

The validity of the rationale for UK's possession of nuclear weapons

On coming to office in 1945, Attlee's first response to the problem of nuclear weapons was to emphasize the need for a war-free world. As it became apparent that that was not a feasible goal at that time, he came to believe that our possession of nuclear weapons might be a way to avoid world-wide devastation. Over the years the nature of the weapons and the nature of the political situation have changed, the former most notably by the manufacture of the thermo-nuclear bomb and the Soviet anti-ballistic missile defences, and the latter by the US refusal to cooperate with the UK between 1946 and 1958, and by the end of the Cold War. However the basic reasons that have been given for retaining or improving our nuclear weaponry have remained surprisingly similar across the years. By collecting Cabinet minutes and other documents from 1945 to 1976, and adding his own comments, Professor Peter Hennessy has provided an opportunity to show how the arguments used now are still largely similar to those used then, and to reflect on their continuing utility¹. The following paragraphs involve an attempt to pick out the important issues.² Many of these came up time and time again because the advantages of having, retaining or improving our nuclear weapons always involved weighing chalk against cheese. In the mid to late sixties, when the building of Polaris submarines and the warheads with which they should be fitted were under discussion, every imaginable issue was brought up.

The main controversies have involved the acquisition of nuclear weapons in the first place (1945-48); the manufacture of thermo-nuclear weapons (1954); the acquisition of Polaris (1963); Improvement of Polaris/Chevaline (1978) and, more recently, the replacement of Trident. All these major decisions have involved prolonged discussion within the Cabinet or within an "inner Cabinet". In 1967 Government departments were divided as to whether Polaris should or should not be retained: it was foreseen that at some time in the future political advantages might be gained by abandoning our nuclear deterrent, though that time had not yet come. Although the nuclear decisions may have been presented to the public as clear-cut, there were always two sides to the case. Since the pros and cons have changed little over the years, it is worthwhile to consider their current validity. First, then, we may list the arguments for the possession of nuclear weapons that have been advanced: later I return to their current relevance.

From the beginning most of the decision-making has been in secret, often, indeed, secrecy from most members of the Cabinet. Attlee concealed the decision that we should make the bomb from Parliament and most of the Cabinet by hiding the figures for costs under other headings in the budget. Later he revealed that he had taken this

¹ Hennessy, P. (2007). *Cabinets and the bomb*. London: British Academy. This publication is an objective presentation of the Cabinet minutes, and does not take sides. Professor Hennessy has given his permission for the use of the material he has collected, but bears no responsibility for the use made of it here.

² I have given dates only when the particular issue seemed especially important, but this is merely my subjective judgement.

course because he thought that some of them were not to be trusted with secrets of this kind. On occasions secrecy was limited to Cabinet members: news about UK bomb tests were revealed to a meeting in memos which had to be returned immediately after they had been read. It became customary for sensitive matters concerning foreign affairs, defence and security/intelligence to be decided by a small group of Ministers and subsequently ratified by the Cabinet. An exception was the manufacture of thermo-nuclear weapons, which was made by the full cabinet (1954). On at least one occasion, when the number of Polaris submarines to be built was under discussion, the Prime Minister effectively lied, by concealing the fact that the keels that had already been laid down could readily be used for hunter-killer submarines, so cancellation was not the problem that it seemed. In 1974 the Prime Minister was forced to explain to the Cabinet why he had authorised a nuclear test. Callaghan limited discussion of the Chevaline programme and a new generation of nuclear-armed submarines to a few Cabinet members, arguing that this had always been traditional with nuclear issues. Thatcher did likewise when she took over. She took the decision for formal approval to the full Cabinet without providing much in the way of back-up evidence for the decision. A later decision to use the D5 Trident missile went to the full Cabinet on the Defence Secretary's insistence. Recently decision making has been much more open: the replacement of Trident was subjected to a vote in Parliament, though full democratic procedures were hamstrung by the use of the whip.

Cost.

Cost has been an issue with every decision. It had to be argued that the cost of making thermo-nuclear weapons would be little more than the cost of atomic bombs (1954). It was recognised that the cost of Polaris would be a heavy burden (1963). At times cost has been a reason for accepting dependence on the USA. The abortive proposal for an Atlantic Nuclear Force was in part a suggestion for sharing the financial load while retaining independent control of our submarines, though the Chancellor of the Exchequer was strongly in favour of a force of only two or three submarines on financial grounds (1964). At that time the necessity of tailoring our defence expenditure to our resources was clear, and it was argued that a contribution of submarines to the proposed ANF might facilitate a proposal to reduce our land forces in Europe. Devaluation of the pound (1967) exacerbated the situation, and it was argued that defence expenditure had become too high in relation to that on social services. Attempts were made to kill off the Polaris programme altogether, and there was a reference to an earlier decision not to develop or acquire a successor to Polaris. In 1974 the Chancellor of the Exchequer argued that our contributions to NATO were not acceptable in public expenditure terms: at 5% GNP it was higher than either France or Germany. However financial arguments were almost invariably brushed aside as trivial in relation to the rest of the defence expenditure, and there were often potential economies, like withdrawal from Hong Kong or Cyprus, that could be put on the balance. A Defence Studies Working Party report in 1974 predicted that total abandonment of our nuclear capability would yield about £1000 million over a ten year period, but would "severely affect our political influence and standing with both allies and foes. Such a course of action is not judged to make political sense." When the future of AWRE was under discussion (1973) it was argued that short-term financial considerations were not important, and were to be disregarded in relation to the implications that forgoing our nuclear weapons would have for our effectiveness and policy. But no hard comparisons of how some of our defence

expenditure could be used in other branches of our armed services, or to ameliorate our needs in the various social services, or for overseas aid, seem to have been made.

Deterrence. Deterrence of an attack by the Soviet Union (or at one point China) has always been the accepted reason, or rationale, for our possession of nuclear weapons. While Attlee had hoped for an international agreement to abolish them, he believed that bombing could only be answered by counter-bombing. He therefore set in train the UK nuclear weapon saga by authorising the construction of a plutonium pile in Cumberland in spite of other industrial demands in post-war Britain. At that time he did not foresee the antagonism of the Soviet Union, and supported the sharing of information with both the USA and the USSR. Subsequently deterrence of the Soviet Union has always been the underlying issue, though it was rarely discussed and other issues became prominent in Cabinet discussions. In 1947 an armed clash with the Soviet Union, bent on the spread of world Communism, was seen as inevitable sooner or later, and deterrence of the Soviet Union was a major underlying issue throughout the Cold War era. In 1967, the maintenance of a credible deterrent was seen as a reason for improving Polaris. Again in 1974 the maintenance of our strategic nuclear weapons was seen as necessary as insurance against the possible loss of the US nuclear deterrent and for national use in the event of the breakdown of NATO. Improvements were necessary to maintain its status as a credible nuclear deterrent. A decision on whether to maintain our nuclear deterrent was necessary and all the usual arguments were deployed. In addition the Prime Minister argued paradoxically that the Soviet Union valued the contribution that our possession of the nuclear deterrent enabled us to make to discussion in the arms limitation field.

However other issues became prominent in Cabinet discussions. Some of these were indeed closely related to deterrence for instance the UK could be a second centre of nuclear decision-making beside the USA, possession of the bomb would be an insurance if NATO should break up (1964) (though this was seen as extremely improbable) or if the USA should decline to come to our support if the UK were threatened (1963). It was part of our obligation to NATO. Recently it has been suggested that it would be a defence against any one who threatened us that is, against nuclear blackmail.

The Top Table.

Closely related to the deterrence theme, there was a strong feeling that possession of the bomb would enable us to influence decisions at the "top table". Ernest Bevin, as Foreign Secretary, made it clear that his voice would only be heard if we had the bomb (1946, 1954). Many related points have been made. Thus we could not claim to be a leading military power without the bomb (1954). It was clearly desirable that Britain should not be left behind in the industrial and military applications of this new invention. When, with the McMahon Act, the USA ceased to cooperate with the UK on nuclear matters, it was hoped that US cooperation would be restored if we showed ourselves capable of making the bomb (an argument that was proved correct when the UK exploded a thermo-nuclear bomb (1957)). We were one of the three victors in World War 2, and possession of the bomb would enable us to discharge our responsibilities to our Empire and throughout the world. In 1967 its political and military influence, both nationally and within our Alliances, was seen as a strong reason for improving Polaris.

Prestige.

Many other issues were expected to follow from the prestige that would accrue with possession of the bomb. For instance: (i) Our status as a world power could be used to promote peace and promote progress on international nuclear disarmament (1963); (ii) The decision to build the first bomb depended largely on the view that we must not acquiesce to a US monopoly of the bomb, even before the Cold War became an issue (1947). Later it was felt that with US monopoly the western alliance might cease to be a free association and lose its cohesion (1963); (iii) Possession would enable us to influence US policies. For instance it was suggested that the US might start a war, or bring such pressure on China that it started one: if we had the bomb we should be in a position to restrain the USA. Yet we must also ensure that US policy included European defence. (iv) It would give us access to US technology (1964, 1967); (v) It would enable us to play our part in turning back the spread of Communism (1954). After leaving office, Callaghan said that the possibility of giving up our status as a nuclear weapon state would be a momentous step in British history that would deprive the UK of influence and knowledge of US decision-taking.

Intra-European issues.

There were also a number of intra-European issues. If we had the bomb, it might prevent Germany or other NATO members from developing one, and the French might be persuaded to cooperate with NATO (1962-3). West German aspirations for nuclear power might be met if they were offered some degree of joint control. It might also prevent a Franco-German or Franco-US alliance (1964). Certainly, France must not be the only European power with nuclear weapons because that might prevent any opportunities we might have to shape European policy (1967). For a while an Atlantic Nuclear Force was envisaged, and we must have bargaining power in its creation and control (1964). Being a nuclear weapon state might influence entry into the Common Market (1962, 1967). US monopoly would be unpopular with France and other European powers (1963). It might also make possible a reduction in our land forces in Europe.

Independence.

The question of our independence from the USA became of major focus over the purchase of the Polaris missiles (1962). The complexities of the concept of independence have often been glossed over: for instance, does it mean independence in origin and construction, in maintenance, or in use. The USA required that Polaris should be committed to the alliance, but the UK insisted on its right to use it for its own purposes in extreme emergency. It was realised that the complexity of the Polaris system made it undesirable to insist on complete independence (1963). The Labour Party manifesto said of Polaris that "It will not be independent, and it will not be British and it will not deter... We are not prepared any longer to waste the country's resources on endless duplication of strategic nuclear weapons". However they went ahead when they got into office. It was argued that we should have a veto over the use of our contribution to the proposed ANF (1965). In the event, all information about the Polaris was shared "to the point where it is no longer possible to identify any specific item of information now available in the United Kingdom as being of United States or United Kingdom origin..."³

³ Annex to Cabinet papers, Sept, 1976).

Aldermaston.

One matter that came up at several meetings was the viability of the Atomic Weapons Research Establishment (AWRE) at Aldermaston. It was argued that if the Establishment were merely concerned with the maintenance of existing weapons, the scientists would lack innovative work into which to get their teeth and would drift away. This is surely an argument that can be turned round: if we do not need the bomb, we do not need more than maintenance at Aldermaston⁴.

Inertia.

The initial decision to build the bomb has been ascribed to the inertia of a power perceiving itself to be great and assuming it would remain so (1948, 1954). Once we had the bomb, it was easier to keep it than to abandon it. The latter would involve a major change in policy. The move from atomic to thermo-nuclear bombs did not involve any sharp distinction (1954). In discussing the Defence Review in 1964, the Prime Minister mentioned that we must maintain our role as a nuclear power, “which the Government had inherited from its predecessors”. In 1967 the Board of Trade agreed to the retention of Polaris “on the broad grounds that we already have it, that it is comparatively cheap to maintain, that it has political value”⁵ An attempt to achieve unilateral disarmament was believed to have been responsible for the defeat of the Labour party in 19** and for the change in their policy from unilateral disarmament subsequently. An unwillingness to abandon our nuclear weapons was also partly a financial matter: the cost of retaining Polaris and even of improving it would be much smaller than the capital investment that would otherwise be wasted (1967). Lord Callaghan admitted in retrospect that, when Prime Minister, he had approved requests for the Chevaline programme because he always thought that a successful conclusion to the programme was just around the corner.

Morality and Legality.

An issue conspicuous by its absence is that of the morality of the bomb. Only once, in 1954 over the manufacture of thermo-nuclear bombs and as the result of pressure from the Methodist Conference, was it mentioned in the Cabinet discussions represented in this collection of Cabinet papers. The issue was dismissed on the dubious grounds that we were already making atomic bombs (so were acting immorally anyway?), and that the moral issue lay in their use rather than their manufacture (implying what about our intended actions?). The question of the number of megadeaths or of how many Soviet cities would be destroyed for deterrence to be effective was accepted as the appropriate measure of our requirements. Two of the three alternative criteria for an effective deterrent listed in the Duff-Mason Report (1978) were “To inflict a level of damage that would cause a breakdown of normal life in Moscow, Leningrad plus two more big cities” and “To inflict breakdown on 10 big cities west of the Urals, including Leningrad, or lesser damage on 30 big targets (also including Leningrad)”⁶.

The legality of nuclear weapons has also been totally neglected in this collection of Cabinet papers.

⁴ Verifying Nuclear Disarmament: A Role for AWE Aldermaston. London: British Pugwash Group, 1999.

⁵ Report by the Defense Review Working Party, (PN (67) 6 Dec. 1967.

⁶ Private information cited Hennessy.

Technical issues

These also have been almost totally absent from Cabinet discussions, except in so far as the effectiveness of the deterrent was concerned. Later discussion about the D5 warhead centred almost entirely round cost and relations to the USA.

THE FUTURE. Most of the issues mentioned above are still being used in the discussions concerning the replacement of Trident. Are they any more relevant now?

Secrecy. The present government claims to be more open in its nuclear decision-making, but the shadow of past secrecy remains: this is clearly a matter for vigilance. If decisions are to be truly democratic, there must be no whips in the Parliamentary votes. It is at least possible that the 2007 parliamentary vote on the renewal of Trident would have gone the other way had the whips not been applied. Beyond that, the issues that concern the decision makers should be made public, so that there can be an informed public debate: even statements that we need the bomb for “political and industrial reasons” must be spelled out so that the reasons and their importance can be assessed.

Deterrence. So far as deterrence of Russia goes, it is surprising that there was any more mention of the matter after General Carver’s doubts about the credibility of an independent UK nuclear deterrent: “If it were to be used when Europe was attacked it would represent the voice of a suicide: if used when Europe had been overrun or we ourselves were under attack, it would be a voice from the grave”⁷. Relations have changed, and international rivalries are more likely to be settled by debate or in the economic arena. A nuclear exchange with Russia is now inconceivable.

Nuclear weapons would never be used against a country from which we were being threatened by a non-state party because of the innocent lives that would be lost. The possibility of an attack from a newly nuclear state is extremely improbable and would incur such a devastating response, whether nuclear, military or political, from other nations that it would be unthinkable (except by a madman?).

Cost. Cost has always been considered in terms of the proportion of a Defence Budget the extent of which had already been decided. It is already apparent that a number of major projects, mostly ships or aircraft, which already have initial approval, will not be affordable without an increase in the Defense Budget which could not be envisaged in present circumstances. In addition, experience has shown that nearly all major projects have over-run their estimated budgets, making the position of these items even more precarious. Recent reports indicate that these over-runs have been concealed by reclassifying expenditure under other budget headings. Finally, some of these items are irrelevant to our current defense commitments and likely to remain irrelevant to any future ones. At the same time the Government ignores the frequent complaints from retired soldiers and the media that fighting wars on two fronts is

⁷ Confidential Annex to COS 12th Meeting/72

incompatible with a peacetime national defense budget and has resulted in unnecessary casualties and discontented service personnel.⁸

Apparently the costs of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have come from Treasury reserves, and not from the MOD budget. This makes it even more important to consider the effect of the military budget on our social services, which are being steadily eroded on economic grounds. Our military expenditure is surely a left-over from the responsibilities that we saw ourselves as still having internationally. If it were compared with the difference it could make to our social services, or even to international aid, it would prove publicly unacceptable. Given the present world recession, it would surely be folly to spend resources on a weapon for which no use can be specified.

Prestige. The view that prestige and a place at the top table depend on military strength is surely no longer a valid view in the twenty-first century. As long ago as 1964, when the size of the Polaris fleet was under discussion, the Prime Minister pointed out that our economic strength is as important to our overseas influence as our military power. It is significant that, on a recent trip, Presidential candidate Obama chose to give a major speech in non-nuclear Germany, not the UK. However our relations with the USA are seen by many as important and as depending on our possession of the bomb: but are they and do they? In any case, US policies are not set in stone and are likely now to change.

One must also consider our influence on the decisions made by other nations. Recently the agreement not to use cluster bombs was greatly accelerated but the announcement of the UK's decision not to use them and to destroy its existing stocks. A decision to abandon our nuclear weapons could have a similar effect on other nations and produce a significant shift towards the MOD's professed goal of total nuclear disarmament.

Europe. Intra-European issues have not been raised recently in discussions on this issue. It is difficult to see that they could be relevant.

Independence. Replacement of our Trident nuclear weapon system would not bring us nuclear independence. Replacement would depend on US expertise, the warhead would probably be of American design if not manufacture, and it is likely that the accuracy of firing would be determined by current US information. Governmental claims of nuclear weapon independence are simply invalid.

AWRE. The argument that the future of Aldermaston must be ensured, and that scientists would drift away if they did not have innovative work to do, and that therefore we must develop new weapons, is not a valid one for developing new weapons. If we do not need new weapons we shall not need Aldermaston once maintenance is no longer an issue.

Inertia. Our initial development of atomic bombs, and the whole course of our nuclear weapon history, has been governed by the shadow of our former glory as an imperial power. It is time we faced reality. Inertia must not govern future decisions.

⁸ Ferguson, Z. Notes on the Defence Procurement Crunch. British American Security Information Council. 11 July 2008.

Morality and Legality. Moral and legal issues are always disregarded, perhaps on the grounds that they are woolly and irrelevant in the real world. But it is difficult to understand how politicians could dispassionately discuss decisions based on megadeaths or number of cities destroyed. If we are ever to achieve a world order based on law and mutual understanding they must be given the prominence they deserve.

Finally, a government spokesman recently, speaking against the possibility of cancelling the aircraft carriers (now confirmed?) and Trident did not mention the need for a deterrent, but did mention industrial and political issues without specifying their nature.. Presumably the former refers to Aldermaston and engineering employment issues, and the latter to relations with the USA?

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