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Preventing a new age of nuclear insecurity? *Analysis of William Hague's July Address to the IISS*

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In a speech delivered to an audience at the International Institute for Strategic Studies in July 2008, William Hague discussed how he believed the vision of a nuclear weapons-free world could be realised. Part of a growing tide and following a talk exactly two years earlier, Hague reflected previous statements made by former Foreign Secretary Margaret Beckett, the Prime Minister Gordon Brown, Minister of Defence Des Browne and a *London Times* op-ed written by a trio of former British foreign secretaries and a former NATO Secretary-General.

This short paper will broadly outline key aspects of the address, focusing on what specific events, policies or plans Hague believes are needed for nuclear disarmament to take place, and what pitfalls should be avoided. This will be followed by a critical response: does the speech go far enough? Are there proposals which are flawed or unlikely to be possible in today's current international climate? It concludes with an assessment of its contribution to the current debate, as well as the next steps that must be undertaken by the international community or the UK government.

Hague's argument

Welcoming the increased international support for the vision of a nuclear weapons-free world, William Hague was critical of the current practice of dealing with proliferating or possibly proliferating states on a case by case basis. By failing to pick up on the common themes that facilitate proliferation – technology has been acquired rather than developed, activities have been hidden for substantial periods of time, and the international response has been delayed and indecisive – the international community is caught unprepared, the response is insufficiently urgent, and the danger of regional spread is magnified.

Citing the example of Iran, Hague argues that irrespective of the extent of nuclear disarmament in the United Kingdom, Russia and the United States, some countries will always see it in their

national interests to develop nuclear weapons. As a result, Hague warns against unilateral and multilateral disarmaments which are not coupled with increased non-proliferation and counter-proliferation efforts:

“However no amount of nuclear disarmament will protect us from the dangers of nuclear weapons without a more comprehensive approach to nuclear proliferation, which is by far the biggest challenge we face today. There is an urgent need for a concerted effort to put the brakes on nuclear proliferation, without which steps towards reducing nuclear stockpiles worldwide will have little effect.”

Today’s geopolitical climate makes nuclear proliferation a greater threat than during the Cold War. Hague believes *“the barriers to becoming a nuclear weapons power are considerably lower than they were in the past”*, and that the dangers from proliferation have magnified for the following reasons:

- **Suppliers:** *“A thriving black market exists operating as a one-stop shop for would-be nuclear powers, so that even those countries such as Libya which did not have the indigenous base for a nuclear weapons programme were able to import it from abroad”*
- **Non-state actors:** *“It is no longer beyond the power of terrorist groups to acquire the nuclear material necessary to detonate a nuclear device in one of our cities”*
- **Spread of dual-use nuclear technology:** *“We have to grapple with the dangers of the nuclear fuel cycle. Once a country knows how to produce enriched uranium for a civilian power programme, it has overcome one of the greatest hurdles to acquiring a nuclear weapon”*
- **A break-down of trust:** *“The absence of effective control of proliferation has contributed to the reluctance by nuclear weapons powers to assist with the transfer of peaceful nuclear technology to states who want it”*

In light of these loopholes in the non-proliferation regime, Hague highlighted eight proposals which the British government should adopt and advocate immediately:

1. There needs to be a conference of ‘strategic dialogue’ between the Permanent Five before the next NPT Review Conference in 2010, to discuss further reductions in stockpiles, and how to reduce the risk of confrontational or accidental nuclear war.
2. We need to listen to states with the capabilities but not the desire to have a nuclear weapons program (for example, Brazil and Japan) and bring on board the non-signees, including Israel, Pakistan and India.
3. The loopholes in the NPT, which allow states to develop nuclear technology and then withdraw without facing a determined punishment, should be closed immediately. The international community should determine a default response for any state leaving the NPT, including immediate referral to the UN Security Council.
4. The uranium fuel cycle needs to be taken under international control – with more states wanting to acquire nuclear technology, the international community should regulate the cycle through partnerships, or ‘fuel banks’.

5. The IAEA should be strengthened by increasing its inspectional powers, by making the Additional Protocol mandatory from 2010, and by substantially increasing its funding.
6. Attempts should be made to improve the international community's ability to disrupt the black market for nuclear weapons and related technology, and to increase the power of the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI) and encourage important states to sign up to it (for example, Malaysia, China and Pakistan).
7. The financial networks that support nuclear proliferation should be disrupted. Suspect banking activity should be blocked and money-laundering banks isolated. International assistance should be provided to states to establish domestic laws and controls against nuclear proliferation.
8. Learning from the examples of North Korea and Libya, there should be a 'step change' in how the international community deals with would-be nuclear weapons states, such as Iran. This should include more European 'sticks' to go alongside American 'carrots' as well as gathering international support for more sanctions.

Finally, Hague argues that the specific challenges of nuclear proliferation must be understood alongside the other global problems of climate change and energy security. There is a need for greater urgency and a 'galvanising moment' to bring together the international community. The United Kingdom should also act quickly in forming a common approach with the new US President in 2009.

Analysing Hague's address

Given his position as official representative of Conservative Party policy in this area, there is much in William Hague's speech to welcome. First and foremost, Hague highlights the urgency of the situation, and the need to secure nuclear stockpiles to prevent nuclear material getting into the wrong hands. Increasing international awareness and support for initiatives such as the Cooperative Threat Reduction (CTR) Program will increase their scope and effectiveness.

Nuclear weapons and nuclear proliferation are global threats, not just limited to either those states that have nuclear weapons now, or those that want to acquire weapons in the future. William Hague appears to recognise that the broader international regime governing non-proliferation needs to include all nations and not just the select few that make the international headlines, and would ensure that other powers, such as Brazil and Japan, will be able to have a voice in the debate. Success depends upon maintaining the consensus at the heart of the Non-Proliferation Treaty, but equally, it does not have to be static and inflexible to changing times.

On the other hand, Mr Hague's advocacy of a universal posture towards would-be proliferators, and the requirement to involve the UN Security Council in establishing general principles to apply to every situation may be over-stated. The Six Party Talks are criticised by Hague as being a non-uniform approach, but by including the immediate neighbours in talks, those most closely affected and likely to respond in ways that affect international security, the situation is

contained and controlled. Perhaps only after these talks break down should the Security Council become more substantially involved.

Hague believes that states which opt out of the NPT or violate its provisions should be immediately referred to the Security Council. But the Council is not some mystical silver bullet – the case of Iran has shown that consensus and agreement within the Council is not always easy to reach. Reaching some prior agreement in principle on the type of response would inevitably be illusive, because Council members would not limit their freedom of action in advance and some would fear abuse by other members.

Hague clearly believes that disarmament is desirable in its own right and also to shore up the NPT consensus, he also believes that certain states will pursue a nuclear weapons programme irrespective of such moves by the nuclear powers. He cites Iran, arguing that its “relative weakness in conventional forces, its perception of being militarily encircled and its desire to ensure the survival of the Revolution” will ensure domestic support for the acquisition of a nuclear weapon. But Hague fails to discuss how the international community should address these systemic causal motivations behind Iran’s suspected nuclear weapons programme. His approach risks focusing on punishment of non-confirming states to the exclusion of attempts to overcome these factors driving proliferation. Too often security between states is seen to be zero-sum, so that policy prescriptions fall into the category of winning over against others. Such an approach will create resistance and animosity in the future, and in the long term will end in failure.

Hague’s approach in prioritising non-proliferation over disarmament also risks strengthening the perception amongst some non-nuclear weapon states that the declared nuclear powers still dictate the global response without holding up to their side of the original bargain. Nations such as South Africa have frequently argued that it is lack of progress in the disarmament pillar of the NPT which is undermining confidence in the treaty and indirectly leading to proliferation.

On the renaissance in nuclear power, which he broadly welcomes, Hague states that the “dilemma of the fuel cycle is one which will only get worse. As things stand, we do not have an answer”. NPT signatories can legally develop nuclear enrichment programmes under the auspices of a civilian nuclear programme and then once the dual-use technology is acquired, withdraw from the NPT. In this context, Hague supports international enrichment partnerships and ‘fuel banks’ implicitly supporting measures to prevent non-nuclear weapon states from developing their own full-cycle enrichment processes. Agreement to such arrangements is only likely if they are non-discriminatory, and states currently with enrichment facilities agree to give up national control and internationalise them. Perhaps Hague’s ‘galvanizing’ moment, that brings the international community together, will be most necessary in this regard.

The need to strengthen the inspectorial power and finances of the IAEA is not in doubt. If additional powers and responsibilities are to be bestowed upon the Agency, it is important that its recommendations are listened to by members of the Security Council, rather than being used as a rubber-stamp for predetermined policies. Similarly, Hague is correct in stating that

the Additional Protocols will increase the effectiveness of monitoring. Increased international efforts should be made to encourage more than the current 88 states to bring into force the enhanced safeguards agreements. This will not be successful until some white elephants are addressed – notably the nuclear states outside the NPT as well as further nuclear disarmament by the nuclear weapons states.

Going forward

William Hague's speech is a welcome addition to the growing international movement that supports the vision of zero nuclear weapons. He insightfully touches upon some of the issues which will be contentious in the future, but necessary to resolve if significant improvements are to be made. It is highly encouraging that there appears to be significant agreement between the two major British political parties, that will ensure sustained movement in the right direction, will bolster the current Labour government's resolve to move on this agenda, and confidence within Washington that moves towards disarmament will be supported by their closest ally before and after any elections.

Even though the Conservative Party has recently come far in realising that nuclear disarmament is both preferential and possible, Hague's speech highlights that a more complex understanding of the perceptions of the wider international community is needed. Additional care must be taken in order to act towards the non-nuclear weapons states with respect and greater equality. In particular, Hague's support for the US-India nuclear deal sends an unsatisfactory message to states which chose to abide by international standards and refrained from developing their own nuclear arsenal. Furthermore, his proposal to include Israel, Pakistan and India in non-proliferation talks as de facto nuclear weapon states will be seen as highly controversial by certain countries. This shows the fine line that any government must tread – the need to include all states within an international agreement and the necessity of deterring states from disregarding their obligations under the NPT. An adequate solution to this dilemma will be crucial for the zero nuclear weapons vision to come into reality.