Debate. Click here to watch Parliament Live

Sarah Wollaston (Totnes, Conservative)

We have heard this afternoon from both a wife and a mother, so I am happy to complete the set as the daughter of an Air Force officer. I grew up for most of my childhood on Air Force bases, so I fully understand the value of our armed forces.

Last month, I visited the cold war nuclear bunker at Bolt Head in my constituency. I hope that it can be saved from dereliction and opened as a museum, because it is a chilling reminder of how close we came to Armageddon. That did not happen largely because both sides understood the rules of the game, but does anybody seriously believe that stateless terrorist groups or rogue regimes understand those rules or even care about the consequences?

Many of my constituents cannot understand why our strategic nuclear weapon is being left out of the strategic defence and security review, because the uncontrolled proliferation of nuclear weapons is one of the greatest threats to our existence. That voice has not been heard this afternoon. I hope that hon. Members will bear with me, because it needs to be heard.

At the heart of the 1968 non-proliferation treaty was a commitment to the goal of disarmament by recognised nuclear weapons states; it was the cornerstone of the pledge to the nuclear have-nots in order to stop them seeking to acquire their own weapons. Dissatisfaction among states without nuclear weapons at the lack of progress in achieving the aims of article VI is widespread. Let me remind the House that at the sixth non-proliferation treaty review conference in 2000 we signed up to

"an unequivocal undertaking by the nuclear-weapon States to accomplish the total elimination of their nuclear arsenals leading to nuclear disarmament to which all States parties are committed".

In renewing Trident, we break that pledge and remove our moral credibility. How can we begin to persuade nations such as Iran to step back from the nuclear cliff edge unless we are at least prepared to step back from the precipice ourselves? I am not advocating a unilateral approach, but if this obsolete, expensive and unthinkable weapon has any value at all, surely it is as the means to bring others to the negotiating table. I am rather tired of being told, "It cannot be done" and that to advocate nuclear disarmament is to be incapable of understanding the complexity of the issue. Nor do I accept the argument that these weapons cannot be un-invented; we cannot un-invent biological weapons, but nobody is suggesting that we take that route to mutually assured destruction.

My concern is that as time distances us from the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the horrific consequences of nuclear war become clouded and remote, and that we lose our sense of outrage. In the event of such an outrage—even with a dirty bomb—would we seriously consider nuclear retaliation? Against whom would we retaliate? I am not alone in believing
that among the greatest threats facing us is uncontrolled nuclear proliferation and the risk of these weapons then falling into the hands of those who would not hesitate to use them. I have received a great deal of correspondence, as I am sure many hon. Members have, from constituents opposed to the renewal of Trident.

I would ask the Secretary of State to address those real and present dangers, as well as the unknown future threats, by delaying Trident in order to persuade others to join us at the negotiating table. Specifically, I would ask whether any efforts have been made to do that; has any contact been made with those countries that lie outside the non-proliferation treaty—Israel, India and Pakistan? Even more importantly, has Trident been offered up as a means of persuading Iran away from its goal of acquiring a nuclear weapon? Surely that would be preferable to waiting for an Israeli strike against Iranian installations.

I ask Members to consider how secure Pakistan's nuclear arsenal is from falling into the hands of extremists. An area the size of Italy is underwater in Pakistan and it will rightly be the greatest recipient of UK overseas aid. Surely Pakistan cannot afford to waste precious resources on maintaining a nuclear deterrent—come to that, nor can we. I would rather have an effective Army, Navy and— I have an interest here—Air Force than spend at least £20 billion of their resources on a weapon that we can never use and that no longer acts as a deterrent. I call on the Secretary of State to delay his decision on Trident, not because I am an idealist, but because I am a realist. I call on him to protect our conventional armed forces and, specifically, to recognise that in my constituency, Britannia naval college is far more important.

I shall conclude by reminding the House that Alfred Nobel, of peace prize fame, was famously convinced that his invention of dynamite would make war too destructive to contemplate. We would be wrong to make the same mistake with Trident.

They Work For You

Hansard