Britain and the future of nuclear weapons

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*The author argues against the prevailing tendency among the nuclear powers to view their nuclear weapons capability as a continuing necessity. Addressing both the reservations of existing possessors of nuclear weapons about relinquishing them and the views of those countries that do not—or do not yet—have them, he puts the case for the abolition of all nuclear weapons, with the essential concomitant of a strengthened non-proliferation regime and greater reliance on conventional military force.**

The new disadvantages of nuclear weapons for the West

The international debate on the future of nuclear weapons and strategy has long suffered from a key defect: a failure to link the nuclear dimension of force with the conventional. Not all participants in the debate, of course, have neglected this linkage. Lord Carver and Sir Michael Howard drew attention over a decade ago to the opportunity costs in terms of conventional forces of Britain's adoption of the Trident missile system. But all too much of the analysis of nuclear strategy undertaken during the Cold War viewed the 'delicate balance of terror' as a thing unto itself. As a consequence, given that the Russians have taken over both the Soviet arsenal and the arms control treaty obligations of the USSR, many major governments still tend to act as if they believe that the nuclear scene has not changed very much, despite the tremendous decline in the conventional forces available to a potentially hostile government in Moscow.

Accordingly, all five publicly declared nuclear powers, the United States, Russia, Britain, China and France, are continuing much as before to maintain and modernize their nuclear weapons systems, within the framework of arms control agreements negotiated on a Cold War basis. France and China have

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active testing programmes, relevant authorities in the Pentagon are urging the resumption of nuclear tests, and it would be foolish to ignore the existence of such a lobby in the Russian defence ministry—or the British. The pressures brought to bear on the five nuclear powers by world opinion to scale back more radically during the recent debate on extension of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty achieved little if any effect.

Persistence by the declared nuclear weapons powers in this approach over the next decade will be very unwise. Adherence to the current line that nuclear weapons are both desirable and all-important determinants of security will lead the world, and the West in particular, into a less secure state, by encouraging others to develop nuclear weapons, and even threaten their use. The prime nuclear target in the world is no longer a Soviet Union equipped with superior conventional forces. The most likely initiator of nuclear threats (not to mention use) is no longer the NATO alliance. Instead the West, and the United States in particular, has become the most likely nuclear target. And the most likely initiators of nuclear threats or the use of nuclear weapons will not be large, well-staffed and well-advised governments who understand and worry deeply about the losses entailed in a nuclear conflict; rather, they will be desperate, hate-driven, small to medium-sized powers, or subnational groups, who see resort to nuclear force as their only option to break an international system which disfavours them, or to take revenge on a more powerful force which is subverting their power bases.

As tensions grow between the haves and have-nots in the international system, the dangers of nuclear threats, and even of use, are bound to increase. The number of nuclear and near-nuclear powers has continued to expand. The Cold War had an inhibiting effect through its all-embracing nature, its virtual global coverage and the discipline exerted by the superpowers over their followers and clients. The post-Cold War anarchy has removed many of these restraints and has created new powers, some of which have inherited nuclear weapons, and some of which have nuclear secrets, not to mention warheads, which they, or their corrupt servants, might be willing to trade for cash. The international system is still plagued by pockets of poverty and strife, frustration and hatred. The nature of the problem presented to humanity in this context is very different from that of the Cold War years.

But while the international political situation has been changing, the power of conventional weapons, particularly those of the West, has also leapt ahead. Now, in the late 1990s, if the West has to use force to meet, control or deter nuclear threats by lesser powers, it will almost certainly prefer to use conventional force rather than nuclear. As the Gulf War showed us, conventionally tipped weapons are now highly accurate, sophisticated in avoiding defences and very powerful in their destructive effect. At the same time they inflict far less collateral damage than nuclear weapons and do not infringe the valuable taboo on the deliberate use of nuclear weapons which has been observed since 1945. Deterrence is extremely difficult to achieve against

smaller, rogue powers and groups; but strong, modern conventional forces would seem to have a better prospect of making it credible than nuclear weapons. Their effectiveness is more readily demonstrated in tests, and from a political and moral standpoint Western powers face fewer inhibitions in using them for retaliation against aggression already committed than they would in considering the use of nuclear weapons.

Although Western public opinion is in a relatively quiescent state on nuclear weapons at present, it cannot be taken for granted that it will remain this way for long. The strong reaction in the Pacific to President Chirac's resumed testing programme is a harbinger of the outrage which would follow an American resumption of testing. Should the United States, Britain or France decide that a considerable sum of money has to be spent on modernization of nuclear forces, domestic opposition is likely to become strident once more. Anti-nuclear opinion during the Cold War placed firm limitations on the nuclear policies of Western governments. In the new context, given the absence of the Warsaw Pact conventional threat to NATO, the ranks of the nuclear dissenters may widen considerably, and the arguments which governments can deploy against them will be far thinner. It is surely better to think of ways to avoid that situation than to head unwittingly into it.

There are several other reasons for governments to reduce reliance on nuclear weapons for the maintenance of international security in the post-Cold War era. First is the possibility of a serious nuclear accident. The world thus far has been fortunate that existing national nuclear systems have suffered so few mishaps, and that the consequences of those accidents which have occurred have not been much worse. But now that part of the veil of secrecy over Cold War nuclear mishaps has been lifted, we can see more fully the dangers associated with human error and equipment failure—not to mention the growing danger of criminality. While we may be grateful for our good fortune thus far, we have no grounds for believing that it will continue for ever. As time goes by, particularly if nuclear weapons spread into the hands of the less technically capable, or the less tightly controlled and disciplined, the risks of serious damage resulting from accidental or unauthorized release of weapons will also rise.

Second, the huge stock of nuclear warheads, both obsolete and current, which exists in Russia presents a new form of threat: leakage into less scrupulous hands. In the old Soviet Union warheads were under tight control and effective management. In the divided and crumbling Russia of Boris Yeltsin, not to mention his possible successors, the effectiveness of control of warhead and fissile material is much more open to doubt, and therefore the potential consequences of leakage have to be taken very seriously by the West. The less permissive the external environment is to traffic in nuclear warheads the better are the prospects that effective control and security can be maintained by the Russian government.

Third, we also have to think about the problem of nuclear leverage, the implied blackmail which can be exerted by smaller powers against the West

through their threatening to develop nuclear forces. North Korea has given a clear example of what a determined small power which is willing to dance for years on the brink of proliferation can achieve. It has been promised a new nuclear power generation system to cost $4 billion, free fuel oil in the interim, emergency food supplies and, most importantly, a major improvement in its diplomatic status from that of pariah to that of full recognition by the United States. Meeting the North Korean threat and attempting to remove it has taken a huge diplomatic effort by the Clinton administration, and has consumed substantial amounts of the President's political capital. Handling several of these cases at once would be nigh impossible, even for the United States, and nobody else can substitute for its authority in these matters. Yet India, Pakistan, Israel, Iran and others can all bring such leverage to bear on Washington at short notice. Additional powers will be able to follow suit in later years.

Fourth, the commencement of nuclear proliferation in any one region heightens the attractiveness of nuclear weapons to other states of that region. The relationship between India and Pakistan is a worrisome example of what can occur. The fact that Israel's probable possession of nuclear weapons has not precipitated an Egyptian or Syrian nuclear programme is no cause for comfort when one thinks of what Iraq is now known to have done in the 1980s, and what Iran might very well do in the coming decade to develop a nuclear force. The spreading of nuclear weapons threatens not only Western security but also that of the states of the region to which they proliferate.

The control of all four problems is facilitated by the existence of a strict non-proliferation regime which permits close surveillance, publicly accuses suspected offenders and then moves quickly and effectively to bring them to judgement and, if necessary, sanctions. Such a regime will also assist in inhibiting the proliferation of biological and chemical weapons, and dissemination of sophisticated missile technology.

In sum, then, the real utility of nuclear weapons to the West during the Cold War lay in their deterrent effect to the use of any force, nuclear or conventional, by the Warsaw Pact against NATO. The size and capabilities of Warsaw Pact conventional forces, together with their holding of an advantageous starting point in central Germany, raised acute questions regarding the deterrent capability of NATO's conventional forces. The break-up of the Warsaw Pact, the weakening of Russia's conventional forces, and their departure from central Germany to a position 800 miles and two countries further to the east, has greatly eased (although not removed entirely) NATO's deterrent problem.

The old Warsaw Pact conventional force superiority has vanished with the Pact itself, and its former strategic point of assembly in central Europe is no longer available to an aggressor coming from the east. It is now more desirable and more feasible to base deterrence of Russia's use of its conventional forces against NATO, or against other powers under its protection, on NATO's own conventional forces. This is one of the most important new factors in the post-Cold War strategic environment governing the future of nuclear weapons. The

threat which is inherent in Russian nuclear weapons is better dealt with by extension of the approaches taken during the past two decades: building a context of transparency and trust, followed by a continuing process of reduction leading to eventual elimination under the aegis of the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty. Such a process places a reciprocal obligation on the United States, Britain and France to move towards nuclear disarmament; and the nettle of persuading China to participate also has to be grasped.

Clearly the world is in a new situation and these challenges have to be faced rationally, not shunned. Therefore we should begin to think very hard about the future of nuclear weapons, recognizing the new balance of dangers that they present for the West, and the decreased security dividend that the West derives from maintaining them in their current position of high prominence in our panoply of arms.

The many obstacles to change

Despite the above arguments, it has to be acknowledged that any radical move by the West away from its present degree of reliance on nuclear weapons is fraught with problems. These may be considered under two subheads: the problems caused by the existing nuclear powers; and the problems occasioned by growing national self-assertiveness and unwillingness to accept international authority.

The current attitudes of the five declared nuclear powers

As mentioned above, nuclear weapons are still seen by the British, French and US governments as playing a useful role in deterring possible use of Russian systems against the West. The converse also applies, of course. Given the uncertainties which exist regarding the political evolution of Russia, many argue that it would be unwise for the West to reduce reliance on its nuclear defences before the Russians formally agree to be bound to a process of planned reductions. Russia might revive some of its former conventional military might and threaten NATO powers, states under NATO protection or important Western interests in the Middle East and East Asia. A related problem is the possibility that Russia might fragment, leaving a nuclear arsenal, large or small, in the hands of a desperate faction which would not hesitate to blackmail other powers, by threat of using nuclear weapons, to come to their aid. Yet surely a Russia without nuclear weapons, even at the price of Western nuclear disarmament, will be much easier to live with, and, if necessary, to compete with militarily, given the change in the conventional force balance and the West's capabilities to rearm with even better conventional weapons.

Russia is not the only source of nuclear threat with which the West has to concern itself. China, although long a conventional military power only in a limited regional sense, has a wider nuclear capability. China's economic growth

may create both the means and a rationale for it to play a more dominant political and military role in the Asian–Pacific theatre. Russia, too, has to think about this possibility: as a neighbouring state, and likely to bear the brunt of Chinese attempts to influence its region more directly, Russia is unlikely ever to be relaxed about its security *vis-à-vis* China, despite the current state of amity between them. Russian memories are as long as those of the West, and we can all recall a long period of intense hostility between the two major communist powers in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. Despite some rhetoric to the contrary, the Russian government is likely to prefer to retain a sizeable nuclear deterrent capability against Chinese adventurism or arrogance.

China similarly is unlikely to feel that it can trust Russia sufficiently for it to do without nuclear weapons in the near term, and very probably also believes that a modern nuclear arsenal still gives it a useful status in Western eyes that could not be achieved otherwise. India's apprehensions regarding China, and Pakistan's security concerns regarding India, further complicate any formula for nuclear disarmament on the continent of Asia. The North Korean attempts to open a nuclear option for themselves are a reminder that China has several regional sources of anxiety and insecurity, including Taiwan, Japan and the states with claims in the South China Sea. While none of these states is especially likely to develop its own nuclear weapons (and their need for good relations with the United States gives Washington ample leverage to use against them should they attempt to step out of line), this may not fully reassure a China whose own relations with the United States could well be under strain at the same time as regional tensions with one or more of these neighbours are growing.

China has demonstrated frequently in the past 45 years that it has a strong sense of independence. The old 'Middle Kingdom' view of the world renders China less sensitive to the attitudes and strictures of others. China will take its decisions regarding nuclear weapons with scant regard as to whether its policies cause acute offence or concern to foreign powers. The essential question for China is whether its own survival and strength are made more or less likely by its nuclear weapons policy. At the same time, it should not be assumed that the Chinese answer to this question will always be the most obvious or direct one. Subtlety and indirection have often been notable components of Chinese security policy. All that can be said is that China will not discard or limit its nuclear weapons because the West urges it to do so. If it takes such steps it will do so only because that is the way it sees its interests as being best served.

The problem of Chinese nuclear weapons may take even longer to resolve than that of Russia's and the West's; and the possibility exists that China could wreck any comprehensive move towards nuclear disarmament. Nonetheless, when all is said and done, it is very difficult to see how the Chinese could see utility in being the sole remaining possessors of nuclear weapons in a world whose major powers could retaliate against anything China did with extremely powerful economic and conventional military measures. And the Chinese may

even mean what they have said in the past, namely that they would disarm if the other nuclear powers disarmed.

In Europe, France under President Chirac also seems a very unlikely partner in a major international programme of nuclear disarmament. This in itself is bound to have an influence on British official attitudes in the competition for influence in the gradually integrating European Union, in which the British position is sometimes paid scant regard. Possession of nuclear weapons might be seen increasingly by British leaders as one way of securing attention for their causes.

Britain and France face special problems in moving further towards nuclear disarmament. Despite all the controversy that these weapons have engendered in the national debates of each country, they are not so unpopular that either government or their most serious political opponents, currently see any political advantage in doing away with them. Each state has a long tradition of arguing that its own nuclear weapons are a hedge against failure of American resolve in a crisis, or that they offer the additional deterrent of a second centre of decision-making that any potential aggressor has to consider before striking. It would not be easy for governments of left or right in either country to swallow their own rhetoric of the past 40 years, particularly as they have let five years go by after the end of the Cold War without acknowledging any basic change in the international environment sufficient to make them recant. Also, substantial segments of both British and French political opinion still believe that nuclear weapons are vital to their country's status, preserving its place at top tables around the globe and ensuring that it continues to warrant permanent membership of the Security Council. As both have claimed for many years that their forces are at the minimum levels for viability and credibility, there are few easy options left such as the British government's recently announced programme to withdraw gravity nuclear bombs from the Royal Air Force in the next two years.

These arguments could not be met and vanquished quickly. Yet the security dividend, and the forgoing of further major expense on new generations of nuclear forces are powerful persuaders. If an international context emerges in which nuclear weapons are seen increasingly as irrelevant, many of these time-honoured British and French arguments will have no substance, and electorates will not be convinced to part with their taxes for new nuclear weapons.

Other NATO members also entertain fears about the resolve and dependability of the United States. In a more general sense there is unease that NATO will lose its essential cohesion and fall apart. This, it could be argued, would make European nuclear weapons extremely important for the preservation of security through deterrence. As the Cold War recedes and the US economy comes under increasing pressures from competitors, American voters are likely to feel increasingly reluctant to provide the security underpinning on which Europe has relied for so long. The resulting disengagement may not be total, but it could well create an environment in

which additional states, particularly Germany, might see a greater incentive for possessing their own nuclear weapons. Surely, it will be argued in these circumstances, Britain and France should not be thinking about giving up their own systems.

These concerns would have to be met by a strong and continuing effort on the part of the United States to demonstrate its commitment to Europe by greater European self-reliance in conventional forces, and by the application of hard logic to the question as to whether European security would be better served by the presence of nuclear weapons or their absence.

A second US-related problem is its desire to build a defensive system which can guard against nuclear attacks by small numbers of missiles or aircraft. Although the United States has expressed some readiness to extend this umbrella over its allies, there is room for doubts of both its willingness and its ability to provide such cover. If the rest of the world is expected to cope with the nuclear threat by abstaining from building nuclear weapons, why, many ask, is that not good enough for the United States? Possession of both the means of nuclear attack and a nuclear defensive capability speaks much more loudly to many other states than the American signature on the NPT. They believe that the United States is intent on having its cake and eating it at their expense.

To this it can be said that if there were general agreement to move towards nuclear disarmament, the US Congress would soon lose interest in funding a nuclear defence system on the scale that would be required to make a meaningful difference to the prospect of withstanding an enemy attack. American technological expertise would continue to be enhanced by the role the US would have to play in a more rigorous NPT regime. The prospect of any other state being able to gain a decisive lead on the United States in nuclear weapons, or in any other military field, cannot be anything but very low. And in the final analysis the possession of a modest nuclear defensive cover is not incompatible with accepting the obligations of nuclear disarmament although there would be a problem in convincing everyone that this is the case.

National reluctance to accept international authority

Since the end of the Cold War there has not been any impressive movement towards the establishment of a stronger, more peaceful and secure world order. In many parts of the world international authority is seen as either stifling (as in parts of Europe) or ineffective. It is difficult for most governments to argue the case for a strengthening of an international body and for growing dependence on its effectiveness. Yet this is what nuclear disarmament requires. Disarmament of any kind is a partial abnegation of national sovereignty. Nuclear weapons will not be surrendered without an extraordinary degree of confidence in the regime which has to police their absence. Clearly the late 1990s are not an auspicious time for initiating moves towards the general

abolition of nuclear weapons. But it has to be recognized that the problem will become worse as time goes by, and that a more rigorous programme of nuclear disarmament has to be initiated at some point.

Many governments still see nuclear weapons as important symbols of status. The less powerful a nuclear state is, the more some elements in its government will struggle to preserve its nuclear prestige. They are unlikely to be frank and open about their objectives and methods, but they will not give up without a major internal struggle taking place, in which they are defeated. This factor seems likely to become more important as nationalism reasserts itself, not only in Europe, but also in Asia and the Middle East.

Many fear that, in a world without nuclear weapons, a state which breaks out of nuclear disarmament might be able to exert more leverage than in a world where nuclear weapons are abundant. Kenneth Waltz's argument that more nuclear weapons powers may be better than fewer still has its adherents. Furthermore, some will argue, a world without nuclear weapons may be more prone to major conventional clashes which would be a bad thing in itself. There would be the additional possibility that an increase in the number or level of conventional conflicts would heighten incentives for one or more powers to bring back nuclear weapons in the hope of restoring stability. Both points have weight but there is even more force behind the arguments that a nuclear break-out power can be dealt with by other than nuclear means and that the real incentives for a state to build a nuclear weapons system are very open to debate, even within the most authoritarian of governments. There is no obvious logic for the case that more nuclear powers will bring about a greater degree of long-term stability. The fact that so many powers have signed the NPT would seem to suggest that few, if any, believe that general proliferation would be a good thing.

Some governments have argued that nuclear weapons also have value as a deterrent against the use of other forms of mass destruction such as chemical and biological weapons. The programmes of Saddam Hussein in these fields, and the recent use of poisonous gas on the Tokyo underground, demonstrate that these dangers are potent; and they may well become more so. If the argument that frustrated elements in disadvantaged parts of the world may turn their hands to nuclear weapons has weight, it also holds that these people may seek to use chemical and biological agents for influence or revenge. Some therefore will argue that nuclear weapons can play a very useful role against such groups' threats. This surely has to be seen as a weak reed: political means, backed by conventional force, are a much better way of handling this problem.

The widespread knowledge of how to build nuclear weapons of a rudimentary kind is a further impediment in the way of an agreed system of international nuclear disarmament. This knowledge is available to both governments and subnational groups. Thus there will always be possibilities that proliferation will occur, and powers which might be the targets of nuclear

threats or actual use will need to have some effective way of responding to these dangers. Some may believe that this can only be a countervailing nuclear force. Furthermore, the knowledge of how to build nuclear weapons will never be forgotten, even though the weapons themselves may no longer be produced. This is the most worrisome aspect of the discovery of how to use nuclear energy. This energy is now an enduring feature of human society, and to contain its less desirable consequences the international community will require an array of countermeasures. While some will be willing to trust the United States to develop and exert such countermeasures, others will insist that they should reside under their own national control. Again, while there is strength in this point, the fact remains that most governments have decided, and declared publicly, that a strong NPT regime is a better protection than an unconstrained world in which everyone is free to build nuclear weapons.

Advocates of strong national defences based on nuclear weapons will be able to tap new sources of public support in the years ahead. As public commentary on international bodies, especially the United Nations, becomes more critical, their authority is weakened. Disillusioned public opinion is more likely to take refuge in stronger national assertiveness, including military defences. Nationalist and isolationist political leaders may come increasingly to the fore. Unconvincing performance by regional bodies charged with upholding the peace is reinforcing this tendency, and may lead to a general weakening of the restraining and ordering capabilities of alliances and linkages such as the European Union and ASEAN. The line taken by John Redwood in challenging Prime Minister John Major for the Conservative Party leadership, and Major's defensive reactions, exemplify the growing visibility of this trend. But, as the result of that contest demonstrated, majority support is not yet on the side of those who would prefer to have fewer international obligations. And even Redwood did not attack the NPT in his campaign.

There is no doubt that the policing of a more rigorous non-proliferation regime will require a stronger form of international authority. Yet this seems to conflict with the upsurge of criticism of international bodies of most kinds: the United Nations is struggling to preserve authority even in its core capability as a peacekeeper; the European Union is feared and detested in several of its constituent states; NATO is in demand by states beyond its pale, but increasingly starved of resources by its existing members; regional organizations elsewhere, such as the Gulf Cooperation Council, the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation, the Organization of American States and the Organization of African Unity, are weak and growing less cohesive; and although new groupings are being formed, such as the Asian Pacific Economic Cooperation linkage, the problems in the way of endowing them with any real authority beyond that of their national constituent members are formidable. How then can the requirements of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty be credibly policed and upheld in the real world?

An associated difficulty for nuclear disarmament lies in the growing sensitivity of the less powerful states towards the intrusive surveillance which is

usually carried into effect by the equipment, and sometimes the official agencies, of the strongest power or powers. Probably only the United States has the necessary array of satellites, sensors and analytical systems necessary for the early detection of nuclear weapons experiments and developmental programmes. Yet the United States is a nuclear power. Why, many ask, should special authority and cooperation be accorded to Washington in the name of preventing others from doing what the United States already has done? Even if the policing authorities were broader in composition, and did not rely so heavily on the United States, they would surely be highly dependent on the capabilities of other governments with a nuclear iron already in the fire. The taint of hypocrisy further stiffens the resistance of insecure, status-conscious, developing states towards international surveillance which reveals to others matters that they keep secret from their own people.

The credibility of a strict, universal NPT regime will ultimately require a degree of self-policing. It will have to become permissible, even desirable, for citizens to be able to blow the whistle against their own governments if they believe seriously that political or military leaders are infringing national treaty obligations in this regard. While the granting and protection of such rights against the state are conceivable in liberal democracies, it is stretching credibility to believe that such rights will be accorded to the citizens of all states, especially ones such as North Korea and Iraq, which are the source of the most acute nuclear problems. Even in Western states, citizens who inform international bodies of the shortcomings of their own governments do not exactly have an easy time of it. Their motives are subject to open public debate and they can be targets for subtle but painful discrimination. In less open societies, it would be an extremely brave person who would be willing to step forward and declaim against an incipient nuclear programme which was protected by the most stringent state security legislation.

All these difficulties have to be faced. There is no escaping the fact that in a world where nuclear disarmament was the rule for all, the strictness of the non-proliferation regime would have to be increased. Greater sharing of authority within the regime would be essential to its political survival. States would have to be willing to permit their own citizens to bring serious charges if they had grounds for belief that their own governments were infringing the NPT. But not everything has to be done at once. It will take a generation at least simply to achieve nuclear disarmament, and many other collateral political changes will occur as democracy becomes more firmly rooted in most parts of the world.

Finally, in considering the realities of the 1990s, when political leadership everywhere tends to be weak and electorates are becoming increasingly self-centred, with a 'devil take the hindmost' approach to those afflicted with social or economic problems, why should anyone seriously believe that international society will be any better? Why would anyone have faith that political leaders will be willing to take the strong, unpopular decisions necessary to implement

the NPT rigorously while they hesitate over paying their dues to the United Nations, or to open their domestic markets to external competition? The lesson of the post-Cold War period in such matters is, in Tip O'Neill's words, that 'All politics is local politics'. The answer to these concerns is, of course, that nuclear weapons are not local issues. Their very existence creates a powerful incentive to look beyond the local, and only the most blinkered will not be aware of it. Political leaders will grapple with matters which appear to threaten their own and their nation's security.

The options for policy-makers

National governments, the British included, obviously face difficult choices in defining their stances on the future of nuclear weapons. The obstacles in the way of making any significant change are formidable; yet if nothing is done, at the least it seems highly probable that nuclear catastrophe will be visited on an unfortunate key Western city and its population, and at the worst the world will slide back to a situation of chronic instability, where the future of civilization itself is under threat from nuclear destruction. The range of policy options is, as Sir Michael Quinlan and Michael MccGwire have argued previously in this journal, essentially threefold: a high-salience nuclear world; a low-salience nuclear world; and a nuclear-weapons-free world.[1]

The first option, a high-salience nuclear world, is what we had during the Cold War, and in essence it continues to be the characteristic mode today. Few things can seize the headlines and the attention of Western political leaders as compellingly as nuclear weapons. North Korea has recently given a clear example of their effectiveness in this regard, reaping considerable political and material gains. Saddam Hussein bore some very negative consequences when he alarmed the principal nuclear powers and brought the combined weight of the United Nations and the International Atomic Energy Agency to bear on his nuclear weapons programme. Ukraine is a case in point of a state which has actually given up its nuclear option in return for tangible economic and political benefits. South Africa surrendered its nuclear weapons programme for no direct material rewards from the great powers, but inevitably President de Klerk must have been motivated by a desire to pre-empt the high costs that would have had to be paid in terms of damage to his objective of transferring power to a majority government.

The second option, a low-salience nuclear world, is what many would like to see, but it would be inevitably a transitional state. It involves acceptance of as much hypocrisy as occurs in the high-salience nuclear world—possibly even more. Unless this hypocrisy is eliminated by the relinquishing of nuclear

[1] Michael Quinlan, 'The future of nuclear weapons: policy for Western possessors', *International Affairs* 69: 3, 1993, pp. 485–96; Michael McCGwire, 'Is there a future for nuclear weapons?', *International Affairs* 70: 2, 1994, pp. 211–28.

weapons by the nuclear powers, i.e. by their adoption of the third option, it would prove unacceptable in the long term to some of the have-nots. Their movement to develop nuclear weapons would soon return the world to a condition where nuclear weapons had high salience. A low-salience nuclear world requires the non-nuclear powers to remain non-nuclear while those who have these weapons are permitted to continue to hold them, keeping them very much in the background, presumably even accepting a comprehensive test ban to keep them out of the public eye. A low-salience nuclear world should, by definition, offer no collateral benefits to the possessors of nuclear weapons. Thus it would be hard to justify the present coincidence between permanent membership of the Security Council and ownership of nuclear weapons. Also, the existing nuclear powers would be expected to commit themselves to a programme of radical reductions in their arsenals, moving towards a posture of 'minimum deterrence' in which, for example, the United States and Russia would each have only a few hundred warheads. It is almost as difficult to imagine the existing nuclear powers adopting this option sincerely as it is to believe that it would remain acceptable in the long term to all the non-nuclear powers.

The third option, a nuclear-weapons-free world, also requires some definitional attention. Even if all existing nuclear weapons were destroyed, that would not be the end of the problem, as North Korea and others have shown. A nuclear-weapons-free world also requires acceptance of highly intrusive surveillance of existing civil nuclear installations, and control of the dissemination of any form of technology which is part of the process of nuclear weapon creation. In other words, a nuclear-weapons-free world is not just a matter for national governments: it inevitably involves giving a substantial degree of authority to an international body, and maintaining an enforcement agency which has the power to expose and to punish violations. To become this serious about halting nuclear proliferation is to call into being a much stronger body than the current IAEA, because there could be no concessions made, as at present, to the declared nuclear weapons states.

Despite these difficulties, a non-nuclear world would remove the existing degree of hypocrisy and offer the durable basis of equality under international law. Problems of inspection would also be simpler: zero is easier to verify than a finite ceiling.

National policies: setting the long-term goal

The choice between these three options reduces to opting for either the first or the third. A low-salience nuclear world is not a stable state of affairs. The arguments in favour of doing nothing, as surveyed above, are formidably strong. Yet the case for moving away from the present high-salience nuclear world is even stronger. What is needed now is a sense of the direction to be taken, and then moves will have to be designed to wear down and overcome the obstacles one by one.

Just as the obstacles to change fall into two broad categories, so the advocates of change will have to orient their arguments and measures to address the concerns of these two different audiences.

The attitudes of all five declared nuclear weapons states are susceptible to logic. If they could agree on a phased advance towards nuclear disarmament, their deterrence-based arguments for maintaining nuclear weapons would become irrelevant, they would improve their own security and that of the world as a whole at the same time, and they would save money for more desirable ends. At the same time they would have to resolve to maintain conventional forces of such strength that they could effectively deter, defeat or disarm a rogue state which broke ranks and began to develop nuclear weapons.

Britain is well placed to play a leading role in the debate which has to precede any move towards radical nuclear disarmament. It is moving towards the final phase of a programme of nuclear modernization and can afford to mark time without having to decide whether to acquire further nuclear weapons for many years. If the attempt to reach general nuclear disarmament is unsuccessful, Britain can then fall back on what it has. Nuclear weapons do not excite the electorate or politicians in the same way that they do in France, making an act of international leadership of this kind more feasible for Britain. Given Britain's close links with NATO and the United States, British nuclear weapons play virtually no role in increasing Britain's security at present. There might even be a domestic political advantage for a major British party which takes up the cause of a nuclear-free world.

While none of the other four declared nuclear weapons powers is as free as Britain to lead the move towards disarmament, all have issued rhetorical pledges to give up nuclear weapons if the world can move towards their total abandonment. Obviously they will not all rush to honour those commitments, particularly the Chinese, who will remain thoroughly independent and narrowly self-focused in their approach. The French can also be expected to be totally unhelpful, but really they signify little as an independent nuclear power, and they are ultimately so susceptible to the influence of the United States and other members of the European Union that the other four could decide to proceed without France's agreement to join in the initial stages.

The second audience to be addressed, the wider international community, will also be difficult to convince. It is not that they are opposed in principle to nuclear disarmament (with the possible exception of one or two such as Israel), but general nuclear disarmament can take place only in the context of a strong and rigorous non-proliferation regime. As noted above, not every developing state will feel ready to cooperate to the full with the kind of surveillance and international policing which will be necessary to guard against hold-outs and break-outs. Checks and balances will have to be built into the NPT regime to reassure developing states that it will not be used as a means to subjugate them, but rather will give them greater equality in the global political system. Nor

must it be forgotten that nearly every government in the world has expressed a preference for the abolition of nuclear weapons. The task of reaching that goal will be extremely difficult, but it is after all a declared goal of many.

It is not the place of an article of this length to offer a complete refutation of all the objections which can be raised to the abolition of nuclear weapons. Indeed, it has to be admitted that many of these objections have enduring force. Whether they can or cannot be overcome will depend not only on logic but also on many external factors, such as whether or not any rogue nuclear programmes are detected in the near future, whether developments in surveillance technology will help reduce sensitivities about loss of national sovereignty, and whether key national political leaders will understand the dangers of continuing to live in a high-salience nuclear weapons world sufficiently to have the motivation to put a major effort into nuclear disarmament.

But, with the ending of the Cold War and the onset of greater global anarchy, we have crossed a Rubicon in terms of the utility of nuclear weapons. What was once believed by Western governments to be an asset has now become a danger. Security, as the Gulf War has shown, has returned to a closer linkage between the means of destruction and those causing aggression. Weapons of mass destruction look increasingly to be unusable by those who now have them. Highly modernized conventional forces and a stronger international system should be the guardians of our security, not the threat to emulate Samson and collapse the roof on top of ourselves—or, if not on ourselves, then on hundreds of thousands of innocents elsewhere.