



Transcript

Do Nuclear Weapons Deter?

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Bridget Kendall:

Good afternoon, everyone. Thank you very much for turning up on this hot afternoon, although the air conditioning in here is quite a relief. My name is Bridget Kendall, I'm BBC diplomatic correspondent and I'm your chair for this session, 'Do Nuclear Weapons Deter?' It's being held on the record.

It's a good moment to have this debate, both in the context of Britain's own debate over the future of Trident but also given the global context: a far more complex, multipolar world than there was 20 years ago, when the Cold War ended and it looked as though the world was a safer place as the two nuclear superpowers agreed to cut back on weapons. Now it seems, on the one hand, as though the nuclear threat is greater than ever. The list of nuclear powers or near-nuclear powers has got longer and not all of them are constrained by having signed up to mutual treaties and obligations – and it's no longer just states we worry about, but non-state actors too. And then on the other hand, nuclear war seems to have been rather eclipsed by other, newer, or seemingly more immediate dangers: the risk of chemical and biological threats, the pernicious problem of cyber attacks, and other less orthodox terrorist tactics.

So does the doctrine of nuclear deterrence still work? Do nuclear weapons still deter? That's what we're here to discuss, and I'm delighted to introduce our panel. On the end, James Arbuthnot is the chair of the House of Commons Defence Select Committee, a Tory MP. Sitting next to him, Des Browne, who was secretary of state for defence from 2006 to 2008, and who is now the convener of the Top Level Group of Parliamentarians for Nuclear Disarmament and Non-Proliferation. On my left, Pauline Neville-Jones, who spent most of her career in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, where she served both as the chair of the Joint Intelligence Committee and political director, and more recently she is the prime minister's special representative to business for cyber security, and was minister for security. Finally, we are delighted to welcome Dr Benoit Pelopidas, who is a lecturer in international relations at the University of Bristol and an affiliate of Stanford University. His research focuses on international security issues, the renunciation of nuclear weapons as a historical possibility, and other aspects of nuclear weapons.

All our speakers are going to speak first for about five to seven minutes each – I will try to be strict. Then that will leave us plenty of time for questions. I'm going to start by asking James to begin.

James Arbuthnot:

Thank you. We've agreed – this is an all-party agreement – to speak from the lectern. My notes are not very long and so I've given most of my time to Des, who, looking at his notes, will use it.

I am probably one of the gloomiest people you have ever met, but I'm also, according to Pauline – I think Pauline thinks I'm one of the wettest people on nuclear deterrence you will ever meet in the Conservative Party. I do not speak for the Conservative Party. I am the chairman of the Defence Select Committee and so I have the luxury of being able to ignore every party line in existence. Usually I don't know what it is.

I said I was a gloomy sort of person. I believe in the end of the world. This is my 'end of the world is nigh' speech. I think that despite all of the new threats that are arising all around us – economic meltdown, Syrian chemical weapons, cyber destruction – I think the greatest threat that the world faces of all is nuclear proliferation, because if a nuclear bomb goes off, we have no practice in how we react to it. We have every likelihood of making a mistake in responding to it, and the real likelihood that I can see is that a nuclear bomb would go off, somebody else would respond, and then the world would rapidly become uninhabitable. I said I was a gloomy sort of person, and this is what I genuinely believe. Sorry about that.

Having said that, you may be surprised by the conclusion that I reach in this brief comment. First, does nuclear deterrence actually work? Who are our nuclear weapons aimed at, in the United Kingdom? They are aimed at states. Not much point in aiming a nuclear weapon at terrorist organizations, because you can never be entirely sure where they are. So they're aimed at states. Presumably they're aimed at rational states, because if they're irrational you would think that deterrence wouldn't be that effective, because they're irrational. And they're aimed at rational states who are not already deterred by the existence of the American and French nuclear deterrence. That may be a contradiction in terms – rational states not already deterred by the Americans – unless we're aiming, of course, our nuclear weapons at the Americans or the French, and I'll come on to that in a few moments.

So it's a fairly small target that we're aiming these nuclear weapons at. Yet it's going to cost quite a lot of money. We don't know how much it will cost: those who want nuclear weapons say it will cost £20 billion; those who don't want them say it will cost £100 billion. So let's say it will be somewhere between £20 billion and £100 billion. Either way, I certainly think, quite a lot of money.

So do our nuclear weapons deter those who might use them against us? My view is that any state wanting to attack us with a nuclear weapon would use a proxy, would use a terrorist organization at its beck and call, and put a nuclear bomb in a container ship and sail it into Southampton. I've got nothing against Southampton, but clearly if a nuclear bomb did go off in Southampton we'd have some difficulty in working out who to retaliate against. If we don't know who to retaliate against, how does deterrence work?

This would lead most of you to think that I therefore feel we should not have a nuclear deterrent. But I don't think that. And the reason I don't think that is because the possession of nuclear weapons, even at the low level that we in the United Kingdom have our nuclear weapons, is – it's a ghastly thing to say this, but it remains true – it is one of the guarantors of our international influence. The reason I say that is then when South Africa unilaterally disarmed in a nuclear sense, it lost such influence as it had in international negotiations – or certainly, it reduced that influence. I believe, ghastly as it is, our possession of a nuclear deterrent does help to maintain our influence. It's not exactly a willy-waving contest but it comes close to it.

If you say that South Africa improved its moral authority by unilaterally nuclear disarming, I would suggest that countries like Iran and North Korea have absolutely no interest in moral authority. All they're interested in is physical authority, and while they are trying to build up their nuclear weapons it would seem to me an odd time for us to reduce our influence and to get rid of the ultimate and the most ghastly weapon. Clearly, they believe in it.

I said I would come back to the French. If we were to disarm ourselves in the United Kingdom, we would be ceding leadership of defence in general in Europe to the French. Now, I don't think that the man in the street is ready for that yet. Polls have suggested that when asked the sensible questions, the man in the street says he wants to keep our nuclear weapons.

So I am ambivalent about our nuclear deterrent. I think that in the end nuclear weapons will bring an end to the world and yet still, curiously enough, I want to keep it. Right, now it's for Des to tell you why I'm wrong.

Bridget Kendall:

Thank you for the challenge to Des, but actually it's Pauline Neville-Jones we're going to hear from next.

Pauline Neville-Jones:

Ladies and gentlemen, you're now going to see the full spectrum of views in the Conservative Party. There are things that James has said with which I profoundly agree. There are some that I don't so much agree with. I'm not going to – I'll try not to cover quite the same ground, because that's pretty boring for you. I'm going to tackle the examination question, which is, 'do nukes deter?' I'm not going to focus, at least in the beginning, on the UK, because it seems to me there's a broader argument that we could profitably think about.

My answer is that nukes have deterred and I think they do still deter, and I think they will continue to deter in the future. That's not because I think that the world hasn't changed – I certainly do. And I wouldn't argue that nukes are all-purpose weapons. They don't deter terrorism, for instance. They don't deter any number of threats we now face. They're not weapons for asymmetric warfare. But it doesn't follow that because those are some of the threats we face, that they still don't have a purpose. In my view, their purpose really is for the prevention of what I could call 'big war'. Also, secondly, I think possession of nuclear weapons prevents a country from being successfully subjected to nuclear blackmail.

If you believe that the only kind of threats we face are these lesser ones, and if you also believe that in a non-nuclear world it will be possible to keep all those lesser threats small and controllable – in other words, without leading to 'big war' – then I think you could safely conclude that we didn't really need nuclear capability and it could be dismantled, because I entirely agree that they are extremely nasty weapons which you want to seek not to have to use. But you've also got to believe, I think, in that sort of world, that this total nuclear disarmament is going to happen in our lifetime and not with the Greek calends, which I fear is the case, and also that reductions would be – particularly if you believe reduction to zero – that they would be verifiable. That's one of the conditions that Henry Kissinger, who is part of the Global Zero movement, does say is absolutely indispensable to Global Zero. Well, I think, tell that to the Iranians. I think the chances of being able to get adequate verification in that sort of world is pretty low, so I don't really trust that future.

I think you also – and this is my second point really – you also have to believe that no country in the future, despite new political regimes, would seek to acquire nuclear capability, whatever the international agreements might say. One has to say that this technology isn't actually particularly complicated or particularly unavailable these days, so I think it's capable of being acquired.

You then have to believe obviously that in that situation it's sensible for you and your allies to have dismantled your own capability. I don't think that's a particularly attractive scenario either.

People also have come to assume – this is a scenario that you hear quite widely canvassed – that we aren't going to have 'big war' in the future, large conflicts. That was something that only happened in the 20th century. But it's not, I think, a safe assumption, for reasons that I've spelt out. One of the reasons I think that it's necessary to keep nuclear weapons is because of their prevention of a big war role. I'm aware of the so-called stability–instability paradox – that is to say, that in the Cold War, which I suppose people would regard as being the *locus classicus* of deterrence, we managed to avoid big wars at the price of smaller proxy wars being fought out on the perimeter of the two ideological empires. I think it's fair to say that the thesis of those who think that we no longer need them is that in a multipolar world, that sort of stability between blocs is no longer attainable. That is a serious argument which I do accept – a complicated situation, and that was James' starting point. It's a good one.

But I don't come to the conclusion therefore that they don't have a role. It's very clear that any role that they do have has to be in the context of a full-blown strategy and a much wider military capability. Responsible deterrence means that nuclear weapons are part of a wider balance strategy and weapons capability. I don't believe, clearly, that you can somehow rely on simply their possession and think that somehow on that basis you're likely to be a good international citizen. I don't think that is the case.

We've seen, have we not, over the last 10–15 years, much more resort to economic sanctions. That is for good reasons. They've become much more usable than they were during the Cold War. One of the things we might think about is Iran in that context, because it's undoubtedly going to be the test of successful economic sanctions in preventing conflict in the Middle East, which could be alarmingly big if it fails.

So just to turn to this country for a moment, my two final points. This country has quite practised what can certainly be called minimal deterrence: just enough of an arsenal and just enough seriousness of purpose about the role that it has to make it credible, and therefore to have deterrent value. The danger, I think, for this country is that we drop below the threshold of credibility rather than that we have too much capability.

I also think that for a democracy, it's very important that nuclear weapons should be regarded as part of an acceptable strategy. By an acceptable

strategy I mean essentially one that's defensive. One can't be seen, as a democracy, to be in the game of playing with nuclear weapons for the purposes of nuclear blackmail. If you're going to have a credible stance of a deterrent and defensive kind, it seems to me one has to have a second-strike capability – that is to say, a capacity not simply to attack but to continue to defend when attacked. Otherwise, why have them, if you're only going to be able to use them for attack? That's not a credible defensive strategy.

The UK has now a single system which is submarine-based. I take the view that for the purposes of a credible second-strike capability, we do have to have continuous at-sea deployment, otherwise I think we are wasting our time. I'm now getting obviously into the modalities of what kind of deployment the UK should have. I also have to say I don't believe in delivery systems that could be more vulnerable than the ones we have now, so I basically want to stick where we are.

I could argue that obviously now Europe is a zone of peace, and that we can rely on extended deterrence – i.e., the Americans. That's another quite serious argument. But I think one needs to bear in mind a couple of things. First of all, don't forget the pivot. We Europeans are expected to do more, not less. There's also the French point, as has already been made. And has anybody looked recently at the Russian build-up? Mr Medvedev is actually I think a signatory to Global Zero, but they are sure hanging on to quite a considerable arsenal of tactical nuclear weapons. What are those for, if they aren't for actually impressing the neighbours? For these purposes, I think we are included in 'the neighbours'.

Two final points. First, on nuclear proliferation: quite right to say that I have absolutely no disagreement between myself and James here. Very, very important. We need to keep down the number of nuclear states and reduce nuclear holdings in existing nuclear states. I don't know how much further the UK can go without sort of dropping below a threshold, but certainly some of the larger ones can be reduced.

We also need verification. The trouble with verification is it's not so likely to happen in places where it's most needed, like North Korea and Pakistan, where, sadly, renunciation is not likely to be forthcoming in the foreseeable future. I don't believe the reductions can simply be a unilateral Western activity. It does have to be something that carries credibility on a global plane.

The last thing I'd say is that I'm not one of those who thinks that there will never be alternatives to nuclear weapons. That's to say that weapon development will not move on and we will never have a situation in which

nuclear weapons might be obsolete. I don't believe it's arrived yet. People look rightly to things like ABM defences, but frankly I think we're so far from the numbers necessary to keep the peace around the globe that way – or indeed, we don't know enough about their reliability – for us to be able to say that somehow we can trust to moving to a system of that kind to replace the deterrence which nuclear weapons provide. Thank you.

Bridget Kendall:

Thank you. Lots of food for thought there. Des?

Des Browne:

Thank you very much. I'm delighted to follow Pauline; I think you set out the arguments. I'm glad you avoided some of the Aunt Sally arguments – or maybe I'm not that glad you avoided some of the Aunt Sally arguments that there are for nuclear weapons, but I thought you made a very coherent argument.

I'm tempted to try to answer on behalf of the Russians to some degree your question about why they want all of these tactical nuclear weapons. I think the answer from their perspective is the same answer we would have given when we had lots of them, which was that there is a conventional imbalance. Their answer to that conventional imbalance is to hold on to tactical nuclear weapons, at least until such times as we can find some way of addressing these conventional issues.

The second point I want to make is the last time I was asked this question, the people who were with me had two days to answer it, at the Hoover Institute and Stanford University. And then we didn't come up with a very convincing answer one way or another, I have to say, despite the fact that some of the best experts in the world were present, disaggregating and picking apart this argument. I have about six minutes, which is why I've written down what I want to say, because I've lost my ability to be able to stay within time if I extemporize. So here we go.

Do nuclear weapons deter? My view is the answer to that question is: it's really a matter of judgment. My judgment at the moment is: perhaps. But we cannot be certain that they did or that they do, and I'm less certain that they will continue to do so in the future. We cannot be certain that they did deter in the past. That a nuclear attack has not occurred does not prove that it was prevented by nuclear deterrence. One cannot prove a negative – that is, that

doing something causes something else not to happen. A nuclear attack has not happened and may be a consequence of a number of factors, possibly simply good luck. The more we learn about the Cuban missile crisis, the more convinced we should be that the absence of a nuclear war was more the consequence of luck than good judgment.

Some say the dangers of the current environment and their uncertainties strengthen the case for our continued reliance on nuclear weapons. That's an unfair summary, I think, of a lot of Pauline's argument. As I deployed that argument myself and was partly responsible for the decision to renew the UK's nuclear deterrent in 2006, and I still do not support the unilateral abandonment of an independent UK deterrent, I agree with that analysis – but only in the short term. The world is changing dramatically, and actually part of the significant change in the world is the fact that we ourselves in the United Kingdom have disarmed to the tune of 75 per cent since the end of the Cold War, in relation to nuclear weapons. Just for those of you who are aficionados of the vocabulary of nuclear deterrence, we did all of this unilaterally. I know that's a bad word in the United Kingdom, but we did it all unilaterally. We never negotiated this with anybody. These were all unilateral decisions. But of course you're not allowed in the mainstream of United Kingdom politics to be unilateral, because if you are a unilateralist it guarantees you will never be in government, we're told.

But this is not 2006, and the relevant factors have changed even since then, as has the significance – which is much more important. It's becoming clear that deterrence as a cornerstone of our defence strategy is decreasingly effective and, much more important, increasingly risky. As nuclear technologies spread, it will become more difficult, not easier, to prevent acts of nuclear terrorism. I've more concern, I have to say, of a lorry with something in it than I have about the possibility of a ship, but either way it will be an unconventional attack, I think, if these weapons are deployed and used.

In 2006, I believed that our deterrent could play a role in deterring nuclear terrorism, by threatening any state known to support it. But as the sources of material use for terrorism multiply, it will become more difficult to pinpoint the state responsible, not more easy. If one cannot do that, one has no target for a credible threat of retaliation, as James pointed out. Nuclear weapons are not physical defence. They're based upon the threat of retaliation. One cannot possibly retaliate against an enemy that one cannot locate. It's not credible to threaten to do so, so in the main it doesn't work against terrorist organizations – and, as those who support them increasingly appear to care less if tens of

thousands or even millions of their own countrymen and women die, it will be largely ineffective at preventing nuclear terrorism or its sponsorship.

Further, nuclear deterrence requires rational decision-makers. There appears to have been a degree of predictable rationality between the main players during the Cold War. However, in the 21st-century multipolar world, with fewer nuclear weapons but more states in possession of them, and many of those states with unstable governments and in the most unstable regions of the world, is it sensibly our expectation that the leaders of all nuclear-armed states will behave rationally at all times? Particularly under conditions of extreme stress, can we be assured that they will behave rationally at all times in the future, even if they do it now? I think most rational and sane people believe the answer to these questions is an unqualified no, and we're seeing at the moment many examples of behaviour across the world that suggest that that unqualified no is a more extreme and loud 'no' day by day.

It goes without saying that deterrence doesn't work against accidental use. If useful at all, it only works against the possibility of an intentional, premeditated attack. Accidents happen. There is no such thing as a foolproof system – ask the Americans who flew nuclear weapons across their country, the crew of the plane not knowing they were on the plane, never mind anybody else knowing that they had done this. When nuclear weapons are involved, it seems to me extremely dangerous for us to begin to think there are foolproof systems that can control these weapons, when we can't in the most sophisticated countries in the world control them at all times.

Finally, deterrence in the current model that we deploy encourages proliferation. To the extent that the theory of nuclear deterrence is valid, and its flaws can be overlooked or dismissed – and I've enumerated some of them but there are many more – it elevates nuclear weapons into the most valuable capability for the strategic protection of a country. Acceptance of nuclear deterrence theory is an incentive for nuclear proliferation. If it's what is necessary to keep countries safe, why shouldn't everyone want them?

The primary purpose of our policy, I think, must be to ensure that we never suffer the consequences of a nuclear attack. At this stage in our history, nuclear deterrence may have a residual role to play in achieving this objective, but the character of the 21st-century threats means that its shelf life is eroding. If we want to be secure against nuclear and other threats, we have to think more creatively than our present reliance on deterrence implies. We have to shift the emphasis away from the threat of massive retaliation to prevention of nuclear catastrophe and, much more importantly, resilience in

the face of any attack. The recent Oslo conference on the humanitarian effects of nuclear weapons concluded, worryingly, that no country on earth has the resources to deal with the consequences of a nuclear war. We and the other P5 countries, of course, because we know better, boycotted that meeting. But we will have our opportunity in Mexico in 2014 to explain why all the world's best experts are wrong about this and what our plan for resilience in the face of any attack is. And if we're able to do that, that will be exceptionally helpful, because we must plan for the unthinkable.

But prevention is our main route to safety. Fewer nuclear weapons and materials in the world must be better than more of both. Who thinks this is a less safe world because we have fewer chemical or biological weapons, fewer, hardly any deployed, antipersonnel landmines, fewer, hardly any deployed, cluster munitions? And if the arms trade treaty works, fewer small arms, the real weapons of mass destruction in the world, around the world?

Disarmament leads to greater security, and it does with nuclear weapons as well as it does with any other weapons system. I think those who argue the opposite are dangerously overconfident of our ability to keep control of nuclear weapons and materials, particularly in the face of terrorist ambitions. I think we have a duty to be honest about the narrowing relevance of nuclear deterrence to our strategic security, particularly if it means and allows reprioritization of scarce resources to prevention, defence and resilience in the face of the other growing 21st-century threats that are real and active in the world that we live in.

Bridget Kendall:

Thank you very much. Now our fourth speaker, a different perspective, a non-parliamentarian's perspective, from Dr Benoit Pelopidas.

Benoit Pelopidas:

Thank you, Madame Chair. Good evening, everyone. It's an honour for me, of course, to follow such a distinguished panel. It's also a challenge not to repeat things that have already been said. If you expect me to be the Frenchman in the room, I'm probably going to be disappointing, because the reason why I find this conversation so interesting is precisely because it exists. It would probably not exist in that form in my country. So I thought I would actually build on some of the points that have been made and offer three major – an argument in three parts, let's say.

My first point would be to say that when we're asked the question 'do nuclear weapons deter?' the first thing we have to realize is that we can actually never be sure about an answer to that question. What we can actually know is specific cases in the past in which deterrence based on nuclear weapons has failed. That doesn't mean that they never did deter, but what it means is that actually a deterrent threat has never been made with nuclear weapons only. A deterrent threat is made by a leader, and a deterrent threat involves a whole set of capabilities on top of which we have nuclear weapons.

So what we are confronted with is just kind of a scepticism on how can we actually be sure of a case where nuclear weapons have deterred. This scepticism leads us to basically some interesting insights. The first one has been touched upon by Baroness Neville-Jones: the issue of the stability–instability paradox. The second insight is the cases in which we know that we avoided nuclear use out of luck. There are cases in which luck can be boiled down to individual deterrence – the individual was scared in the end. There are cases in which it's clear that the absence of nuclear use was sheer luck. The Cuban missile crisis was mentioned. In the Cuban missile crisis, there was one moment when actually planes over the Arctic were meeting – US planes and Soviet planes were meeting, and the US pilots were allowed to use nuclear weapons to intercept their Soviet counterparts. Basically the planes never reached each other because the Soviet planes went back – we don't know why to this day.

So that was my first point. We actually cannot be sure of when nuclear weapons alone deter or when they deter in general. All we can know is specific instances in which they failed.

My second point will be to say that nuclear threats have a major credibility problem. It's really hard to convince your opponent that you're going to use nuclear weapons against him or her. What that means is that this credibility problem leads decision-makers to take riskier strategies. The logic is because we are facing a credibility problem, a deterrent threat and a nuclear threat is more credible when we are on the brink of disaster. So basically the idea of making a deterrent threat more credible leads leaders to get closer to the brink. That assumes we know where all the red lines are and we are really confident that we're not going to go over them.

My third point will be to say nuclear deterrence perpetuates what I would call global nuclear vulnerability. This also has been touched upon. By that I mean we still have no protection against a nuclear attack. Only the belief in a worldwide fail-safe technology solves the vulnerability problem, because it's

not only about our arsenal being safe – it's about any nuclear arsenal in the world that might target X or Y country being safe. Only this would basically put an end to global nuclear vulnerability.

Here I reach my conclusion, which is, if you combine all those points, since we will never know for sure whether nuclear weapons have deterred in the past, since riskier nuclear strategies have been encouraged in the name of nuclear deterrence, and since the strategy of nuclear deterrence perpetuates the global nuclear vulnerability, the question worth asking would be: what would justify to continue global nuclear vulnerability into the future? In other words, are we prepared to trust technology, commonly controlled worldwide, so much that our populations would accept to expose themselves to an intended nuclear strike? This is not just a rhetorical question. This is actually a very important question, because there was a time where there was an answer to that question. In 1959, when President Eisenhower met with the British ambassador, he said, 'I want you to realize that I would better be atomized than communized.' So there was something worth dying for. The question is: what is it today?