



Global Security Newswire
by National Journal Group

Daily news on nuclear, biological and chemical weapons, terrorism and related issues.

Former Top Diplomat Says U.K. Might be Able To Cut Trident Sub

Friday, July 8, 2011

By Lee Michael Katz

Special to *Global Security Newswire*

LONDON -- The United Kingdom might be able to cut one of its four submarines armed with nuclear-tipped Trident ballistic missiles, according to the nation's former top diplomat (see *GSN*, June 30).

At issue is whether the British deterrent in the 21st century still calls for the current practice of keeping at least one of the nuclear-armed vessels deployed at all times, ex-Foreign Secretary Margaret Beckett told *Global Security Newswire* in June.

The debate centers around "whether continuous at-sea deterrence is any longer a stance that you need to maintain, or whether you can take a less immediate approach," Beckett noted in an interview. "It is an issue that people are increasingly discussing and examining. And given that," she said, "takes you in the direction of not necessarily needing four boats."

When the then-Labor Party government decided to modernize the small Trident fleet while Beckett was foreign secretary in 2006-7, the move was coupled with the idea that the United Kingdom would ultimately "explore" reducing the number of submarines, she said. The coalition government headed today by Prime Minister David Cameron is divided on the matter, with some key figures in Cameron's Conservative Party backing the status quo and the junior partner Liberal Democrats preferring a more limited alternative (see *GSN*, May 25).

Beckett also argued that the roughly 200 U.S. tactical nuclear weapons that analysts believe remain in the European theater are a relic of the Cold War face-off between the United States and Russia. While noting that their removal is a "sensitive" issue, both for U.S. allies and Moscow, "I think most people believe they are no longer of value," Beckett declared (see *GSN*, June 3).

As foreign secretary, Beckett was known for a landmark 2007 speech in Washington that put the British government on record as endorsing the idea of a world without nuclear weapons at some future time.

The former diplomat remains a Labor Party member of the British Parliament and is prominent in nuclear weapons reduction efforts. She is also part of a group of former top British officials supporting nonproliferation activities. In addition, Beckett is a member of the European Leadership Network for Multilateral Nuclear Disarmament and Nonproliferation. The organization of senior political, diplomatic and military figures crosses national boundaries to push disarmament efforts in Europe and around the world.

She offered insights on numerous issues in a lengthy interview with *GSN*. In edited excerpts below, Beckett discussed a host of issues including: the United Kingdom's nuclear modernization plan; British politics and nonproliferation; President Obama's nonproliferation agenda; the planned European missile shield; prospects for terrorism using weapons of mass destruction; and progress on her call for a world without nuclear weapons.

Q: What is your take on the U.K. plan for modernizing its nuclear deterrent? Do you support the one-for-one Trident submarine replacement, something less extensive, or just getting rid of the nuclear weapons entirely?

Beckett: We as a government, when I was foreign secretary, produced quite a substantial white paper as to whether we should have a strategic deterrent, and argued it through, and came to the conclusion that we ought to seek to replace Trident. But we did also say it looked as if there might be the possibility, with improved technology and so on, not to have a one-for-one replacement, but that you could maybe maintain the same stance with one boat less of four boats.

And the feeling was, it was a mixture of new possibilities with technology and perhaps new ways of working may give you the possibility. So, we didn't commit ourselves to that, but we certainly committed ourselves to looking at these very seriously and to proceeding on that basis if that looked possible. And we said that we would explore that, and as I understand, that is also the stance of the present government.

Q: Do you think it's possible to eliminate a Trident submarine? Would you like to see it?

Beckett: I think a lot of people will push for it if it looks possible. And, yes, I would certainly be among them.

There's an increasing amount of dialogue in the case of the United Kingdom, whether continuous at-sea deterrence is any longer a stance that you need to maintain, or whether you can take a less immediate approach. It is an issue that people are increasingly discussing and examining. And given that, again, that takes you in the direction of not necessarily needing four boats. It's very controversial, by the way. A lot of people will be very unhappy about not maintaining continuous at-sea deterrence.

Q: What is the most important part of the white paper that accompanied the modernization plan?

Beckett: There are two things that were very important about it. One was that we tried to put the basic arguments in the public domain, really, I think, rather for the first time. I mean, when many decades ago, a previous Labor government modernized the then-deterrent and went in for Trident, I think I'm right in saying that even the Cabinet weren't told [of the decision].

But the second thing that we thought was equally important, and I don't think anybody took seriously at the time except us, was the explicit commitment that while we do think it is right to consider modernizing our existing fleet, we also believe that this is time for a big push forward on nuclear disarmament. We were quite sincere about that as a government.

I'm quite certain that most people thought that was just a fop for those who didn't want the deterrent to be modernized, but simply wanted to get rid of it. All of whom were absolutely astounded when we then did indeed commit ourselves to the long-term goal of a world without nuclear weapons and joined in the drive to promote the notion of much greater moves toward nuclear disarmament. To which, of course, we said we would be prepared to commit our own weapons in time.

We also reduced the number of warheads that we had deployed. And the present government has reduced them still further.

Q: So, while obviously, there are political differences between different parties, between the governments, you see these reduction efforts continuing?

Beckett: I do have confidence that the present government will continue this path. And as I say, in fact, since they came to power, [current Foreign Secretary] William Hague has announced a reduction in the number of warheads.

Q: In 2007, you delivered your landmark speech lending British government backing to the notion of a world without nuclear weapons. What have you done to follow up on that goal?

Beckett: Almost the last thing I did as foreign secretary was to make the speech about this issue in Washington on behalf of the government in committing the then-government to moves toward nuclear disarmament. And in the aftermath of that, [former U.S. Secretaries of State and Defense] George Shultz, and William Perry approached me and said it was very encouraging to them to have people who were in government saying that they agreed on the need to pursue this goal of a world without nuclear weapons.

By then, I was out of government. And they asked me if I would try to convene a group in this country which was, as theirs is, a nonpartisan group composed of people who had held relevant experience at the top level. And who therefore spoke from a different standpoint from the admirable people who just as idealists have campaigned on these issues for a long time.

So, we have set up this cross-party group. We call ourselves "The Top-Level Group" because we can't think of a better title. And we are all pretty much former foreign secretaries, former defense secretaries; we've got a former chief of general staff, and so on. We had clearance from the now-prime minister, the now-foreign secretary, from the now-defense secretary. They were cool with having such a group which contained senior politicians from their own side.

And we have just some months ago, also reached out to a European network. Again, we're talking about people who've been foreign minister, defense minister, president, prime minister, whatever. People who have had to contemplate these issues. There is now a European network set up with its own identity.

Q: There are plans for a private consortium headed by U.S. contractor Lockheed Martin to take a management role at the Royal Navy Armaments Depot Coulport in Scotland. The privatization issue is causing a fair amount of controversy. There are people who say a contractor shouldn't be running such operations related to national security. What do you think? (see GSN, May 31).

Beckett: I think these are difficult issues. There's always sensitivity. Without any disrespect to Lockheed, my own preference is always for control to be as much as possible in the hands of British nationals and British companies. But as I say, these are things the present government will have to consider. I think it depends on how real the alternative is.

Q: What do you think of President Obama's leadership on nonproliferation?

Beckett: I applaud it very much. His Prague speech was a big stepping stone for a lot of people.

While obviously people are keen for even more steps to be taken, the New START [treaty] with Russia and the fact that he has committed the American government to try to work towards ratifying the test ban treaty and the fissile materials treaty, both of which have been under discussion for a very long time. These things take time, we all understand that - but the fact that these are goals he believes are right for America, I find very encouraging.

Q: What do you think of the new U.S.-Russia START treaty? (see GSN, June 2).

Beckett: It's a step in the right direction. People would have liked to see more, but everybody understands that these things do take time. But we all hope it won't be the last such treaty.

Q: What about the CTBT, the nuclear test ban treaty? Do you feel that the United States is moving fast enough? (see GSN, May 11).

Beckett: No, no, I'm not suggesting that there are fast moves or that there's any likelihood of getting a majority for it at the present time. But the fact that the president has indicated he thinks this is in America's long-term interest and is prepared to work on these issues in the quiet sort of way that you have to do, as I understand it, to stand a chance of getting any kind of agreement in the United States. It's something that requires quiet and thorough work over a period of time. But the question is, are you

prepared to try and put in that work or not? And my understanding is that his administration is prepared to try and put in that work without having any illusions about the fact that it's going to happen next month.

Q: You're not disappointed that they're not moving quickly?

Beckett: Well, one is always regretful, but, you know, the reality of an agreement at some point is better than pushing your luck and having no agreement and turning things sour.

Q: Although the Cold War is over, tactical nuclear weapons are still available for the European theater. Russia is believed to have many more tactical nukes than the U.S. How do you feel about the role of those weapons?

Beckett: I'm very well aware they're a very sensitive issue for Russia. They're certainly sensitive for the United States in that, as you say, Russia obviously has far more. And it's a good example of one of those issues which is still quite delicate.

I think most people believe that they are no longer of value except that obviously having anything like that lying around the place is a risk. There's an anxious dialogue going on about whether or not this is part of the concept of extended deterrence. And whether there are other ways in which those who do not themselves have nuclear weapons can be reassured in the strength of the alliances they have other than having these particular weapons deployed on their soil.

But I'm very conscious it is a very delicate issue because I referred to the group that we have here. I will not disguise from you that in that group, although I think probably most people, certainly maybe a majority of us do think that they are a weapon whose useful time has passed, it is something about which there are strong feelings. And there are those who very much disagree and who believe that it is diplomatically, a risk to start to move on them. A risk of destabilizing the balance of deterrence that has existed so far and reducing the confidence of some of those who look to others as their shield, if you like. ... But I would see it as a diplomatic sensitivity as much as and perhaps more than defense sensitivity.

Q: How do you feel about the situation with the planned U.S. missile shield for Europe in light of Russia's continued resistance (see GSN, July 6).

Beckett: I think we'll have to recognize Russia's particular anxieties. When the missile shield was originally being pursued and much more recently in discussions about it, they felt that no matter what anyone said, that it was actually in some way potentially directed at them. And I think anything we and other members of NATO can do to convince them that is not the case and that this is a development that could be beneficial for everybody, I think that would be a useful and constructive contribution. So, anything that can be done to encourage everyone to see the potential of such technology for the benefit of everyone who isn't going to want to blow up the rest of the world. It's in the diplomatic area, I suppose, that perhaps the U.K. can make a contribution.

Q: Do you think a new missile shield agreement with between Russia and NATO is something that's going to happen soon?

Beckett: I'm always very cynical about how long all these things will take. They're talking about things that take time but nevertheless that are not impossible.

Q: What do you expect at the next NPT review conference?

Beckett: It's very hard to know what to expect because a huge amount will depend on whether we have been able to make progress which is visible and accepted by non-nuclear weapons states. This last NPT review conference seems to have gone not too badly, although not as well as some would have hoped. The previous one [in 2005], from what I understand, was a bit of a disaster, made no real progress and made people feel there wasn't any progress and wasn't going to be. And of course, this is a particular matter of concern for two main reasons.

First of all, because although there hasn't been anything like the proliferation of nuclear weapons that people expected when the NPT was first signed, we have seen sort of more worrying developments more recently of new states acquiring nuclear weapons. We've also seen a much greater risk of proliferation which comes from what has been and may still be, despite the Japanese earthquake, a big move toward civil nuclear power in part because of climate change. Now, that's not necessarily a bad thing in itself. But if what it means is there's far more material lying about the place, obviously that's an issue of concern.

Q: The International Atomic Energy Agency recently issued a report in which it said an Israeli-bombed Syrian site did appear to be a nuclear reactor. Are you concerned? (see GSN, July 5).

Beckett: Obviously. And I think any further spread of nuclear weapons is something which we ought to be trying to avoid, and especially, frankly, in the Middle East.

Q: How do you think the IAEA is doing or functioning? Former head Mohamed ElBaradei was considered not as pro-Western, perhaps, as his successor, Yukiya Amano.

Beckett: Dr. ElBaradei was respected in many quarters, but I don't think anybody would have sort of said he was on our side. But then he's not required to be. He was an international civil servant. But I think our general feeling is that we'd like to see the IAEA strengthened because it's hard to see what alternative body there is ... on some of these issues.

Q: I once interviewed someone who described the IAEA as an official watchdog that barks but does not bite. Do you agree with that?

Beckett: I think there is some truth in that. Most of us in the U.K. would quite like to see it strengthened.

Q: What do you see as the prospect of nuclear terrorism?

Beckett: Really hard to judge. I mean, it's like all of these other things. One has to be conscious that it's a risk. It's such an apocalyptic sort of thing that everybody finds it hard to imagine that there are people of the world who would be prepared to do such a thing. But on the other hand, I think it would be unrealistic to assume that there aren't.

Q: With Osama bin Laden dead, do you think the threat of al-Qaeda trying to obtain, develop and use nuclear weapons is over?

Beckett: No, anymore than al-Qaeda's over. I don't discount anything. I think there are people who would contemplate things that most of us would be astounded by and horrified by -- and we are wise to recognize that (see related *GSN* story, today).

Q: Are you worried also about terrorism issues connected to nuclear power?

Beckett: Of course. I mean, we know some of the people who wish all of our countries harm would like nothing better than to get their hands on nuclear material and have tried--and no doubt are still trying.

I would say there are three areas of concern for me. First of all, is the fact that we have started to see a spread of nuclear weapons. And we've started to see the possibility of a greater accessibility of nuclear material because of civil nuclear power, although, whether the Japanese earthquake will make a difference to that remains to be seen.

But the third area that personally is just as worrying is around the time of the NPT review conference, we saw some attitudes in the dialogue in this country, for example, and elsewhere which I would characterize personally as utterly frivolous. In fact, if you like, contemptibly frivolous, from people who probably would like to see a world without nuclear weapons but who started to say things like, "Well, you know, if the present P-5 [permanent U.N. Security Council members] can have nuclear weapons, why shouldn't other people have them? It's only fair."

As if these things are pea shooters. And that isn't widespread, but the fact that it appears at all in mature democracies, is somewhat alarming.

Q: What kind of impact did President Obama's similar endorsement to yours on the prospect of a world without nuclear weapons someday have on the other governments in other countries?

Beckett: Tremendous. Because people thought that, you know, maybe an American president wouldn't feel able or prepared to say such a thing. And so, I think it had a big impact ... that was massive across the world.

Q: You are 68. Do you think you will see the removal of nuclear weapons in your lifetime?

Beckett: Probably not. I do say in my own speech at the end, it might take longer than I have left. Although, you know, it would be a wonderful thing to see.