

Britain's Part in a Nuclear Falling Out

Britain may have sponsored the treaty which controls the spread of nuclear weapons - but have we honoured it, asks Walter Patterson

THE TREATY on the Non Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons came into force on May 5, 1970. It laid down clear-cut conditions and commitments aimed at controlling the spread of nuclear weapons, in the form of a bargain of confidence. Those countries that did not have nuclear weapons would agree not to acquire them. In return they would get preferential assistance with peaceful nuclear technology; and the weapons-states would undertake "negotiations in good faith" aimed at eliminating the existing nuclear arsenals.

Britain was, with the United States and the Soviet Union, one of the Treaty's three sponsors. By 1984 more than 120 countries have become parties to the Treaty.

Article III of the Treaty stipulates that no party will supply nuclear technology or materials to any non-weapons country unless the other country accepts so-called "fullscope safeguards" on all nuclear activities in the country. Nevertheless, after the Treaty came into force, Britain supplied separated plutonium - potential nuclear weapons material - to Italy and Japan, for five and six years respectively, when neither country was a party to the Treaty. Indeed a strong faction in the Japanese Diet opposed Japanese adherence to the Treaty in order that Japan preserve the option of acquiring nuclear weapons.

In March 1976, several months before Japan at last ratified the Treaty, the then Labour government gave British Nuclear Fuels the go-ahead to negotiate with the Japanese a contract entailing the supply to Japan of up to 40 tonnes of separated plutonium. The British Government made no reference to Japanese Treaty-membership as a precondition.

From late 1975 onwards, as domestic nuclear programmes in industrial countries slowed drastically, Britain played host to a series of secret top-level meetings between nuclear exporting countries. When word of the meetings leaked out participants became known as the "London Club". The meetings were billed as seeking better ways to control the spread of dangerous nuclear technologies, especially involving plutonium and highly-enriched uranium. In 1978, however, when the Club "guidelines" were at last made public, it became clear that they were much less stringent than Article III of the Non-Proliferation Treaty.

The "guidelines" laid down various conditions to be met by the recipients of nuclear technology and materials; but they did not stipulate fullscope safeguards, nor did the London Club supplier countries require them. On the contrary: members of the London Club, desperate to assist their floundering nuclear industries, offered more generous terms to non-Treaty countries like Argentina, Brazil, China, India, Israel, Pakistan, and South Africa than they did to their Treaty partners.

Britain did not, to be sure, have as much success in this as fellow Club-members like France and Federal Germany. But the impediment had less to do with Britain's Treaty commitments than with Britain's lack of exportable nuclear technology and the generous credit financing to make such exports feasible. Britain did nevertheless pursue exports to non-Treaty countries including Brazil, Chile and China.

Nothing came of the discussions with the first two; but the British government is even now vigorously promoting the sale of an Anglo-French nuclear power station to China. China is not a party to the Non-Proliferation Treaty; it has never accepted safeguards of any kind; and it is the one country still exploding nuclear weapons in the atmosphere. Furthermore, intelligence reports have repeatedly asserted that China has assisted Pakistan to develop nuclear weapons.

Even while Britain was banning the import of books from Argentina, on the basis that Argentina had not agreed to a cessation of hostilities after the Falklands war, the Thatcher government acceded with alacrity to the sale of 143 tonnes of heavy water to Argentina. Not only is Argentina not a party to the Non-Proliferation Treaty; the Argentines will shortly have completed both a reprocessing plant and a uranium enrichment plant, each of which will be able to produce nuclear weapons material and neither of which is subject to any safeguards whatever.

In mid-autumn 1984, in evidence before the Sizewell inquiry, it was revealed that Euratom has been trying for 10 years to have its safeguards inspectors admitted to the Windscale reprocessing plant at Sellafield, without success. BNFL has refused them admittance because the Windscale plant processes both civil and military plutonium in the same facilities, indeed apparently sometimes in the same batch. The Non Proliferation Treaty was an attempt to establish a clear cut boundary between civil and military nuclear activities; the situation at Windscale is a direct challenge to even the tenuous credibility of the Treaty.

Article VI of the Treaty is aimed particularly at the three Treaty parties with nuclear weapons. It commits them to "pursue negotiations in good faith on effective measures relating to cessation of the nuclear arms race at an early date and to nuclear disarmament." It need hardly be added that Britain's deploying of cruise missiles and stubborn pursuit of the Trident system is egregiously contrary to both the spirit and the letter of Article VI.

The sorry performance of British governments in complying with their Treaty commitments would be inexcusable in any case; but the matter has a more immediate and alarming dimension. The third five-yearly review of the Treaty will take place at a conference of Treaty parties in Geneva in September 1985.

There is a serious possibility that next year's conference will see the break-up of the Treaty. If so, the result will almost certainly be a global nuclear free-for-all.

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