The international community must take real action to reduce the global nuclear stock pile and to tackle the ability of states to obtain fissile materials, Sir Malcolm Rifkind said at a UK Conservative Party Conference fringe meeting on the case for multi-lateral nuclear disarmament. Joining the former Foreign Secretary on the panel was Michael Ancram MP. Robin Ashby reports

Sir Malcolm stated that the issue of nuclear weapons had often been viewed as a left wing policy, but that at the end of the day, nobody had a vested interest in nuclear war.

There was now a consensus that if there was a need for nuclear weapons, it was key to ensure that only the minimum were kept to meet the required objective, he said.

Sir Malcolm argued that there were far too many nuclear weapons in the world, adding that times were moving on and it was therefore appropriate to look at whether the international community was comfortable with how many nuclear weapons there were in the world today.

During the Cold War, there had been great competition in terms of arms, he said, explaining that inevitably, nuclear weapons were linked to the Cold War and the need to end the conflict in a peaceful way.

The group of nuclear nations were originally the prime players in the Cold War, but much had happened since the end of it - over 13,000 nuclear weapons had been destroyed mainly by the USA and Russia.

The UK had also made great strides in reducing its nuclear stockade, and had abolished 'free fall' nuclear weapons and reduced the number of warheads carried by Trident submarines.

It was also interesting to note that nuclear proliferation was going in the right direction. South Africa, Libya and a number of former Soviet Union nations had successfully managed to reduce their nuclear capability.

However, there still remained too many nuclear weapons with over 12,000 active weapons remaining in the world. Over 95 per cent of these where in the hands of the USA and Russia, which were infinitely more than was needed for national security.

It wasn't just a question of numbers. The more weapons there were, the more likely such weapons would end up in the wrong place and in the wrong hands. He related an anecdote where a number of nuclear weapons had gone missing in the USA for 36 hours, and added that if this could happen in the US, it was frightening to imagine what could happen elsewhere.

Turning to proliferation, he predicted that Iran would become a real question mark noting that if the nation was to become nuclear, there was a real risk that neighbouring Arab states would

seek to acquire a nuclear stockpile.

Another problem was the fact that terrorists who sought to use nuclear weapons would not be deterred by any kind of conventional deterrent. Sir Malcolm expressed concern that such a situation meant that the risks became infinitely greater.

Wondering whether there was actually a case for the total elimination of nuclear weapons, he asserted that nobody of a sensible background would call for total elimination, but expressed hope that nuclear weapons could be effectively limited.

Any disarmament on any level had to be certifiable, he said, with a whole series of checks in place to ensure that those who had committed themselves were actually reducing their capability.

Secondly, it would be important to ensure that states no longer carried fissile materials which could be used to construct new weapons.

Sir Malcolm questioned whether the balance of nuclear power that existed during the Cold War could be applied to the current age, and argued that wasn't possible as the notion that nuclear weapons could prevent the break out of conventional war breaking out was no longer valid.

The international community could have a long term vision for nuclear weapons, but that there was a powerful need for some serious changes to be made immediately.

There was no need for the US and Russia to have so many nuclear warheads he argued, noting that the reduction of such a stockpile would reduce the problems associated with the capability and set an example to the rest of the world.

It was also crucial to ensure greater control over fissile materials, and he wondered whether there might be a case for some kind of depository under central control.

He added that Russia and the USA should be 'deeply ashamed of themselves' over the ballistic missile defence system, asserting that Russia was grossly over estimating the potential threats from Iran. There ought to be an opportunity between Russia, the US and Europe for greater cooperative protection from ballistic missiles.

In order to actually make the kind of impact required, real action was needed to reduce nuclear weapons and tackle the ease at which states obtained fissile materials.

Speaking earlier in the session, Mr Ancram had said that the international challenges faced by the world were the obvious ones of water shortages, food prices and energy. However, the underlying issue was the threat of nuclear confrontation.

Confrontation was part of the human story, he said, and would always continue to be. Confrontation in the modern world was increasingly framed in the nuclear context, such as the growth in numbers and the availability to rogue nations. This was a very real issue, not a

theoreticalone.

Mr Ancram argued that the international environment was no longer static; the number of nuclear weapons and the number of states trying to acquire them was increasing.

In the current climate, there needed to be a nuclear deterrent, and a group of civilised nations leading the world in its attempt to reduce weapons and the possibility of nuclear conflict on a multi-lateral basis.

Turning to Trident, he declared that committing oneself to nuclear weapons in 15 years time was the wrong direction to go, and the wrong signal to send.

He expressed hope for a coalition of the great nations working together to reduce the world's stock pile of nuclear weapons.

From the floor, it was argued that a world without nuclear weapons could also be a world with greater slavery, as rogue nations would have little deterrent to prevent them from 'taking over the world'.

Responding, Sir Malcolm stated that the notion of the balance of nuclear power no longer carried the same weight it once did, noting that it was not possible to deter rogue nations and terrorist groups in the same way as rational states.

Sir Malcolm agreed that the potential for the Iranian government to obtain nuclear weapons was a serious issue, but noted that the Iranian political situation was an extremely complex one, with many within the system who were open to negotiation.

The best way of going forward with Iran was the 'carrot and the stick' approach, arguing that the US should offer full relations and the abolition of sanctions in return for Iran turning its back on a nuclear programme. If the US could achieve a deal with Libya, there was no reason why a deal could not be struck with Iran.

A member of the audience wondered why it wasn't possible to reduce the number of nuclear weapons from 12,000 to 1,000 tomorrow.

In response, Sir Malcolm stated that this was down to political will, noting that a high number of warheads had been destroyed following the end of the Cold War. As relations had soured between the US and Russia, the political will was no longer there.

The actual process of rendering nuclear weapons safe took months if not years, which required great skill and expense as well as a strong political initiative to get the reduction case moving.

He noted that there was now a consensus in the US surrounding the situation, and expressed hope that a similar agreement could be reached in Russia.

In response to a question on protecting fissile materials, Sir Malcolm asserted that there was

not a queue of nations waiting to obtain nuclear weapons, but that the problem of proliferation meant the neighbouring nations could feel the strain to acquire nuclear warheads.

How was it possible to negotiate with rogue states on nuclear weapons.

Sir Malcolm noted that some terrorist organisations had close links with government around the world, adding that even if you couldn't directly place pressure on terrorist groups, it was possible to influence governments who had 'shady friends'.

In response to a question on 'dirty bombs', the former Foreign Secretary noted that biological weapons could potentially be as devastating as nuclear weapons, adding that it was possible to make it infinitely more difficult for terrorist organisations to access fissile materials.

This was a priority and a cause for concern that the world did not have to worry about during the Cold War.

Asked whether his ideas were having traction within the Conservative Party, Sir Malcolm explained that the party believed that there were responsible ways in which nuclear stockpiles could be reduced, but that the key issue was the US election.

Decisions would have to be made over what US position on nuclear weapons would be, he said, adding that a much more constructive relationship between Washington and Moscow could be achieved if the political will was there.