STATEMENT ON NUCLEAR DISARMAMENT

By

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Please check against delivery
Madam President

The United Kingdom aligns itself with the intervention just delivered on behalf of the European Union.

Nuclear disarmament is a very important topic for the United Kingdom and the Conference on Disarmament is the pre-eminent forum in which the international community addresses nuclear disarmament, so there is much to say. In the interests of time, I will circulate the entire speech but summarise the key points orally.

The United Kingdom has long been committed to the goal of a world without nuclear weapons. We continue to play an active role in helping to build an international environment in which no state feels the need to possess nuclear weapons. Sadly, we are not there yet. There are still substantial nuclear arsenals, the number of nuclear-armed states has increased rather than decreased, and there is a significant risk of new nuclear-armed states emerging. Several countries that either have nuclear weapons or are trying to acquire them are in regions that suffer from serious instability or are subject to significant regional tensions, so there is still the potential for a new nuclear threat to emerge despite the end of the Cold War.

While there continue to be significant risks of further proliferation and while other states retain much larger nuclear weapons arsenals, we have been clear that the United Kingdom will retain a minimum credible nuclear deterrent as the ultimate guarantee of our security.

In 2007, the United Kingdom Parliament debated, and approved by a clear majority, the decision to continue with the programme to renew the UK’s nuclear deterrent. The Government set out in the 2010 strategic defence and security review that the UK would maintain a continuous submarine-based deterrent and begin the work of replacing its existing submarines which are due to leave service in the 2020s. This remains the UK Government’s policy.

A study known as the Trident Alternatives Study is ongoing and is due to report to the UK Prime Minister and Deputy Prime Minister in the first half of 2013. It is too early to speculate about the conclusions of The Trident Alternatives Study. An unclassified document on the Trident Alternatives Study will be published in due course.

Madam President

This then is our policy on our nuclear deterrent. Let me speak now about disarmament. People sometimes ask the United Kingdom to take action to match our words. The record shows that we have already taken significant actions. We have moved from living in a world of tens of thousands of nuclear warheads, standing to fire at a moment’s notice during the Cold War, to a world in which the major nuclear weapons states have significantly reduced their arsenals, have stopped targeting them at anyone and have reduced their operational readiness. More recently, in 2010 we saw the signing of the new START agreement between the United States and Russia, holders of the largest nuclear stockpiles by far. Under that treaty, both countries agreed to reduce the number of strategic nuclear missile launchers by half and to limit the number of deployed strategic nuclear warheads to a figure nearly two-thirds lower than that agreed in 1991.

In the same year, we saw the agreement of the first ever Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty action plan, in which all 189 signatories reaffirmed their commitment to the treaty and committed to making tangible progress towards our shared goal of a world without nuclear weapons. Under that plan, nuclear weapons states all committed to making concrete progress on the steps leading to nuclear disarmament, including reducing the overall global stockpile and reducing further the role and significance of nuclear weapons in our military doctrines. Next year – at the third NPT Preparatory Committee in New York, we will set out publicly how we have made progress on this action plan.

Madam President.

The UK’s own record on nuclear disarmament is strong.
We have greatly reduced the number of our nuclear weapons since the end of the Cold War. For almost 20 years now, our nuclear weapons have been de-targeted and placed on several days' notice to fire. We have built on that strong record, announcing in our 2010 strategic defence and security review that we are reducing our requirements for operationally available warheads from fewer than 160 to no more than 120, reducing our overall stockpile to no more than 180 and reducing the number of warheads on board our submarines from 48 to 40 and the number of operational missiles to no more than eight. Our policy is to have the minimum credible deterrent and that the UK would consider using nuclear weapons only in extreme circumstances of self-defence, including the defence of our NATO allies.

Of course unilateral actions alone will not produce the results that the world expects and demands. It is only through moving forward together, through balanced and reciprocal disarmament, that we will achieve a world without nuclear weapons. We can achieve this only by building trust between states that will convince all of them that they can safely disarm.

That is why the UK instigated a dialogue among the P5 states in London in 2009, when we reaffirmed our unconditional support for the non-proliferation treaty and engaged in meaningful dialogue-as mentioned by the noble Lord opposite-aimed at building the mutual understanding needed to help us take forward our shared disarmament commitments. Since then, we have held further dialogues, in Paris in 2011 and Washington last year, and met in between to discuss disarmament issues.

The P5 will hold a fourth conference, hosted by Russia, in April this year. In order to maximise the value of this ongoing dialogue, it will be important to maintain momentum at that next conference. We will need to be able to demonstrate progress across a range of issues, especially on our plans to report on the commitments we all made in the 2010 NPT action plan. It is an issue on which the international community is looking to the P5 to provide a lead, and the UK will be at the heart of the efforts to achieve this.

Madam President

Building confidence between nuclear weapons states and non-nuclear weapon states is equally important if we are to find a realistic route towards global disarmament. To that end, we have been conducting ground-breaking work with Norway on the verification of warhead dismantlement, which will be a crucial aspect of any future global disarmament regime. This initiative has been the first time that a nuclear weapons state has engaged in such an open way with a non-nuclear weapons state on such a sensitive issue.

Both we and Norway have learnt a huge amount through this initiative about how nuclear and non-nuclear weapons states can work together effectively in pursuit of our shared goal. We have shared what we have learnt so far with the P5, and with a range of non-nuclear weapons states, and we will continue to share developments as we move forward. Building on this first, we are in consultations with Brazil about establishing a disarmament-focused dialogue. We see such dialogues with non-nuclear weapons states as a crucial part of our contribution towards building the right environment for multilateral disarmament.

Madam President

Today many countries are gathering in Oslo to discuss the humanitarian consequences of a nuclear detonation. The UK, and the rest of the P5 are not attending, and I want to set out why.

As I have already said, the UK remains firmly committed to the goal of a world without nuclear weapons, and our decision on attendance this week does not change this at all.

The topic under discussion in Oslo is a serious one. We do understand the serious consequences of nuclear weapon use and will continue to give the highest priority to avoiding such contingencies.

It is in the interest of all nations to assure that nuclear war should never be fought, for there can be no winners in such a conflict.
We think that at this time all our efforts should be focussed on getting the Conference on Disarmament back to work, so that we can adopt a comprehensive Programme of Work, which will allow us to move forward on nuclear disarmament. For the UK, the negotiation of Fissile Material Cut Off Treaty is our top priority but we have shown great flexibility in our response to CD Presidents when they have asked us to agree to something a little different from our preferred Programme of Work. We are not blocking multilateral nuclear disarmament.

We fully respect those who campaign against nuclear weapons but we disagree on the issue of the legitimacy of nuclear weapons and that a ban on such weapons is the right way to move us closer to the complete elimination of nuclear weapons. We are concerned that the Oslo event will divert attention and discussion away from what has been proven to be the most effective means of reducing nuclear dangers – a practical, step-by-step approach that includes all those who hold nuclear weapons. Only in this way could we realistically achieve a world without nuclear weapons.

We also believe that all NPT Members have a duty to focus on the implementation of the actions from the NPT Action Plan in 2010, on disarmament, on non-proliferation and on peaceful uses. We are half way through the NPT’s five-year cycle but some appear already to have abandoned the Action Plan, convening alternative processes which will divide the international community. The most effective way to implement that NPT Action Plan would be to break the stalemate in the Conference on Disarmament.

Madam President

One other very important outcome from NPT Review Conference in 2010 was the decision on the Middle East.

I wish to refer to a statement by the Foreign Office Minister Mr Alastair Burt last November in which he said “The British Government supports the objective of a Weapons of Mass Destruction Free Zone in the Middle East. We regret that it will not be possible to convene a successful conference to be attended by all states of the region as planned in 2012. More preparation and direct engagement between states of the region will be necessary to secure arrangements that are satisfactory to all”.

He continued ...

“We support the convening of a conference as soon as possible. We endorse fully the work of the Conference Facilitator ... to build consensus on next steps ... We will continue to work with our fellow convenors (the US, Russia, and the UN), with the Facilitator, and with countries of the region, to meet our undertakings to convene a conference on this important issue, as soon as possible”.

In that connection, the UK understands that Ambassador Laajava hopes to bring together states of the Middle East for multilateral consultations in order to prepare for the Conference itself. Those consultations could be a bridge to the Conference and a bridge to bring together regional parties. Not the final step, but a first step.

Madam President

As well as improving collective trust and understanding, we need to continue our efforts to make it as difficult as possible to develop and produce nuclear weapons, particularly by those who pose a threat to global security. On this the UK is making a strong contribution. We have signed and ratified the comprehensive test ban treaty. We are vocal campaigners for the entry into force of the treaty. We continue to actively support the need to negotiate an international fissile material cut-off treaty, which would put an end to the future production of the material needed to make nuclear weapons. We are firm supporters, too, of nuclear weapons free zones, which literally shrink the geographical space within which nuclear weapons can exist.

The UK has signed and ratified the protocols to three nuclear weapons free zones, in South America and the Caribbean, in Africa and in the South Pacific, and is working hard with ASEAN and PS partners to sign the protocol to the Treaty of Bangkok. We support the objective of a weapons of mass destruction free zone in the Middle East, as I have already mentioned, and we continue to push for the convening of that conference.
Madam President

The UK is also active in seeking to reduce the risk of proliferation from the civil nuclear sector, and strongly supports a universal safeguards system to uphold the NPT's non-proliferation regime. The IAEA's comprehensive safeguards agreement and additional protocol should be the universal verification standard for all NPT state parties. We continue to urge all those who have not yet done so to sign and ratify it.

The risks of proliferation are all too real. The international community was reminded of this following North Korea's most recent nuclear test, on which the United Kingdom commented in this chamber last month. We, with our E3+3 partners, continue to pursue negotiations with Iran, and hope Iran will respond positively to the E3 plus 3 offer made in Almaty. Urgent, concrete steps need to be taken by Iran to allow progress.

The risk of new states acquiring nuclear weapons is grave—but so, too, is the risk of sensitive knowledge and materials falling into the hands of non-state actors. The UK played a key role at last year's Seoul nuclear security summit and remains committed to shaping the direction of global nuclear security. Our G8 presidency will see us chair the Global Partnership Against the Spread of Weapons and Materials of Mass Destruction.

This 25-country partnership channels around $2 billion per year to programmes to counter proliferation risks. In 2012, UK contributions helped secure 775 bombs' worth of fissile material in Kazakhstan; create new jobs for 3,000 former Soviet Union weapon scientists; and, through collaboration with the IAEA, deliver physical protection upgrades and nuclear and biological security training around the world.

In conclusion, the UK strongly supports the goal of a world without nuclear weapons and is active in helping to build the international environment that we hope will deliver this. We have shown leadership in reducing our own nuclear weapons capabilities and in offering reassurances about the very limited and discrete circumstances in which we may contemplate their use. We are working hard to build the trust needed between nuclear weapons states to make progress multilaterally; we are engaging with non-nuclear weapons states to try to take positive, concrete steps forward; and we are firmly committed to putting in place the practical building blocks that will support multilateral disarmament by making it as difficult as possible to develop and produce nuclear weapons. The CTBT, a fissile material cut-off treaty and the strengthening of non-proliferation and nuclear security regimes are all areas in which we work. Our contribution towards the goal of multilateral disarmament is and will continue to be strong. We will take every opportunity to pursue our resolute commitment to a world without nuclear weapons.