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The Importance of Political Leadership in Achieving a World Free of Nuclear Weapons

Des Browne, Shatabhisha Shetty and Andrew Somerville

Abstract

The dramatic injection of energy into the debate over the importance of nuclear disarmament in recent years presents a historic opportunity to make the world safer from the unacceptable risks posed by its most powerful weapons. We cannot allow this moment to pass. The positive steps taken by President Obama have added crucial momentum to the disarmament and non-proliferation agenda, but we cannot rely on him alone. No one leader, regardless of their vision, can carry such a burden. After the years of nuclear atrophy since the end of the Cold War, a sustained effort is needed at the highest levels to reverse the damage done by successive failures of political leadership. This article outlines the key features of political leadership, explains its importance, examines historical instances of leadership and highlights instances of successful political leadership. In this multi-polar world, it is only through multilateral action that we can achieve a world free of nuclear weapons, and this requires proactive multilateral political leadership.

Keywords: *non-proliferation, nuclear disarmament, nuclear weapons, political leadership*

Introduction

Forty-three years ago, as the finishing touches to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty were being approved, Robert Neild delivered the Annual Lecture of the David Davies Memorial Institute of International Studies. His lecture was entitled 'What Has Happened to Disarmament?' The lecture drew attention to the fact that despite the apparent progress made by the international community in reaching agreements and signing treaties—the ongoing negotiation of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, the ratification of the Partial Test Ban Treaty and the creation of a Latin American Nuclear Weapon Free Zone—the threat from nuclear weapons had increased, and the probability of their intentional or unintentional use was becoming ever greater. Neild argued that the responsibility for this apparent contradiction lay squarely with political leadership. He criticised their lack of real movement in disarmament.¹ He was right to do so and he would almost certainly repeat that accusation about the majority of current and recent political leaders.

But in recent years, thanks to the leadership of a few, there has been a dramatic injection of energy promising concrete achievements in multilateral nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation. From being an ambition which polarised opinion – perceived as unrealistic and unachievable, with its advocates dismissed as dreamers and radicals – multilateral disarmament has recently received strengthening

endorsement from senior members of the political and military establishment, whose own personal histories mean that they cannot be so easily dismissed. Statesmen with strong defence credentials have emphasised the importance and urgency of nuclear disarmament. These leaders notably include former US Cold War warriors, the quartet of Kissinger, Nunn, Perry and Shultz, with their 2007 and 2008 co-authored *Wall Street Journal* op-ed pieces² and the subsequent formation of their Nuclear Security Project. In the UK, former Foreign Secretary Margaret Beckett,³ former Defence Secretary Des Browne⁴ and former Prime Minister Gordon Brown⁵ repeated the pledge to put Britain at the forefront of this endeavour. More significantly, President Obama's Prague declaration of support for a world without nuclear weapons, his chairing of the September 2009 United Nations Security Council meeting and the integration of his rhetoric in the US Nuclear Posture Review have galvanised the multilateral disarmament movement. Whilst these developments suggest that politicians are becoming gradually re-engaged in the nuclear issue and take disarmament seriously, we cannot be complacent that this momentum will be maintained without further effort. The state of affairs Neild described in 1967 has obvious parallels with today. Without hard work, action, continued pressure and substantive political leadership, the world, considerably sooner than in another 40 years, may find itself closer to destruction than we are at present.

As the former Russian President Mikhail Gorbachev wrote in the *Wall Street Journal*:

In fact, we have seen a failure of political leadership, which proved incapable of seizing the opportunities opened by the end of the Cold War. This glaring failure has allowed nuclear weapons and their proliferation to pose a continuing, growing threat to mankind.⁶

Such failures can only be redressed with strong commitments to multilateral disarmament through concerted global political leadership. In this article, we outline the features of leadership, explain why it is important, examine historical instances of leadership and highlight instances of successful political leadership. We conclude by describing the efforts of senior leadership in the UK and Europe, as well as the newly emerging globalised political networks. We believe that states and leaders cannot continue to look to others to provide this effort and neither can we depend on one lone leader, irrespective of how powerful he or she may be, to drive this agenda forward. A multipolar world requires multilateral action to achieve a world free of nuclear weapons, which in turn requires genuine multilateral political leadership.

The duty of leadership

According to the presidential biographer James MacGregor Burns, 'Leadership is one of the most observed and least understood phenomena on earth.'⁷ Attempts have been made in numerous fields to examine and model leadership, yet it still

remains a concept that is difficult to define. Even so, leadership plays an essential role in international affairs to such an extent that in many areas of foreign policy and decision-making it is the critical determinant of success or failure.⁸

Indeed, on more than one occasion individual leadership has been a critical feature in preventing nuclear conflict. During the 1962 Cuban missile crisis, four submarines were mobilised to spearhead a Soviet submarine base on the island. Unbeknown to the US anti-submarine forces charged with pursuing them, the Soviet boats were carrying torpedoes tipped with nuclear warheads. The captains of the Soviet submarines had orders not to allow their boats to be captured or forced to the surface. As the US anti-submarine forces detected and tracked these boats, intending to harass them until they surfaced, one of the Russian submarines was damaged and cornered by the US Navy. After their efforts to contact the General Staff in Moscow failed, there followed an extended period of tension on board the Russian boat as the carbon dioxide levels rose. The prospect of escape became slim and crew members began to pass out. The captain flew into a rage and, fearing that war had already broken out, ordered his nuclear torpedo to be armed, shouting: 'We will die, but we will sink them all.'⁹ Thankfully, the torpedo was never launched. According to testimony, two fellow officers intervened and in a private meeting one of them was able to persuade the captain not to launch the torpedo, but to agree to allow the submarine to surface. This act of individual leadership, not from the captain but from a subordinate officer, prevented the possible escalation of a crisis into a nuclear war.¹⁰

These instances of escalating nuclear crisis are not restricted to the peak of the Cold War. On 25 January 1995, for example, Russian early warning systems registered what appeared to be a missile launch only five minutes from Moscow. The launch bore all the hallmarks of a preliminary high-altitude Electro-Magnetic-Pulse attack as a prelude to a massive nuclear First Strike. Fearing the worst, President Yeltsin, the Russian Defence Minister and Chief of Staff were placed on high alert. Preparations for retaliation were made and full control and command systems were activated. In fact, the rocket had been launched as part of a joint US–Norwegian experiment of which Russia had been given advance notice, but this information had not reached the on-duty personnel of the early warning system. The remaining details surrounding the incident are vague, but according to comments made by President Yeltsin he was forced to activate his portable nuclear weapons control device for the first time.¹¹

In both of these examples the cumulative result of a series of events, actions and errors eventually placed a single leader in an extreme position, bearing the immense pressure of unknown consequences. Thankfully, in both, the effective leader, a military commander in one case and a political leader in the other, was able to exercise individual restraint and, through a combination of good judgement and luck, prevent a nuclear catastrophe.

In a democratic society, it is only at the highest levels of decision-making, where legitimacy, accountability and responsibility coexist in our elected leaders, that individuals are trusted with the immense responsibility and the immense burden of the potential use of such destructive weapons. The expectation is that the ultimate

decision about the use of nuclear weapons should be the responsibility of the highest level of government – our political leaders.

However, as the two examples show, in moments of crisis the actual responsibility for leadership can shift dramatically. Only in one of the examples was the decision-maker a political leader. The inherent fallibility of humans and the unpredictability of conflict lead to the obvious conclusion that, whilst nuclear weapons exist, we cannot guarantee that leaders, political or military, will not be placed in these circumstances again. As long as this is true we run the risk of mass annihilation. Nor can we be certain that only state-based and politically accountable leaders or their military equivalents will be the only decision-makers. With nuclear technology and expertise becoming increasingly available, and the widening distribution of nuclear materials for peaceful purposes, the threat of non-state actors acquiring these weapons grows.

However, whilst political and military leaders have shouldered the responsibility of leadership at times of crisis, addressing the underlying factors which cause these times of crisis to arise has largely been ignored. There has been a comprehensive failure to reduce the threat that nuclear weapons pose to global security and to combat the main source of risk: the existence of the weapons themselves. Ultimately only political leaders have the mandate and the power to reduce and eliminate these weapons.

Unfortunately, history shows that when it comes to making disarmament decisions political leaders have been more tactically reactionary than strategically visionary. From an examination of examples of progressive movement towards nuclear disarmament, we can postulate that they occur cyclically, prompted by events and external pressures at times of crisis as opposed to proactive leadership taken in times of relative peace. For example, the 1962 Cuban missile crisis catalysed the rapid negotiation, signature and ratification of the Partial Test Ban Treaty (PTBT) by the United States, the United Kingdom and the Soviet Union in 1963. Prior to the Cuban crisis, a treaty had been subject to inconclusive negotiation for seven years. Another example is the formulation of the 13 practical steps towards disarmament agreed in the 2000 Review Conference of the Non-Proliferation Treaty, which was partly a response to the regional nuclear arms race between India and Pakistan. On 11 May 1998, India conducted three nuclear tests, followed by another two just two days later. Less than three weeks after India's initial tests Pakistan retaliated by testing six nuclear weapons. Two years later, the 2000 NPT Review Conference adopted a final consensus document, the first to be agreed and adopted by all NPT signatories since 1985, with one of its resolutions stating: 'the Conference *deplores* the nuclear test explosions carried out by India and then by Pakistan in 1998'.

As these two examples indicate, arms control efforts have been primarily driven by external influence and reaction to current crises. Although moments of crisis are important in helping to concentrate political minds to mobilise and enable change, we cannot rely on waiting for a crisis to occur before progress can be made.

There have, however, been a few occasions where political leadership has been bold and strategic and not just a tactical response to an immediate crisis. One example is Ireland's push in 1959 for the adoption of resolution 1380 (XIV) by the UN General Assembly.¹² This resolution was for an international agreement to be considered by

the Ten Nation Committee on Disarmament which called for nuclear-armed states not to give control of these weapons to other states and for non-nuclear-armed states not to develop nuclear weapons. Resolution 1380 (XIV), introduced by Frank Aiken, the Irish Minister for External Affairs, paved the way for future arms control and disarmament measures and, most importantly, provided the founding principles for the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.

Another example of strategic political leadership occurring without the threat of an immediate crisis, is the 1986 Reykjavik Summit between US and Russian leaders Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev. Although disagreement over the US Strategic Defence Initiative meant that the two leaders were unable practically to deliver the ambitious agenda of eliminating their countries' ballistic missiles and strategic offensive arms within 10 years, the summit was nonetheless momentous in what it represented: namely the meeting of the world's two superpower leaders, controlling the two largest nuclear arsenals, negotiating extremely deep reductions of their nuclear weapons. The disappointment and perceived failure of this bold approach led to the association of grand political disarmament efforts with impracticality: manifesting in the first Bush administration's unofficial mantra of 'no more Reykjaviks'.¹³ In retrospect, however, this summit represents a refreshing instance of political leaders genuinely, passionately and courageously attempting to address the global nuclear threat with the only permanent solution, that of multilateral disarmament. The longer-term effects of this leadership effort were much more substantial than the initial perceived failure of the Summit would suggest. These included the negotiation and signing of the START I Treaty in 1991 and the signing and ratification of the Intermediate Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty – the first ever arms control treaty that worked to reverse the nuclear arms race between the two major powers.

As both examples show, the combination of political will to enact change with the practical steps to implement that change can result in progress towards the gradual elimination of nuclear weapons. As stressed by George Shultz, Henry Kissinger, William Perry and Sam Nunn in their 2007 *Wall Street Journal* article: 'Without the bold vision, the actions will not be perceived as fair or urgent. Without the actions, the vision will not be perceived as realistic or possible.'¹⁴ Sustained political leadership is crucial both to implementing these actions and to pursuing the vision.

Contemporary disarmament

After the end of the Cold War, and intermittently throughout the 1990s, there were a number of political acts progressing the disarmament agenda. These included the United States and Russia signing START I, followed two years later by the signing of START II; unilateral announcements by the US and Russia on dramatic cuts in their nuclear arsenals; South Africa giving up its covert weapons programme and acceding to the NPT; former Soviet Union states renouncing their weapons inherited from the USSR and acceding to the NPT;¹⁵ China and France acceding to the NPT;¹⁶ the agreement in 1995 by NPT signatories to extend the Treaty indefinitely; the

announcement by China in 1996 of a moratorium on testing; the adoption of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) by the General Assembly in 1996 and the subsequent opening of the Treaty for signature; and in 1997 the coming into force of the South East Asia Nuclear Weapons Free Zone.¹⁷

By the end of the 1990s, however, there was a marked deceleration in political momentum. As the threat of global nuclear war appeared to evaporate, multilateral nuclear disarmament became less of a political priority. India and Pakistan continued to refuse to sign the NPT and in 1998 tested weapons, awarding themselves the status of nuclear-armed states outside of the Treaty along with Israel. In 1999 the United States became the first state to reject the ratification of the CTBT and in 2003 North Korea withdrew from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). In 2006 and 2009 North Korea conducted nuclear tests, directly challenging the non-proliferation regime.

Some of the disarmament failures at the end of the last decade can clearly be attributed to the internal domestic politics of the respective affected country (the failure of CTBT ratification in the United States was in part a symptom of the difficulties being experienced then by the Clinton administration). However the major change in momentum at this time and the causes of that change are symptomatic of a greater systemic shift that has occurred since the end of the Cold War. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the shift from a bipolar to a multipolar system means that the nuclear stand-off by the two major global powers is no longer a singular, and, some argue, balancing force in the system. The emergence of China and India as global powers, politically and economically, with increases in their respective nuclear arsenals, has increased the danger of hedging by more state players. Reflecting this changing context, Oran Young has argued the importance of leadership and the role of institutions in this new and changed environment. He wrote:

Given the growing pluralism of international society, the rise of complex interdependencies, and the increasing significance of global change issues, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that the role of leadership in devising effective international institutions will become ever more important during the foreseeable future.¹⁸

This systemic change also demands a renewed approach to addressing the challenges in the new nuclear order – one in which advancements in disarmament and non-proliferation cannot be made by one political leader alone. A broad, cooperative and multilateral approach is necessary, in which political leadership is shared in the efforts to reach the collective goal of a world free of nuclear weapons.

This is perhaps most evident with the NPT, first signed in 1968 to control the nuclear order, and which for the last 40 years has been the primary instrument preventing the mass proliferation of nuclear weapons. It is now under serious pressure as member states face a crisis of confidence in the ‘grand bargain’ at the heart of the Treaty. The perception from non-nuclear-weapon states that the nuclear-weapon states are renegeing on their nuclear disarmament obligations has reached a critical point.

Nuclear-weapon states must act to restore faith in their original pledge to disarm. Fundamentally, today's nuclear powers can no longer afford to ignore the demands of non-nuclear-weapon states that they make good their disarmament commitments. This crisis coincides with increased demand for both peaceful nuclear technologies and an effective counter to regional and global security concerns.

The aim of a universally subscribed non-proliferation treaty has been compromised by the continued challenge posed by the nuclear-armed states of India, Pakistan, Israel and North Korea, which sit outside the non-proliferation and disarmament structures. Moreover, Iran's persistent non-compliance with its NPT obligations threatens not just a regional nuclear arms race but overtly undermines confidence in the enforceability of the regulatory structures of the Treaty.

Now we find the world in a similar dilemma to the one Neild set out in 1967. Again there is the fear that if no action is taken, we will face a proliferation of nuclear weapons to a multitude of states over the coming years, increasing the risk of their use by either state or non-state actors. As the threat posed by nuclear weapons rises back to the top of the political agenda, we again find ourselves asking, 'What Has Happened to Disarmament?'

Political leadership as a force for disarmament

Whilst political engagement is inherently constrained by the realities of the domestic, regional and international environments, it can be a force for disarmament in two major ways.

Firstly, in a conventional way, it can address two of Scott Sagan's three major drivers for individual states' desire for nuclear weapons – security-based and norms-based motivations – with methods such as diplomacy and trust-building combating prestige and regional or international security concerns.¹⁹ Secondly, it can foster multilateral disarmament by creating international regimes that enable and ensure disarmament.

According to Young's leadership taxonomy, multilateral disarmament can be fostered through three different kinds of political leadership, all of which are necessary for success.²⁰ These approaches are dependent on whether the leader is:

- (i) presently in power; or,
- (ii) not in a direct position of power but still able to exert forms of influence.

The first approach is *structural leadership*, which is exhibited when political leaders in positions of power can make decisions about the resources at their disposal to leverage a multilateral bargain.

Those not in a position of immediate power can use their negotiating skills to aid and broker the successful achievement of an agreement, bargain or treaty. This is known as *entrepreneurial leadership*.

The final type is *intellectual leadership*, which can alter the normative or ideational environment to create opportunities for agreement.²¹ In this way, political leadership could and should shape the debate on nuclear disarmament.

Strong political leadership is essential in producing the binding commitments for states to make the prerequisite steps allowing disarmament, as well as for disarmament itself. Leaders have the authority to direct strategists and defence planners to devise postures without these weapons in acts of structural leadership – and with such leadership strategists and planners will fashion a policy in which reliance on nuclear weapons can be reduced. This can be done whilst maintaining security and also creating a conceptual shift through intellectual leadership. As Mikhail Gorbachev remarked when recalling how he and Ronald Reagan agreed on the ultimate goal of eliminating nuclear weapons: ‘It took political will to transcend the old thinking and attain a new vision. For if a nuclear war is inconceivable, then military doctrines, armed forces development plans and negotiating positions at arms-control talks must change accordingly.’²²

For too long, decisions about strategy, the bargaining processes involved in reaching a consensus, and formation of the intellectual environment of nuclear weapons disarmament have been left to the military and senior civil servants. Their choices have been mostly conservative, due in part to a lack of consistent political leadership at either domestic or international levels. As Hedley Bull noted in 1969: ‘It is also striking that among non-official students and groups interested in promoting arms control, advocates of drastic or comprehensive disarmament have ceased to exert a significant influence.’²³

This is a situation which persisted until very recently and is the very same situation that Neild condemned in 1967. Too little responsibility has been taken by politicians, leaving the detail of nuclear policy to be agreed by technocrats and diplomats at review conferences and other similar multilateral fora. There has been a comparative absence of significant political leadership towards disarmament in this area for the last two decades. As we shall later argue, in the UK there have recently been improved efforts to forge a path of leadership, but generally nuclear disarmament in the international sphere has been subject to years of benign neglect. This is part of the reason why Obama stands so tall.

Following his lead in Prague, the intellectual landscape of the political elite has shifted to allow the idea of working towards a nuclear-weapons-free world. However, whilst a permanent ideological shift is possible, it requires political leadership in all areas. Thus a clear vision has to be outlined, with efforts to improve global security (as the French often argue is essential as a precursor to disarmament) as well as priming the international community intellectually, structurally and legislatively for disarmament.

As in the case of Reykjavik, there is a danger that leadership of this ambition, and the inevitable failure of reality to reflect the scale of this ambition, will support the perennial criticism that disarmers are ‘dreamers’. The answer to that criticism is also to be found in Obama’s Prague speech, in which he accepted and spelt out the nature of the challenge, the likelihood of incremental change, and the likely failure to achieve the goal in his lifetime. It is the duty of political leaders, however, not to allow this daunting truth to be an excuse for abdicating responsibility.

A prime example of structural leadership in support of this goal was President Obama’s steering of the US Nuclear Posture Review, whereby a small but significant

change was made to the nation's declaratory policy. In aligning the posture with the principles he outlined in his Prague speech, he showed that only by devaluing nuclear weapons as the 'ultimate currency of power',²⁴ reducing both their role in military strategy and their numbers, will we be able to move towards a world free of nuclear weapons. By delegitimising the role of nuclear weapons in security, we also decrease the incentive for other states to acquire them, as well as exhibiting both intellectual and structural leadership by achieving a large number of small, but vitally important policy shifts. In doing so, Obama not only achieved a crucial shift in the momentum of US nuclear policy, but also leveraged enough faith in its disarmament efforts to allow a modest but successful outcome at the recent NPT Review Conference to be snatched from the jaws of a period of crisis.

Another example of structural leadership is the negotiation and signing of the new US–Russian Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START). The importance of this agreement lies not in the numeric reduction of nuclear weapons or delivery vehicles but in the evidence it provides of the resetting of relations between the United States and Russia. As Obama himself has made clear, improved relations between these two nations is essential to nuclear disarmament. The ultimate goal of a world free of nuclear weapons axiomatically requires the participation and collective political leadership of all nuclear-armed states, especially from the five NPT nuclear-weapon states.²⁵ However, as the United States and Russia are estimated to possess over 95 per cent of the world's nuclear weapons, it is equally axiomatic that agreement for significant reductions between these two nations must come first. It is both a necessary condition and a condition precedent to a world free of nuclear weapons.

The NPT Review Conference, however, is both negotiated and signed off by diplomats, not political leaders. No president or prime minister needs to come forward to sign off the conclusion of a review, despite the fact that there is a growing international political momentum for serious discussion about nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation. This must change. As a potentially crucial forum for all three forms of political leadership, the Review Conference is currently restricted to entrepreneurial leadership alone, as experienced diplomats without any real structural power are nominated as officers and attempt to broker multilateral agreements over the review conference process. This is also largely true of the NATO Strategic Concept Review process. This has happened, so far, with little or no input from any NATO national parliament, and almost entirely without political scrutiny. The issues involved in guaranteeing transatlantic security in the twenty-first century are simply too important to be dealt with behind totally closed doors and solely through one form of leadership.

Diplomats and negotiators should only set the framework for decisions that ultimately should be taken by their political masters. This way, political leaders who should be held to account for their decisions can also be held to account for the implementation of them.

Prioritising reductions in the numbers and salience of nuclear weapons, whilst maintaining our security, is a necessary precursor to working towards disarmament. The decisions to deploy nuclear weapons are not the sole responsibility of the military. The formulation of a nuclear posture should not be their responsibility either, as it

constitutes a crucial tool for intellectual leadership to sculpt an ideational environment in which nuclear weapons take a less prominent role in security policy.

We bore witness to the consequences of weak political leadership after the 2000 NPT Review Conference successfully produced an ambitious final document that set out '13 steps' towards nuclear disarmament. Although these steps were agreed by the diplomatic teams of all the negotiating parties, the lack of concrete and consistent political engagement and commitment to these steps led to few of these measures being implemented. Therefore it is clear that political leadership, with all three forms outlined acting in concert, needs to be a sustained and consistent effort.

British position and leadership efforts

Accepting that it is difficult to point to evidence of significant multilateral disarmament by the P5, there has, however, been notable unilateral action. As discussed earlier, the United States and Russia made substantial cuts to their respective nuclear arsenals in the early 1990s. The United Kingdom, for its part, has reduced its nuclear explosive power by 75 per cent since the end of the Cold War, almost halving the number of its nuclear warheads from approximately 300²⁶ to fewer than 160 operationally available warheads. Its strategy of 'minimum deterrence' has allowed the United Kingdom to make these meaningful reductions without jeopardising its security. Of the five recognised nuclear-weapon states, the United Kingdom is now the closest to disarmament, with the fewest nuclear weapons and the first to have moved to a single delivery platform: the Trident submarine force.

In 2006, as Secretary of State for Defence, Des Browne was responsible for explaining this approach to nuclear-weapons policy and disarmament to the nation and to parliament when he pursued the government's objective of seeking parliament's permission to design and build a new generation of Vanguard class submarines. As set out in the 2006 White Paper,²⁷ the government made the case for the need to maintain a minimum nuclear deterrent, to ensure the UK's security for the next 20 to 50 years in a potentially unstable international security environment, which at the time lacked significant multilateral disarmament momentum. It was argued that this renewal was not inconsistent with the UK's Article VI commitment in the NPT to multilateral disarmament. That is why, in June 2007, Margaret Beckett, then Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, addressed the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace,²⁸ and Des Browne addressed the Conference on Disarmament in Geneva the following year.²⁹ Publically and deliberately, the government committed the United Kingdom to leadership in multilateral disarmament and put forward proposals to this end, such as making the United Kingdom a 'disarmament laboratory' and hosting a confidence-building conference for technical and policy experts from the five recognised nuclear-weapons states – which took place in September 2009.

Since then the UK government has published two further documents, 'Lifting the Nuclear Shadow' and 'The Road to 2010', exploring the nuclear issues faced and outlining policies to address them. These documents, published by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Cabinet Office respectively, exhibit the commitment

and engagement of the government to these issues. Moreover, most recently, on 26 May 2010, the new British Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, William Hague, announced for the first time the UK's nuclear warhead stockpile ceiling (225) as well as announcing that the United Kingdom would re-examine its nuclear declaratory policy as part of the Strategic Defence and Security Review.³⁰

However, it is not only governments that bear these responsibilities. The initiative by Shultz and others in the United States has been echoed across the world. The United Kingdom also has its own 'gang of four' – Lords Hurd, Robertson and Owen and Sir Malcolm Rifkind MP. In 2008, this impressive group of former Foreign and Defence Secretaries from the two largest parties set the UK agenda in a letter to *The Times*.³¹ The content of this letter echoed the sentiments of Kissinger, Nunn, Perry and Shultz. This exhibition of a UK broad political consensus across the parties on multilateral nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation was just the beginning.

In October 2009, 16 prominent British politicians, including three of the UK 'gang of four', launched the Top Level Group of UK Parliamentarians for Multilateral Nuclear Disarmament and Non-Proliferation, a cross-party parliamentary group which advocates the vision of working towards a world free of nuclear weapons.³² This Top Level Group includes former Chiefs of the Defence Staff; several former Defence and Foreign Secretaries of State; a former NATO Secretary-General and other prominent senior parliamentarians. The membership of the cross-party group individually and collectively has held responsibility for British foreign and defence policy for the last 20 years.

The strategic aims of the group are threefold. First, to inform political and public debate about the issues involved in achieving the objective of working towards a world free of nuclear weapons. The fact that these issues have been absent from the political agenda for the best part of 20 years has deskilled and desensitised a generation of politicians to the complex and inter-related issues that inform the decision-making process. There are a limited number of elected politicians or members of the House of Lords who have the confidence to engage in debate on these matters.

Second, the Top Level Group, trading on the individual histories of its membership, set itself the objective of providing a credible and persuasive UK voice in the debates and discussions that take place on this subject in the United States. The importance of congressional, particularly Senate, support for international policy is a unique feature of the US constitution. It is important that the members of both Houses of their legislature are exposed to credible UK voices providing reassurance that those in the UK share their President's ambition, support the direction of his policies, and are comfortable that our security as members of NATO will not be reduced by their implementation.

Third, and finally, the group set themselves the task of encouraging the proliferation of the UK initiative across Europe, particularly in the European states that are also members of the NATO alliance. Across Europe a high level of support has already been expressed for the goal of a world free of nuclear weapons. This support has included important national opinion pieces, written by prominent statesmen in Belgium, the Netherlands, Germany, Italy, Norway, Poland and France, again emulating the message of the original US four. These articles demonstrate that the political will exists for multilateral nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation across

NATO Europe. In the broader context of renewed nuclear security and a revitalised NPT, evidence is emerging that multilateral disarmament is in the centre ground of European political thought.

These efforts across Europe have further manifested themselves in the recent debate over NATO's tactical nuclear weapons in Europe. US B61 free-fall gravity bombs, hosted by NATO since the Cold War, are now deployed in five European countries after their recent withdrawal from Greece and the United Kingdom. Following leadership from the German coalition government in October 2009, three of the five states – Germany, Belgium and the Netherlands – requested that the removal of these weapons be discussed by NATO. By raising the profile of these forgotten weapons, the three states have generated internal debate within NATO on the future of their extended nuclear deterrence. That this will now be debated openly in the genuinely multilateral environment of NATO is, in itself, a healthy development. If NATO decides to remove these weapons in the context of broader multilateral agreements (such as in return for movement on Russia's tactical nuclear forces) then it will be a significant contribution to disarmament.

The future of disarmament

With the recent reinvigoration of multilateral nuclear disarmament, primarily as a consequence of President Obama's commitment to this effort, a genuine opportunity has been presented to the world. Articles of support from Prime Ministers and Foreign and Defence Secretaries have been published internationally, creating a global policy agenda of disarmament and improved non-proliferation. The threats that the world faces place us at a key junction. However, in order to move forward, there are a number of key areas which need to be addressed. These include changing the nuclear posture and doctrine of nuclear-weapon states; deeper and faster cuts in nuclear weapons by possessor states; fostering a deeper transatlantic dialogue on NATO nuclear doctrine and creating a 'zone free of weapons of mass destruction' in the Middle East. Political leadership must forge the way and multilateral cooperation is crucial to this effort.

The European Leadership Network for Multilateral Nuclear Disarmament and Non-Proliferation, an initiative which has grown out of the Top Level Group, will aim to address some of these issues. A network of senior political, military and diplomatic figures who have knowledge and experience of defence, security and nuclear issues, it offers a strong collective European voice to contribute to the debate in the United States, as well as providing a platform for engagement on these issues more widely across the world. The network aims to improve pan-European diplomacy, debate and discussion by utilising the reach and influence that former European statesmen and women have in their own countries and beyond. It also hopes to build a more coordinated high-level European policy community that is capable of impacting on wider international diplomatic discussions to address some of the nuclear challenges.

A different, dynamic and multilateral form of leadership is required today and the European Leadership Network can assist in enabling this process. As a form of transnational advocacy network,³³ with individuals who also possess the traits of entrepreneurial and intellectual leadership, the Network can use its members'

knowledge, influence and reach into governments to assist those in power – structural leaders – to take political action.

The United Kingdom, as a P5 state and having already taken progressive action, also has a unique position within this process. It has a responsibility to further act upon its disarmament commitments and lead others to also reach a consensus on this goal.

Conclusion

Having lived in the shadow of nuclear weapons for 65 years, unfortunately we have got used to the reality that ‘more energy can be released in one micro-second from a single nuclear weapon than all the energy released by conventional weapons used in all wars throughout history’.³⁴ Consequently, we fear that the world has become complacent about the consequences of the release of such awesome power. Today we must recognise that the risk we face from these devices is not decreasing, but increasing. The fragile balance at the edge of a nuclear precipice cannot be maintained indefinitely, and thus we must find a safer, less armed ground on which to place our feet.

The power of a single leader has been shown by the immense hope and optimism engendered by President Obama’s declared aims. The potential that he embodies has been recognised, but there are immense challenges that must still be faced. Political leaders that are both willing and capable of driving forward global nuclear disarmament are rare. Therefore this opportunity must not be squandered as the rest of the world waits for his leadership at every point. That is a burden that will almost certainly be too great. It is clear that in this new multipolar world collective action is needed to ensure progress.

The debate for nuclear disarmament will continue for a very long time. A world free of nuclear weapons is unlikely in our lifetimes but it does not mean that our actions can be postponed indefinitely. Nuclear weapons remain one of the gravest threats to our planet, and one which continues to increase, and it is critical that we are proactive in our attempts to improve and secure the strategic environment rather than passively respond to it with too little action, too late. Our aim should be to enhance the security of all continents, nation-states and peoples. Persuasion, action and – above all – leadership is required to enable us to move towards a more secure world, rather than a less stable one. This is a complex and ambitious task, but we shall achieve it by acting in concert with other leaders to remove from humanity the threat of nuclear annihilation.

Notes

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