Speech: Foreign Secretary Speech at Chatham House London Conference 2017

Good morning everybody,

It is fantastic to be here in this wonderful hotel, that I think that I opened or reopened. I opened many hotels across London in my time as Mayor and I definitely reopened this hotel at one stage and this is after all an example of the kind of infrastructure that you were just talking about Robin. It is an inspirational structure that was created many, many decades ago, over a hundred years ago, and it has been beautifully upgraded and it has stood the test of time and that is what I want to talk about this morning.

All you young, thrusting Chatham House types look far too dynamic to remember the early 1980s or indeed the late 1970s. Do you? I certainly do.

I remember being chilled to the marrow not just by the newspaper graphics, the hundreds of nuclear missiles trained on this country by the Warsaw Pact.

Scarier still were the attempts by the UK Government to reassure the population, the pamphlets and films that told you such things as how to build a fallout shelter.

You took several doors off their hinges and propped them up diagonally against a wall, reinforced by suitcases full of books, and then you were told to tune to Radio 4, where the contingency plan was to play endless re-runs of Just a Minute.

And there really was a time when British children knew all about the four-minute warnings, and the perils of radiation sickness, and we all read a book called Where the Wind Blows by Raymond Briggs, and brooded, as I did as a teenager, on the horror of those weapons.

For decades now that threat has seemed to vanish. It went with the end of the Cold War.

We don’t want it back.

That is why people are now watching with such interest – and the first stirrings of apprehension – the events in the Korean Peninsula.

Kim Jong Un has tested 19 missiles so far this year, and has conducted four of the six nuclear tests ever carried out by that country.

It is now widely accepted that Kim is coming closer to being able to launch a nuclear-armed ICBM at the continental United States.

I should stress that this has not only prompted outrage in America, but it is a prospect that has been unanimously condemned by Russia, by China, by the EU, to say nothing of the dismay of those quintessentially peaceable

countries – Japan and South Korea.

It is this increased tempo of nuclear testing, coupled with florid outbursts of verbal belligerence, that have reawakened – even in this country – those forgotten fears.

The public can be forgiven for genuinely starting to wonder whether the nuclear sword of Damocles is once again held over the head of a trembling human race.

So now is perhaps a good moment, in a calm and dispassionate way, to take stock.

Before we reissue that old pamphlet called Protect and Survive, before we teach our kids how to hide under the desks or lay on stocks of baked beans or spam, let us look at the history of nuclear proliferation, how nuclear weapons have spread, and how we have collectively sought to contain their spread.

Back then, as now, most predictions were gloomy – and yet those gloomy predictions have been utterly confounded by events.

America was of course the first to use the bomb, in 1945; then the Soviet Union detonated a device at Semipalatinsk in 1949; then we were next, the UK, in 1952; then the French did their test in the Sahara in 1960.

At that point the then American presidential candidate, John F Kennedy, predicted that by 1964, within only four years, there would be ten, 15 or 20 nations that would acquire nuclear weapons.

As things have turned out, it is now almost 60 years after he issued his warning – and yes, the NPT has some notable non-signatories including India and Pakistan; and yet the number of nuclear-armed countries has yet to reach double figures.

This is on the face of it an absolutely astonishing statistic and an extraordinary achievement.

When you consider that every previous military development – from firearms to fighter jets – has spread among humanity like impetigo, you have to ask yourselves: why? Why have nuclear weapons been the great exception?

It can’t just be the kit. They can’t be so complex that only a handful of so-called advanced nations have the intellectual wherewithal to make them.

It is true that the process is laborious and highly expensive – but the basic technology is more than 70 years old and indeed has been taught in universities – if not schools – for decades, for generations.

The answer is partly that many countries wisely decided, after the war, that they were going to take shelter under the nuclear umbrella provided by the United Nations.

Nations in both Europe and in Asia opted for this protection, a commitment that must be rated one of the greatest contributions by America to the unprecedented epoch of peace and prosperity that we have all been living through.

I should observe that some European countries found themselves under a rival umbrella provided by the Soviet Union, though at that stage they had no choice in the matter.

And it was that American offer – that guarantee – that made possible the global consensus embodied by the 1970 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.

By this treaty 191 countries came together to recognise the special role of the five existing nuclear powers, and also to insist that there should be no further dispersal of such weapons.

Nuclear technology would be made available to other countries, provided it was used exclusively for civilian purposes.

That was a great diplomatic achievement.

It was an effort in which the UK – as one of the leading upholders of the post-war rules based international order – played a crucial role.

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That diplomacy has helped to make the world safer, more secure, more confident and therefore more prosperous.

It has helped avoid what might otherwise have been a Gadarene Rush to destruction, in which the world was turned into a great arena of Mexican stand-offs, a nuclear version of the final scene of Reservoir Dogs.

That far-sightedness is now needed more than ever, not only to keep the NPT, but also one of its most valuable complementary accords, the nuclear deal with Iran.

To grasp the importance of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, we should remember that just before it was signed in 2015, Iran had enough centrifuges and low-enriched uranium to be only months away from producing the essential material for at least one nuclear weapon.

Let us remember what the consequences would have been – for Iran and the world – if Tehran had gone down that road.

Never mind the response of Israel, or indeed the United States to the fact of nuclear weapons in the grip of the Iranians, a regime that has been capable of blood-curdling rhetoric about the mere existence of the “Zionist entity”.

A nuclear-armed Iran would have placed irresistible pressure on neighbouring countries to up the ante, and to trigger an arms race in what is already one of the most volatile regions of the world.

Imagine all those mutually contaminating sectarian, dynastic and internecine conflicts of the Middle East today. Then turn the dial, and add a nuclear arms race.

Think of the nightmare that deal has avoided.

It is a nightmare we can continue to avoid if we are sensible, if we show the same generosity and wisdom as the negotiators of the NPT.

And first and most important it is vital to understand that President Trump has not withdrawn from the JCPOA. He has not junked it.

He has continued to waive nuclear-related sanctions against Iran, and having spoken to some of the most influential figures on Capitol Hill – none of them fans of the Iranian regime – I have absolutely no doubt that with determination and courage the JCPOA can be preserved.

This is not just because the essential deal is in the interests of Western security – though it is – but because it is profoundly in the interests of the Iranian people.

This is a great nation, of 80 million people – two thirds of whom are under the age of 30.

They are highly educated, both men and women.

They watch Youtube; they dance to music videos, even if it is in the privacy of their own home.

They use and understand technology and they are bursting with a capitalist and entrepreneurial spirit.

If we can show them that they are welcome in the great global market-place of ideas and innovation then, in time, a very different relationship is possible with the modern heirs, of what is after all, one of the greatest of all ancient civilisations.

That is the possibility the JCPOA holds open – not just averting a perilous and debilitating arms race, but ending the long and largely self-imposed exclusion of Iran from the global mainstream that so many millions of Iranians yearn to join.

Of course, we in the UK, we share with our American friends and with many of our allies – in Europe and across the Middle East – their legitimate concern over the disruptive behaviour of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard in countries hundreds of miles from their borders.

It is simply provocative and dangerous that Iran has supplied tens of thousands of rockets and missiles to Hizbollah in Lebanon – weapons that are even now pointing at Israel – but whose use would bring the most destructive retaliation not upon Iran – the responsible party – but upon the people of Lebanon.

It is no conceivable benefit to the tormented people of Yemen that Iran should be supplying missiles that Houthi rebels use routinely to strike targets in Saudi Arabia; behaviour which alas can only strengthen the convictions of those in the region who believe they have no choice but to respond to Iran's actions.

And frankly it's astonishing that the Iranians – who rightly complain that the world looked the other way when they suffered so tragically from the chemical weapons deployed by Saddam Hussein in the 1980s – should even now be abetting and concealing the crimes of Bashar al-Asad who has used the same methods against his own people.

So I think it's right that we should join with our American friends and allies to counter this kind of behaviour wherever possible.

But that does not mean for one minute that we should write Iran off, or that we should refuse to engage with Iran or that we should show disrespect to its people.

On the contrary, we should continue to work to demonstrate to that population in Iran that they will be better off under this deal and the path of re-engagement that it prescribes.

And that is the model – of toughness but engagement, each reinforcing the other – that we should have at the front of our mind as we try to resolve the tensions in the Korean Peninsula.

It is right that Rex Tillerson has specifically opened the door to dialogue.

He has tried to give some sensible reassurances to the regime, to enable them to take up this offer.

Remember the four Noes – that have been offered by the South Korean president and reinforced by the US Secretary of State.

No seeking regime change in North Korea; No seeking to force the collapse of North Korea's regime; No seeking to deploy US forces beyond the 38th parallel; No attempt to accelerate the reunification of Korea.

These are the commitments that we hope will encourage Kim Jong Un to halt his nuclear weapons programme, to come to the negotiating table, and thereby to take the only path that can guarantee the security of the region as a whole. You will often hear it said that in weighing up those options Kim must bear in mind the woeful precedents of those who disarmed.

Of Libya, where the leader listened to the blandishments of the West and gave up his nuclear weapons programme – only to be overthrown with Western connivance.

Or of Ukraine, which actually surrendered its nuclear arsenal, only to suffer the first forcible loss of territory in Europe since 1945.

It is therefore suggested that Kim would be sealing his own fate if he were

to comply.

I reject those analogies.

What finished Gaddafi was an uprising of his own people, including on the streets of Tripoli.

Even if he had been able to perfect a nuclear arsenal in time, and even if it is true he had a justified reputation for mercurial and unpredictable behaviour, it seems unlikely that he would have decided to nuke his own capital – including himself.

As survival strategies go, that would have been eccentric even by his own standards.

As for Ukraine, the fundamental difference is that no one, not South Korea nor any other neighbour, has any designs on the national territory of North Korea.

And the crucial question Kim Jong Un surely needs to ask himself is whether his current activities are making Pyongyang any safer for himself and his regime.

No one, I'm sure no one in this room, certainly no one in the UK or around the world wants any kind of military solution to the problem. No one actively desires that outcome.

But Kim Jong Un and the world need to understand that when the 45th President of the United States contemplates a regime led by a man who not only threatens to reduce New York to "ashes", but who stands on the verge of acquiring the power to make good on his threat, I am afraid that the US President – whoever he or she might be – will have an absolute duty to prepare any option to keep safe not only the American people but all those who have sheltered under the American nuclear umbrella.

And I hope Kim will also consider this: that if his objective is to intimidate the US into wholesale withdrawal from East Asia, then it strikes me that his current course might almost be designed to produce the opposite effect.

Already President Moon of South Korea – hitherto seen as one of the political leaders most open to engagement with the North – is installing the US-made THAAD missile defences.

And in Japan and South Korea it is easy to imagine the growth of domestic pressure for those governments to take further steps to protect their own populations from a nuclear North Korea.

In short Pyongyang faces the same dilemma as Tehran:

By continuing to develop nuclear capabilities Kim risks provoking a reaction in the region that is at once defensive and competitive, that reduces not increases his security and therefore reduces not increases the survival

chances of the regime.

And therefore I hope that Kim will see that it is no part of Juche – his family doctrine of national self-reliance – nor is it in his interest of national security to end up with an escalation of America's military presence in East Asia, let alone to run risks that could imperil his regime.

And until he understands that I am afraid that we have no choice collectively but to step up the pressure on Pyongyang.

It is one of the most encouraging developments this year that the UN Security Council – with the strong support of the UK – has unanimously passed three resolutions to tighten the economic ligature around the regime.

When I joined a debate on North Korea in the Security Council earlier this year, I was struck by the unaccustomed absence of discord.

For the first time the Chinese have agreed to impose strict limits on the export of oil to North Korea, which until now was taboo.

There has been an unmistakable change in Chinese policy, and that is warmly to be welcomed.

In his speech to the 19th Party Congress last week, President Xi hailed China's standing as a world power

And I would say there is no more urgent problem for China to address – nor any where Beijing has greater influence – than the threat to international security represented by the behaviour of North Korea.

There is also unprecedented discussion between China and the US on how to handle this crisis, a closeness, by the way, that I believe bodes well for the world; and I should again pay tribute to my colleague Rex Tillerson for his efforts.

Whatever we may think of the regime and its behaviour, the ruling elite of North Korea is in the end composed of human beings.

We must find ways of getting through to them, and at the same time not just toughening the sanctions regime but enforcing those already in place; and in this respect again, the Chinese hold the key.

This is the moment for North Korea's regime to change course – and if they do the world can show that it is once again capable of the diplomatic imagination that produced the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty – arduously negotiated – and that after 12 years of continuous effort produced the JCPOA nuclear deal with Iran.

It will not be easy, but the costs of failure could be catastrophic.

We cannot dis-invent nuclear weapons or wish them away; and the events on the Korean Peninsula are the clearest possible rejoinder to those [political content deleted] who say that we should unilaterally cast aside our nuclear

weapons.

To wield a nuclear deterrent, as this country does, is neither easy nor cheap; indeed it imposes a huge responsibility on this country.

We are one of the handful specifically recognised by the NPT to possess such dreadful weapons, and we do so not just in the name of our own security but – via NATO – for the protection of dozens of our allies.

And by holding that stockpile – a minimum stockpile, I should say, which has been reduced by half since its Cold War peak – we play our part in deterring the ambitions of rogue states.

It is 25 years since the end of the Cold War, and a new generation has grown up with no memory of the threat of a nuclear winter, and little education in the appalling logic of mutually assured destruction.

Hiroshima, Nagasaki. Their destruction, the full horror of what took place is now literally fading from living memory.

When people like Alun Chalfont drew up the NPT, those horrors were still fresh in the hearts of the world.

We must not be so forgetful or so complacent as to require a new lesson in what these weapons can do, or the price of failing to limit their spread.

The NPT is one of the great diplomatic achievements of the last century. It has stood the test of time.

In its restraint and its maturity it shows an unexpected wisdom on the part of humanity, and almost evolutionary instinct for the survival of the species.

It is the job of our generation now to preserve that agreement, and British diplomacy will be at the forefront of the endeavour.

Thank you all very much for your attention.