

Speech

UK Statement at Conference on Disarmament: High-level Segment

Conference on Disarmament: High-level Segment. Statement by the United Kingdom, as delivered by Lord (Tariq) Ahmad of Wimbledon at the United Nations on 28 February 2024.

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Mr President,

It would be fair to say that we live in what can only be termed extremely troubled, uncertain and indeed vulnerable times for many. When we look around the world today, international norms are being eroded, and the global security environment is deteriorating and these challenges, to put it quite bluntly and in a straightforward way, are too great for any single State to manage alone. They can only be addressed through effective cooperation between international partners.

This Conference has made historic contributions to arms control and non-proliferation efforts, but notwithstanding what has been achieved, we must be absolutely clear-eyed about both the challenges this particular Conference faces – and indeed we all face – and in doing so, the only way forward is to work together to resolve them.

The United Kingdom appreciates the efforts of the Indian and Indonesian Presidencies to seek agreement on a Programme of Work, but it is regrettable that once again, consensus seems to be elusive. From our perspective, it is also regrettable that the Russian delegation chose to block 15 EU and NATO States from participating as observers, purely on political grounds. If we are truly going to address these issues, we need a collective effort.

It is clear that Russia has a growing disregard for its nuclear responsibilities. It has undermined the work of this Conference by suspending its obligations under the New START Treaty and de-ratifying the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty. It has trampled international law and the UN Charter through its barbaric and continuing war and illegal invasion against Ukraine. We ourselves are a nuclear power, but an invasion marked by irresponsible nuclear rhetoric is not the way to behave. The horrific targeting of civilians and the cruel weaponisation of energy and food supplies, to put it simply, is wrong.

Elsewhere, Iran's escalating nuclear and ballistic missile programmes are threatening international security and undermining global non-proliferation.

Through its development and proliferation of ballistic missiles, Iran, and I can speak quite specifically as the United Kingdom's Minister for the Middle East, is destabilising the Middle East, threatening maritime security and increasing the risk of miscalculation. Iran is also refusing to co-operate with the International Atomic Energy Agency's investigations, preventing the Agency, that has been created for the purpose of looking at these particular issues, from assuring that Iran's nuclear programme is exclusively peaceful. The United Kingdom remains committed to ensuring Iran never develops a nuclear weapon, and to using all available diplomatic levers and options to that end.

As we look more broadly elsewhere, North Korea's advancement of its nuclear and ballistic missile programmes, in clear breach of UN Security Council Resolutions, is clearly another big concern. It is important when the UN Security Council has passed resolutions that these are adhered to. We therefore call upon North Korea to halt its illegal launches and refrain from conducting further nuclear tests. The United Kingdom is committed to securing peace on the Korean peninsula, and we are working closely with our partners to urge the North Korean regime to return to talks and take credible steps towards denuclearisation. Until then, we will continue to enforce sanctions against them.

Mr President,

We must ensure that our existing disarmament, arms control and non-proliferation instruments are meeting these challenges. We have to have organisations, systems and structures which are fit for purpose.

This will take a global effort which includes redoubling our commitment to the Treaty on Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, which remains the cornerstone of nuclear disarmament, non-proliferation and civil nuclear prosperity. The United Kingdom strongly advocates for all States that have not yet done so to sign and ratify the Treaty at the earliest opportunity. We remain firmly committed to fulfilling our obligations under all three pillars of the Treaty and will focus on taking the practical and necessary steps to prepare for eventual disarmament. This includes funding initiatives on irreversibility, verification and importantly, transparency. The United Kingdom is also working to reinforce the non-proliferation system by supporting the IAEA financially, diplomatically, and politically.

We believe that a Fissile Material Cut-off Treaty would be a significant step towards a world without nuclear weapons. We call for such negotiations to commence immediately within this Conference. We reaffirm our existing unilateral negative security assurances regarding the use or threat of use of nuclear weapons against Non-Nuclear Weapon States parties to the Non-Proliferation Treaty. We also underscore our legally binding commitments to over 100 countries in the context of the nuclear weapon-free zones in Latin America and the Caribbean, Africa, Central Asia and the Pacific Ocean.

Let me pay tribute here, Mr President, to your country's leadership on the Protocol to the South-East Asia Nuclear Weapon-Free Zone Treaty. I know the drive that your Foreign Minister has shown in her advocacy for important causes across that region. Let me reassure you that the UK remains committed to signing and ratifying this at the earliest possible opportunity.

The Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty is another fundamental instrument that contributes to international security and disarmament. Therefore, the United Kingdom encourages all relevant States – including Russia – to declare and maintain moratoria on explosive nuclear testing. We also call on the remaining Annex 2 states to sign and ratify this essential Treaty.

Mr President,

We must also focus our efforts on preventing an arms race in outer space, where misunderstandings could easily trigger conflicts. We must also ensure that emerging technologies are used for good, not for ill. What we need is fresh thinking and new approaches. This is why the United Kingdom brought forward the Responsible Space Behaviours initiative. We call on all States to engage in this initiative, so we can reduce the growing threat. First and foremost, States should comply with the Outer Space Treaty, including the obligation not to place nuclear weapons in orbit around the Earth.

The same goes for Artificial Intelligence – we must ensure this is developed and used safely and responsibly. That is why the United Kingdom convened the first ever meeting of the UN Security Council on the opportunities and risks of AI, and hosted the AI Safety Summit, which agreed the Bletchley Declaration.

Next year marks the 50th anniversary of the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention. The United Kingdom is committed to helping to strengthen the Convention, to mitigate the risks posed by new and emerging biological threats and keep us all safe for the next 50 years.

I will end by reflecting on our objectives when it comes to chemical weapons. The United Kingdom welcomes last year's confirmation by the OPCW that all declared chemical weapons stockpiles have finally been destroyed. This is a real milestone, and evidence of what States can achieve when they work together. But despite this step forward, deep concerns remain over the possible use of riot control agents by Russia in Ukraine, and Bashar al-Assad's willingness to use chemical weapons against civilians in Syria. This is not a mere threat; it has happened, and it is something the OPCW themselves have stood up. We therefore welcome the Decision adopted at the 28th CWC Conference of States Parties to reduce the threat of further chemical attacks by the Syrian regime and will work to implement this. We judge them by the simple fact that the first responsibility of any government is the security and welfare of its own

citizens. Yet Syria under Assad turned that crucial first priority and responsibility of any government against their own citizens.

Let me also make it absolutely clear that any use of chemical weapons by Russia in Ukraine would, of course, attract severe consequences. We need to ensure that we really put chemical weapons not just back in the box but put them into the realms of history.

Mr President,

This is a time of great challenge and great intensity but also a time of great need for our collective diplomacy. But it is through strong and sustained multilateral cooperation that we may hope to make progress towards sustainable peace.

Let me assure you of the United Kingdom's good offices and those of many others here today who are working to preserve that noble objective at a time when the international order and multilateral system is under threat.

Whose responsibility is it? I put it to all of you. It is our collective responsibility to defend the UN, to defend multilateral institutions, to defend the diplomacy that is required now to resolve the conflicts that we face and ensure that the challenges that I have outlined here can be averted. We owe that to those who have fought for these multilateral systems, who have created those conventions, who have invested in these treaties, and we owe it to the generations that follow us.

We remain firmly committed to this Conference, to this objective, to the multilateral family; like any family we will have differences, but if our collective effort is towards sustainable peace, let us act.

The United Kingdom and many others here today are working to preserve and strengthen the open international order that is so vital for all our futures. As I have said, this needs to be a collective effort.

Thank you.

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