Select Committee on International Relations

Corrected oral evidence: Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and nuclear disarmament

Wednesday 9 January 2019

11.10 am

Watch the meeting

Members present: Lord Howell of Guildford (The Chairman); Baroness Anelay of St Johns; Baroness Coussins; Lord Grocott; Lord Hannay of Chiswick; Baroness Helic; Baroness Hilton of Eggardon; Lord Jopling; Lord Purvis of Tweed; Baroness Smith of Newnham; Lord Wood of Anfield.

Evidence Session No. 4 Heard in Public Questions 35 - 48

Witness

I: Mr Tom Plant, Director, Proliferation and Nuclear Policy, Royal United Services Institute.

USE OF THE TRANSCRIPT

1. This is an uncorrected transcript of evidence taken in public and webcast on www.parliamentlive.tv.
Examination of witness

Tom Plant.

Q35  **The Chairman:** Mr Plant, good morning and thank you for being with us. I have formally to remind the Committee and you as our witness that this session is being recorded, and there will be a transcript afterwards available for you to change if it does not reflect what you think you said.

I also remind colleagues on the Committee that we have to declare any relevant interests when we ask questions. That is the formalities over.

Welcome, and thank you for your time with us. We are engaged in an inquiry in which we seek to focus on the state of nuclear disarmament and the prospects for the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty review, but there are many ancillary and background aspects relevant to it, so it is very hard to keep the thing contained.

Given that that is our ambition, would you like to begin by sharing your thoughts with us on the NPT review prospects and our role in it, taking account of the fact that we can see with our own eyes that the background to this is a very visible shift in the whole prospects for nuclear disarmament—with the old, safe world, if you can call it that, of nuclear deterrence under attack, the changing of the balance of power, new weapons coming along that are blurring the old division between theatre nuclear weapons, conventional nuclear weapons, intercontinental weapons, and so on?

It is a turbulent, changing scene against which we must try to consider the NPT in particular. That is our thought. Give us your take on that, before we go into the detail.

**Tom Plant:** You are right: it is a big challenge and exceptionally complicated. Some of the questions that we will no doubt get into later today will bring in all the complexities of different geopolitical situations and how they relate to it.

The NPT occupies such a primary role for analysts like us in our lives and work, but we have to remember that it occupies a relatively small part of global strategic affairs. Nuclear weapons themselves, on the other hand, have fairly substantial effects on various regional security complexes and how they relate to each other.

On your specific question about the Non-Proliferation Treaty and the non-proliferation regime, I want to separate the two things a little. The Non-Proliferation Treaty process itself at the moment is going through almost a ceasefire. In the run-up to the 2015 NPT review conference, there was a substantial diplomatic conflict of viewpoints on disarmament progress, a WMD-free zone in the Middle East, and so on, which led, in 2015, to failure to agree a consensus outcome document at the Review Conference, which many cited as a failure of the process.

On the other hand, addressing the regime in the round, that has not resulted in the emergence of new nuclear-weapons states. I am sure that
we will touch on some of the issues of the geopolitical role of nuclear weapons in Russia, North Korea, and so on. However, there have been no substantial changes to the global nuclear landscape as the result of that failure in 2015. We have to consider the two in relation to each other, but remember that one is a narrow reflection of the whole.

Within the process, however, I think it is fair to say that the UK—I should perhaps declare an interest, having been in the MoD\(^1\) and the Foreign Office at various points at junior level—has been in the lead of championing the NPT process, the non-proliferation regime as it stands, and taking unilateral action on disarmament.

The question is whether that has been meaningful in its impact on the wider regime. In the run-up to the 2020 Review Conference, the UK Government have more to do to show that they are cherishing and taking forward that leadership role.

**The Chairman:** That is a very helpful start. We will go on to some of the precise areas where everything is boiling, if I may put it like that, and is in question.

**Q36 Lord Hannay of Chiswick:** Perhaps we could have just a few minutes on two big test cases for the NPT, Iran and North Korea, which are quite different in their characteristics.

On Iran, this is perhaps a bit crude, but could you comment on whether you think the JCPOA\(^2\) approach is the one we should stick with, as the British Government are doing and as other European Governments are doing, or whether President Trump’s approach of withdrawing from it and trying to bring Iran to its knees through sanctions is likely to help or hinder the non-proliferation regime. Perhaps you could give us a few words on what the ‘son of JCPOA’ might look like, because as the months tick by we are getting closer to the expiry of some of the JCPOA constraints.

On North Korea, we are in the shadow of a probable further meeting between Trump and Kim. Perhaps you could just say what you think has been achieved so far, if anything, what could be achieved, and what needs to be achieved, if it is not just to be another Trump Potemkin village kind of victory.

**Tom Plant:** Thank you for your questions. On Iran, although I should say that I am not a specialist on the issue, from my reading of the situation I think the British Government’s position on JCPOA, which is a fairly stern critique of US policy, considering the usual tenor of UK-US discussions on anything diplomatically, but nuclear issues in particular, has been quite refreshing.

I strongly support that, because I think that the approach that the Administration in the US is taking is entirely wrong. The sanctions never

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\(^1\) Ministry of Defence

\(^2\) The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (the Iran nuclear deal)
brought Iran to its knees in the first place. They succeeded in creating a perceived security risk within Iran for the Supreme Leader: if there was another Green Revolution, certain groups that had sustained him might not turn out in the same force again.

Those circumstances do not exist now, because there is broader support, frankly, for the JCPOA. The fact that the Iran nuclear issue is to some extent seen as being dealt with means that there is not the international pressure on oil exports that there was in 2011 through 2015 that allowed the JCPOA to be achieved.

In terms of what might come next, if I were in the Iranians’ shoes I would do everything that I was legally allowed to do, everything that I was not prohibited from doing, because that is negotiating capital. Trump has signalled that there is another negotiation to be had, so that is how I would behave. If the JCPOA were still in play with the US, that might not be the same. Honestly, it probably would, but it might not be because there would be an opportunity to pursue restraint on both sides. That is where I sit on that.

On North Korea, I like the way you framed the question: how much has been achieved, if anything? That leads us in the right direction. What has been achieved is that we are not at war in North Korea, but we were never going to be had the US Administration not taken the position they did in and around September 2017, responding to North Korea’s nuclear tests.

The diplomatic achievements are difficult to parse. You have the US-DPRK process, which is happening at a senior working level, but still a working level. You have the summit process, which is achieving rather little substance. Then you have the South Korea-North Korea track, which is promising in a number of ways, but, of course, the priorities of the South Korean Government—the South Korean Administration, I should say, which has a particular character—are not those of the US.

My interpretation is that non-proliferation is very low down that list of priorities for the South Korean Administration. The discrepancy in the approach between the two allows North Korea to forum shop, and of course they have chosen the forum that is better for them: South Korean discussions.

The South Koreans are doing more on non-proliferation than the US fears, and they could do more if they were less nervous of the US not wanting them to get into that space. I am, however, slightly concerned that it seems likely that at the follow-up meeting that we expect to see between Kim and Trump this year he will emerge parroting the line of the person he has just met, as he has in every summit meeting to date with allies and adversaries. We have seen that with Putin in Helsinki, Shinzo Abe in DC and Xi Jinping, and I expect that Kim Jong-un will be the latest in a long line—to the dissatisfaction, I assume, of many in the Administration who have to try to manage that. That is a very unfortunate prospect.
On what needs to be done, I should like to see the South Korean Government, as they have done effectively in reducing the risk of war in the peninsula, create facts on the ground. The rapprochement between the north and the south has effectively removed the risk of war on the peninsula, because it takes the ground out, if you like, from any US desire to do so, if it existed in the first place. It precludes that option.

They could do something similar with the nuclear programme. There, the risk is that, given that Moon Jae-in in South Korea is so focused on making progress with the north, he is inclined to give up too much. This is where we have an issue with co-ordination between the two. As a North Korea specialist, I could talk about that issue for the rest of the session, but that outlines the situation.

If the north and south could negotiate a broad freeze on North Korea’s nuclear programme—a freeze that is not in place at the moment; there is only a testing freeze—that could progress towards verification over a period of time, and at least almost to arms control rather than disarmament, in a year’s time we might be in a situation where we can talk about reductions, but it takes a while to get to that point. We must recognise that we are not in a disarmament paradigm with North Korea; we are in an arms control paradigm.

Lord Hannay of Chiswick: And are we correct in thinking that so far the North Koreans have done nothing of any value on denuclearisation? They have produced some token things that do not signify very much. Are we correct in assuming that they are going full steam ahead in their research and development of fissile material, and so on? They have not changed any of that, have they?

Tom Plant: That is fair to say. The first-order answer is: yes, they have not given up much of value. There is one cautionary note, which is that all we have in effect is a freeze on testing ballistic missiles and nuclear weapons. That is very little, because, as you rightly point out, all the other R& D below that level can continue. What I have in mind by a broader freeze is a freeze on that activity as well, much of which could be verified without in-country access, which of course is North Korea’s biggest bugbear.

There is an attack/defence race here to think about in terms of North Korea’s ability to deter or prevent US intervention in a second Korean War and to protect South Koreans. The US missile defence system has its problems. It does not perform to specification as people would like. But the North Koreans are currently unable to flight-test missiles or new nuclear weapons—yes, they can do R&D, but they cannot make progress on the critical issue, which is warhead survivability on re-entry.

US missile defences are unrestrained and able to advance and develop. If you were to say that the US has no realistic prospect of intercepting North Korean ICBMs, you would effectively be betting against US R&D

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3 Inter-continental ballistic missiles
and technology development, which I think is unwise. There will always be a minuscule prospect of a missile making it through, but there is the question of whether that is significant.

**Q37** The Chairman: What do you think the Chinese leaders will have been telling Kim Jong-un on his visit to Beijing in the past few days? Will they be shrugging their shoulders? They are also signatories to the NPT.

**Tom Plant:** They are indeed. They would be saying two things. They would say, first, that they exert all efforts to bring North Korea back. They would want a negotiated solution, with both parties behaving reasonably, et cetera, and they would cite the joint statements put out by the Chinese and the Russians, by Xi and Putin, a year and a half ago as a process for that. The second thing they would say is, ‘You overestimate the level of influence that we have over the North Koreans’.

In both regards, their plan is not terrible; it is a little soft on the North Koreans, but it is okay. The level of influence they have is a bit of a diplomatic dodge. Diplomatically, of course they cannot tell the North Koreans what to do. Their power over North Korea is one of survival—life and death. It is not that they cannot do anything; it is that it is not in their interest to do those things. That is important to remember.

What is Xi telling Kim? Oh to be a fly on the wall in that meeting, but the suspicion after their last conversations was that Xi’s message had effectively to be to strengthen Kim’s resolve: to say, ‘If you hold firm you can get more out of Trump than you might have thought. If you are seen to be behaving ‘reasonably’, that makes it easier for China to support you’.

The issue of what China considers to be reasonable for North Korea to do is critical in understanding what futures are possible on the peninsula.

**The Chairman:** Now let us get back to get back to our position in this changing scene.

**Q38** Baroness Smith of Newnham: In some ways, I want to take you back to some of your introductory remarks. One thing we are looking at is the UK’s role in all this. As you said, in 2015 there was no great success, but we have not seen a major proliferation of nuclear powers. However, we are clearly not seeing any significant moves to disarmament at the moment.

You touched on the idea that the UK had led in the past because we had engaged in some unilateral disarmament, or at least arms reduction, but that we would need to do more ahead of 2020. In what way do you envisage that? Is it by the UK chairing meetings, or should we be advocating our own type of disarmament?

**Tom Plant:** That is a good question, and you are right to call me out on some of that. Let me be a little more nuanced about it. The UK had attempted to show leadership through unilateral reduction. At the time when those things were done, the environment was more normative.
There was a perception that the norm was towards disarmament and that reinforcing that would be sensible.

‘Practical disarmament’ might describe my position. For me, the goal is to pursue multilateral disarmament, ultimately. I have a bugging question: what is the utility of UK unilateral reductions in stimulating larger nuclear powers, who rely more heavily on nuclear weapons, to disarm? How does our unilateral disarmament drive that? I do not think it does. If we are indeed trying to provoke multilateral disarmament, how best do we do that?

I do not think that we should sit there and wait for the circumstances to come to us. It is about how we play a part in creating those circumstances. That narrows the space. The UK does not want to increase the number of its nuclear weapons or change its posture in a negative way for the disarmament portfolio for various reasons. Equally, if it cuts further, it falls foul of two things: first, the trap I have just outlined and, secondly, the question of whether we have a minimum credible deterrent in the first place that allows us to trade-off against others. There is the issue of how you square that circle.

Internationally, the UK has played a fairly substantial role leading on arms control verification with non-nuclear weapon states. Again, I should declare a small interest in that I worked at Aldermaston as a specialist on arms control verification and latterly as a technical authority for it, so I guess I have an institutional dog in the fight, although I am not connected to that anymore.

The UK has done an awful lot working with non-nuclear weapon states, Norway and Sweden in particular, we have a greater history of working with the US and a little with China, and then multilaterally as part of the International Partnership for Nuclear Disarmament Verification. There is the question of what it is all about. Is it just about looking good? Is it about showing others how hard it is to disarm, in which case it is just messaging? Or is it about genuinely preparing for and creating the circumstances in which these techniques and tools could be used in the real world, and thus, because the technical reality moves on, creating a political opportunity for that to happen?

That is where we have been lacking. The US invested heavily in academic research into arms control verification. It spent $25 million over five years from 2014. That was devoted not to nuclear weapons labs but to researchers. It was about creating a climate with a pool of people who were interested in and motivated to work on technological solutions, recognising that those things would not come out of government and sustaining those who would go into government later so that they would understand what they were dealing with.

The UK has not done anything like that, but $25 million over five years is a tiny drop in the ocean of the UK’s nuclear defence enterprise.

The Chairman: May I ask you to speak up a little? The acoustics are
very bad here.

**Tom Plant:** Sure. If I play back to the beginning of that, the US invested $25 million over five years under something called the Consortium for Verification Technology, including researchers in academia in various places such as Princeton, MIT, Illinois and elsewhere. That was not under the control of the Government but was about creating an environment where it is possible for academics to develop and sustain a career that can support Governments and create options that are technical realities that can be exploited.

The UK has not done anything like that, and it would be very easy, and comparatively cheap, for the UK to do that. That is one thing that the UK could do: bump up its financial commitment to arms control verification. The second thing it could do to make it politically meaningful would be to describe in more detail the circumstances in which it might in future join strategic arms control multilaterally. At the moment, it has said only, ‘At the right time’, or, ‘At the appropriate time’. It has not said more than that. It has not said what other arrangements would need to be in place.

Are we proceeding on the assumption for example that the UK would engage in strategic arms control only as part of a coalition or independently? Do restrictions on other weapons systems need to be in place before it does that? Would the collapse of the INF\(^4\) mean that the UK would be more or less inclined to engage in strategic arms control? Probably less, so perhaps the UK should say that and start creating circumstances where it is slightly clearer where the future is going.

There are other transparency-related points with both Parliament and the public, as well as internationally, that I think are worth exploring further.

**Q39 The Chairman:** I think you were at Aldermaston at one stage. I am trying to clarify the extent to which we are independent or caught up in the slipstream of America changing policy on this whole area. Just as a matter of fact, America is concerned with our delivery system, and we are trying to modernise theirs, but we manufacture and install the warheads. Is that right? America has no dictation over where our submarines are, does it?

**Tom Plant:** No. The point which the Government often make about operational independence of the deterrent is, to the best of my knowledge, entirely correct, although I should be very careful to say where the bounds of my knowledge and competence are on this. On those issues, I am only tangentially involved, and you are better off asking the Government about those points.

On the issue of warheads and the delivery system, the Trident missile is obviously US-provided. The common missile compartment is obviously US provided, with UK design input. The new fuses for the Trident nuclear warhead are in the public domain as being US-provided, as are various

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\(^4\) The Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty
other components, such as the re-entry vehicle aeroshell—the cone that contains the warhead.

Are we operationally independent? I think that is correct. Independence of production and supply is much more open to question.

**The Chairman:** I just wanted to clarify that, because operational independence is clearly related to independence of view on how we proceed. All these things flow together.

**Q40 Baroness Coussins:** I should like to ask you about modernisation plans. My question is in four parts.

First, what are the current nuclear modernisation plans of the nuclear weapons states?

Secondly, could you spell out in a little more detail to what extent new technologies such as cyber are incorporated as part of those modernisation plans? As part of that, how well-founded are concerns that I have seen expressed by commentators over the past year in background papers that we have been reading that the new technologies involved might risk giving rise to unplanned or accidental conflict or even nuclear activity by rogue states or hacker groups?

Thirdly, to what extent are the modernisation plans taking account of those concerns.

Finally, could you give us your assessment of whether the modernisation plans are undermining the NPT and the wider disarmament regime?

**Tom Plant:** Okay. A big portfolio. If you forgive me, I will not give a rundown of all the nuclear-weapons states’ plans. If you do not mind, I will give a general answer and then supplementary detail, if you need any.

In general terms, I think it is fair to say that every state that possesses nuclear weapons—I do not know about Israel, so I will give it a pass for now—is in some sense involved in a modernisation programme of some kind, of varying scale. Some can be described legitimately as modernisation.

I am as critical of the UK’s operation of the nuclear deterrent as anybody, but I think it is as fair to say that the UK’s is more accurately described as nuclear modernisation than, say, Russia’s progress. There, yes, there is a strategic renewal process, but it operates on a relatively short cycle compared to the renewal cycle that, say, we and the US operate, which gives a slightly inflated impression of regular developments of new systems when many of them are replacements. But it is also fair to say that Russia is maintaining the role of nuclear weapons in its doctrine, even potentially expanding it, and it has developed, and in some cases deployed, systems that contribute to that expanded doctrine. So the character is different in that regard. For me, the Russian approach is not just modernisation.
For the US, it is hard to say. The funded programme of record, which I understand still retains bipartisan support—a US witness may correct me on this—is still fairly characterised as one of modernisation. The potential programme laid out in the US Nuclear Posture Review could be more open to accusations of an expansion of role, or at least returning to roles that had been assigned to US nuclear weapons before, say, Obama. The withdrawal from service of naval-launched nuclear cruise missiles, for example, might come back, in which case, having taken a step back, much as in my answer to the noble Baroness, Lady Smith, earlier about the UK having taken a step to reduce nuclear weapons, it is not quite the same to step back up to where you were as if you just maintain that level. Going back to where you were before is different from just maintaining.

That is a sketchy answer, but we will see how that plays out. It will be very difficult for the Administration to get many of those plans funded by Congress. Leaving aside the Trump issue, the continuation of US-Russia arms control was pretty critical to continuing the consensus on funding that programme of record. That one has yet to play out, and my understanding is that many of the systems we see listed in the NPR are unlikely to make it even to the funding stage.

On the issue of other states, it makes sense to me that we think about India and China, both in terms of their expanding horizons. China is beginning to flex its muscles—I do not mean in a belligerent sense, although I think that is accurate in the South China Sea—I mean it being assertive and standing up in its view for what it considers to be its place in the world. One of the big milestones would be its starting to operate nuclear ballistic missile submarines outside its immediate ocean area. If it were to transition through what it calls the first and second island chains—the island chains that surround China and mark quite helpful defensive boundaries for the US, Japan and others—and effectively operate an SSBN outside the island chains, that is a step change in the deterrence landscape. There is no sign that China would not do that. Again, if you were in their shoes and saw yourself as a global power in a long-term rivalry with the US, of course you would look to do that.

Secondly, there are the Indians, who are significantly further behind, but we are evidently starting to see more than a bilateral deterrence relationship. They have a bilateral deterrence relationship with Pakistan, and to some extent with China, but considering their development of longer-range missiles and a ballistic missile submarine, one has to look at their horizons and see how much further they are drawn. Those are the states that I would look at particularly.

Your second question was about new technologies and their role. There are two ways in which this is important. I will lump together all the advances in cyberspace, AI and everything else—even, to some extent, micro-drone technology. A lot of these things, taken together, act to

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5 A SSBN is a nuclear-powered, ballistic missile-carrying submarine
reduce decision-making time in a crisis. It is absolutely right to say that they may well impose additional risks of nuclear use in such a crisis. That is not to say that they cannot be managed, but it is fair to say that existing arms control mechanisms, as they collapse, in some cases are collapsing because of the development of those new technologies. The INF is a good example.

Russia has long been worried about something called the reconnaissance strike complex—the idea that a US-led coalition would have such an advance in stealthy, long-range precision strike without using nuclear weapons that it would be able to achieve strategic effect and effectively blunt and intercept the remains of any Russian nuclear response, removing Russia’s nuclear deterrent through conventional means.

That is just with long-range precision cruise. If you look at technologies such as AI and the wider use of cyber, it ultimately acts to confuse the decision-making of senior leaders. Does that lead to a change in nuclear posture? All these developments are propagating now, so I do not have a good answer for you. We are doing research on them, actually, and I hope we will have good answers in the longer term, but it is fair to say that as in the early Cold War, when there was ‘the delicate balance of terror’—the person shooting first will ‘win’, but they will end the world in the process—we may be heading in that direction again, although not necessarily; it could be managed through the appropriate arms control and diplomatic methods, I am sure. They just do not exist yet, so more work needs to be done on those fronts.

The second way in which new technology, particularly cyber, is relevant is in degrading the operation of nuclear weapons at all. Supply-chain risk is something which the US has quite publicly expressed concern about. In the telecommunications space, the role of Huawei in UK and other telecoms is something that the US is obviously concerned about. If you extend that concern to microchip manufacturing in general, the vast majority of those things are produced in China, so if you are concerned about your supply chain in telecoms, why not other systems that use those things?

So I assume that both the US, the UK and other responsible nuclear weapons states will be taking measures to account for that. We know that it is a neuralgia. I assume that the solution would be very highly classified—I have no idea what it would be—but I understand that responses are being taken there.

In relation to other nuclear-weapon states, perhaps that is not seen as such a high priority. I honestly do not know. Perhaps they are not seen as such a target. I have to leave you with a hanging question there.

You also asked about the impact of modernisation programmes on the NPT as a whole. That is an interesting and nuanced question. I was trying to think of an analogy the other day. If I had a rifle here and I put a safety catch on it, I have modernised that weapon in a way—I have...
improved its capability—but I have also made it safer. It is difficult to argue that that is not a disarmament step, yet it is a modernisation step.

It has that effect partly because you can see me doing it. If I did it behind a screen over there and said, ‘honest, I have put a safety catch on this, but I will not show you the rifle’, that has a very different character, and that is the state that we are in with UK nuclear modernisation, for example. Obviously, too much transparency is impossible, but the secrecy around it leads to mistrust.

It is possible to have modernisation that at least minimises the impact on global nuclear disarmament. It is very hard to say that it is positive in any way, but it is possible to say that it minimises it. Again, the non-proliferation regime is founded on many things and the NPT is the core of it. A lot of it relates to disarmament but not all. The NPT was originally a security bargain between states that wanted to see the nuclear weapon states disarm but also did not want their neighbours to become nuclear states. The bargain to some extent was: ‘If you don’t develop them, we won’t’, and that bargain is still extant, as far as I see.

Coming back to my original remarks about separating the document from the regime and non-proliferation from disarmament, it is important to think about those things in those different layers. I see no great drivers for nuclear proliferation from nuclear weapons modernisation—horizontal proliferation—which is the spread of nuclear weapons from one state to another. There are drivers for vertical proliferation—which is the increase of capabilities within a state. That is probably how I would break that down.

Q41 Lord Grocott: Early in your answer you said, ‘I am not going to mention Israel because I do not know much about it’, which is fair enough. It just strikes me—I would be interested in your observation on this—that one issue that does not seem to get discussed very much is that of the four nuclear powers that are not signatories to the NPT. For obvious reasons, one is in a different category. We all know why it is pretty important to be clear as far as we can about what is happening in North Korea.

For the other three—India, Pakistan and Israel—are they just parked? Is the view that we cannot do much about it; they are nuclear states that are not in the Treaty. We do not know much about how they are modernising, or whether they are modernising, because they are not an obvious threat to ‘the West’? India and Pakistan may be a threat to each other, and Israel may be a threat to its neighbours; we do not know.

Is this an issue which people in your community, who spend their lives assessing these things, have just parked as something that we cannot or should not do anything about, or are there great specialists who could tell us precisely how far they have developed their nuclear weapons and how much of a threat they are?

Tom Plant: I think the answer to your second question is yes, there are. I am not one of those people, I hasten to add. There are people who study these things.
You are right to highlight the three countries that you mention: India, Pakistan and Israel. Israel, in particular, gets very little attention.

**Lord Grocott:** Why is that, do you think?

**Tom Plant:** There are a number of practical reasons. This sounds incredibly mercenary, but someone has to fund these things. As a think tank, we are funded by Governments, industry, non-profits, endowments, memberships et cetera. Some funders may be more or less willing to look at different issues. Although it might be very interesting for us to spend time looking at Israeli nuclear weapons, if we cannot find the funding to do that it is very hard to do. So there is the funding landscape. I just want to be candid with you about that. That does not mean that there are not people doing it.

**Lord Grocott:** It is slightly worrying, though, is it not, if we inquire only into countries where someone is willing to pay? It is understandable and a pragmatic answer, but it is not a very reassuring one.

**Tom Plant:** Totally. I would love to have the complete freedom to look at anything we liked and our funders were so hands-off—some of them are, and we are very grateful to them for it—but they are few in number, and Governments fund according to their priorities. India-Pakistan, on the other hand, is blessed with rather more analysts; I am simply not one of them. If you were to call one, I am sure that they will be able to give you a much better account than I am.

**Q42**

**Lord Wood of Anfield:** I have a quick question on another kind of modernisation: missile defence systems. A lot of us will have seen the Avangard Russian display over the New Year period. Is that a direct challenge to traditional notions of deterrence, or is it more an addition to the bargaining portfolio for more traditional negotiations in the future?

**Tom Plant:** I think it is both, in a way. I do not think there is a system out there that cannot be bargained over in some way. Some things are more or less valuable than others, and it may be impractical for them to be totally bargained away.

Let us talk about Russian attempts to defeat US missile defence in general. That is probably safer. I commented earlier that US missile defence was not performing as any of its proponents originally desired, although they argue that it will do. Russia cannot take that for granted now or that it will always be the case, so it fears to some extent what US missile defence will become. The scenario is that in some confrontation between, say, the US—the West—and Russia, the US and allies decide to use this reconnaissance strike complex, so the Russians fear to reduce their nuclear capabilities to the point where US and other missile defences could defeat any second strike.

Obviously Avangard and other systems, even stuff like the Status-6—the long-range nuclear torpedo—are to some extent about securing second strike. They are not entirely for signalling purposes, because some of these things have been developed and deployed. The great example
would be the INF-busting system. I have this open question: if, as some have said, this was all about gaining leverage to bargain with the US over ‘[insert problem here]’—a variety get cited—why do it in such secrecy? Why not conduct everything that is allowed to be conducted under the INF treaty in relation to that system—R&D and so forth? The US says that it will do INF-compliant research on ground-launched cruise. The Russians could have done that, but they did it in secret, which suggests that it has a purpose beyond bargaining. I would apply that reasoning to other systems as well. There is a genuine security fear. The Russian military-industrial complex also plays a role in this; we should not forget the idea of the Kremlinology of Russian defence politics.

Q43 Baroness Smith of Newnham: I have a brief follow-up question on something that you said about what gets funded for research and so on. I was not going to declare an interest, because my academic job is European politics, not nuclear deterrence, but it caused me on one occasion to write about the problems of doing academic research—think tanks have a similar issue—on who is willing to fund what. It means that certain things get more studied than others.

In the absence of funding for certain things and in light of the fact that we are at the start of this inquiry, are there issues related to the topic of our inquiry that you think are underexplored and on which you think we might usefully ask questions?

Tom Plant: That is a great question. I would like, if I may, to reflect on that in writing. When I was talking about funding, I wanted to be as candid as possible with your Lordships, rather than selling a sob story, if you like. That was not my intention; I just wanted to lay down the surrounding circumstances.

As you accurately wrote, what gets funded affects what gets done. Let me think about that. I made the point about meaningful development—an arms control research community in the UK seems like something that could be developed. There are centres of expertise on that in universities in London in particular—King’s College London, for example, where I am a visiting fellow—and elsewhere, but they are small and it is specialist.

My thinking is therefore that if you identified this as a big strategic issue that is in some sense fundamental to the geostrategic order, it would seem sensible to devote slightly more attention to it, in academia if not in think tanks.

Q44 Lord Hannay of Chiswick: Could you throw a little light on your thinking about the prospects for the INF? Is the INF Treaty now past praying for? Is it doomed, partly because of the way the Russians have flouted it and partly because of the way the Trump Administration are playing their reaction to that, or is it saveable in a slightly different form—for example, as a regional agreement that covers the whole of Europe, including, of course, Russia, but does not seek to inhibit the Americans in their dealings with China? Or is there another variant that would involve the treaty ceasing to bind the two parties but with their
acceptance that they would never deploy these weapons?

Could you give us a feel for where you think the INF arguments are at and what this Committee, for example, could usefully say about this imbroglio?

**Tom Plant:** Again, another toughie. To take your last question first—the sense that the Treaty might fail and that you would still in some sense be bound by it or at least act accordingly in never deploying these systems—the challenge for the US is that the Russians have already deployed the Treaty-busting system. Two different deployments are cited, which I am sure an expert would be able to go into in detail. That is the first: I do not think that the US would trust it.

Secondly, there is no bipartisan support for new arms control with a Russia that is not in compliance with its current agreements. There is no case for it. Frankly, as a proponent of arms control, I find it hard to make the case that agreements that are not being complied with should be extended or should set a good tone for future discussions. That is not to say that we should throw it on to the bonfire and be done with it. For example, New START—the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty—is, by all reports from the US, being complied with by the Russians. So if it still serves some value for global security, as I think it does, the UK’s position should be to advocate strongly for its extension. That is about recognising that the house that we had built is collapsing and that a new arms control edifice needs to be constructed, but that demolishing the last remnant of the last one before we have even laid the foundations of the new one seems a little premature.

As for the chance of saving INF by modifying it, you would run into legal issues in both the US and Russia. You could turn it into the equivalent of a presidential nuclear initiative. That is the only thing that I can see that would—

**Lord Hannay of Chiswick:** Into what?

**Tom Plant:** The equivalent of a presidential nuclear initiative. If you were to try to get a new treaty, because it would be seen as a new treaty, any modification to the INF text would have to be approved by the Duma in Russia, which would probably be doable if Putin wanted that to happen, but it would also have to be approved by Congress in the US, which seems a lot harder at present—I do not know whether that would be true for this, but maybe others can speak to that. That is the challenge. The option would be to do something at the presidential level, which would not be legally binding; it would be a unilateral initiative and would be around restraint, which is not a word that I typically associate with President Trump.

To go back to my point about the systems that the Russians have already deployed, how could you trust a declaration of restraint without verification? If you are doing restraint with verification, that looks an awful lot like arms control. That is the problem. Should we still be praying for it? I do not pray, but there is still a chance that it could happen,
although it seems vanishingly unlikely. We just have to adjust ourselves to a future where the INF is not part of our security structure.

The Chairman: We come to what will probably be the last question.

Q45 Baroness Anelay of St Johns: Thank you for leading us through the political hardware and the R&D environment, on which, as a Committee, we are taking evidence in advance of PrepCom\(^6\) and RevCon.\(^7\) At the beginning, you mentioned something that Baroness Smith took up: as we approach RevCon, the UK has more to do to show its leadership role. If you were back advising the Government about how to exercise that leadership role at PrepCom and RevCon, in this difficult environment, where would your priorities lie?

Tom Plant: I think that if I were back advising, I would be paid no attention to—I was quite junior, I should say. I reiterate the points that I made about the UK making a big show of commitment to arms control verification, in particular. Putting some political teeth behind that would make sense, as would trying to understand how the activities that the UK conducts are linked in the real world to potential future arms control scenarios.

The UK devotes a lot of attention to nuclear warhead dismantlement verification, for example. For me, that is interesting. Some argue that that is against the day when a great breakthrough is made and we need technologies available quickly that will allow us to verify warhead dismantlement of, say, Russia and China, with them being able to verify ours. But it seems more practical to think about technologies that could verify the next arms control treaty.

The UK is not doing anything in that regard that I know of, but it could do. It could say that it is doing that and show how those things are linked, but it has not done those things. The UK has shown leadership in unilateral reduction. It has not shown leadership in the sense of taking things by the scruff of the neck, if you like, and saying, ‘This is a path forward, or one of many potential paths forward, that we can see’.

I can see that being an option. That is not to say that there should be a UK grand plan for global nuclear disarmament, but we should at least have a sense of the possible futures that we would sit in and how we would help those to happen. Waiting for the right time does not befit a member of the nuclear-weapon states group or a permanent member of the UN Security Council. We have more to do there.

There are also things that we can do on transparency, which is worth thinking about. The UK again does a pretty good job on international transparency around posture, nuclear planning, and communication about one deterrence system, its operation, detargeting et cetera. To some extent, the collaborations on arms control verification are a kind of transparency, because they allow peer-to-peer working between nuclear-

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\(^6\) The Preparatory Committee of the NPT (in 2019)
\(^7\) The Review Conference of the NPT (in 2020)
weapon and non-nuclear-weapon states, which is very important for trust-building and mutual understanding. More of that would be appropriate.

There is an element of detail and of internal transparency in the UK. It would be appropriate if the UK could show, or if others querying the posture of the UK could see, a vibrant domestic debate in which the relevant ministries looking after the UK’s nuclear deterrence were more open in responding to inquiries from Parliament and the public about certain details, and were less willing to wave the national security restriction flag, which is totally justified in many cases but is overapplied in relation to certain issues.

Baroness Anelay of St Johns: On that point, there are different departments that clearly have a major role in this, and the Foreign Office leads on preparations for PrepCom and RevCon. Do you see them both working in concert to conceal information, or is it simply the way Whitehall works? Can we take some leadership in showing what we are doing, or not doing, on modernisation that might be in conflict with the existing treaties?

Tom Plant: Let me address the first point about concealing information. I do not think there is some sort of cross-Whitehall conspiracy to conceal information that should not be concealed. I do think there is a cultural difference between the Foreign Office and the Ministry of Defence in responding to queries from researchers, the public, Parliament and so forth. I have experienced both; my training in the Foreign Office was that informing Parliament is a privilege, and it felt in the MoD that informing Parliament is a duty. Those are two different positions, are they not? I would be interested in that being rebutted, in a way that is credible, by the current incumbents.

There is another thing I would find particularly useful with regard to the transparency commitment, from the MoD in this case. The UK is going to make a decision on its new nuclear warhead by 2022. That is what it said in its 2017 update to Parliament. The 2018 update to Parliament says nothing about warhead timeline, which always sets alarm bells ringing. A commitment that the decision would be taken to Parliament would be very sensible. If it were not taken to Parliament, it would feel like concealment; let us put it that way. The expectation among researchers is that that would be done, not because analytically we think that but because that is the trajectory which the UK has taken. Not to do that, having done it for Trident replacement, would seem to me again to be a step backwards. That is my concrete suggestion there.

Q46 The Chairman: We had evidence in a previous session from Dr Ford, the US Assistant Secretary at the State Department, about creating the conditions for the new nuclear disarmament initiative that is brewing up in the United States, I think. Is that something you are aware of and support?
**Tom Plant:** It is something I am aware of. I have seen the position paper that came out that highlighted this idea; I think it was in the last Preparatory Committee to the NPT. It was a fairly expansive position paper that said, ‘We’ve been talking for a long time about not being able to give up nuclear weapons entirely unless the circumstances are right, so we need to think about how to create the circumstances, and this is our approach for doing that’.

I understand that the working group will talk about the practical arrangements regarding what was announced more recently and what I imagine Dr Ford will have said, although details are yet to emerge, I think. It is much like the International Partnership for Nuclear Disarmament Verification, which is multilateral, and it is political, obviously, but it is more focused on solutions. That is the idea at least. It will look to create something in that model that works towards understanding what those conditions would look like.

Most charitably, it is an attempt to address the challenge that I have put forward to the UK about linking future arms control to what you would do, in what circumstances this would happen, and how you might create those. There is quite a lot of scepticism about it, not least because the initiative changed its name a couple of times over the year, which never breeds certainty. But it is wait and see on that one. I do not see it as signalling a US change in policy. It looks more like a presentation exercise to me.

**Q47 Lord Hannay of Chiswick:** I just wanted to see whether I had rightly understood your answer in relation to the Review Conference—that it would be quite unwise to think that some great leap forward can be achieved at this stage and that we should be looking—‘we’ being the UK, this Committee and so on—at what you might call small steps that could create greater confidence and perhaps stem the degradation of the international regime. Have I understand that rightly?

**Tom Plant:** I think so. One thing that we have not talked about at all is the nuclear weapons Ban Treaty, or the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, and its interaction with the dynamics of the last Review Conference; I mentioned the dynamics briefly in my opening remarks.

I think that is right, but the problem with that approach is that it will not be enough for many of the Ban Treaty advocates in particular and the states that support them. So the question, I suppose, is whether enough nucleates around that that it is a seemingly viable alternative or, if nothing else, a scream of diplomatic rage.

The crack in the wall will come—if it comes; I do not think it is guaranteed to—when a state decides that it would prefer to discharge its non-proliferation obligations under the Treaty of Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons than it would under the Non-Proliferation Treaty. There are lots of mechanisms that would restrict that from happening and that would
restrain a state from making that decision. It is not the kind of decision that would be made by the groups...

One of the issues with many states is that the policies on non-proliferation and disarmament are very rarely a supreme national priority; they are not top of the heads of states’ list of issues. Withdrawing from the NPT, on the other hand, would quite quickly become top of the heads of states’ list of issues, because there would be a succession of major partners beating down their door to make plain the consequences and so forth. That is not to say that that would not happen; there are lots of restraining factors. But that is where I would see the first serious challenge to the NPT coming.

Where states discharge their obligations in connection with both, to the extent that it does not undermine the NPT we will have to see what the practical implications of that are. But, again, if states are forum shopping, the verification requirements on non-proliferation, for example, under the Treaty on Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons are much less stringent than they are under the NPT. That is a step backwards for disarmament and non-proliferation. It is hard for that to be cast as anything else. The scream of rage may be justified, but it does not mean that the subsequent lashing out is productive. That is essentially where I would sit on this.

That is a long way of saying yes, it is small steps, but we should be conscious that it is not going to be enough for some, and we should find ways to at least restrain any lashing out, to use my previous characterisation, co-operatively—I do not mean in the confrontational sense—in the UK’s position to make clear and to demonstrate, to show not tell, that commitment to disarmament and non-proliferation is warranted.

**Q48**  
**The Chairman:** I end by asking you a more general question, which might make the whole non-proliferation debate more difficult.

We have been used to talking for the last few decades about escalation and the ladder of escalation in the use of nuclear weapons. Is that becoming an out-of-date concept as the whole thing turns into a much more complicated web? If it does, how are we going to cope with the non-proliferation of all kinds of intermediate weapons, as effected by the INF, as well of course as intercontinental weapons? Is that a new difficulty? What do you think about that?

**Tom Plant:** The whole idea of a ladder of escalation is one paradigm for understanding how conflict might develop between one or more actors. I do not think it is invalidated, by the way; I think it is a useful tool in some circumstances. We just have to recognise where it is more usefully applied.

It seems to me that you are talking about the sense of a greater spread, not just of nuclear but of capabilities that might provoke nuclear use, to more states with more independent centres of decision-making—a world that is not just bilateral or even multilateral within a coalition, such as
NATO or Russia, but that has a number of interacting regional security complexes. The India-Pakistan complex can no longer be seen as a bilateral; it now incorporates China and maybe even Russia. That then has an interaction with the US, France, the UK and so on. If you were to add other issues relating, for example, to long-range conventional precision strike, which I alluded to earlier, you bring non-nuclear-weapon states into that mix.

So you are right to say that there a lot of things that will complicate this picture, but the factors that restrain or can restrain military capability developments in those states have not changed: the perception of external risk, the presence of alliances, the presence of diplomatic processes that reduce tensions between states and increase trust, people-to-people or peer-to-peer context can all do the things that they did in the Cold War; they just have to do it with more actors now. We are yet to see those processes interact.

We saw in the Cold War, for example, US-Russia academies of science exchanges. There have been similar things between the US and China, and there could be similar exchanges between, say, academies of science, other bodies, other groups, other states. It will be harder work; there is no question of that. But it requires repurposing and updating these tools, which were, admittedly, not wholly effective but partially effective and acted to restrain risk, at least. There is the prospect of that, at least, if work is done to move it forwards.

**The Chairman:** We will have to leave it there. We would like to go on drawing on your wisdom, because it has been fascinating to hear the things that you have had to say. But time moves on, so can I on behalf of the Committee thank you very much indeed for all that you have told us and for giving us your time? It was extremely valuable, and we are very grateful.

**Tom Plant:** And I am very grateful to you. Thank you for the opportunity to give evidence. I appreciate it.