

THE UK'S NUCLEAR DETERRENT: A RESPONSE TO MALCOLM CHALMERS

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The excellent article by Malcolm Chalmers in the December 2013 edition of this journal – ‘Towards the UK’s Nuclear Century’ – deserves further comment.¹ The article’s abstract says that Chalmers suggests that the UK remains committed to maintaining a nuclear deterrent into the indefinite future. This is true. But he ‘suggests’ this not because, as a strategic analyst, he thinks it is the best thing to do, but because, as a political realist, he thinks it is the most likely outcome. In almost every paragraph he points out the problems, difficulties and dangers confronting the British Trident programme. He concludes that:

[It] is an illusion to believe that any single weapon system, however powerful, can guarantee UK security in isolation. The central guarantee of British security for the last seven decades has been its close alliance relationship with the US and its European neighbours themselves embedded in, and reinforced by, a wider international order based on liberal principles. The world has now seen, as a result, the longest period of peace between major powers in human history. If these gains were ever to be lost, nuclear weapons could not hope to fill the gap. Yet the *path dependency of history* [emphasis added] means that the UK nuclear force is likely to survive through to its 100th birthday.

In other words he is saying, in elegant language, that the UK’s Trident capability will probably survive for another forty years as a result of political inertia. Is this really the best we can do?

Let us begin with the question of opportunity costs. Chalmers says that by 2021/22, according to the latest MoD Equipment Plan, around 35 per cent of total committed MoD spending on new equipment procurement is due to be on submarine and deterrent systems. The latest MoD Equipment Plan, from 2013, underlines this point, forecasting that equipment spending on ships (including new carriers) would amount to some £17.4 billion over the next ten years, while equipment spending on submarine and deterrent capabilities (including SSNs) would amount to £38 billion. Over the same period, equipment spending on combat air is due to reach £18.8 billion, spending on air support £13.4 billion, spending on helicopters £11.2 billion, and spending on land equipment £13.1 billion. The imbalance is glaring.² It comes at a time when a number of influential voices, both at home and abroad, are complaining about the hollowing out

of British conventional forces to a point where the UK will cease to be a front-rank ally in the types of operation that actually take place. Moreover, it is far from certain that spending on defence will remain even at the level currently planned. It is true, of course, that if the UK decided to forego its nuclear deterrent there would be substantial short-term costs of cancellation and decommissioning to be set against the savings. And there would be difficulty in persuading the Treasury that any savings should accrue to the defence budget. However, the latter’s case for pocketing the lot has been greatly weakened by its previous insistence that the full costs of Trident be borne on the defence budget. Even a small proportion of the savings from Trident would make a great difference to the equipment budgets for the conventional forces.

What value can the UK expect to get from the money spent on Trident? According to a recent statement, ‘The first duty of the Government is to defend the interests and citizens of the United Kingdom. Our nuclear deterrent exists to prevent, at the extreme, any threat to our

national existence, or nuclear blackmail from a nuclear-armed state against the UK homeland or our vital interests’.³ This is, at least, clear. But is it rational? Having reviewed a number of potential dangers against which Trident might defend us, Chalmers concludes: ‘All these scenarios appear implausible, even alarmist, when viewed from 2013. The potential candidates for adversary status – China and the medium powers of the Middle East – would have to adopt much more adventurist foreign policies, with all that this would risk for their own economic prosperity and security. Much diplomatic effort, by the UK and its allies, is devoted precisely to making clear that a more co-operative approach is in everyone’s interests’.⁴

But we are looking forty years ahead. It is fashionable to assume that the re-emergence of a Cold War-style nuclear threat is unlikely. Chalmers quotes the distinguished French scholar Bruno Tertrais, who has said that ‘massive organised conflict is now an exceptional feature of human society, and is on the verge of becoming a historical relic. It may well have disappeared by the end



Vanguard Class Submarine HMS Victorious off the west coast of Scotland during a visit by Prime Minister David Cameron, 4 April 2013. *Courtesy of AFP Photo/Andy Buchanan.*

of the century'.⁵ Yet this prediction could well be wrong. The recent abortive threat by the US to bomb Syria has awakened memories not so much of Afghanistan or Iraq in 2001–03, but of 1914.⁶ Let us assume the worst: that a mortal threat has arisen from a nuclear-armed power in circumstances where the US is not prepared to engage its nuclear weapons in support of the UK. (This is a stretch. The US is not only the UK's closest ally but, where nuclear weapons are concerned, like a Siamese twin joined at the hip. Nevertheless, memories of 1940 have a way of kicking in.) If the UK no longer had any nuclear weapons of its own what would follow? The government argues that 'only possession of our own nuclear weapon can give us the ability to confront blackmail and acts of aggression by nuclear armed opponents'.⁷ Yet, if this is true, it raises the question of why all but five of the 190 states party to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty have committed to non-nuclear-weapon status permanently. If this makes them potential victims of nuclear blackmail, they do not seem unduly apprehensive.

The reason for this is plain. History does not provide a single instance where a non-nuclear state has been compelled to do something it did not want to do, or deterred from doing something it did want to, by a nuclear-weapon state in virtue of the latter's nuclear weapons. (One may say that the Japanese were forced to surrender by the American atom bombs in 1945, but this was by use, not threat, and in any case is highly controversial⁸). There are also many instances where a non-nuclear-weapon state simply defied a nuclear-armed adversary: the Soviets' blockade of Berlin (1948); China's rout of the US in North Korea (1950); the Arab states' attack on Israel (1973); the collapse of a US client regime from Vietnam (1975); Leopoldo Galtieri's annexation of British territory (1982); Saddam Hussein's defiance of the US in seizing Kuwait (1990) and, even more brazenly, his bombardment of Tel Aviv and Haifa with Scud missiles (1991).⁹ It may be said that all of these governments were authoritarian and that a democratic state might be less resolute. I do not believe this argument and no British leader could seriously advance it.

The government of a non-nuclear Britain, in the teeth of a nuclear threat, would do what all these governments have done: it would keep calm and carry on.

Julian Lewis, who has kindly allowed me to see his parallel article (also published in this issue of the *RUSI Journal*), suggests a crucial example of where my argument might fail. Had Argentina been in possession of a few nuclear bombs when it seized the Falkland Islands, and had the UK abandoned Trident, would Britain have had the fortitude to repossess the islands nonetheless? Maybe not. He knew Mrs Thatcher better than I did. But how much better, in that case, to have adopted the leaseback solution defeated by hardliners a few years earlier.¹⁰ There is no end to re-writing history as it might have been. Lewis also argues that the possession of nuclear weapons makes the UK willing to play 'a more important and decisive role in preserving freedom than other medium-sized states'. This is on a par with the idea that Britain, as a force for good, punches above its weight. This notion has been specifically disavowed by David Cameron.¹¹ And it is completely

undermined by the government's contention that the UK would only undertake major operations in alliance with others. If this is true, then the UK's Trident is neither here nor there.

One may say that this argument implies a gamble that the present 'nuclear taboo' is bound to last indefinitely.¹² I am saying something rather different: that the likelihood of a rogue state picking on the UK uniquely as the target of a fatal nuclear threat is highly improbable, when measured against the known hazards of cyber-war, jihadist terrorism and climate change. Even if it did so, history shows that the UK should, in all probability, carry on regardless. Hence Trident is simply not worth the resources that it is absorbing.

Why do these arguments have no political traction? It is commonly accepted in the political discourse of the United Kingdom that any significant reductions in the potency of the Trident force, let alone its abolition, could only be countenanced on a multilateral basis. The label 'unilateralist' is still regarded as the kiss of political death for politicians and played on by the pro-Trident lobby when they run out of convincing arguments for keeping and replacing it. But, contrary to the assumptions implied in this unilateral-versus-multilateral discourse, all the many reductions undertaken by British governments in the past twenty-five years have been 'unilateral' in the sense that no *quid pro quo* has been looked for from any other nuclear-weapon state. These have included large reductions in the number of missiles and warheads deployed as part of the Trident force, as well as the elimination of tactical nuclear weapons in the 1990s. It is time to take the argument a step further and to examine why unilateral nuclear disarmament should be ruled out in the context of possible future reductions, or indeed renunciation, of the British nuclear deterrent force.

An obvious starting point is to ask what value other nations, and particularly those in possession of nuclear weapons or on the threshold of doing so, place on British nuclear weapons. In March 2013, the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) hosted a panel discussion at which several eminent former British

statesmen assessed the potential foreign-policy implications of the UK's decisions on Trident replacement.¹³ The panellists were asked to what extent Britain's role in the world is determined by its nuclear-weapons capability and how the UK's international status would be affected by a change to the proposed Trident 'like-for-like' replacement. Lord Hannay, a former ambassador to the UN and currently Joint Convenor of the All-Party Group on Global Security and Non-Proliferation, noted that the Trident replacement has no bearing on the UK's UN Security Council membership, which derived from the Allied victory in the Second World War. For the same reason there is no equivalence between the possession of nuclear weapons and permanent membership of the Security Council. At the time that the UN Charter was agreed in June 1945 and the five permanent members were chosen, not even the US was recognised as a nuclear-weapons possessor.

Sir Jeremy Greenstock, also former ambassador to the UN and currently chairman of the United Nations Association UK Board of Directors, explained that a range of factors contribute to the UK's image and influence in the world. Amongst these, nuclear-weapons capability is one of the least relevant. Ultimately, the most important criterion for influence is a country's economic strength. The UK's global influence comes from its association of relationships; its ability to manage these interests and relationships around the world; its capacity to solve problems in the international community in the various committees and councils; and its input into development and security in the developing world.

Sir Richard Mottram, former permanent under-secretary of defence and currently chairman of the Defence Science and Technology Laboratory,¹⁴ agreed that for most countries, the UK's conventional forces have most salience. He differed from the diplomats, however, in suggesting that for the US, France and perhaps one or two of the country's other NATO allies, the UK's nuclear weapons 'do buy a certain form of influence'. This delicately worded statement is worth examining further.

The US may be more reluctant to get involved in the UK's decision-making on Trident than assumed by many on both sides of the argument. One of the IISS panellists suggested that the Americans are interested in the UK debate on Trident because they respect the quality of British contributions in various fields, but 'they are beginning to despise our quantity'. He argued that the UK was very close to reaching the point at which the reduced quantity of military assets in the conventional sphere makes it impossible to retain respect. On 12 April 2013, the *International Herald Tribune* published a report from Brussels by Steven Erlanger entitled 'NATO faces turning point as members spend less', which included the following: 'As for Britain, Prime Minister David Cameron is insisting on keeping a nuclear deterrent on a new generation of submarines even as US officials are pushing London to consider abandoning the idea. As one US official said privately, "They can't afford Trident, and they need to confront the choice: either they can be a nuclear power and nothing else or a real military partner"'.¹⁵ If this truly reflects a view developing within the US administration it abolishes one of the few remaining arguments for retaining and renewing Trident, namely that the US wants the UK to keep it. And it demolishes a further argument, sometimes advanced, that the US would stop sharing intelligence with the UK if it ceased to be a nuclear-weapon state.¹⁶

The apparent French support for the UK's retention of nuclear weapons is wholly self-serving; they fear that any large reduction or renunciation of nuclear forces by Britain would weaken their own case for continued possession. It is clear, from this discussion as a whole, that any contribution to the UK's global status and influence from the possession of nuclear weapons is regarded as low at best.

It is often argued by supporters of Trident that the reduction in the UK's nuclear capability since the end of the Cold War has met with no response from the rest of the world and that further nuclear disarmament or even renunciation by the country would be most unlikely to affect decisions taken by India, Pakistan, Israel, Iran, North Korea or any other would-be proliferator. This

seems entirely plausible.¹⁷ If so, however, then it follows that nuclear weapons in British hands have no value whatever as a bargaining counter or *quid pro quo* in any future disarmament negotiations. Why, then, insist that further British nuclear disarmament (or renunciation) can only be countenanced as part of a multilateral process?

In response to a parliamentary question earlier this year, Alastair Burt MP, on behalf of the Foreign Office, gave the following written answer:¹⁸

In order for the UK to offer to include its small number of nuclear weapons in multilateral disarmament negotiations there would first need to be further reductions in the much larger nuclear weapons stockpiles held by other states and greater assurances that no new major threats will emerge that could threaten the UK or its vital interests.

There is no logic in this. Only the US and Russia have 'much larger' deployed stockpiles than the UK.¹⁹ The size, or indeed the existence, of the British arsenal is in no way determined by or related to the shape and size of these

stockpiles.²⁰ British holdings are in any case barely one twentieth of those of the US and Russian combined. The possible emergence of 'new major threats' has no relevance to the unilateral-versus-multilateral discussion.

While recognising that insisting on multilateral disarmament offers an attractive way for politicians to sit on the fence, this makes no actual military or political sense – except perhaps as a tactic for postponing any decision to forego nuclear weapons into the indefinite future. However, rather than stay trapped in misleading – and irrelevant – 1980s rhetoric about 'unilateral' versus 'multilateral' disarmament, it would be more sensible and straightforward to act upon the UK's own national interest when taking decisions on the size and, indeed, the future necessity (if any) of British nuclear forces.

If the argument from military necessity is weak at best, and the objection to 'unilateral' nuclear disarmament illusory, what remains? The best answer is national self-esteem. At a time when the UK has still not found a secure role in the world; when attempts at being a 'force for good' and

punching above its weight, whether in Basra or Helmand, have brought more embarrassment than kudos; when its place in Europe is increasingly problematic and even the union with Scotland is in question, maybe the possession of nuclear weapons is treasured as one remaining claim to a place in the premier league. I do not question the importance, for any nation, of its self-esteem and a degree of national pride. To feel good in itself and on terms with the world is vital for any country or tribe. Pre-eminence in sport, the arts, manufacturing and finance all have a part to play. But I cannot see possession of Trident as a sensible way for the British to pursue this aim. If, in the last resort, money saved by doing away with it is spent on the mitigation of climate change, the provision of high-capacity transport and digital links, schools, hospitals or simply paying down the national debt, then that is fine by me. ■

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Notes

1 Malcolm Chalmers, 'Towards the UK's Nuclear Century', *RUSI Journal* (Vol. 158, No. 6, December 2013), pp. 18–28.

2 In short, expenditure on submarines and the deterrent is twice as much as for any other item and three times as much as for land forces. For what it is worth, I accept the government's argument that if the UK is to keep the Trident force it makes no sense to go for cheaper versions: abandonment of continuous at-sea deterrence; fewer boats, or even a bomber or cruise-missile alternative.

3 Ministry of Defence and Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 'The Future of the United Kingdom's Nuclear Deterrent', Cm 6994, December 2006, pp. 6–7.

4 Chalmers, 'Towards the UK's Nuclear Century', p. 26.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 25.

6 See Margaret MacMillan, 'The Great War's Ominous Echoes', *New York Times*, 13 December 2013. She says: 'A comparable mistake in our own time is the assumption that because of our advanced technology we can deliver quick, focussed and overpowering military actions ... resulting in conflicts that will be short and limited in their impact and victories that will be decisive. Increasingly we are seeing asymmetrical wars between well-armed organised forces on the one side and insurgencies on the other, which can spread not just across a region but across a continent, or even the globe'.

7 MoD and FCO, 'The Future of the United Kingdom's Nuclear Deterrent', pp. 6–7.

8 See, for example, Paul Ham, *Hiroshima and Nagasaki: The Real Story of the Atomic Bombings and their Aftermath* (London: Transworld Publishers, 2011),

pp. 533, 538 and 563. Ham's conclusions are unequivocal. 'The use of nuclear weapons was unconscionable and/or militarily unnecessary – so argued Generals Eisenhower and MacArthur, and Admirals Halsey, King and Leahy'. Furthermore, 'The most that may be said in defence of the bombing of Hiroshima – in strictly military and political terms – is that it bounced the Russians into the war a week or so earlier than Moscow planned'. And: 'Let us dispense with the easy myths: the bomb did not "shock the Japanese into submission"; the bomb did not save a million American lives; the bomb did not, of itself, end the war ... The truth is, the bombs were militarily unnecessary'. The author is an Australian journalist and a highly regarded military historian.

9 I have argued this case at greater length in my article 'Trident: White Elephant or Black Hole?', *RUSI Journal* (Vol. 154, No. 1, February/March 2009).

- 10 In June 1980, the Foreign Office drew up a proposal, approved by the cabinet's defence committee, whereby Britain would hand Argentina titular sovereignty over the islands, which would then be leased back by Britain for ninety-nine years. The British and Argentinian flags would be flown side by side on public buildings on the islands. British administration would continue with a view to guaranteeing the islanders and their descendants 'uninterrupted enjoyment of their way of life'.
- 11 Glen Owen, '... as No 10 goes to war on "luxury" Army budget"', *Mail on Sunday*, 16 June 2013.
- 12 I believe nothing of the kind. It seems to me that, so long as nuclear weapons persist, there will always be the possibility that someone, somewhere, will let one *off* – whether state or terrorist group, whether by design or accident. This is the case for Global Zero. But it is not what I am arguing here.
- 13 IISS, 'The Foreign Policy Implications of the Trident Replacement Debate', Panel Discussion Report, 13 March 2013.
- 14 A trading fund of the Ministry of Defence whose purpose is to maximise the impact of science and technology on the defence and security of the UK.
- 15 Steven Erlanger, 'NATO Faces Turning Point as Members Spend Less', *International Herald Tribune*, 12 April 2013.
- 16 It is perhaps worth recalling the comments of Robert McNamara, then-US secretary of defense, at Ann Arbor, Michigan on 16 June 1962, in connection with American support for an independent British nuclear force: 'Limited nuclear capabilities, operating independently, are dangerous, expensive, prone to obsolescence and lacking in credibility as a deterrent'.
- 17 It follows that the argument sometimes made by opponents of British Trident, which says that Britain, by keeping Trident, is setting a bad example to other would-be proliferators, is also a bit of a stretch.
- 18 *Hansard*, HC Debates, 18 January 2013, col. 998W.
- 19 According to *SIPRI Yearbook 2013*, the nuclear arsenals (including stored as well as deployed warheads) number approximately: 7,700 in the US; 8,500 in Russia; 300 in France; 250 in China; 225 in the UK; 90–110 in India; 100–20 in Pakistan; 80 in Israel; 6–8 in North Korea.
- 20 The original design of the Trident force was based on the notion of holding to ransom 'key aspects of Soviet state power'. No doubt that included the targeting of the bunkers containing all the essential apparatus of Russian command and control, as well the missile defences of Moscow. It had nothing whatever to do with the size of the Russian strategic rocket forces. Nor has it now.