

5.29 pm

Moved by

Lord Howell of Guildford

That this House takes note of the Report from the International Relations Committee *Rising nuclear risk, disarmament and the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty* (7th Report, HL Paper 338)

My Lords,

This report is presented to your Lordships for debate against a background of a fast deteriorating world arms control environment and rising nuclear risk. Some have now suggested that the risk of nuclear weapons being used is at its highest since the Second World War. I thank my colleagues on the committee, the excellent committee staff who worked on this report and our superb specialist adviser Dr Heather Williams. She was an immense support as well.

There used to be a time when it was assumed that the international containment of nuclear weapons was in good hands, so that we could all confidently leave these matters to experts and diplomats, while getting on with more exciting and seemingly urgent matters such as Brexit, climate change or whatever Donald Trump is going to do next—but not any longer. The safe world, if one can call it that, of balanced nuclear deterrence where two sides are in mutual understanding about the catastrophic outcome of nuclear deployment has crumbled away, almost unnoticed by the world or by media busy on other issues. What seemed balanced has now become highly precarious; where there seemed progress, there is now stalemate. Some of the reasons for this are obvious and some much more obscure and complex: they lie in the deepest reaches of very advanced technology, with which Governments have barely caught up.

In this report, we have tried to throw light on some of the main influences changing the situation, including in particular the exponential growth of digital technological power. Meanwhile at the forefront, anyone who wishes to can see that at the international level rising tensions, ill will in place of goodwill and distrust in place of trust have grown, duly souring and paralysing the arms control dialogue. US-Russian contacts on these matters are now said to be less than they were even at the height of the Cold War; those two countries are still by far the biggest holders of nuclear warheads, by a factor of at least 10. The Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty has been dropped by both sides, starting with

outright Russian violation and, incidentally, ensuring that all Europe is now moving back into the missiles' line of fire. The START I treaty is about to run out and there is no sign at all of renewal. Other treaties concerning fissile materials and the comprehensive test ban are stuck and still await entry into force. Both Russia and America are developing new missile vehicles and inflammatory rhetoric is flying around on all sides. The scene is complicated compared with the past, in that a third nuclear great-power force is now on the scene, namely China—officially and, to my mind, foolishly declared by America to be its enemy. Wisely, we do not see it that way ourselves.

Outside the big players, Iran is, predictably, ignoring the 2015 nuclear deal or Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, as it is called, and speeding up uranium enrichment thanks to American rejection, while tensions now rise daily in the Arabian Gulf. We wait to see whether the European powers, including the UK, can rescue the Iran nuclear deal at this stage and whether the offered release of the Iranian oil tanker at Gibraltar will in any way ease the situation. Meanwhile Kim Jong-un carries on with his missile and nuclear programme, despite Mr Trump's wooing efforts. Then there are the unofficial nuclear states, notably India and Pakistan, which carry on their bitter 70 year-old hostility.

However, the enormous technological impact on the nuclear scene is perhaps the newest and most unnerving danger. The committee was warned clearly about the vulnerabilities to nuclear command and control systems from cyberattacks. If cyberattacks can now knock out early warnings, simulate fake attacks or compromise delivery systems, the entire doctrine of nuclear deterrence is undermined. The Government's response to our concerns on this was:

“We will work with Allies to review the implications”,

of “these new technologies”. Is that really enough? I am told that microchip processing speeds are now more than 240 million times—I repeat: 240 million—faster than they were in the Apollo 11 moon shot computer 50 years ago, which I think your Lordships will discuss later. We are now living in a completely different world from the one in which thinking on arms control was first developed.

At the core of the existing nuclear regime is the nuclear non-proliferation treaty, which is coming up to 50 years old and due for review next year. It has certainly done its work in containing the number of nuclear states, but it is not in good shape today. Some even fear that it is becoming obsolete. Trust is the key in keeping this treaty alive and effective: trust between the five nuclear powers it legitimises—the so-called P5—and trust between these five and all the non-

nuclear signatories, in whose strong interest it is to stop further proliferation or, worse still, nuclear weapons getting to non-state and terrorist actors. The deal at the heart of the NPT is that the non-nuclear signatories will accept the disparity, provided that the five nuclear powers show a sustained path towards having fewer warheads, dismantling systems and having better verification methods to show that promises are being kept. Is this happening?

The non-nuclear powers think not, or not fast enough, and are getting impatient. As we report, many have banded together to agree to a straightforward ban or prohibition on all nuclear weapons—just like that. This so-called ban treaty has been endorsed by 122 countries but has not yet entered into force. It sounds splendid, of course, but the reasons why it will not work are equally obvious. Just wishing will not make it so. The tensions that keep nuclear weapons in place need to be wound down first; this can be done only step by patient step, and with the most advanced verification methods possible. The ban treaty will not help and may even hinder. On this latter point, our witnesses strongly disagreed with each other. The United Kingdom, along with the rest of the P5, definitely does not support a ban. We do not believe it is helpful.

In the meantime, we can do our best here in the UK by going for minimal critical deterrence, minimising warheads, keeping systems safe and, with the most modern controls, improving verification systems all the time and grinding away at the underlying antagonisms. This is broadly what the United Kingdom, for one, is doing. Our operational number of warheads is, I understand, now no more than 120.

This step-by-step approach necessitates unending attempts at engagement in dialogue, including with Russia despite its other hostile and unhelpful attitudes and actions. This also means having a lot of patience rather than just passing hopeful treaties that get us nowhere. Nevertheless, the ban treaty's supporters have a point, or so the committee heard in evidence. We believe that exchange and discussion between the P5 and the non-nuclear signatories to the NPT should be intense, continuous and understanding. Meanwhile, the dangers remain and grow. In this report we have urged the Government, as they currently chair the nuclear powers' P5, to put all possible energies into making a success of the NPT and consolidating the trust essential to hold it together.

Share

The edit just sent has not been saved. The following error was returned:

This content has already been edited and is awaiting review.

Lord King of Bridgwater (Con)

Share

If my noble friend will allow me, there is an important recommendation in view of the recent tension between India and Pakistan. The committee made a sensible recommendation to invite India and Pakistan to attend the next P5 meeting; they have been included in past discussions. I see that the Government's response merely says:

"Such an invitation would require the explicit agreement of all members of the P5".

Does my noble friend know whether the Government will propose that to the other members?

Share

The edit just sent has not been saved. The following error was returned:

This content has already been edited and is awaiting review.

Lord Howell of Guildford

Share

Like my noble friend, I am not enlightened by the Government's reply. It would be a very good idea, but the P5 would have to do it. As the UK is its chair, it may have some additional influence in persuading that step to be taken. I very much hope so.

In conclusion, without the general determination between nations to co-operate closely, even with those who oppose and frustrate in other areas, the slide away from international rules towards international anarchy is certain, with nations putting their own narrow and short-term interests first, often driven by populist

political appeal and force. From there, the step to nuclear deployment, accidental or intentional, unforeseen or sudden, at tactical or strategic level, is now perilously close. We can and must, at all costs, avoid and forestall. I beg to move.