

The Future of the Strategic Nuclear Deterrent: The Strategic Context

An Inquiry by the United Kingdom Parliament Defence Committee

Memorandum by the Nuclear Free Local Authorities (NFLA) Steering Committee

Introduction

1. The NFLA Steering Committee has the support of 72 Local Authorities throughout the UK including the City Councils of Glasgow, Edinburgh, Leeds, Manchester and the Greater London Authority. Throughout its 25 year existence the NFLAs have campaigned for the abolition of nuclear weapons believing it to be in the interests of the communities they serve.

Proliferation

2. NFLAs are concerned about the implications of nuclear proliferation and believe current UK Government policy fails to send clear and consistent messages to the international community regarding this. The Government asserted in its 2003 Defence White Paper that it was “committed to working towards a safer world in which there is no requirement for nuclear weapons.” The Government regularly asserts its commitment to the articles of the Nuclear Non Proliferation Treaty (NPT). At the NPT Review Conference in May 2000 it agreed to an “unequivocal undertaking by all the nuclear weapon states to accomplish the total elimination of their nuclear arsenals leading to nuclear disarmament.” Yet the Government now chooses to open a debate about maintaining a strategic deterrent beyond Trident. Raising the question now of whether and if so how to maintain the UK nuclear deterrent beyond Trident sends a message to the wider world that the UK is insincere in its commitment to nuclear non proliferation.
3. Between now and 2008 the Government has committed £1.5bn to the development of the Aldermaston plant to maintain the operability of the current nuclear weapons stockpile and keep the door open for a new nuclear weapons programme. This development will not go unnoticed in

States accused by the UK Government of having nuclear weapons aspirations.

4. In 2004 the Government renewed for a further 10 years the 1958 Agreement with the USA for *Cooperation on the Uses of Atomic Energy for Mutual Defense Purposes*. Again, this will not go unnoticed overseas. It sends another signal to the international community that the UK does not take its non-proliferation obligations seriously.

Nuclear Reprocessing

5. A continuing Government commitment to supporting nuclear fuel cycle services, through public funding via the newly created Nuclear Decommissioning Authority (NDA), must also be viewed in its strategic context. UK Government diplomatic engagement with other States, where there is concern about nuclear aspirations, is unlikely to carry any moral force because we seek to deny to others what we seek for ourselves. The same is true of all countries that possess nuclear fuel cycle facilities but seek to deny them to other States.
6. The NFLAs in response to the recent public consultation by the Nuclear Decommissioning Authority on its Draft Strategy urged an open and transparent public consultation on the future of the THORP reprocessing plant at Sellafield that is currently closed due to an accident and now several years behind its reprocessing schedule. In our view, the proliferation implications of plants like Sellafield must be weighed more seriously by Government.

Sellafield MOX Plant

7. Completion of the current UK spent fuel reprocessing programme will give rise to a UK plutonium stockpile around 100 tonnes. NFLAs have submitted to the Committee on Radioactive Waste Management that this plutonium be declared a waste form and taken into account in future UK radioactive waste management policy. Additional plutonium has been separated through reprocessing spent fuel from overseas. Overseas plutonium is now being converted to MOX fuel for return to countries of origin. NFLAs consider this to be a serious proliferation danger, providing weapons usable material to several countries, and risking theft and diversion during transportation by organised sub-state groups.

NFLAs, in response to the NDA's consultation on its Draft Strategy, urged that the case for continued operation of the Sellafield MOX Plant be openly and transparently justified. In our view Government must weigh more seriously how the activities it permits are viewed from overseas. In our view, an international plutonium trade operated out of the Sellafield site invites nuclear proliferation.

Burden of risk

8. The costs to the UK do not end here. The infrastructure developed to maintain the UK's nuclear weapons programme and nuclear fuel cycle programmes significantly contribute to the burden of radioactive waste that will require management for generations to come. Transportation of warhead components between Aldermaston, Berkshire, and Coulport on the Clyde estuary, and transfers of spent nuclear fuel by rail from nuclear stations to Sellafield imposes a burden of risk on all the communities through which such transports pass. In a 'post 9/11' world these burdens are increased by the potential for terrorism.

Illegality

9. The International Court of Justice in 1996 delivered an advisory opinion that generally in international law the use or threatened use of nuclear weapons is illegal because these weapons are indiscriminate and grossly disproportionate in effect. What is known of the US *Doctrine for Joint Theater Nuclear Operations* shows nuclear targeting includes communications infrastructure and industry. Such targets will be predominantly located in centres of civilian population. It is understood that UK nuclear targeting is integrated into US and NATO nuclear strategy. If this is the case then UK nuclear weapons will also be targeted on centres of civilian population. As the experience of Hiroshima and Nagasaki informs us, this is a truly appalling prospect.

Conclusion

10. The NFLAs consider there is a serious disjunction between stated Government policy and its deeds. This disjunction will be recognised in the wider world and exploited by those who would seek a nuclear weapons capability. The same is true of all States that possess nuclear weapons but call for nuclear restraint. The NFLAs wish to see a strong

Government policy commitment towards nuclear non-proliferation underwritten by our deeds. A Government commitment not to extend the strategic nuclear deterrent beyond the life of Trident could be the starting point for a much wider review of foreign policy and the active leadership role the UK Government can play in securing a safer future.

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