RUSI Nuclear Policy & Counter Proliferation Conference

British & NATO Policy after the Prague Summit

Sir Timothy Garden – 8 January 2003

Introduction

We have moved into a somewhat confused period for Western policy on countering the threats from nuclear weapons. We look back on the period of the Cold War almost with nostalgia where the mixture of deterrence, confidence building and arms control appeared to offer an intellectually coherent approach to a very dangerous strategic situation. For the decade of the 90's, the nuclear threat seemed to sink beneath the waves of the more exciting challenges of peace support doctrine, and we looked only for ways to reduce our own nuclear arsenals in a managed manner. However the new century has bought a savage downturn to our perspective on future peace and security. The mass killing on 11 September 2001 has made the previously theoretical risks of non-state actors acquiring nuclear capabilities appear much more realistic. It has also given the United States Administration much greater public support for a proactive security agenda which includes addressing the risks from proliferation.

While this session is specifically focused on the British and NATO responses to the nuclear issues, it is impossible to isolate this from the changes in US thinking. NATO policy to an extent goes where the US drags it (sometimes reluctantly). The UK policy is developed always with an eye on where the US is going (and often, but not always, enthusiastically). The key markers in the recent developments in policy are:

- a. The arrival of the Bush Administration and the new thinking on arms control, defence and deterrence, and states of concern.
- b. The effect of terror attacks of 11 September 2001.
- c. The new US strategic doctrine of September 2002, and the growing focus on dealing with Iraq.
- d. The recent open declarations on nuclear weapon development by North Korea.

In parallel with these developments both NATO and the UK have also moved their nuclear policy positions, but perhaps only to a fairly limited degree.

Nature of the Problem

When we look at the nuclear problem (and for this conference I distinguish nuclear from the broader WMD problems), we find that it remains limited in scope. The states with a known nuclear weapon capability are in alphabetical order: China, France, India, Israel, Pakistan, Russia, UK and US. Somewhat strangely, current western policy seems to accept all of these as being to a greater or lesser extent all right. Counter-proliferation policy is not really directed at any of the 8 in a serious way. Yet some of these capabilities affect regional stability. Israel would argue that its nuclear weapons provide a deterrent against attack by WMD or overwhelming conventional force in an area with virtually no strategic depth. Its Arab neighbours are concerned to be threatened by nuclear capability without their own ability to deter. This gives a strategic rationale for Iraq, Iran, Syria, Saudi Arabia and Egypt to pursue such capabilities. Similarly, we can see the concerns raised by the India-Pakistan-China nuclear weaponry on each other, and on neighbours. North Korea is on the brink of a nuclear capability which has implications for not just South Korea, but also for Japan and beyond. A longer term policy aim must be to reduce this dependence on nuclear and WMD capability.

In terms of missile delivery systems, the nations either operating or developing capabilities for missiles of over 500km range are: the 5 nuclear weapon states, India, Iran, Iraq, Israel, N Korea, Libya, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Syria and Taiwan. All of the proliferators are in reaction to regional rather than global balances of power, although gaining a nuclear capability would change their status within the international community. Iran is active in its development of both cruise and ballistic missiles. Iraq can do little about longer range missiles while UN sanctions continue. Libya has tried unsuccessfully to obtain strategic missile technology. We have also become more aware of how isolating proliferators can make them sell on their technology. The recent delivery of North Korean SCUDs to Yemen showed this trade at work.

The focus for US attention has been on Iraq. It has a proven record of trying to develop a range of WMD, and it has used chemical weapons in recent times. There is little prospect of its developing a nuclear capability while current international constraints continue. However, illegal procurement of nuclear material from elsewhere cannot be discounted. It has a very limited ability to deliver such weapons in a normal state to state war. It seems unlikely that the regime would wish to give assistance to Islamic fundamentalist groups. The current mixture of sanctions and military policing of the air continues to restrict the opportunities for Iraq to break out. The return of the UN inspectors has been an added constraint. There are three new dimensions to add to this analysis. First is the intention of the US to change the regime at some time in the relatively near future. Second is the explicit declaration by both the US and the UK that their nuclear weapons might be used in response to a chemical or other WMD attack on their troops. Third is the uncertainty over how the Israel-Palestine dispute will play out. The most likely time for any state to use WMD is when it believes that its survival is in doubt. There is a difficult judgement to make about future military action in Iraq. It may succeed in pre-empting the production of WMD capability, but it may encourage the use of any such capability that currently exists. This debate is likely to a be a difficult one within NATO.

While the state to state WMD problem remains, and may get worse, in the region, the more difficult problem is that of non-state actors. The West possibly faces three different types of security threats: al-Qaeda type fanatical terrorists; despairing Palestinian style suicide bombers; and perhaps a post attack Iraq responding with state sponsored agents. None of these is

intelligence, police and protective measures. None of these have been major roles for NATO in the past. It is not clear that they will be most naturally roles for NATO in the future.

NATO and Prague

So what is the part that NATO should play in this messy security arena? NATO has a continuing role to provide deterrence against attack of any of its members by hostile states. Beyond that, its best role may be in the various ways that it can promote stability. The problems stem from inequalities and injustices. NATO has done a good job at making the conditions for rebuilding trust in the Balkans. It is unlikely that the USA will want NATO as an organisation to carry out high intensity offensive military operations as part of a counter-proliferation strategy, and it is equally unlikely that its members could agree on such a role. NATO will remain important in making it possible for nations to operate together, but its day of being in the driving seat are probably over. There will be some pressure for it to become more involved in the active defence side of nuclear policy through participation in US plans for missile defences in the first instance. There will be limited enthusiasm among many Europeans for signing up to what is considered an expensive and technologically dubious venture, although NATO members will make the right diplomatic noises.

At Prague, the nuclear related decisions were, as usual, pretty modest. It was agreed to:

- *Endorse the implementation of five nuclear, biological and chemical weapons defence initiatives, which will enhance the Alliance's defence capabilities against weapons of mass destruction: a Prototype Deployable NBC Analytical Laboratory; a Prototype NBC Event Response team; a virtual Centre of Excellence for NBC Weapons Defence; a NATO Biological and Chemical Defence Stockpile; and a Disease Surveillance system. We reaffirm our commitment to augment and improve expeditiously our NBC defence capabilities.*
- *Examine options for addressing the increasing missile threat to Alliance territory, forces and population centres in an effective and efficient way through an appropriate mix of political and defence efforts, along with deterrence. Today we initiated a new NATO Missile Defence feasibility study to examine options for protecting Alliance territory, forces and population centres against the full range of missile threats, which we will continue to assess. Our efforts in this regard will be consistent with the indivisibility of Allied security. We support the enhancement of the role of the WMD Centre within the International Staff to assist the work of the Alliance in tackling this threat.*
- *We reaffirm that disarmament, arms control and non-proliferation make an essential contribution to preventing the spread and use of WMD and their means of delivery. We stress the importance of abiding by and strengthening existing multilateral non-proliferation and export control regimes and international arms control and disarmament accords.*

None of these mark a vast change in approach by NATO. One of the issues which seems to have gone away for now is the continuation from the Cold War of US nuclear weapons deployed in Europe. This may come back if transatlantic relations deteriorate.

UK Nuclear Policy

After a decade of pushing UK policy on nuclear weapons further back into the shadows, an unfortunate question to Defence Secretary Geoff Hoon at the end of a Defence Select Committee session last year put British nuclear strategy under the international spotlight. During the Cold War the rationale for the UK nuclear capability was relatively easy to describe (even if CND was less than convinced). Since the end of the Cold War, nuclear strategy has seemed much less important. The UK has taken all of its nuclear weapons out of service apart from the remaining Trident systems based on 4 submarines. After the Strategic Defence Review (SDR) of 1998, even the numbers of those missiles and warheads per missile were further reduced.

The UK nuclear forces now number 4 submarines each with a maximum of 16 missiles carrying a maximum total of 48 warheads in one submarine. The total warhead stockpile is under 200, which makes the UK the smallest of the five official nuclear weapon states, and it may even have fewer than Israel. Nevertheless 48 nuclear weapons represents a devastating power. The SDR recognised that this could be inappropriate and hence incredible. It said therefore:

"The credibility of deterrence also depends on retaining an option for a limited strike that would not automatically lead to a full scale nuclear exchange. Unlike Polaris and Chevaline, Trident must also be capable of performing this 'sub-strategic' role. "

What was not explained in any more detail was the thinking behind this sub-strategic task. Presumably it was for occasions when one or two nuclear weapons might be sufficient to show resolve in some unspecified future crisis. However the SDR was quite clear on the circumstances under which UK nuclear weapons could and could not be used. It repeated what is called the Negative Security Assurance, and spelled out what that assurance means:

"Britain has repeatedly made it clear that we will not use nuclear weapons against a non-nuclear weapon state not in material breach of its nuclear non-proliferation obligations, unless it attacks us, our Allies or a state to which we have a security commitment, in association or alliance with a nuclear weapon state. Britain has also undertaken to seek immediate UN Security Council action to assist any non-nuclear-weapon state party to the Non-Proliferation Treaty that is attacked or threatened with nuclear weapons."

This assurance is designed to act as an encouragement to non nuclear weapon states to stay that way, and is a sensible diplomatic approach to dissuade potential proliferators. That said, like any assurance given in peaceful times, it will probably not be believed by an enemy at times of crisis. Thus Saddam Hussein may have been deterred from using chemical weapons during the Gulf War, because he believed that there was a possibility of western nuclear retaliation. Deterrence can happen without explicit statements.

Defence Secretary Hoon's exposition of nuclear strategy in March 2002 was a significant change in declared policy. He was asked in the closing minutes of a Defence Select Committee session on missile defence whether our nuclear deterrent

mitigated the need for a missile defence system. Instead of giving a short and ambiguous answer, he chose to say:

".....there are clearly some states who would be deterred by the fact that the United Kingdom possesses nuclear weapons and has the willingness and ability to use them in appropriate circumstances. States of concern, I would be much less confident about, and Saddam Hussein has demonstrated in the past his willingness to use chemical weapons against his own people.. ....They can be absolutely confident that in the right conditions we would be willing to use our nuclear weapons. What I cannot be absolutely confident about is whether that would be sufficient to deter them from using a weapon of mass destruction in the first place."

Students of nuclear policy took this as a major change in UK thinking. We were now apparently contemplating the potential use of nuclear weapons against an enemy using chemical weapons. This could run counter to our negative security assurances. It could also be read as a rather loose description of deterrence at the end of a difficult select committee session, when Geoff Hoon's mind may have been focused on the emergency debate on Afghanistan, which was scheduled for later that afternoon. However, four days later on the Jonathan Dimbleby ITV programme, he made his meaning quite clear. He said that, if British troops were threatened by chemical or biological weapons, the UK Government reserved the right to use nuclear weapons. With the possibility now of British troops being used in a war against Iraq, the theoretical constructs of UK nuclear deterrence theory may be put to the practical test.

The other two aspects of UK policy which are important in the context of proliferation are arms control and missile defences. On the former, the UK appears to be doing the best it can to continue to promote the strands of arms control despite the difficulties with current US administration policy, which appears to discount the value of the arms control process. On missile defences, it is more difficult to be sure where the UK is at present. Until last month, it had held to a public position of being an interested observer. Ballistic missile defence was a US initiative and as such the UK government need make no judgement. Nor would they answer hypothetical questions about the US use of UK facilities in any future scheme. However the MOD published a discussion document in 2002 looking at the policy issues around the ballistic missile threat, and announced shortly afterwards that the US had indeed made a request to use UK facilities. It now looks most likely that the UK government will offer whatever facilities the US requires, but will not at this stage commit itself to expenditure in what is a high risk and uncertain pay off area.

Conclusion

To the outside observer there is a sense that the US, Europe and their joint alliance, NATO, are floundering over their nuclear policy. Having lost the simplicity of Cold War deterrence, they operated a multi stranded policy of containment, coercion, deterrence and arms control for a decade. There is much debate about how successful it was. We must remember that India and Pakistan were prepared to become overt nuclear powers in this period, and North Korea was cheating on its undertakings. Yet for the most part, it slowed proliferation and reduced the likelihood that nuclear weapons would be used. Now we seem to be moving to a mixture of pre-emption, apparent willingness to use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear assaults, and developing magic umbrellas to defend ourselves. It does not appear to be a strategy which can success in the long term.