquire nuclear weapons. He agreed with Peter Jenkins that overall, the NPT has had a very important constraining effect, though over the last ten years, the picture had become less clear. He proposed to look in more detail at three countries where the position was debatable.

Iran is arguably not doing too badly. It is said to have halted its nuclear weapons programme in 2003. A benign reading of this would be that Iran suspended its programme because the fall of Saddam meant that they had much less need of a nuclear weapon to counter a threat from Iraq. However the threat then became the US forces deployed in Iraq and Afghanistan, so it was only when the war in Iraq made clear the limits of US power that Iran felt that it could lift its subservient attitude towards the US and become more hawkish.

In recent years, Iran has faced two sets of declared ‘red lines’: one from the US – that Iran should not possess or develop a NW - and one from Israel - that Iran should not even accumulate one bomb’s worth of uranium enriched to 20% or more. Its response has not been wholly benign. It has continued to develop and deploy centrifuges in numbers, and of a quality, which suggest that within a few years it could reach the point of ‘rapid breakout’, where it could produce weapons grade material so fast, and in such quantities that it could make weapons, before the IAEA either detected it or could get the UN to stop it. Unsurprisingly, Israel wants the Western world to respond before that happens.

However, one does not have to subscribe to these alarmist views in full to see a dark side. It is arguable that Iran is a rational actor, simply seeking to keep open the possibility that it might eventually develop a nuclear weapon as a deterrent against hostile neighbours. Equally however, view of the hawks within the US and Israel see Iran’s current behaviour as evidence that it plans to go further. They fear that Iran’s response to the US and Israeli ‘red lines’ will be to do what Iraq did in the 1980s – claim that its nuclear programme is wholly civil and benign, but in fact restart its weapon programme outside IAEA supervision. Such behaviour would indicate that its concern over an attack would override its concern over losing NNWS friendship – as India did.

Pakistan is undoubtedly the world’s most rapid vertical proliferator, with the fastest growing stockpiles of fissile materials (especially plutonium) and ambitious development programmes for short range missiles. From its public statements, it appears to be seriously considering deploying these missiles armed with nuclear weapon in a ‘tactical’ role, in response to the much larger conventional forces deployed by its neighbours. The threat to international order comes from various possible scenarios:

- possible changes in Pakistani leadership from the current 'democratic' government towards one which has less favourable elements – e.g. Islamic fundamentalist/jihadi groups.
- non-state actors with sufficient military capability to capture inadequately defended state weapons
- elements within the Pakistani military-industrial complex which might wish to continue the tradition of clandestine supply of NW to other proliferators – as in the case of AQ Khan. A possible example is supply to Saudi Arabia.

Pakistan's relationship with the US may break down once the US withdraws from Afghanistan. There is also the concern that although Russian and Chinese have a commitment to non-proliferation, in relation to Pakistan, they both have a history of providing support to its fissile stock.

North Korea has challenged the international community, with clear evidence that the strictures imposed upon it – no more bombs, no better bombs and no exports – are being breached.

The regime, which is currently supporting the development of nuclear weapons, is less evidently pursuing rational policies, making it more difficult for the international community to negotiate with it. Recent examples of 'madness' perpetrated by the regime include the sinking of a South Korean warship by a North Korean torpedo, and the shelling of South Korean islands, both in 2010.

In summary, in these three areas at least, the trend during the past decade has been towards greater danger from nuclear weapons.