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## Senior UK parliamentarians urge nuclear disarmament must remain priority in 2012

Fri, 11 May 2012



### Statement

*London, Friday 11 May 2012*

#### Senior UK parliamentarians urge nuclear disarmament must remain priority in 2012

Despite President Obama's Prague speech in 2009, and the subsequent negotiation of the New START Treaty with Russia, efforts to address the world's growing nuclear dangers have stalled. Domestic politics in the US and Russia, and the impasse reached between NATO and Russia on missile defence are now souring relations across the East-West divide. Progress on Iran and North Korea also remains difficult to discern. Leaders meanwhile are distracted, for understandable reasons, both by the challenging politics of austerity at home, and by the compelling crises of the Euro-zone, the wider Arab Spring, and the violence in Syria abroad. Despite this, it is still true that the nuclear risks we face today are growing, not reducing, and if we do not take action urgently, and on a broad front, we are likely to face a more dangerous and unstable nuclear future. That is why we believe 2012 must be a year of active and determined nuclear diplomacy.

Iran is the most pressing challenge and it is important to be clear why. An Iranian nuclear weapon could trigger a proliferation cascade across the Middle East involving countries such as Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Egypt. This would not only mean a much greater number of nuclear weapons, in more hands, in one of the world's most conflict ridden regions, but it would also put far greater constraints on what the international community could do to help stabilise events in this crucial part of the world.

Beyond Iran, and North Korea, there is more to be worried about. Russia and the United States, two countries that along with the UK and France have reduced the size of their nuclear arsenals considerably in recent years, remain committed to maintaining large scale nuclear forces long into the future, despite budget constraints and in some cases associated delays to programmes. Despite the reduction in nuclear weapons numbers from a peak of 70,000 in the 1980s to around 23,000 today, moreover we have also seen an increase in the number of states in possession of these weapons in recent years. India and Israel are now seeking to build nuclear triads of their own whilst both countries, along with Pakistan, remain outside the non-proliferation regime. Terrorist groups are further known to be seeking fissile materials and/or access to a fully developed bomb.

Despite measures to reduce alert status in some national contexts, far too many of the nuclear weapons in existence today also remain on high states of alert, and nuclear warning and decision times are alarmingly short for any leader caught in a crisis.

We commend the current and previous UK governments for maintaining a declared commitment to the goal of a world without nuclear weapons, and for making real contributions to that goal through disarmament measures over many years. But our message is that more must now be done.

First, the economic and diplomatic pressure must be kept on Iran. The door to negotiations must remain open but Iran must be made to realise that international resolve remains strong. It must live up to its obligations under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and its safeguard agreement with the IAEA, and must demonstrate to the IAEA that its programmes have no military objectives. If necessary, sanctions must be tightened even further but their purpose must be to bring Iran into a serious diplomatic process.

Second, and on a related issue, the international community needs to put sustained effort behind the concept of a Weapons of Mass Destruction Free Zone in the Middle East. This is not about creating false equivalence between the Israeli and Iranian nuclear programmes but about what is best for the long-term future of one of the world's most unstable regions. The requirement to hold a conference on such a zone in 2012 was critical to achieving consensus at the 2010 Review Conference of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). Any failure to carry this through, or apparent lack of sincerity in attempting to do so, may have consequences not only for the Middle East but for the wider NPT regime as a whole.

Third, the UK and other governments should press hard for warning and decision-times associated with nuclear weapons to be lengthened. This is an area where real progress could be made but it is a matter of the utmost urgency. Almost two decades after the Cold War has ended, it is bordering on madness that decisions on nuclear weapons use would still have to be taken in minutes or hours rather than days in many countries.

Fourth, we need to tighten further the security of nuclear materials in addition to the steps taken at the 2002 G8 summit. The Nuclear Security Summit in Seoul continued modest progress in ensuring that potentially dangerous materials and facilities are made safe and international nuclear security standards are created and implemented globally. Nuclear terrorism, including through the use of dirty bombs, cannot be ruled out if continued efforts are not made in this area.

Fifth, efforts to negotiate a Fissile Material Cut-off Treaty (FMCT) have to be stepped up. This proposed international treaty would prohibit any further production of fissile material, the essential ingredient in nuclear weapons production. Today, there is enough fissile material in the world to build around 60,000 simple nuclear weapons, yet some states, such as Pakistan, are increasing their production of fissile material further. Despite this, talks on the FMCT at the Conference on Disarmament in Geneva have been stalled for years. The international community needs to act on this challenge urgently, if necessary taking the responsibility for drafting the FMCT back to the UN.

Sixth, action is needed on tactical nuclear weapons based in the European countries of NATO and in Russia. Reciprocal steps by both Russia and NATO would serve the political and strategic interests of both, possibly laying the path to wider elimination of this type of weapon in the future as has already been done with intermediate nuclear weapons under the INF treaty.

The package of measures we outline would address short-term challenges and put in place stronger regimes and controls for the future. Despite the many issues jostling for leadership attention in 2012, the nuclear issue is so serious it must be moved up the agenda and action must include but go well beyond Iran. This issue needs sustained political leadership. Nothing less will do.

#### **Signatories**

1. Michael Ancram (Lord Lothian; Member of the Intelligence and Security Committee)
2. Margaret Beckett MP (Former Foreign Secretary)
3. Michael Boyce (Admiral the Lord Boyce, Former First Sea Lord of the Royal Navy and Chief of the Defence Staff)
4. Sir Menzies Campbell MP (Member of the Intelligence and Security Committee and the Foreign Affairs Select Committee)
5. Des Browne (Lord Browne of Ladyton, Former Defence Secretary)
6. Charles Guthrie (General the Lord Guthrie of Craigiebank; Former Chief of the Defence Staff)
7. David Hannay (Lord Hannay of Chiswick; Former British Ambassador to the European Communities and the UN)
8. Geoffrey Howe (Lord Howe of Aberavon; Former Foreign Secretary and Deputy Prime Minister)
9. John Kerr (Lord Kerr of Kinlochard; Former British Ambassador to the United States)
10. Tom King (Lord King of Bridgwater; Former Defence Secretary)
11. David Owen (Lord Owen; Former Foreign Secretary)
12. Sir Malcolm Rifkind MP (Former Defence Secretary and Foreign Secretary)
13. David Ramsbotham (General the Lord Ramsbotham; Former Adjutant General and ADC General to Her Majesty the Queen)
14. John Reid (Lord Reid of Cardowan; former Defence Secretary)
15. George Robertson (Lord Robertson of Port Ellen; Former NATO Secretary General and former Defence Secretary)
16. Sir John Stanley MP (Chairman of the Committees on Arms Export Controls and former Minister of State for the Armed Forces)
17. Elisabeth Symons (Baroness Symons of Vernham Dean; Former Minister for the Middle East, Minister for Defence Procurement, and the Prime Minister's envoy to the Gulf)
18. Shirley Williams (Baroness Williams of Crosby; Former Leader of the Liberal Democrats in the House of Lords and Adviser on Nuclear Proliferation)

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The individuals above are all members of the [Top Level Group of UK Parliamentarians for Multilateral Nuclear Disarmament and Non-Proliferation](#).

The Top Level Group (TLG) of UK Parliamentarians for Multilateral Nuclear Disarmament and Non-Proliferation is a cross-party group of senior British parliamentarians who share the belief that multilateral nuclear disarmament, non-proliferation and nuclear security are critical global issues ought to be addressed, as a priority, by governments worldwide. This group is made up of almost all of the former British Foreign and Defence Secretaries over the last two decades, former Chiefs of the Defence Staff and prominent British diplomats who also served during the same period.