



Select Committee on International Relations

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

Wednesday 20 February 2019

11.30 am

Watch the meeting

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

Evidence Session No. 13

Heard in Public

Questions 121 - 127

Witness

I: Dr Tong Zhao, Fellow, Carnegie-Tsinghua Center for Global Policy, Beijing.

USE OF THE TRANSCRIPT

1. This is a corrected transcript of evidence taken in public and webcast on www.parliamentlive.tv.

Examination of witness

Dr Tong Zhao.

Q121 **The Chairman:** Dr Tong Zhao, we are extremely pleased to welcome you this morning. We thank you for sparing the time to share your wisdom with our Committee on the crucial matters of arms control, nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation. Good morning on behalf of the Committee.

Dr Tong Zhao: Thank you so much for having me.

The Chairman: I shall start by asking you a fairly general question, which is to describe China's position on nuclear power, nuclear weapons, non-proliferation, disarmament and, obviously, the future review of the Non-Proliferation Treaty that is coming up. Associated with that, you have just finished in Beijing the important P5 conference of the existing nuclear powers, where China has taken a very active and apparently constructive part. We would like to hear your comments on that. On those two matters, I give the floor to you to tell us how you view these things.

Dr Tong Zhao: Thank you so much. Before I answer your question, please feel free to let me know if the connection is not good or if you cannot hear me very clearly. I think the way that China feels about the issue of non-proliferation has changed dramatically over the last few decades. During the revolutionary years, China believed that some nuclear proliferation within the developing countries could be a good news for international peace because it helped break the monopoly on nuclear weapons by the big superpowers. However, that perception changed after China opened up to the international system and started to engage with the Western world. Today, I think the Chinese mindset is very much aligned with the international community. China is a full supporter of nuclear non-proliferation.

One important factor is that China is becoming an important global power, at least in its own perception. As a result, we have increasingly global economic interests. Now we have a greater stake in seeing peace and stability in other regions and also in nonproliferation China has a greater interest because the proliferation of nuclear weapons undermines regional stability. However, when it comes to certain non-proliferation institutions, China does not always see eye to eye with other countries. For example, China believes that some of the existing non-proliferation institutions have become politicised. It is a mainstream view here in Beijing that the United States practised a double standard in some of its non-proliferation policies. According to this view, some of the non-proliferation efforts by such countries are partially driven by their own geopolitical interests. On Iran, for example, the recent withdrawal from the JCPOA¹ could be a cover for seeking regime change instead of addressing proliferation concerns. Those are some of the views in China

¹ The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (the Iran nuclear deal)

that you can often hear that do not wholly align with the mainstream view in Western countries.

Another important factor is the re-emergence of great-power competition. This matters because in north-east Asia, North Korean nuclear proliferation is a major concern. And addressing this issue requires the full co-operation of all the big powers, including the United States and China. But growing US-China competition is making these countries increasingly look at this issue from their own narrow geopolitical perspectives, which means that they care more about their own influence in the region than how they can co-operate to address the proliferation challenge. That is a potential problem going forward.

On the issue of disarmament, I think China feels that it has already contributed a lot to nuclear disarmament in terms of adopting an unconditional no-first-use policy, providing negative security assurance to non-nuclear weapons states, and maintaining a very small nuclear arsenal and keeping its nuclear weapons at low alert levels during peace time. With that said, it is also true that China in general has less experience over nuclear arms control agreements, especially when it comes to nuclear reduction agreements. Many Chinese experts tend to have a cynical view towards arms control; they see it as an extension of the struggles among big powers for hegemonic interests. They have not embraced the view that arms control can be used as a useful instrument to advance China's own security. There is also another view that if China is to engage in disarmament or arms control negotiations in future, in order to avoid being strong-armed into unfair deals during the negotiations, it needs to possess equal or similar capabilities to other negotiating parties to begin with. That view also undermines Chinese efforts to engage in arms control or nuclear disarmament, because it feels that its current nuclear capability is still much weaker than other big powers.

You mentioned the P5 process. The last P5 meeting just took place at the end of last month. In general, this mechanism to some extent has functioned as a solidarity effort among the P5 over how the P5 can jointly resist and the pushback against disarmament pressure from many of the non-nuclear weapons states. During the Beijing P5 meeting, one of the major results was a decision to pursue phase 2 of the glossary of key nuclear terms. This result in itself is not unmeaningful because it is important to agree on the concepts and terminology, but it also shows the lack of capacity of the P5 process to generate substantive progress on more critical issues of nuclear disarmament. I think that in some sense all the P5 countries, including China, feel confidence in this mechanism because it provides protection against outside pressure for disarmament. In general, I am not saying that the P5 is useless, because despite its lack of capacity to move things forward on disarmament, it can be a very valuable mechanism to help maintain strategic stability among the P5 themselves. There is a growing risk of intensified nuclear competition among some of the P5 countries themselves, so the P5 process can function as a channel for nuclear-weapons states to come up with new

ways to address this growing nuclear competition as fuelled by the emergence of new non-nuclear strategic technologies.

The Chairman: Unfortunately, Dr Zhao, the line kept breaking up a bit. I do not know if it is possible for us to get a better one. Let me put just one point to you. I heard your remark about double standards. I think many of us are very pleased to see that China, as a great power, is inevitably deeply involved in these matters and has taken a deeply involved role in the recent P5. Are you saying that China is questioning the basic double system of the NPT system—namely, the five existing powers legally having nuclear weapons, although they have pledged to disarm, versus the rest of the world which does not have nuclear weapons and is not legally entitled to do so? Is that in question in your mind?

Dr Tong Zhao: Not at all. What I was trying to say is that China has common interests with other nuclear-weapons states and is a full supporter of the NPT, but it feels that the practices of some other countries in their pursuit of nuclear non-proliferation are driven by their own narrow geopolitical interests. I am sorry, do you still have a problem in hearing me?

The Chairman: No, we can hear you very well now. It has become better.

Dr Tong Zhao: There is a somewhat cynical view about how other countries are pursuing non-proliferation. China believes that some American efforts in particular are driven by its narrow geopolitical interests, and the US has been practising double standards in its non-proliferation efforts. That is what I meant. China disagrees in some cases about how other countries should practise non-proliferation or counterproliferation.

The Chairman: Thank you for clarifying that. I am going to ask Baroness Smith to put some questions to you about other aspects of this problem.

Q122 **Baroness Smith of Newnham:** You have already talked about non-proliferation and China's scepticism about it. In the recent past there have been two key challenges, one in your near neighbourhood with North Korea and the other the Iranian case and the JCPOA. What is China's thinking about dealing with these cases? The international arena talks a lot about Donald Trump and his desire to simply walk away from the JCPOA, but what is China's thinking? How do you envisage dealing with the North Korean case? Would an equivalent JCPOA be appropriate?

Dr Tong Zhao: You are right about the JCPOA. Clearly, China wants to make sure that Iran does not have nuclear weapons. China is pursuing an important project called the Belt and Road Initiative, and Iran is at a key location for that initiative. It therefore needs a stable Iran and a stable middle east for the project to succeed, and the prerequisite for that is Iran would not get nuclear weapons. China is a great supporter of preserving the JCPOA; there is no question of that. However, a

complicating factor is that there are growing US/China bilateral problems. At this moment, China has many disputes with the US, especially the trade disputes, so I am not sure how much China wants to provoke the US in its efforts to preserve the JCPOA.

On North Korea, again there are absolutely common interests between China and other members of the international community in promoting North Korean disarmament. However, I have to say that China has some different understandings about the nature of this issue. First, China never believes that economic sanctions can work in this case. China itself went through serious economic sanctions during the Cold War and they never made China give up its own nuclear programmes. China, in its own security interests, could never completely cut off North Korean economic life because that would basically destroy the China-DPRK bilateral relationship and potentially turn the DPRK into an enemy of China. Now that the DPRK has nuclear weapons, China would never want to put itself in the crosshairs of North Korean nuclear weapons. If China cannot cut off its lifeline, that means economic sanctions can never be strong enough to force North Korea to reconsider its nuclear decision.

Therefore, from the Chinese perspective, there is no way we can force North Korea into denuclearization. More importantly, China believes North Korea's nuclear programme is fundamentally driven by genuine fear in North Korea. North Korea is a paranoid country, so we have to address the root cause of the problem of its paranoia. It really needs time—a period of trust-building process to fundamentally transform the bilateral relationship between North Korea and the US. China therefore welcomes better North Korean/US relations. Furthermore, based on China's own experience, much of North Korea's paranoia is very much the result of its long-term isolation. I think that is why China feels that it is necessary to promote rather than to prevent international engagement and interaction with North Korea. If we want to address North Korea's paranoia, if we want to help it develop a balanced understanding of the outside world, we have to open up North Korea and help it to develop its economy. China believes that that is the most effective way to make North Korea a less paranoid country and a normal member of the international community. So whenever there is an opportunity, China wants to engage North Korea.

- Q123 **Lord Hannay of Chiswick:** I would like to go a little further on North Korea. It is quite normal, certainly in London, and I think in Paris and Berlin, and probably also in Beijing, to contrast the effectiveness of the JCPOA and its verification and monitoring processes, overseen by the International Atomic Energy Agency, with the total absence in the US/North Korean negotiations so far of any progress on verification and monitoring at all. One could contrast those and say that that is pretty inconsistent, but is not China's position on the verification and monitoring of North Korea also a bit inconsistent? I think it is your view that the JCPOA and the Iran arrangements are the gold standard for ensuring that a country is not developing nuclear weapons, but all your Government's statements about North Korea are pretty vague and do not say anything

about verification and monitoring. Is China going to take the position in future that anything North Korea offers that falls short of the provisions of the JCPOA is probably rather deeply flawed?

Dr Tong Zhao: Thank you. I do not think there is any gap between China's view on this issue and the view of other countries. I think China wants to see a strong verification regime in the process of North Korean denuclearisation; there is no doubt about that. However, China feels that North Korea has genuine security concerns before trust can be built with the US. If the international community demands intrusive verification measures for now, certain verification measures could potentially provide sensitive information about the North Korean nuclear programme, which could be viewed by North Korea as making its existing capability more vulnerable. It would be hard for North Korea to accept such verification measures. I think that is the Chinese view. If trust can be built and North Korea can be persuaded to be more receptive to verification measures, I think we would be fully supportive of those measures and China would be happy to help implement verification measures and provide necessary technical expertise.

Lord Hannay of Chiswick: I do not imagine that you would disagree that Iran also could have genuine security concerns, but the P5 were very firm with it and made it clear that there would not be an agreement without its acceptance of this. I think, if I may say so, that there is a little bit of a contradiction there in the position on North Korea.

Dr Tong Zhao: As I mentioned, even though China and other members of the international community share the goal of the denuclearisation of North Korea, we have to consider another big picture, which is the growing competition between big powers in this region. The overall US-China relationship is becoming more competitive and even hostile. So in this process of promoting arms control, China also wants to make sure that North Korea does not develop a closer relationship with Washington. It wants to make sure that China does not lose its influence. So I think that undermines their capacity to work closely together in putting the greatest pressure on North Korea to make it accept strong disarmament and verification measures. The chances for big power cooperation is becoming smaller as a result of growing big power competition. It is not good news to the North Korean denuclearization.

Q124 **Lord Jopling:** Dr Zhao, I am afraid the line is exceptionally bad. I must bring you back, if I may, to your earlier remarks about the sanctions regime against North Korea. I was in Seoul in the last months of last year and repeatedly heard reservations there, in the South, about the breaking of the sanctions applied to North Korea, whether they are transshipments at sea or a very porous border with Russia, to say nothing of allegations—I do not know whether they are true or not—about the porosity of the border with China. I wonder whether I can bring you back to this and ask you how effective those sanctions are in your view. Are those in South Korea justified in saying that the level of sanctions-breaking is very prolific? I got the feeling you were saying that you did

not feel that sanctions should be so strong and vigorous, and that they transgressed some of the essential situations which they might cause in North Korea.

Dr Tong Zhao: In the Chinese view, there is always space for flexible interpretation of UN Security Council resolutions that impose sanctions on North Korea. China may feel that its standard of implementing the sanctions is different from that of the United States, and that it is okay to have different standards. I think China does not believe it has to uphold the same standard as the US. More importantly, I am not saying that we should not keep some pressure on North Korea. However, China fears turning a nuclear DPRK into a Chinese enemy. Therefore, China really could not impose the strongest pressure on North Korea by completely cutting off North Korea's economic lifeline. And because of the increasingly competitive relationship between it and the US in this region, China always has an interest in making sure that North Korea would not be absorbed into Washington's orbit. China has a long-standing interest in maintaining a good relationship with North Korea. That reduces China's incentive to impose sanctions at as high a standard as the United States might. Certainly, when it comes to the practice of sanction implementation, there is also this issue of the central government's control of the local governments. In north-east China, where the provinces border North Korea, they have a stronger interest in promoting cross-border trade. Their local economies have not been doing well recently. So, at the local level, the interest in resuming trading relationship with North Korea is stronger. Putting all these together, I agree that it may not be possible for us to keep a watertight sanctions regime. It is also clear that North Korea can always come up with new ways to evade sanctions. In general, the sanctions regime's leverage is reducing.

The Chairman: Lord Jopling, would you like to expand on your last question, because that is the big one?

Q125 **Lord Jopling:** Dr Zhao, you have helpfully said a certain amount about international nuclear arms control, but I invite you to look into the future and suggest what you feel China's role may be in future negotiations on international nuclear arms control. Secondly, you will recall that the United States has been talking about its perception of a threat from China in its decision to withdraw from the INF Treaty. How likely do you think it might be—again, in the future—that China would be prepared to engage in negotiations to multilateralise this INF Treaty? If you could speculate on the future, we would find that very valuable.

Dr Tong Zhao: I think China would still be generally supportive of CTBT² and FMCT,³ the comprehensive nuclear test ban treaty and the start of negotiations on the Fissile Material Cut-off Treaty. That said, I have to give you a more disappointing assessment, because I think it is very unlikely that China would join additional arms control treaties, especially

² The Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty

³ The Fissile Material Cut-off Treaty

if those treaties would significantly undermine Chinese capacity to develop capabilities it feels are important. The reason is, first, that the Chinese security community is not very receptive to the concept of arms control. It does not believe yet that arms control is an effective instrument to advance Chinese security interests. Again, many Chinese experts embrace a cynical view of the arms control policy of others. For example, they believe that previous bilateral arms reductions by US and Russia are primarily aimed at getting rid of old and useless weaponry, and not a genuine effort to promote disarmament. Again, they believe that for China to have a fair and equal arms control deal, it needs to possess equal or similar capabilities to other partners. So that makes it unlikely that China will join nuclear arms reduction regimes in the future. My personal view is, however, that arms control can be helpful for advancing China's security interests and can help China maintain strategic stability with powers such as the United States. It can also help alleviate the security concerns of neighbours about a rising China. China should be able to fill the gap in the leadership role in international arms control that is vacated by others and should be more proactive in arms control. China can thereby improve its international image. However, those views are not shared by Chinese leaders at this moment.

On the INF Treaty, I think I need to explain the mainstream perception in China. One often-heard view is that both Russia and the United States have not really fully complied with the treaty obligations; and both countries should take responsibility for the INF Treaty's end. Also, a common view is: treaty violations are not at all rare, but they can be resolved as long as there is the political will to do so; But for now, the United States has no political will to do so and that is the fundamental reason for the possible end of the treaty. Many people believe that the US decision to withdraw is partly driven by an American interest in keeping the options open to address the so-called China threat. Therefore, if the American decision is to counter China, then China should not back down, according to many Chinese experts. If China backed down this time, it would set a precedent for the future. In future disputes with the United States, the US would make even greater demands of China. Also, it is obvious that China feels the intermediate-range missiles are very important to Chinese security, and feels confident in its capability to outcompete the United States in this area in the future. Given all these factors, I think it is unlikely that China would join the treaty. However, there is one caveat. If the United States is open to making structural changes to the agreement--and that could include also putting sea-based and air-based missile systems on the table--then there is a possibility that China would consider that. But I do not think that the United States has interests in limiting its sea-based and air-bases missile systems and, as a result, it is not very likely to happen.

Q126 The Chairman: Dr Zhao, in your written evidence, you sound rather more sympathetic to the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons—the so-called Ban Treaty—than many other P5 members and other people who have come before this committee. Would you like to comment on

that?

Dr Tong Zhao: Some of the disagreements of nuclear weapons states about the Ban Treaty are problematic. Nuclear-weapons states such as the United States tend to emphasise creating the right environment and right conditions for disarmament. However, I think this is a very biased approach because the simple existence of nuclear weapons creates as many problems as it might help resolve for the international security environment. In the case of the US-China bilateral relationship, Chinese efforts to maintain a credible mutual nuclear deterrent with the US have turned out to be an important driver of US-China security disputes. China is very concerned about American missile defence' impact on its nuclear deterrence, for instance, and that has produced a lot of disputes between the two countries. Those disputes have very much undermined the security relationship as a result. Sometimes those disputes over US missile defence even spill over beyond their borders, and have affected China's relationship with South Korea, Japan and other countries. So the simple effort of trying to maintain a credible mutual nuclear deterrent could create many additional problems and disputes—missile defence is only one of those issues. Today's nuclear systems face possible threat from advanced conventional weapons, hypersonic weapons systems and even cyberweapons—all these new technologies can be threatening to nuclear deterrent. Therefore, countries would develop particularly serious threat assessments about these capabilities of other countries and that creates many additional security problems. If we look only at how we can create an environment conducive to arms control or disarmament, we will never get there. We have to simultaneously look at the security challenges introduced by nuclear weapons themselves; We have to make countries less dependent on nuclear weapons as well. I think that there is a mutually influencing relationship between nuclear weapons and the international security environment. I believe that, as long as countries continue to maintain and modernize nuclear weapons, the process itself creates embedded interests and entrenched beliefs on nuclear weapons, especially within the defence industries and the military. Having lived with and maintained such weapons for decades, it would become increasingly difficult for these people to think about being less dependent on nuclear weapons. So it is necessary for the international community to impose some external pressure if we really want nuclear disarmament. Otherwise, just as one can never lift oneself up, nuclear weapons states—their embedded bureaucratic interests and their entrenched beliefs—will prevent them from making real progress towards disarmament. For that reason, I think the external pressure created by the Ban Treaty is helpful.

- Q127 **Lord Hannay of Chiswick:** You mentioned very briefly the Fissile Material Cut-Off Treaty, which I think the Chinese Government, like the others of the P5, basically support. For many years, any progress on negotiating such a treaty has been blocked by Pakistan, a country with which China has a close and friendly relationship. Why is China not prepared to use its powers of persuasion with Pakistan to enable negotiations finally to get under way? Would it perhaps be wise at least to consider the possibility of moving the matter to the UN General

Assembly, where it cannot be blocked by a lack of consensus, which is what prevents it being progressed in the Conference on Disarmament?

Dr Tong Zhao: I think that China is generally supportive of the negotiating efforts at FMCT. However, in practice there are other interests that would block Chinese efforts from pushing further. China feels that its relationship with Pakistan is more important for example. Because of these other geostrategic issues, China is not making a full effort to advance the negotiation. Also, China is very concerned about moving the discussion out of the Conference on Disarmament. It feels that the UN General Assembly could be used by non-nuclear weapons states as a means to build pressure on China and other nuclear weapons states. China prefers a consensus mechanism. As for China's general scepticism towards arms control, I do not think it is easy for China to overcome those entrenched beliefs, or to overcome those practical geopolitical interests, to play a leadership role in promoting the FMCT, even though in general China has no real issue with FMCT.

The Chairman: Dr Zhao, there we must leave it. We are extremely grateful to you for sharing your thoughts for us and for speaking so fluently in our language when we are not sufficiently practised to speak Mandarin Chinese, for which I apologise. We are grateful to you for communicating. We are always ready for more open dialogue between our nations, because we think this is the way forward to sensible, peaceful arrangements. I thank you on behalf of the Committee.

Dr Tong Zhao: Thank you so much.