

BECKETT: WE WANT RESULTS ON DISARMAMENT (25/06/07)

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Speaker: Foreign Secretary, Margaret Beckett



Thank you very much for that welcome and for those very kind words,

I expect that many – perhaps all – of you here today read an article which appeared in the Wall Street Journal at the start of this year. The writers would be as familiar to an audience in this country as they are respected across the globe: George Shultz, William Perry, Henry Kissinger, Sam Nunn.

The article made the case for, and I quote, “a bold initiative consistent with America’s moral heritage”. That initiative was to re-ignite the vision of a world free of nuclear weapons and to redouble effort on the practical measures towards it.

The need for such vision and action is all too apparent.

Last year, Kofi Annan said – and he was right – that the world risks becoming mired in a sterile stand-off between those who care most about disarmament and those who care most about proliferation. The dangers of, what he termed, such mutually assured paralysis are dangers to us all. Weak action on disarmament, weak consensus on proliferation are in none of our interests. And any solution must be a dual one that sees movement on both proliferation and disarmament – a revitalisation, in other words, of the grand bargain struck in 1968, when the Non-Proliferation Treaty was established.

What makes this the time to break the stand-off ?

Today the non-proliferation regime is under particular pressure. We have already seen the emergence of a mixture of further declared and undeclared nuclear powers. And now, two countries – Iran and North Korea, both signatories of the NPT – stand in open defiance of the international community. Their actions have profound and direct implications for global security. Each of them also raises the serious prospect of proliferation across their region.

In the case of Iran, in particular, if the regime is trying to acquire nuclear weapons – and there are very few either in that region or outside it who seriously doubt that that is the goal – then it is raising the spectre of a huge push for proliferation in what is already one of the most unstable parts of the world.

That alone makes the debate on disarmament and non-proliferation we have to have today different in degree: it has become more immediate and more urgent.

On top of that, we must respond to other underlying trends that are putting added pressure on the original non-proliferation regime. One of those, just one, is the emergence of Al Qaeda and its offshoots – terrorists whom we know to be actively seeking nuclear materials.

Another though is the anticipated drive towards civil, nuclear power as the twin imperatives of energy security and climate security are factored into energy policy across the world. How can we ensure this does not lead to either nuclear materials or particularly potentially dangerous nuclear know-how – particularly enrichment and reprocessing technologies – being diverted for military use or just falling into the wrong hands? How do we do so without prejudice to the economic development of countries that have every right under the NPT to develop a civil, nuclear capability.

And last there are some very specific triggers for action – key impending decisions – that are fast approaching. The START treaty will expire in 2009. We will need to start thinking about how we move from a bilateral disarmament framework built by the US and Russia to one more suited to our multi-polar world.

And then in 2010 we will have the NPT Review Conference itself. By the time that is held, we need the international community to be foursquare and united behind a global non-proliferation regime. We can't afford for that conference to be a fractured or fractious one: rather we need to strengthen the NPT in all its aspects.

That may all sound quite challenging – I meant it to. But there is no reason to believe that we cannot rise to that challenge.

Let's look at some of the facts. Despite the recent log-jam, the basic non-proliferation consensus is and has been remarkably resilient. The grand bargain of the NPT has, by and large, held for the past 40 years. The vast majority of states – including many that have the technology to do so if they chose – have decided not to develop nuclear weapons. And far fewer states than was once feared have acquired and retained nuclear weapons.

Even more encouragingly, and much less well known outside this room, many more states – South Africa, Libya, Ukraine, Kazakhstan, Belarus, Argentina, Brazil – have given up active nuclear weapons programmes, turned back from pursuing such programmes, or – as the case of the former Soviet Union countries – chosen to hand over weapons on their territory.

And of course the Nuclear Weapons States themselves have made significant reductions in their nuclear arsenals, which I will come to later.

So we have grounds for optimism; but we have none for complacency. The successes we have had in the past have not come about by accident but by applied effort. And we will need much more of the same in the months and years to come. That will mean continued momentum and consensus on non-proliferation, certainly. But, and this is my main argument today, the chances of achieving that are greatly increased if we can also point to genuine commitment and to concrete action on nuclear disarmament.

Given the proliferation challenges we face, it is not surprising that so much of our focus should be on non-proliferation itself.

For the reasons I gave a moment ago, stopping and reversing nuclear proliferation in North Korea and Iran has to remain a key priority for the whole international community.

With North Korea the best hope to reverse their nuclear programme remains patient multilateral diplomacy underpinned by sanctions regimes.

As for Iran, the generous offer the E3+3 made in June 2006 is still on the table. Sadly Iran has chosen not to comply with its international legal obligations, thereby enabling negotiations to resume. That forced us to seek a further Security Council Resolution. And we will do so again if necessary.

The US contribution on Iran has, naturally, been critical. It made the Vienna offer both attractive and credible – showing that the entire international community was willing to welcome Iran back into its ranks provided that it conformed to international norms on the nuclear file and elsewhere.

And I have no doubt that the close co-operation between the US, Europe, Russia and China has been a powerful point of leverage on the Iranians. We must hope that it succeeds.

The US has also taken the lead on much of the vital work that is going on to prevent existing nuclear material falling into the hands of terrorists and rogue states. That framework is perhaps more robust than ever before – the Global Threat Reduction Initiative, the Proliferation Security Initiative, the Global Initiative to Combat Nuclear Terrorism and efforts to prevent the financing of proliferation.

Meanwhile, there is some imaginative work going on aimed at persuading states that they can have guaranteed supplies of electricity from nuclear power without the need to acquire enrichment and reprocessing technologies. For example, the work on fuel supply assurances following the report of the IAEA expert group; the US's own Global Nuclear Energy Partnership initiative on more proliferation-resistant technologies; and the UK's own proposal for advanced export approval of nuclear fuel that cannot subsequently be revoked – the so-called "enrichment bond".

But the important point is this: in none of these areas will we stand a chance of success unless the international community is united in purpose and in action.

And what that Wall Street Journal article, and for that matter Kofi Annan, have been quite right to identify is that our efforts on non-proliferation will be dangerously undermined if others believe – however unfairly – that the terms of the grand bargain have changed, that nuclear weapon states have abandoned any commitment to disarmament.

The point of doing more on disarmament, then, is not to convince the Iranians or the North Koreans. I do not believe for a second that further reductions in our nuclear weapons would have a material effect on their nuclear ambitions.

Rather the point of doing more is this: because the moderate majority of states – our natural and vital allies on non-proliferation – want us to do more. And if we do not, we risk helping Iran and North Korea in their efforts to muddy the water, to turn the blame for their own nuclear intransigence back onto us. They can undermine our arguments for strong international action in support of the NPT by painting us as doing too little too late to fulfil our own obligations.

And that need to appear consistent, incidentally, is just as true at the regional level. The international community's clear commitment to a Middle East Nuclear Weapons Free Zone in successive UN resolutions has been vital in building regional support for a tough line against Iran.

So what does doing more – and indeed being seen to do more – on disarmament actually mean?

First, I think we need to be much more open about the disarmament steps we are already taking or have taken. Here in the long-standing, and perhaps understandable, culture of increased secrecy that surrounds the nuclear world we may be our own worst enemy. There is little public remembrance or recognition of the vast cuts in warheads – some 40 000 – made by the US and the former USSR since the end of the Cold War. Nor, for that matter, the cuts that France and the UK have made to our much smaller stocks. We all need to do more, much more, to address that. And I welcome the US State Department's recent moves in that direction.

But we would be kidding ourselves if we thought that this was a problem only of perception – simply of a failure to communicate, although that failure is very real. The sense of stagnation is real enough. The expiry of the remaining US-Russia arms control deals; the continued existence of large arsenals; the stalemate on a Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty and Fissile Material Cut-off Treaty. They all point to an absence of debate at the highest levels on disarmament and a collective inability thus far to come up with a clear, forward plan.

What we need is both vision – a scenario for a world free of nuclear weapons. And action – progressive steps to reduce warhead numbers and to limit the role of nuclear weapons in security

policy. These two strands are separate but they are mutually reinforcing. Both are necessary, both at the moment are too weak.

Let me start with the vision because, perhaps, that is the harder case to make. After all, we all signed up to the goal of the eventual abolition of nuclear weapons back in 1968; so what does simply restating that goal achieve today?

More I think than you might imagine. Because, and I'll be blunt, there are, I was going to say some, but I think many who are in danger of losing faith in the possibility of ever reaching that goal.

That would, I think, be a grave mistake. The judgement we made forty years ago, that the eventual abolition of nuclear weapons was in all of our interests – is just as true today as it was then. For more than sixty years, good management and good fortune have meant that nuclear arsenals have not been used. But we cannot rely just on history to repeat itself.

It would be a grave mistake for another reason, too. It underestimates the power that commitment and vision can have in driving action.

A parallel can be drawn with some of those other decades-long campaigns conducted as we've striven for a more civilised world.

When William Wilberforce began his famous campaign, the practice of one set of people enslaving another had existed for thousands of years. He had the courage to challenge that paradigm; and in so doing helped with many others to bring an end to the terrible evil of the transatlantic slave trade.

Would he have achieved half as much, would he have inspired the same fervour in others if he had set out to 'regulate' or 'reduce' the slave trade rather than abolish it? I doubt it.

Similarly the Millennium Development Goals, the cancellation of third-world debt, increased overseas aid were all motivated by the belief that one day, however far off it might seem, we could "Make Poverty History".

So too with nuclear weapons. Believing that the eventual abolition of nuclear weapons is possible can act as a spur for action on disarmament. Believing, at whatever level, that it is not possible, is the surest path to inaction. If there will always be nuclear weapons, what does it matter if there are 1000 or 10 000?

And just as the vision gives rise to action, conversely so does action give meaning to the vision. As that Wall Street Journal article put it, and again I quote: "Without the bold vision, the actions will not be perceived as fair and urgent. Without the actions, the vision will not be perceived as realistic or possible"

By actions, I do not mean that the nuclear weapons states should be making immediate and unrealistic promises – committing to speedy abolition, setting a timetable to zero.

The truth is that I rather doubt – although I would wish it otherwise – that we will see the total elimination of nuclear weapons perhaps in my lifetime. To reach that point would require much more than disarmament diplomacy, convoluted enough though that is in itself. It would require a much more secure and predictable global political context.

That context does not exist today. Indeed it is why, only a few months ago, the UK took the decision to retain our ability to have an independent nuclear deterrent beyond the 2020s.

But acknowledging that the conditions for disarmament do not exist today does not mean resigning ourselves to the idea that nuclear weapons can never be abolished in the future. Nor does it

prevent us from taking steps to reduce numbers now and to start thinking about how we would go about reaching that eventual goal of eliminating all nuclear weapons.

That is why in taking the decision to retain our ability to have nuclear weapons, the UK government was very clear about four things. First that we would be open and frank with our own citizens and with our international partners about what we were doing and why. It is all being done upfront and in public - not as in the past, behind the scenes. Second that we would be very clear and up front that when the political conditions existed, we would give up our remaining nuclear weapons. Third that we were not enhancing our nuclear capability in any way and would continue to act strictly in accordance with our NPT obligations. And fourth that we would reduce our stock of operationally available warheads by a further 20 per cent – to the very minimum we considered viable to maintain an independent nuclear deterrent.

This was our way – and I can assure you it was a difficult process – to resolve the dilemma between our genuine commitment to abolition and our considered judgement that sadly now was not the time to take a unilateral step to totally disarm.

It's the same dilemma every nuclear weapons state faces. And we can all make the same choices in recommitting to the goal of abolition and taking practical steps towards achieving that goal.

Practical steps include further reductions in warhead numbers, particularly in the world's biggest arsenals. There are still over 20 000 warheads in the world. And the US and Russia hold about 96 per cent of them.

Almost no-one – politician, military strategist or scientist – thinks that warheads in those numbers are still necessary to guarantee international security. So it should not be controversial to suggest that there remains room for further significant reductions. So I hope that the Moscow Treaty will be succeeded by further clear commitments to significantly lower numbers of warheads – and include, if possible, tactical as well as strategic, nuclear weapons.

Since we no longer live in a bipolar world, those future commitments may no longer require strict parity. They could be unilateral undertakings. Certainly the UK experience – and indeed the United States' own experience with the reduction of its tactical weapons in Europe – is that substantial reductions can be achieved through independent re-examination of what is *really* needed to deter: that approach has allowed the UK to reduce our operationally available warheads by nearly half over the last ten years from what was already a comparatively low base. We have also reduced the readiness of the nuclear force that remains. We now only have one boat on patrol at any one time, carrying no more than 48 warheads – and our missiles are not targeted at any specific sites.

Commitments like these need not even be enshrined in formal treaties. The UK's reductions, after all, are not. But clearly both the US and Russia will require sufficient assurance that their interests and their strategic stability will be safeguarded. Part of the solution may be provided by the extension of the most useful transparency and confidence building measures in the START framework, should the US and Russia agree to do so.

And I should make clear here again, that when it will be useful to include in any negotiations the one per cent of the world's nuclear weapons that belong to the UK, we will willingly do so.

In addition to these further reductions, we need to press on with both the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty and with the Fissile Material Cut-Off Treaty. Both limit – in real and practical ways – the ability of states party to develop new weapons and to expand their nuclear capabilities. And as such they therefore both play a very powerful symbolic role too – they signal to the rest of the world that the race for more and bigger weapons is over, and that the direction from now on will be down and not up. That's why we are so keen for those countries that have not yet done so to ratify the CTBT. The moratorium observed by all the nuclear weapon states is a great step forward; but by allowing the CTBT to enter into force – and, of course, US ratification would provide a great deal of impetus – we would be showing that this is a permanent decision, a permanent change and in the right direction.

At the same time, I believe that we will need to look again at how we manage global transparency and global verification. This will have to extend beyond the bilateral arrangements between Russia and the US. If we are serious about complete nuclear disarmament we should begin now to build deeper relationships on disarmament between nuclear weapon states.

For our part, the UK is ready and willing to engage with other members of the P5 on transparency and confidence building measures. Verification will be particularly key – any future verification regime for a world free of nuclear weapons will need to be tried and tested. In my opinion, it will need to place more emphasis on the warheads themselves than the current arrangement which focuses primarily on delivery systems. That will become particularly true as numbers of warheads drop.

And we have to keep doing the hard diplomatic work on the underlying political conditions – resolving the ongoing sources of tension in the world, not least in the Middle East and between Pakistan and India. We also need to build a more mature, balanced and stable relationship between ourselves and Russia.

And since I have the non-proliferation elite gathered in one room, let me emphasise the importance this and future UK governments will place on the agreement of an international and legally binding arms trade treaty. Conflicts across the globe are made more likely and more intense by those who trade all arms in an irresponsible and unregulated way. And an arms trade treaty would contribute to a focus on arms reduction and help build a safer world.

And when it comes to building this new impetus for global nuclear disarmament, I want the UK to be at the forefront of both the thinking and the practical work. To be, as it were, a “disarmament laboratory”.

As far as new thinking goes, the International Institute of Strategic Studies is planning an in-depth study to help determine the requirements for the eventual elimination of all nuclear weapons. We will participate in that study and provide funding for one of their workshops, focussing on some of the crucial technical questions in this area.

The study and subsequent workshops will offer a thorough and systematic analysis of what a commitment to a world free of nuclear weapons means in practice. What weapons and facilities will have to go before we can say that nuclear weapons are abolished? What safeguards will we have to put in place over civil nuclear facilities? How do we increase transparency and put in place a verification regime so that everyone can be confident that no-one else has or is developing nuclear weapons? And finally – and perhaps this is perhaps the greatest challenge of all – what path can we take to complete nuclear disarmament that avoids creating new instabilities themselves potentially damaging to global security.

And then we have these new areas of practical work. This will concentrate on the challenge of creating a robust, trusted and effective system of verification that does not give away national security or proliferation sensitive information.

Almost a decade ago, we asked the UK’s Atomic Weapons Establishment to begin developing our expertise in methods and techniques to verify the reduction and elimination of nuclear weapons. We reported on this work throughout the last Non-Proliferation Treaty review cycle. Now we intend to build on that work, looking more deeply at several key stages in the verification process – and again report our findings as soon as possible.

One area we will be looking at further is authentication – in other words confirming that an object presented for dismantlement as a warhead is indeed a warhead. There are profound security challenges in doing that. We need to find ways to carry out that task without revealing sensitive information. At the moment we are developing technical contacts with Norway in this area. As a non-nuclear weapons state they will offer a valuable alternative perspective on our research.

Then we will be looking more closely at chain of custody issues – in other words how to provide confidence that the items that emerge from the dismantlement process have indeed come from the

authenticated object that went into that process to begin with. Here we face the challenge of managing access to sensitive nuclear facilities. We have already carried out some trial inspections of facilities to draw lessons for the handling of access under any future inspections regime.

And last we intend to examine how to provide confidence that the dismantled components of a nuclear warhead are not being returned to use in new warheads. This will have to involve some form of monitored storage, with a difficult balance once again to be struck between security concerns and verification requirements. We are currently working on the design concepts for building such a monitored store, so that we can more fully investigate these complex practical issues.

The initiatives I have announced today are only small ones. But they are, I hope you will agree, in the right direction – a signal of intent and purpose to ourselves and to others. We will talk more and do more with our international partners – those who have nuclear weapons, and those who do not – in the weeks and months to come.

I said earlier that I am not confident, cannot be confident, that I would live to see a world free of nuclear weapons. My sadness at such a thought is real. Mine, like yours, is a generation that has existed under the shadow of the bomb – knowing that weapons existed which could bring an end to humanity itself. We have become almost accustomed to that steady underlying dread, punctuated by the sharper fear of each new nuclear crisis: Cuba in 1962, the Able Archer scare of 1983, the stand-off between India and Pakistan in 2002.

But there is a danger in familiarity with something so terrible. If we allow our efforts on disarmament to slacken, if we allow ourselves to take the non-proliferation consensus for granted, the nuclear shadow that hangs over us will lengthen and it will deepen. And it may, one day, blot out the light for good.

So my commitment to that vision, truly visionary in its day, of a world free of nuclear weapons is undimmed. And although we in this room may never reach the end of that road, we can take those first further steps down it. For any generation, that would be a noble calling. For ours, it is a duty.