

“THE UNITED KINGDOM’S NUCLEAR DETERRENT  
IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY”

SPEECH BY THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR DEFENCE  
KING’S COLLEGE LONDON

25 January 2007

I am pleased to be giving this speech here at King’s – the venue of the last major speech on this subject by any of my predecessors in this job, Malcolm Rifkind back in 1993.

I re-read that speech in preparation for today, and I was struck by the continuity of approach. No doubt some will see that as evidence of inflexibility in the face of a changing world. I see it differently. By necessity this is an area of our security policy that spans the decades. We have had a nuclear deterrent for fifty years; in taking the decision we face now, whether to maintain it through the 2020s and beyond, we have to look ahead another fifty. There is merit in consistency – and I hope I will persuade you of that today.

But first, since there is still a lively debate over whether we really do need to take this decision now, I want to tackle this aspect to begin with.

The need for a decision is driven by the lifespan of the submarines.

Submarines have been the basis of our deterrent since the late 1960s – and the sole basis since 1998, when we scrapped the WE177 free fall bomb, thereby becoming the only recognised nuclear state to restrict ourselves to a single weapon system.

This was consistent with our general approach, of reducing our nuclear weapons to the minimum necessary. But we were only able to do it because of our confidence in the submarine based system – confidence earned over long experience. This year will see the Royal Navy's 300<sup>th</sup> deterrent patrol. For almost forty years, there has been a Royal Navy deterrent submarine continuously on patrol somewhere in the world – and not once in all that time have they been detected.

Some people argue that this cannot last – that technology will somehow render the oceans transparent. We do not believe this is remotely likely, any more likely than the last time this prediction was made, which was of course the last time we built a new generation of submarines. We cannot guarantee it will not happen. But even if it does, even it is no longer impossible for a potential enemy to detect and attack our submarines, they will still be far less vulnerable than the alternatives of land-based silos or aircraft.

So it is logic and experience, rather than complacency or inflexibility, which leads us to believe that a submarine-based system will remain the most credible and least vulnerable form of nuclear deterrent. And this brings us to the decision we now face. The current generation of submarines start to reach the end of their planned lives from 2017 onwards. We can and will extend their life – but not by more than 5 years. Anything more would be too risky – and in cost terms, almost certainly counter-

productive. So we have to work on the basis that the existing submarines will go out of service from 2022. To guarantee we can maintain continuous patrols, we need to design, manufacture, test, and deploy a new class of submarines by the time the existing submarines go out of service. Our best estimate, which has been thoroughly examined and tested against American and French experience, is that this whole process will take around 17 years. This is why we must make a decision now. Otherwise we will effectively be committing future generations to disarmament – by depriving them of the option of a credible deterrent.

The bigger question is not the timing of this decision – important though that is – but the decision itself. Why do we need a nuclear deterrent?

The answer is because it works. Our deterrent has been a central plank of our national security strategy for fifty years. And the fact is that over this fifty years, neither our nor any other

country's nuclear weapons have ever been used, nor has there been a single significant conflict between the world's major powers. We believe our nuclear deterrent, as part of NATO, helped make this happen.

Others will say the opposite – that we have had peace despite our nuclear weapons, rather than because of them. It cannot be proved either way. But not only history, but basic human psychology suggests that in certain conditions, nuclear deterrence can play a positive role. As Michael Quinlan puts it, “it is precisely because the nuclear reality is so terrible, that so long as there are nuclear weapons around, war has to be ruled out of the list of options for settling disputes and awkward problems.”

I know there are some who accept that our deterrent has played this positive role in the past, but argue that it is no longer needed. They argue that the threats to our security have changed, and our weapons should change to match them. Right

now there is no country which has both the capacity and the intent to threaten us with nuclear weapons; so there is nothing for our deterrent to deter.

The problem with this argument is that we cannot be sure that such a threat will not re-emerge at some point over the next fifty years. That is the timescale we need to think about when we are considering the future of our deterrent. And we cannot just wait until the time is nearer and we have more certainty about the nature of the threat. Other countries' intentions over the use of nuclear weapons can change quickly – certainly more quickly than we could possibly re-acquire a nuclear capability if we allowed it to lapse.

We are not arguing – as some have suggested we are – that uncertainty is our only reason for retaining a nuclear deterrent. Actually I do believe that insuring against uncertainty is a strong argument. But in fact the case for maintaining our deterrent is even stronger. As well as uncertainty there are identifiable risks

and trends which it would be irresponsible not to factor into the argument.

The number of countries with nuclear weapons is growing. This does not mean that the international effort against proliferation has failed: it just reminds us how difficult it is. We believe that without this effort, many more states would now have nuclear weapons. This is why we remain as committed as ever. But equally, we believe that even with this continuing effort, there is no realistic prospect of a world without nuclear weapons in the foreseeable future.

Moreover, several of the countries who either have nuclear weapons or are trying to acquire them are in regions which suffer from serious instability. These regions are if anything likely to become more unstable over the coming decades, given clear trends in demography, competition for natural resources, climate change, and religious extremism.

So yes the nature of our security situation has changed; but a proper understanding of it suggests that, while there is, right now, no nuclear threat, we cannot rule out the possibility that one will re-emerge.

There are some who concede this, but argue that it is not the threat but the concept of deterrence which is somehow outdated and no longer relevant in a post-cold-war world.

I do not accept this. I think it is unfortunate that the idea of deterrence has become so closely identified with the cold war. In its simplest terms, deterrence is about dissuading a potential adversary from carrying out a particular act because of the consequences of your likely retaliation. This is not an especially complex or unique concept. Nor does it have anything inherently to do with nuclear weapons, or superpower blocs. Our conventional forces are themselves a form of deterrent; they can and do deter various different kinds of states and non-state actors even in today's post-cold-war world.



The reality is that it is hard to be sure exactly what capability will deter any particular threat. The best we can do is to retain a broad spectrum of capabilities to enable us to respond to a range of potential threats. But nuclear weapons are unique in terms of their destructive power, and as such, only nuclear weapons can deter nuclear threats.

Of course by the same logic, they should not be used for anything other than deterring extreme threats to our national security. The UK has in fact never sought to use our nuclear weapons as a means of provoking or coercing others. We will never do so. Nor are our weapons intended or designed for military use during conflict. Indeed, we have deliberately chosen to stop using the term “sub-strategic Trident”, applied previously to a possible limited use of our weapons. I would like to take this opportunity to reaffirm that the UK would only consider using nuclear weapons in the most extreme situations of self-defence.

But it is precisely those situations which those who argue against maintaining our nuclear deterrent need to think about. They need to explain how else they propose we manage them. We cannot sit back and accept the consequences of a nuclear attack. Emerging capabilities like ballistic missile defence have real potential but can never assure us of full protection. So if a nuclear threat does re-emerge, we must take the same approach as we did in the Cold War: using non-military means to try and reduce or remove the threat, while relying on our nuclear weapons to deter it as long as it endures.

Again, it is possible to accept the argument thus far – to accept that a threat may re-emerge, and that nuclear weapons would be of some value in deterring it – but to question whether this should be a priority, given the probability, the cost, and the other pressures on our defence budget.

We believe our plans offer not just the most effective but the most cost-effective way of maintaining our deterrent. There is no remotely credible cheaper option. But there is no denying the cost is significant. Considered across the life of the system, however, it amounts to around two tenths of one per cent of our GDP. What we are saying, is that we believe that insuring ourselves and future generations against this devastating potential threat is worth this level of investment. And just as we believe conventional forces cannot substitute for a nuclear deterrent, so too we believe that the deterrent cannot substitute for conventional forces – which is why we have made absolutely clear that the investment required will not come at the expense of our conventional capabilities.

If you accept the argument to this point – that we cannot rule out the re-emergence of a nuclear threat, that a nuclear deterrent is still an effective response, and that it is affordable, then it is clear that the decision to maintain our nuclear deterrent is rational from the point of view of our national security.

But even if this is the rational thing to do, there is still the distinct question of legality – and, separate again from that, of morality.

I believe we have made the legal position very clear.

Maintaining our nuclear deterrent is fully compatible with all our international legal obligations. This is reflected in the international response to our announcement, which has been quietly supportive. Many of our allies, including those without nuclear weapons, have good reason to support our decision, and have privately indicated as much. This is not surprising. We have a reputation for scrupulously fulfilling our obligations under the Non Proliferation Treaty, and for playing a leading role in international negotiations. No one believes that our current plans will undermine our ability to carry on playing this role. More importantly, no one really believes we are living in a

situation where an alternative unilateral approach would have any real effect.

Against these facts, I suggest that critics of our decision need to offer more than ill-informed accusations of hypocrisy, or vague warnings of destabilising international repercussions.

There is nothing hypocritical about our plans. It is Iran and North Korea who are the hypocrites – they signed up to the NPT, the NPT requires them as non-nuclear-states not to develop nuclear weapons, and they are flouting that obligation.

The NPT does not give us, as a recognised nuclear weapon state, an obligation to disarm unilaterally. It gives us an obligation to resist escalation, and to work towards disarmament – which we have always done, and will continue so to do.

Indeed we have set out in the White Paper that even though we already have a strong record in this area – the best of all the recognised nuclear weapon states – we intend to go further.

Already we have reduced the number of warheads by nearly half, leaving us with the smallest stockpile of all the recognised nuclear states. We are now proposing to reduce again to fewer than 160 warheads, a reduction of a further 20%.

And there is nothing destabilising about our plans. Under the NPT regime all the recognised nuclear weapon states, have taken equivalent steps to maintain their deterrents, including ourselves in the 1980s, without any perceptible ‘destabilising’ effect. Nor is it right to describe this as a ‘missed opportunity’.

There is no reason whatever to believe that if instead of maintaining our deterrent we allowed it to lapse, or even dismantled it tomorrow, this would make it any more likely that other countries would abandon their nuclear weapons, or their ambitions to develop them.

I hope I have convinced you that the decision is rational from the point of view of our national security, and that it is legal. But – and this brings me to my final question – is it moral?

Some – including some prominent church leaders – argue that regardless of our international obligations, regardless of the threats facing us, and regardless of the benefits and costs, possessing nuclear weapons is inherently morally corrupting, and cannot be justified under any circumstances.

They are of course entitled to their opinions. But that is what they are: opinions, rather than authoritative, unambiguous ethical or religious pronouncements – for there is no clear unambiguous position on this issue across the various churches and across the decades.

If it was true that nuclear weapons were simply immoral, and if religious teachings or values clearly implied this, that would always have been true. But in fact the established churches have taken a variety of positions on this over the years. This suggests, as I believe, that this is one of those difficult questions where in the end we face a moral choice. The moral arguments are very

serious on all sides but are not decisive – so we have to choose, and of course we have to take responsibility for the choices we make, and for their consequences.

I do not believe it makes sense to say that nuclear weapons are inherently evil. I have argued that in certain circumstances, they can play a positive role – as they have in the past. But clearly they also have a power to do great harm. In most circumstances imaginable, to use that power would be an evil thing to do. The question is, given that this power exists, is it wrong for us to have it, to deter others from using it against us? Are we prepared to tolerate a world in which countries who care about morality lay down their nuclear weapons, leaving others to threaten the rest of the world or hold it to ransom?

To be consistent, any proponent of the absolutist moral argument must argue that, even were a Hitler to possess nuclear weapons, it would be morally wrong for us to possess a counterbalancing nuclear force. I suspect many of us think the



opposite – that it is at the very least morally permissible, maybe even morally required, for us to possess a nuclear deterrent under these circumstances. This is the judgment that British governments have made over the last fifty years – and in my view it is likely to continue to hold good for the next fifty.

## **Conclusion**

This brings me back to the point I made at the beginning – that in this debate more than most, we have to pull back from the pressing concerns of today and think over the very long term – not always something which Governments have got right, but something which in this area at least, I am happy to inherit a consistent position which has developed over many decades.

I have tried, in this spirit, to address what I believe to be the main issues – and at the same time to tackle some of the arguments which have been raised since we announced our plans. To sum up, I have argued the following:

- First, that it would be irresponsible to rule out the possibility that a nuclear threat to the UK will re-emerge.
- Second, that nuclear deterrence remains valid as a concept, and provides the most effective and most responsible way to try and manage nuclear threats in future.
- Third, that a submarine based system remains the most effective, least vulnerable, and affordable form of deterrent
- And therefore that our plans, as set out in the White Paper, are rational from the point of view of national security – but also compatible with our international legal obligations, and with our consciences – although in the end, that last question must and will remain a matter of personal moral choice.

Thank you for listening. I look forward to taking your questions.