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An Interview With British Minister of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs Bill Rammell

Interviewed by Jeff Abramson and Daniel Horner

Bill Rammell serves as minister of state for foreign and commonwealth affairs in the United Kingdom. His responsibilities encompass the Middle East, including Iraq and Iran; counterterrorism; counterproliferation; the Far East and Southeast Asia; North America; drugs and international crime; and migration policy. Arms Control Today met with Rammell May 5 to discuss the United Kingdom's efforts on an arms trade treaty and other international arms control issues.

ACT: The United Kingdom is playing a leadership role in the arms trade treaty, promoting a legally binding global arms trade treaty. By some accounts, the United Kingdom is the second- or third-largest arms supplier in the world. Why is the United Kingdom still interested in this treaty when it could in theory limit its ability in the arms market?

Rammell: This would put no greater constraints on the legitimate trade in arms. And yes, we have got substantial jobs and business investments in that. That is something that we support. But there is nothing within our proposal for an arms trade treaty that would constrain us any more than our current arms export controls, which are very strong. It will be an international treaty implemented by domestic law. It is about creating a level playing field with the same environment for everybody. There is a fundamental issue that, in some circumstances, weapons are exported to countries of conflict, to countries of civil disorder, that are creating enormous problems and carnage for civilians. That is what we are trying to tackle. It is not the legitimate arms trade, which I think is here to stay.

ACT: Other countries have been less enthusiastic about the arms trade treaty. What do you think their rationale for supporting the treaty would be? Is it the same as yours, or would it be different and require different arguments?

Rammell: One, what is interesting with the way we have led this is that this isn't just a government or nongovernmental organization backing it. We've got substantial elements of our own arms exporting industry that are backing it because they can see it makes life clearer and it reinforces their legitimate trade and underlines those companies that seek the illegitimate route. I think there is growing support for an arms trade treaty. I mean, if you look at the figures from when we first raised this, there were 114 countries who co-sponsored a resolution. There was then, at the back end of December, 133 states who voted in favor of the resolution. We're now going through the open-ended procedure at the United Nations. I think there are grounds for optimism that this is an argument that is beginning to gain greater traction.

I'm sure you're going to ask me about the position of the United States. My very strong sense is that, under the previous administration, it was no, no, no. It was interesting in the first meeting of the open-ended working group, the contribution from the U.S. delegate was not no, no, no. It was, "Well, how exactly would this work?" That, combined with our discussions with the administration, indicates to me that there is now an interest in this issue. It is by no means at the point where [the
U.S. position] is “Yes, we want to sign up” yet. But [there is] an interest, and we're going to pursue that dialogue, and I hope it gets to a position where the United States can support it.

**ACT**: You mentioned that the British industry is behind this, which may not be happening in other countries. Do you have a feel for whether there is dialogue in that way to bring another voice to calling for an arms trade treaty at this point?

**Rammell**: Yeah, I guess because we've been very up front with this and taken the lead on it internationally, we've gone out of our way to take British exporters with us.[4] And I think that has worked. We're now trying to do two things. In the discussions that we have with other partners internationally, we're saying, "Look, you guys need to be talking to your arms exporters." And two, we're actually getting British businesses to talk to their counterparts from overseas to try and build that momentum and coalition.

**ACT**: One criticism leveled at conventional arms treaties is that there is no real enforcement mechanism. The UN Security Council can have an arms embargo, but sometimes those are not effective. How do you think about an arms trade treaty and how it might be enforced, if "enforced" is the right word?

**Rammell**: We're not saying that there's going to be some global mechanism to enforce this, one, because I don't think it would be very effective, [and] two, it would kill the treaty stone dead. It's going to be a legally enforced situation, but down to national enforcement. Now if you look at the countries that have got strong arms export control regimes, that's how it works. I think there are grounds for confidence that once you establish it, there will then be the legal powers within individual countries and it's then down to them to enforce it.

There was one other thing on the United States I wanted to say because I think it's important to make this very clear. This is in no way, shape, or form targeted at domestic gun control. You've got rigorous arms export controls at the moment. That doesn't impact on domestic possession of guns in the United States. This wouldn't in any way, shape, or form do that also.

**ACT**: Back to your point about those standards: What level of specificity do you have?

**Rammell**: Part of my difficulty in answering that question, and I’m not trying to duck it, is we're in a process of negotiation and if I start setting out detailed prescriptions, then that's going to put some people [off from] coming on board. Nevertheless, there will be standard benchmark criteria that will exist for every country, but it's then down to those individual countries and their legal systems to enforce it. I think that's the right way to go. There are a number of models we can look at internationally that already exist, like we've got now legally binding arms export controls within the European Union, which again are legally enforceable, but it's down to the individual nation-states to enforce them.[5]

**ACT**: As currently set up, the open-ended working group that is discussing the arms trade treaty could extend its work through July 2011. It has been suggested by some that if that goes too slowly, it might make sense to pursue negotiations outside of the group, perhaps something similar to the Oslo process.[6] How do you assess progress so far in the open-ended working group? Do you think it realistic that countries might launch a separate process, and could you envision the United Kingdom ever being part of that separate process?

**Rammell**: Well, I never say never, but I’m actually cautiously optimistic at the moment. I think the figure I quoted-133 states have signed up in principle to support, [and] when we had that vote in December there were only 19 abstentions, and I know the United States voted against it, and I think things have shifted since then. So there's a lot of detailed work to be done. I would hope we can get there sooner rather than later, and I think this is developing a momentum. I never rule out any mechanism, but I think at the moment there are very reasonable prospects that we can achieve this through the open-ended working group.

**ACT**: Address some of the nuclear questions, especially along the lines of what Prime Minister Gordon Brown raised in his speech.[7] Can you flesh out a little bit more of this concept of the new
international architecture for nuclear security? There were some specific references to the IAEA [International Atomic Energy Agency] and the role of the IAEA, so how do you see that playing out, and how would you strengthen the role of the IAEA? Financially? Institutionally? Enforcement mechanisms?

Rammell: I mean, in personnel terms, we need a strong director-general, and the process of his appointment or election is currently being gone through on that front. We want a properly resourced IAEA. It is interesting that the IAEA recently undertook their own internal assessment. It said actually there needs to be a greater prioritization, and I think also the idea, especially in the current fiscal climate, that you're going to get a lot more resources is not realistic. I think we've got to bridge the divide that exists and really focus on the role of the IAEA in enforcing the international agreements that exist. I think we're looking in the [Preparatory Committee] for the NPT [nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty] review for strong outcomes.[8] I am encouraged by the moves that are being made generally on disarmament. If you look at our own record, we've reduced our number of warheads by 50 percent in the last decade.[9] I think we've taken a leading position on that. But I'm now very encouraged by President Obama, what he's been saying about further reductions. The Russians appear to be responding cautiously and in kind. That's the disarmament side, and I think that is positive, and we've got to move forward with that.

The flip side is, we've absolutely got to tackle the problem of proliferation, which is why the IAEA dealing with Iran, why, through the six-party talks process, tackling the problem in North Korea is particularly important. Because go back to the heart of the NPT and there's a deal there.... I think sometimes we can underplay how effective the NPT has been. I was giving some evidence recently to our foreign affairs select committee, and I came across [President John F. Kennedy's] statements....[10] His projection, and I don't think this was unrealistic at the time, was that there would be a massive explosion, excuse the pun, massive growth of nuclear-weapon states, and actually it hasn't happened. We've got some challenges, but we've got to keep that deal going.

ACT: Can I just backtrack on some of the points you sort of ticked off? "We need a strong director-general." Do you think Mohamed ElBaradei has been a strong director-general?

Rammell: I think he's been effective, but inevitably when you come for the election for somebody new, you look at what you need from that person. You see you need someone that is managerially focused, who can manage what is a very large organization. You need someone who will be able to bridge the divide between the advanced world nuclear-weapon states and the Nonaligned Movement. You critically need someone who is going to implement the rules and the authority of the IAEA and not try to paper over...if you got someone who is that sublime that they will actually seek to tackle that problem with the authority of the IAEA, not look at the compromises which actually lets an offender off.

ACT: And you're implying that perhaps ElBaradei has done that?

Rammell: Nope, I think he's been effective. But I'm saying to you whenever you have an election for a new post, you need to look at what qualities you're looking for.

ACT: People have been talking for a long time that there would have to be some penalty for countries doing [something] like what North Korea did: they withdraw from the treaty and invoke this clause of the NPT of a supreme national interest,[11] when it is apparently not the case. It is difficult to come up with a really feasible, implementable way to do that. What can you do?

Rammell: I think that is the difference if you look at North Korea, and I'm still the only British minister to have gone to North Korea, which I did in 2004, it is more cut off from any nation anywhere on Earth. Historically, it has not been able to feed its people, has very little trade links with the outside world. In those circumstances, what sanctions could you implement? I mean, there is a debate about those countries which do have trade links with the country actually being prepared to take action on that front. But a legally enforceable sanction, I think, would be difficult to achieve.

ACT: On the economic issue, you said, given the current financial situation, it would be difficult
expect significant increases. The Zedillo report advocated an immediate 50 million euro increase,[12] and the Obama administration has been talking about doubling the IAEA budget.[13] Do you have some sort of quantity in mind or some goal?

**Rammell:** Over the medium term, I think you may get some movement on this. But I just think, at the moment, it is unrealistic to expect big increases in the budget. Actually, what came out of that report strongly for me was that [the] first call wasn't for an increase in resources. It was actually, "Come on guys; we need to look at the way money is being spent and how it's being prioritized at the moment."

**ACT:** You said sort of an important parallel component to the strategic reductions and proliferation, sub-strategic weapons-do you see the United Kingdom as playing a role in pushing that? Do you still see those weapons as necessary in serving an important security function?

**Rammell:** At the moment, yes. But our longer-term ambition is to get further disarmament, and I think the commitment being made by the United States, the discussions, the potentially starting with the Russians, I would hope that that would make progress.

**ACT:** In April, the E3+3 welcomed the U.S. approach to Iran, including the occasional joint talks with Iran from now on.[14] What does U.S. participation mean in the process, and is there a new approach to be pursued as a group?

**Rammell:** I think there is genuine unanimity on this. We certainly welcome President Obama's commitment to engage in a dialogue with the Iranians. It's not an open-ended offer. I think the Iranians need to recognize that this is a serious opportunity and they could have taken it by engaging seriously. I think there is a window of opportunity for that to happen this year. If they don't, then I think we need to be in a much, much tougher position on sanctions. I think it is that twin-track approach that's saying, "Look, come on, there's all sorts of advantages and benefits to you here, in terms of normalization, in terms of trade relationship, in terms of giving you what you say you want in terms of access to civil nuclear power, if you can reassure us on your nuclear weapons intentions. If you don't take that approach, we're going to be in a much tougher position on sanctions."

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**ENDNOTES**

1. In recent years, Russia and the United Kingdom have been the second- and third-largest suppliers of conventional weaponry, depending on measurement metrics. See Jeff Abramson, "U.S. Atop Expanding Global Arms Market," *Arms Control Today*, December 2008, pp. 56-57.

2. In 2006, 76 countries sponsored and, ultimately, 139 countries voted in support of the UN First Committee resolution that began "[t]owards an arms trade treaty: establishing common international standards for the import, export and transfer of conventional arms." The United States voted no; 24 countries, many from the Middle East, abstained. That vote led to the establishment of a group of governmental experts to study the issue and to the submission of comments by nearly 100 countries on a possible treaty. On December 24, 2008, the General Assembly voted to move the process forward into an open-ended working group. In that vote, 133 countries voted in favor, the United States voted no, and 19 countries abstained. That resolution was co-sponsored by 114 countries. See Jeff Abramson, "Arms Trade Treaty Discussion Creeps Forward," *Arms Control Today*, December 2008, pp. 53-54.

3. Prior to the March 2-6 open-ended working group meeting, the U.S. position had been interpreted as unsupportive of an arms trade treaty. On March 5, U.S. representative Donald Mahley stated that "[n]one of this history, though, can or should be taken to mean that the United States is not
interested in and would not support effective international arrangements for controlling the international conventional arms trade and especially preventing such arms from serving illegitimate or anti-humanitarian purposes." U.S. Statement, ATT Session One, March 5, 2009, www.un.org/disarmament/convarms/ArmsTradeTreaty/docs/OEWG09_S1_statements/US-5Mar.PDF.

4. British trade associations that have expressed support for an arms trade treaty include the Defence Manufacturers Association and the Society of British Aerospace Companies.

5. In December 2008, the European Union adopted a legally binding common position that updates the 1998 EU Code of Conduct on Arms Exports, which established criteria for examining applications for the export of conventional arms as well as consultative and transparency mechanisms.

6. Following the failure of the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons to address the use of cluster munitions, Norway announced in 2006 that it would take the lead on reaching an agreement concerning the weapons. That effort, known as the Oslo process, resulted in the Convention on Cluster Munitions. See Jeff Abramson, "Countries Sign Cluster Munitions Convention," Arms Control Today, January/February 2009, pp. 25-27.

7. On February 6, the British Foreign Office released "Lifting the Nuclear Shadow: Creating the Conditions for Abolishing Nuclear Weapons," which identified steps toward ridding the world of nuclear weapons. In a March 17 speech in London, Prime Minister Gordon Brown further discussed the United Kingdom's vision on nuclear issues.


9. The British government stated in a 1998 Strategic Defense Review that it would "maintain a stockpile of fewer than 200 operationally available warheads," down from about 300. It is unclear how many warheads might be held in reserve.

10. At a press conference on March 21, 1963, President John F. Kennedy warned, "I see the possibility in the 1970s of the president of the United States having to face a world in which 15 or 20 or 25 nations may have [nuclear] weapons. I regard that as the greatest possible danger and hazard."

11. Article X of the NPT says, "Each Party shall in exercising its national sovereignty have the right to withdraw from the Treaty if it decides that extraordinary events, related to the subject matter of this Treaty, have jeopardized the supreme interests of its country. It shall give notice of such withdrawal to all other Parties to the Treaty and to the United Nations Security Council three months in advance. Such notice shall include a statement of the extraordinary events it regards as having jeopardized its supreme interests." North Korea withdrew from the treaty in 2003.

12. Ernesto Zedillo et al., "Reinforcing the Global Nuclear Order for Peace and Prosperity: The Role of the IAEA to 2020 and Beyond," 2008, p. 30, www.iaea.org/NewsCenter/News/PDF/2020report0508.pdf. Zedillo, the former president of Mexico, was the head of an independent commission that prepared the report at the request of ElBaradei. According to the report, the IAEA Board of Governors should agree "to underpin the expansion of the Agency's security and safety work, other activities in support of newcomer states embarking on nuclear programs, and an expansion of work in nuclear applications and technology transfer." The report also says that "the exact amount of additional regular budget should be determined after a detailed review of the budgetary situation and additional workloads of the Agency, but the Commission estimates that increases of about €50 million annually in real terms might be necessary during several years."

13. "The IAEA is understaffed and under-resourced for the current and growing responsibilities placed on it by the international community. That is why the President-Elect has called for doubling the IAEA's budget over the next four years." Hillary Rodham Clinton, Answers to "Questions for the Record" from Senator John Kerry, January 2009, p. 29. The questions were submitted in conjunction with Clinton's January 13 confirmation hearing.
14. The E3+3 comprises China, France, Germany, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States. An April 8 joint statement by the six countries said, "The other members of the group warmly welcome the new direction of US policy towards Iran and their decision to participate fully in the E3+3 process and join in any future meetings with representatives of the Islamic Republic of Iran."