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Valuing and Devaluing Nuclear Weapons

NICK RITCHIE

Nuclear weapons remain deeply embedded not only in strategic thinking and force postures, but also in our political cultures in ways that assign multiple, powerful socio-political values to the bomb. Progress towards nuclear zero will necessarily require peeling away the layers of value to the point where it becomes politically, strategically, and socially acceptable to permanently relinquish a nuclear capability. The concept and process of *devaluing* nuclear weapons is contested. It is a broad concept that covers notions of *reducing the role*, *delegitimizing*, *reducing the salience*, and *marginalizing* nuclear weapons in the declaratory and operational policies of the nuclear powers. This article argues that to understand what a process of devaluing might look like, we first need a deeper understanding of how nuclear weapons are valued. To achieve this, the article moves through four stages. First, it provides an overview of the lexicon of devaluing and subsidiary terms in global nuclear discourse since the end of the Cold War. Second, it discusses how we *know* nuclear value and its discursive construction. Third, using the United Kingdom as a case study it explores the 'regime of value' in which British nuclear weapons are embedded and the implications for devaluing. Finally, it reflects on William Walker's notion of 'responsible nuclear sovereignty' and the tensions at the nexus of deterrence/devaluing.

Momentum behind significant progress towards a nuclear weapons-free world (NFWF) to reduce long-term nuclear risk has gathered pace since 2007. The Obama administration has demonstrated leadership, other nuclear weapon states (NWSs) and American allies have lent strong rhetorical support, and global public opinion polls suggest widespread backing.¹ Most studies of nuclear disarmament examine the political and technical conditions for a succession of negotiated steps to reduce the quantity and *salience* of nuclear weapons and the challenges and opportunities therein.² This article explores nuclear disarmament through a sociological lens³ that views nuclear weapons less as discrete political-military weapons for exerting a deterrent effect and more as social objects embedded within a web of social relationships, interests, and identities. The purpose is to develop a better understanding of what reducing the salience, or more accurately the value, of nuclear weapons means. The article builds on early explorations of the concept of *devaluing* nuclear weapons that began to emerge in global nuclear discourse in the early 1990s and international commissions on nuclear disarmament over the 1990s and 2000s that have deployed the concept.⁴

The article defines devaluing as a set of social, political, and economic processes that reduce or annul the intersubjective value(s) assigned to nuclear weapons within a polity, notably its defence and security elite. Disarmament occurs when the value

assigned to nuclear weapons falls below a context-specific threshold such that nuclear weapons have insufficient intersubjective value to warrant continued possession for a polity. Processes that devalue nuclear weapons will not necessarily lead to disarmament if residual value remains above a context-specific threshold. For disarmament to occur, the value assigned to nuclear weapons will have to diminish. I conclude that nuclear disarmament will necessarily entail a process of devaluing, or *un-valuing*, nuclear weapons since states are unlikely to voluntarily surrender highly prized national assets. Nuclear disarmament will therefore require nuclear armed states to think differently about the values currently assigned to their nuclear weapons. Since devaluing is a process, rather than an end state, quantification of value is problematic. Determining the extent of valuation/devaluation is a subjective assessment concerned, as it is, with social meanings assigned to material objects.

To understand what devaluing might mean, we need to understand first how the concept relates to associated terms like *reducing the role*, *delegitimizing*, *reducing the salience*, and *marginalizing* nuclear weapons, and second how nuclear weapons are valued in order to contemplate a process of devaluation. This will become ever more important as we approach the 2015 NPT Review Conference amid forthright expectations from the non-nuclear weapon states (NNWSs) that implementation of the 2010 Review Conference's 64-point Action Plan will be underway and that the NWSs' 'unequivocal commitment' to nuclear disarmament will have been translated into concrete actions. The article therefore moves through four steps. First, it provides an overview of the lexicon of devaluing and subsidiary terms in global nuclear discourse since the end of the Cold War. Second, it discusses how we *know* nuclear value. Third, using the United Kingdom as a case study, it explores the 'regime of value' in which UK nuclear weapons are embedded and the implications for devaluing. Finally, it reflects on William Walker's notion of 'responsible nuclear sovereignty' and the construction of devaluing steps as appropriate nuclear behaviour for responsible nuclear armed states.⁵

Devaluing Lexicon

Analysis of devaluing nuclear weapons is located in the much broader literature on the policies and practices of nuclear deterrence and conceptions of 'minimum' deterrence, the strategic pragmatist and principled moralist cases for nuclear disarmament, and institutional and normative accounts of the contours and constraints of contemporary nuclear order. The concept of devaluing nuclear weapons itself is ill defined and contested but it relates to associated notions of *reducing the role*, *delegitimizing*, *reducing the salience*, and *marginalizing* nuclear weapons in the declaratory and operational policies of the NWSs. Devaluing, I argue, is not a surrogate for these but a meta-concept that encompasses them.⁶ Furthermore, devaluing is best conceived as a *process* unfolding over time. In this context one can differentiate between devaluing as an analytic concept and a normatively prescriptive concept. The former implies an objective assessment of the evolving significance of nuclear weapons in national, regional, and global politics, whilst the latter encompasses specific policies to actively diminish the values assigned to nuclear weapons as

part of a broader nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament project. This article is broadly concerned with a conceptual analysis of 'devaluing' as a normatively prescriptive concept.

The notion of devaluing nuclear weapons and its associated terms began to coalesce in global nuclear discourse centred on the NPT from the mid 1990s onwards. They found new traction as conceptions of cooperative, global, and human security circumvented and relegated excessively militarized, statist, geostrategic security logics of a disappearing era. Even as the Cold War was winding down, analysts began to speculate on the role of nuclear weapons in a transforming geopolitical environment, both in terms of inevitable decline and irrevocable importance.⁷ By the time of the 1995 NPT Review and Extension Conference, the Non-Aligned Movement was talking about 'efforts by the NWSs to carry forward the process of de-emphasizing the role of nuclear weapons' and that this 'will create a strong political thrust towards international efforts to prevent proliferation of nuclear weapons'.⁸

A year earlier the UN General Assembly had formally requested an Advisory Opinion from the International Court of Justice (ICJ) on the legality of the threat or use of nuclear weapons. The Court advised in 1996 that 'the threat or use of nuclear weapons would generally be contrary to the rules of international law, and in particular the principles and rules of humanitarian law' applicable in armed conflict because the destructive blast, incendiary, and radiation effects of nuclear weapons cannot be contained either in space or time.⁹ The verdict contracted the legitimate space for consideration of nuclear use, although it did not eliminate it. The 2000 Review Conference went further and incorporated language of de-emphasizing nuclear weapons into its Final Document's 13 practical steps for working towards nuclear disarmament, including '[a]n unequivocal undertaking by the Nuclear Weapon States to accomplish the total elimination of their nuclear arsenals leading to nuclear disarmament' and '[a] diminishing role for nuclear weapons in security policies to minimize the risk that these weapons will ever be used and to facilitate the process of their total elimination'.¹⁰ In 2005 the New Agenda Coalition called on the NWSs to 'diminish the role of nuclear weapons in their security policies'.¹¹ The 2010 Review Conference Final Document elaborated a 64-point Action Plan that called on the NWSs to 'further diminish the role and significance of nuclear weapons in all military and security concepts, doctrines and policies'.¹²

A series of international commissions have also highlighted the necessity of devaluing nuclear weapons as part of the disarmament process, including the 1996 Canberra Commission, the 1999 Tokyo Forum, and the 2006 Blix Commission on Weapons of Mass Destruction.¹³ In 2007 the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace released a major report entitled *Universal Compliance: A Strategy for Nuclear Security*, which argued that nuclear weapons 'are politically, strategically, and psychologically important as signifiers of power and technological prowess. This will remain true so long as serious efforts are not under way to devalue nuclear weapons'.¹⁴ The report's second of six obligations was to '[d]evalue the political and military currency of nuclear weapons. All states must diminish the role of

nuclear weapons in security policies and international politics'.¹⁵ This encompasses diminishing

... the security and political status associated with nuclear weapons so that political actors in other highly capable societies do not conclude that they will gain international leverage or status by seeking these weapons. The role of nuclear weapons in national security doctrine should be clearly reduced, not increased. Development of new nuclear weapons should be rejected, not embraced. The correlation between nuclear weapon possession and veto power in the UN Security Council should be broken.¹⁶

Most recently, the 2009 report of the International Commission on Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament (ICNND) stated:

If we want to minimize and ultimately eliminate nuclear weapons, the critical need is to change perceptions of their role and utility: in effect, to achieve their progressive delegitimation, from a position in which they occupied a central strategic place to one in which their role is seen as quite marginal, and eventually wholly unnecessary as well as undesirable.¹⁷

It argued that there exists a strong base upon which to devalue nuclear weapons, notably the ICJ's 1996 Advisory Opinion on the threat or use of nuclear weapons, arguments that nuclear weapons have little or no utility as instruments of war-fighting, that there 'is a strong taboo on the actual use, if not possession, of nuclear weapons', and arguments that the currency of nuclear weapons has diminished with the end of the Cold War such that they no longer represent a route to political prestige and global influence (if they ever did).¹⁸

The NPT process and succession of international commissions in the 1990s and 2000s cemented two key concepts in the disarmament narrative aimed at qualitative change in nuclear policy and practice: reducing the role of nuclear weapons and delegitimizing nuclear weapons. The 2007 Carnegie study gave force to the concept of devaluing nuclear weapons and together these ideas were a central strand of the 2009 ICNND report. In fact, the strength and range of the recognition that *devaluing* nuclear weapons in the security policies of the NWSs is an essential process along the road to nuclear disarmament is impressive.¹⁹

The concepts of *reducing the role* and *delegitimizing* nuclear weapons have specific connotations but are subsumed, I argue, within a broader concept of devaluing. The concept of delegitimizing, for example, means to render illegitimate or, as Gill puts it, 'to diminish or destroy the legitimacy, prestige or authority of an entrenched idea or object'.²⁰ This has been routinely associated with two dynamics: a process of formally 'rendering illegal' the possession and/or use of nuclear weapons in international law; and the informal stigmatization of nuclear use captured by the notion of a 'nuclear taboo'.²¹ Devaluing and delegitimizing are not synonymous. Nuclear weapons could be stripped of much of their value but still be considered legitimate weapons to possess and use in extremis. Likewise, delegitimizing nuclear weapons does not mean stripping nuclear weapons of all value if possessor states still imbue considerable value irrespective of widely

accepted and codified illegitimacy. Nevertheless, a process of normative and potentially legal delegitimation will diminish the values assigned to nuclear weapons through explicit and widespread political and social stigmatization.²² Legitimizing and delegitimizing nuclear weapons will be explored in a subsequent article.²³

Reducing the role and reducing the salience of nuclear weapons can be conflated with a third term: marginalizing. This describes a process of changing and circumscribing the values assigned to the possession and operation of nuclear weapons and the practice of nuclear deterrence through changes to declaratory and operational policy and force structure that reflect the changed strategic situation following the end of the Cold War and collapse of the Soviet Union. It generally refers to retrenching formal guidance on possible scenarios of nuclear use and reducing the priority given to nuclear weapons in national security strategy and force structures, reducing the alert status of some or all deployed nuclear forces, and eliminating nuclear weapons considered suitable for nuclear war-fighting and 'strategic' nuclear forces deemed excess to newly constrained requirements. Nevertheless, the reduction in assigned value via marginalizing processes can be slight and does not eliminate the possibility of a very high value assigned to a very small number of nuclear warheads for an extremely narrow set of circumstances invoking existential national threats, Israel being an obvious example.

Two studies by Garrity and Barkenbus at the end of the Cold War argue that the value of nuclear weapons has and will decline with the end of the East–West confrontation.²⁴ Barkenbus highlights the marginalization and partial delegitimation of nuclear weapons through the declining centrality and efficacy of nuclear deterrence in national security strategy with the end of superpower 'nuclear bellicosity'; a growing disinclination of political leaders to contemplate nuclear use or even accept the sustainability of nuclear deterrence as the central pillar of international stability; and devaluing through technology substitution whereby new forms of advanced conventional munitions replace nuclear weapons across a range of missions rendering nuclear weapons superfluous as war-fighting tools. Garrity argued that '[i]n light of the end of the old international order, the major powers must now re-evaluate the place and value of nuclear weapons in their respective national policies. The most likely outcome of this re-evaluation will be a general depreciation, or devaluation, of nuclear weapons – a process by which nuclear weapons become considerably less significant instruments of national power compared with other assets'.²⁵ He concluded that the domestic consensus for maximum forms of nuclear deterrence policies will erode, that nuclear weapons will no longer be prioritized in military planning and force structure, that they will be of declining utility in the regional conflicts likely to dominate international security, and that nuclear weapons will become far less salient as an indicator of major power status. This stands in contrast to realist analyses of the day that continued to conflate nuclear weapons with great power status and predicted the imminent nuclearization of Germany and Japan.²⁶

Barkenbus and Garrity were right to highlight the diminishing value of nuclear weapons in US–Soviet/Russian relations insofar as the value of nuclear weapons was constituted in large part by the bipolar structure of the Cold War confrontation. Escaping the Cold War fundamentally altered the context in which value was

assigned to nuclear forces. But we are not dealing with absolutes here. Nuclear weapons still retained considerable value and that value was reproduced and freshly appropriated by other nuclear armed and arming states. Proliferating states were socialized into a regime of nuclear value that had been diluted with the end of the Cold War but was now assuming a global character in what some have labelled a second nuclear age.²⁷ In the United States the new abolitionists²⁸ argued that the changed strategic context had reduced the residual value of nuclear weapons *below* a threshold of continued possession. This included powerful statements on the danger and irrelevance of nuclear deterrence by the former head of Strategic Command, General George Lee Butler, and head of North American Aerospace Defense Command and US Space Command, General Charles Horner. Horner, for example, declared that '[t]he nuclear weapon is obsolete. I want to get rid of them all'.²⁹ Their arguments were rejected by the nuclear weapons establishment that had begun to rethink the role of nuclear weapons, not in terms of a fundamental downgrading of their utility or radical reductions, but in terms of new missions in national security policy. A commitment was soon made to retain a modern and diverse arsenal of nuclear weapons well into the post-Cold War period.³⁰ Rogue states arming with nuclear weapons became the primary threat to international security in US national security discourse for which US nuclear deterrent threats were regarded as a necessary and appropriate response.³¹ This was reflected in the outcome of the 1994 Nuclear Posture Review and is presented perhaps most succinctly in the 2001 *Rationale and Requirements* report of the National Institute for Public Policy that served as the basis for the 2001 Nuclear Posture Review.³²

Knowing Nuclear Value

The concept of devaluing nuclear weapons has become a fixture of NPT politics and discourse. It encompasses but also goes beyond related notions of marginalizing and delegitimizing nuclear weapons. Yet the concept of 'devaluing' has received little analytical treatment in terms of what devaluing might actually constitute in socio-political terms for the nuclear weapon states (NWS) and the political challenges involved. Conceptualizing the value of nuclear weapons as a precursor to their devaluation in security policies as part of a step-by-step process towards a nuclear weapons-free world is under-studied and begs the question 'how do we "know" nuclear value?'

The value of nuclear weaponry is not objective or pre-determined. Instead, values are assigned in a particular socio-historical context. More specifically, it is the perceived beneficial effects of possession and deployment that are valued. Multiple effects mean that nuclear weapons are valued in multiple ways by possessor states. Perceptions of beneficial effects are part of a society's nuclear weapons discourse that tells us what nuclear weapons are and what they can do across a range of social and political domains. Nuclear discourse itself is nested in a broader strategic culture. Kartchner defines strategic culture as a set of

shared beliefs, assumptions, and modes of behaviour, derived from common experiences and accepted narratives (both oral and written), that shape

collective identity and relationships to other groups, and which determine appropriate ends and means for achieving security objectives.³³

Discourse, here, is a socially constructed and historically contingent system of signification, or 'code of intelligibility', that reflects, enacts, and reifies relations of power by reproducing accepted ways of being and acting in the world and silencing others.³⁴ It is discourses that shape our understandings of appropriate nuclear policy practice and processes of valuing/devaluing nuclear weapons.³⁵ This brings us closer to Foucault's conception of discourse not simply as synonymous with language but as a form of discipline whereby formal and informal discursive practices define the boundaries of a discourse and determine what can be done and said, and how. Discourses and discursive practices draw authority by reference to a set of 'truths' that shape how external actors, events, and desired outcomes are defined and interpreted, and what information or knowledge is considered 'real', legitimate, and therefore relevant.³⁶ Power and knowledge directly imply one another, in our case the power to define, legitimize, and institutionalize what constitute 'normal' understandings about nuclear weapons and nuclear practice. As Edward Lock argues:

... strategic culture represents a political web of interpretation in which strategic practices gain meaning. This web shapes the military practices of states by rendering certain strategic practices as possible and legitimate while others remain either impossible or illegitimate.³⁷

Foucault labelled this a hegemonic 'regime of truth' and from a contingent and situated regime of nuclear truth emanates what we can label a 'regime of value' in which nuclear weapons are discursively embedded. In sum, we can 'know' the value of nuclear weapons through analysis of nuclear discourse embedded in a broader strategic culture that assigns beneficial effects to nuclear weapons that constitute a socially and historically situated regime of nuclear truth.³⁸

Policy elites have a vital role as purveyors of nuclear discourse and producers and reproducers of cultural 'nuclearism'.³⁹ It is in that sense that Lantis characterizes strategic cultures as a 'negotiated reality' among elites.⁴⁰ As noted above, devaluing is a process rather than an end state and as such quantification of value is subjective. This has important methodological implications for how one might 'measure' value in order to detect devaluation. This study draws on formal reports, statements, and interviews with current and former policy-makers to uncover and elaborate the regime of value for UK nuclear weapons. More specifically it is concerned with the ways in which particular notions of value, role, legitimacy, marginalization, and devaluation of nuclear weapons are constructed, the relationships between them, and how they relate to frameworks of minimum deterrence and legal, political, and economic constraints on nuclear policy options in contemporary policy discourse. Devaluation can therefore be detected through changes in material force structure and operations, formal nuclear policy, *and how such changes are interpreted* in terms of the intersubjective meanings assigned to nuclear weapons in formal and informal nuclear policy discourse.

This argument insists, perhaps controversially, that nuclear weapons have no *intrinsic* values beyond those assigned within a particular socio-historical context,

even if some of those values have been essentialized in the materiality of nuclear weapons.⁴¹ Roscow, for example, writing in 1989, insisted that nuclear weapons are ‘cultural artefacts which derive meaning from the complex interaction of economic, cultural, and political forces’ and that ‘nuclear weapons are not “things”, mere objects separable from the social, economic, and cultural systems which produce them’.⁴² ‘Material facts do not speak for themselves’, as Finnemore argued in 1996, but instead ‘acquire meaning only through human cognition and social interaction’.⁴³ This claim clashes, at least superficially, with historical processes of exceptionalizing nuclear weapons guided by a set of norms that generally define instantaneous, indiscriminate mass death as horrific and universally unacceptable. For some, these understandings are endemic to humanity and therefore the destructive material capacities of nuclear weapons do indeed embody intrinsic, objective meanings.⁴⁴ It is also where I part company with Susan Martin’s argument that the structure of international anarchy ascribes an irreducible value of strategic deterrence into the fabric of nuclear weapons, one that is impervious to ideational meddling. The deterrent value of nuclear weapons, she argues, is a natural function of their material destructiveness that renders them ‘strategically effective’, though with no word on how strategic effectiveness is defined, measured, and evaluated.

United Kingdom Domains of Value and Devaluing

Having explored the lexicon of devaluing nuclear weapons and how we can ‘know’ the value assigned to them, we can now examine the ‘regime of value’ in which British nuclear weapons are embedded in order to understand the processes by which value can be diminished or transformed in ways that facilitate nuclear disarmament. Why the United Kingdom? First, this section builds on a body of work examining and critiquing the rationales for replacing the United Kingdom’s current Trident nuclear weapon system and remaining in the nuclear weapons business well into the second half of the century.⁴⁵ Second, and perhaps more importantly, the United Kingdom represents a crucial test case for the possibilities of significant progress towards the goal of a nuclear weapons-free world. Successive British governments have declared their full commitment to that goal and a desire to take an active leadership role in examining the practical steps and challenges involved.

At the same time, the Blair government committed the country in December 2006 to replacing the United Kingdom’s nuclear arsenal through a long and expensive renewal of the current Trident nuclear weapons system.⁴⁶ This has proven deeply controversial in an era of economic stagnation and divisive arguments about the necessity and opportunity cost of replacing Trident.⁴⁷ Trident is the United Kingdom’s only remaining nuclear weapon system and if it is not replaced in some form Britain may cease to be a nuclear weapon state (NSW).

For the first time in the post-Cold War era, then, the prospect of one of the original nuclear powers and a permanent member of the UN Security Council renouncing nuclear weapons is potentially on the table. Britain certainly has the potential to take a major leadership role on nuclear disarmament as the most progressive of the NWSs. It has taken a number of important steps to reduce the size, increase the

transparency, and limit the operational posture and declaratory policy of its nuclear forces. It has ended nuclear testing, ratified the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, ended production of fissile materials for use in nuclear weapons, declared its full commitment to a nuclear weapons-free world, and supported a number of initiatives towards that end. It agreed at the NPT Review Conference in May 2010 along with the other NWSs to 'further diminish the role and significance of nuclear weapons in all military and security concepts, doctrines and policies' and to 'commit to undertake further efforts to reduce and ultimately eliminate all types of nuclear weapons, deployed and non-deployed, including through unilateral, bilateral, regional and multilateral measures'.⁴⁸ In fact, it is already approaching the status of what Walker has labelled a 'disarmament threshold state'.⁴⁹

The United Kingdom could continue on this trajectory by taking concrete steps to reduce the salience of and reliance upon its nuclear weapons for national security as it considers the parameters of its nuclear future. If, on the other hand, the United Kingdom continues with business as usual then the prospects for significant progress towards nuclear disarmament begin to look bleak as observers ponder the practicability of a world without nuclear weapons if even a self-styled 'reluctant' possessor of nuclear weapons operating a 'minimum' nuclear posture cannot take a decision to radically rethink its commitment to nuclear deterrence when the strategic rationales for retention are so thin, the opportunity costs for the armed forces are significant, public opinion is ambivalent or hostile to the replacement programme, and the commitment to the NPT and a desire to exercise leadership on nuclear disarmament is strong. As the Blix Commission's report on *Weapons of Terror: Freeing the World of Nuclear, Chemical and Biological Arms* noted:

France and the UK will have to decide whether it will be meaningful to retain costly nuclear arsenals that were developed for an enemy that no longer exists, in order to meet hypothetical threats against which such weapons are of questionable value. Both countries are now at a crossroads: going down one road would show their conviction that nuclear weapons are not necessary for their security, while the other would demonstrate to all other states a belief that these weapons continue to be indispensable.⁵⁰

Many nuclear policy practitioners insist that the exclusive value of nuclear weapons is deterrence. It is the only variable in play and it is a value that bifurcates into a yes/no dichotomy: either one deploys and operates nuclear weapons in a manner that exerts a 'credible' nuclear deterrent threat, thereby generating national security value, or one deploys and operates nuclear weapons in a manner that does not, thereby generating zero national security value (explored further below).⁵¹ This article, in contrast, argues that nuclear discourse assigns multiple values to nuclear weapons and that a spectrum of value exists such that devaluing nuclear weapons is a process rather than an either/or decision. We can also delineate a hierarchy of values in nuclear discourse whereby some are officially sanctioned as legitimate for public debate and constitute formal rationales for possession (e.g. nuclear deterrence) and others are publicly silenced, or hidden, but constitute unstated, implicit values that are nonetheless significant (e.g. conceptions of prestige).

Analysis of contemporary British nuclear policy discourse reveals six domains of value of which the latter three focus on deterrence. The term 'domains' refers to discrete socio-political categories of value. The six are labelled domestic, ontological, institutional, systemic, relational, and operational and they have been developed through coded analysis of UK nuclear weapons and national security policy reports, statements, speeches, and interviews with current and former policy-makers engaged in nuclear arms control and nuclear weapons policy and practice.⁵² These six domains capture the totality of core values assigned to UK nuclear weapons and revealed through interpretative discourse analysis of UK nuclear weapons policy, though others might identify more or less or different domains. The six are derived from a UK-specific analysis but the methodology could be applied to other nuclear armed states and reveal a comparable set of domains.

Domestic Value

Domestic political value encompasses four key interconnected areas: industry and skills in terms of the political value assigned to retention of manufacturing and other highly skilled jobs in the warhead and nuclear-powered submarine-building industries, the importance of which was outlined in the British Ministry of Defence (MoD)'s 2005 *Defence Industrial Strategy*;⁵³ party politics in terms of the electoral value of being, and being seen to be, 'strong on defence' through a long-term commitment to remaining a nuclear power;⁵⁴ organizational value in terms of the value assigned within the MoD as an organ of state to possession of nuclear weapons in terms of positive and negative opportunity costs; and finally public opinion in terms of the political value assigned to continued support for nuclear possession by the electorate in opinion poll data.

Ontological Value

Ontological value refers to ontological security: the reproduction of stable role conceptions reflective of a collective sense of national identity amongst the policy elite that shapes what we do by virtue of who we think we are.⁵⁵ The continued possession of nuclear weapons is implicated in representing and reproducing dominant conceptions of the United Kingdom's national role in global politics in two important ways.⁵⁶ First, powerful cultural narratives frame the United Kingdom as a militarily moral 'force for good' and a 'pivotal power' with special responsibility for upholding international peace and security and maintaining the current international order. This requires an interventionist foreign policy and expeditionary defence capability vital for a global role to facilitate legitimate armed interventions in support of global values and interests. The legitimacy and necessity of continued nuclear possession have been firmly integrated into this narrative as an essential capability that reaffirms and in part constitutes the collective identity of Britain as an interventionist, pivotal world power.⁵⁷ Second, for the United Kingdom, its ontological (as well as material) security is predicated upon remaining the United States' foremost political and military ally. Here, British nuclear possession is deemed essential to reproducing the much-valued 'special relationship' identity and national role through a stable pattern of British–American security relations and dependencies. In a broad sense,

then, nuclear possession is in part constitutive of who we are and how we act to the extent that becoming a non-nuclear weapon state would deeply threaten political and military elites' ontological security. This British national role value is encapsulated by what Hennessy labels a 'gut instinct' that the United Kingdom should be and must remain a nuclear power because it is in some vital sense who we are and what we do.⁵⁸

Institutional/Governance Value

Institutional/governance value relates to notions of status, prestige, and associated influence assigned to possession of nuclear weapons that is closely tied to the correlation between the five permanent (P5) members of the UN Security Council and the five states defined as Nuclear Weapon States (N5) in the NPT. The connection has cemented and reproduced an ideational association between nuclear weapons as highly prized commodities and international power, what Mutimer labels a 'potent symbolic value in the interstate games of prestige'.⁵⁹ It is that connection that is important in relation to notions of prestige, rather than an intersubjective value assigned to nuclear weapons per se.

Indeed, Harrington de Santana convincingly argues that nuclear weapons have been fetishized as a currency of international power because the 'veto power on the Security Council is coincident with the possession of nuclear weapons mak[ing] nuclear weapons more desirable by linking them to the practice of legitimate authority'.⁶⁰ This has resulted in tacit systems of entrenched political privilege in global security governance for the P5 that is often conflated with nuclear possession, particularly in the UN's institutional disarmament architecture. As former governor of Tokyo and advocate of a Japanese nuclear weapons capability, Shintaro Ishihara stated in November 2012, 'I think Japan should at least carry out an analysis on going nuclear . . . The diplomatic voice of countries without nuclear weapons is overwhelmingly weak'.⁶¹ Atkinson argues that possession of nuclear weapons 'exerts political influence as a form of latent power' to control and shape international issues, agendas, and institutional procedures through the institutionalization and naturalization of the implied threat of use such that 'observable conflict does not emerge in the first place'.⁶²

A recent example was the collective vote by the P5 against the UN General Assembly resolution on nuclear disarmament in October 2012 noted by former British Secretary of State for Defence, Des Browne.⁶³ In the context of the collective commitment to nuclear disarmament cemented most recently in Security Council Resolution 1887 in September 2009, which resolved to 'seek a safer world for all and to create the conditions for a world without nuclear weapons', and the 2010 NPT Review Conference, Browne observes that 'some of the behaviour of the P5 in other multilateral forums requires an explanation. An example is the P5's agreement on 19 October to vote collectively and en bloc against the draft multilateral disarmament resolution of the most recent UN. General Assembly. That is quite disturbing when set against the shared ambition'.⁶⁴ Current and former British nuclear policy-makers interviewed for this research argued that the possession of nuclear weapons imbues a subtle political confidence and has a quiet, implicit,

intangible effect on the political decision of other states, not as a crude, overt means of exercising influence, but as a deeply embedded, unstated form of political authority.⁶⁵ The United Kingdom's P5/N5 status is considered a highly valued source of influence and leverage with one dependent upon the other such that continued nuclear possession constitutes the United Kingdom as a permanent member of the Security Council (as an extension of the ontological domain of value) and an insurance against a dissipation of practical global political influence. As Secretary of State for Defence Liam Fox stated in 2010, possession of nuclear weapons 'is not an obligation, but I certainly think that it adds credibility to our position as a member of the P5'.⁶⁶

The importance of the NPT cannot be underestimated here. British nuclear weapons are valued because it is legal and therefore legitimate to do so under the United Kingdom's formal NPT NWS status. Indeed, according to then-Prime Minister Tony Blair in February 2007, the NPT 'makes it absolutely clear that Britain has the right to possess nuclear weapons'⁶⁷ and that 'it is clear that those who are the major nuclear powers can remain nuclear powers'.⁶⁸ This institutionally ordained legitimacy forms the bedrock of the United Kingdom's regime of value and compounds the legitimacy of Britain's P5 position, at least in London's eyes.

Systemic Value

The next two domains of value relate to the deterrence utility ascribed to nuclear weapons. A conceptual distinction is drawn between a general deterrence value as a structural or systemic function of an anarchical inter-state system and a specific deterrence value symptomatic of an adversarial political relationship between two or more actors. In the United Kingdom nuclear weapons are assigned value as an 'insurance' against general strategic uncertainty, itself a function of the structure of the international system.⁶⁹ From a structural perspective, a global system of major-power deterrence perpetuates (and regulates) nuclear value by maximizing the prospects for long-term international political stability by making 'all substantial warfare between nuclear powers, and not just nuclear warfare, absurd', as Quinlan argued in 1991.⁷⁰ Quinlan reiterated in 1993 that the United Kingdom must retain nuclear weapons after the Cold War 'to underpin war prevention, to close off nuclear adventurism and to serve as a low-key element of insurance, not directed against specific adversaries, in support of world order'.⁷¹

The systemic value of continued British nuclear possession as a source of international order relates to the assertion that continued nuclear possession by the West and responsible NWSs is vital for the longevity of the post-war international, liberal, capitalist, institutional order. Continued Western possession of nuclear weapons is legitimized as an essential bulwark against non-liberal, non-democratic, nuclear armed states that might use their nuclear weaponry to challenge, diminish, and possibly overturn the Western international order.⁷² This systemic value connects to the identity narrative that bestows global responsibilities on the United Kingdom by virtue of its global history, interests, and values. Paradoxically, active and often violent counter-proliferation measures to maintain a hegemonic nuclear order

unchallenged by ‘rogue’ armouries serves to reinforce and reproduce the totemic value assigned to nuclear weapons in regional and global politics.

Relational Value

British nuclear weapons are also assigned strategic value through posited deterrent effects against specific adversaries, categorized but not named in the 2006 White Paper on *The Future of the United Kingdom’s Nuclear Deterrent* as: WMD-armed rogue states (Iran); acts of nuclear terrorism sponsored by a nuclear armed state (Iran, Hezbollah, Al-Qaida); and major nuclear powers (Russia, possibly China).⁷³ This spectrum of specific nuclear risk is translated into the continued necessity of nuclear possession as a vital tool in the management of specific adversarial relations in ways that diminish or negate the ability of the adversary to undermine British interests and constrain the legitimate exercise of British power.

Britain’s nuclear policy discourse routinely invokes Russia and Iran as specific and enduring threats that justify continued possession of nuclear weapons. Underpinning this relation valuation is the firm contention that nuclear deterrence works in adversarial relationships, and works unproblematically.⁷⁴ The construction and articulation of a specific, relational value may, in fact, be a political prerequisite for democratic polities to justify the risks and costs of deploying such a singularly destructive yet niche capability (even if that niche is potential existential salvation in exotic scenarios of nuclear incineration). A threat-confirmation bias can be seen at work here, in that as expansive a set of significant and specific (relational) nuclear risks as possible is required to justify retention of such destructive weapons. Relational value with regard to Russia also extends to the United Kingdom’s nuclear defence assurances to its NATO allies and the value assigned to British nuclear weapons as a ‘second centre of decision-making’ in a NATO context – a vintage Cold War argument repeated in the 2006 White Paper.⁷⁵

Operational Value

Our final domain of value lies in the operational realm. Operational value is assigned to British nuclear weapons in terms of there being discrete value in operating nuclear weapons in a specific way reflecting prevailing notions of ‘effective’ nuclear practice. For the United Kingdom this means a posture of continuous-at-sea deterrence (CASD) whereby at least one of its four Vanguard-class SSBNs is always at sea on operational patrol in the Atlantic armed with up to 40 nuclear warheads aboard Trident SLBMs of global reach. This implies a threshold that connects devaluing nuclear weapons and the operational requirements of specific conceptions of minimum deterrence. Here, steps to devalue nuclear weapons that envisage ending operational practices such as CASD (e.g. radical de-alerting measures) run counter to prevailing notions of ‘minimum’ deterrence and degrade the operational value assigned to nuclear weapons.

This connects to a nuclear discourse that stipulates what it means to be a ‘responsible’ nuclear weapon state, what it means to operate a ‘minimum’ deterrent ‘properly’, and therefore what it means to provide strategic insurance for the safety and

security of the British people as a responsible sovereign.⁷⁶ Operational value also encompasses the high value assigned to nuclear weapons for pragmatic safety considerations insofar as such weapons demand great care, attention, and skill and strict regimes of safety, security, and oversight. Concerns in both the United Kingdom and the United States about atrophying nuclear custodian expertise, skills, and tacit knowledge have resulted in heavy investment in nuclear weapon production complexes and resistance in nuclear bureaucracies to measures that risk downgrading nuclear missions in the armed services.⁷⁷

For some, this reveals an irreducible set of practices associated with responsible possession and deployment of nuclear weapons, an irreducible minimum below which it would be inherently unsafe and destabilizing to drop.⁷⁸ Many in the United Kingdom's defence establishment argue that the United Kingdom has now reached that minimum. This circumscribes the idea of a continuum of devaluing-as-marginalizing from various iterations of maximum deterrence, through minimum deterrence, to virtual deterrence, to complete elimination of a residual nuclear weapons capability. It suggests, instead, a fundamental contradiction between a political project of devaluing nuclear weapons and a strategic-technical project of maximum deterrent stability such that the values assigned to nuclear weapons can be steadily diminished up to a point at which any further devaluation renders the practice of nuclear deterrence ineffective and therefore the possession of nuclear weapons redundant.

The six inter-related domains outlined above constitute a powerful regime of value in which British nuclear weapons are embedded based on an underlying regime of nuclear truth. Not all of these values are equal. In officially sanctioned policy discourse nuclear deterrence is the only legitimate value, and then primarily its systemic and operational domains. In addition, nuclear valuing does not occur in a national vacuum. Whilst value is produced and reproduced within indigenous nuclear discourse and strategic culture, it is constituted in part by interpretations of others' conceptions of the value of our nuclear weapons. If other governments speak and act in ways that assign prestige and status to Britain's possession of nuclear weapons, or conversely antipathy and disgust, this cannot help but shape the contours of this regime of value. Construction of the value of nuclear weapons is therefore not an instrumental means deliberately crafted to meet rational national ends, but a socially constituted and historically contingent regime.

United Kingdom Devaluing

This deconstruction of the multiple values assigned to British nuclear weapons enables a more considered examination of what 'devaluing' nuclear weapons might mean in practice that incorporates the notions of marginalizing and delegitimizing outlined above. First, an argument can and has been made that British nuclear weapons have been significantly devalued since the end of the Cold War in terms of nuclear force consolidation and formal restrictions, the circumstances under which it would contemplate using nuclear weapons. On the former, the United Kingdom has reduced its strategic nuclear capability to a single system in

Trident; reduced the number of warheads from a planned 512 with 128 warheads per submarine under Thatcher to a total of 180 with 40 per submarine under the current coalition government;⁷⁹ eliminated all non-strategic weapons and repatriated all forward-deployed American nuclear weapons; denuclearized the air force, army, and surface navy; and ended production of fissile materials for use in nuclear weapons. In doing so, the United Kingdom has diminished the value of nuclear weapons as war-fighting weapons and actively discredited the idea of any 'tactical' use of nuclear weapons, notably by dropping the term 'sub-strategic' from its official nuclear lexicon.⁸⁰

Formal restrictions on nuclear use include, first, the 1995 'negative security assurances' (NSA) issued by nuclear weapon states (NWSs) that was further consolidated by the United Kingdom in its 2010 *Strategic Defence and Security Review* and states that 'the UK will not use or threaten to use nuclear weapons against non-Nuclear Weapon States parties to the NPT';⁸¹ second, the legal codification of its NSA for nearly 100 countries by ratifying the protocols annexed to the treaties establishing nuclear weapon-free zones in Latin America and the Caribbean, the South Pacific, and Africa; and third, the United Kingdom's acceptance of the 1996 ICJ Advisory Opinion and its language of limiting nuclear use to 'extreme circumstances of self-defence'.⁸²

These steps are to be commended but they represent only a partial devaluation at best associated with a steady consolidation of nuclear forces and the compass of British nuclear use scenarios after the Cold War.⁸³ A distinction can be drawn between 'surface' and 'deep' valuing to be explored in a further paper. Briefly, the former views devaluing as the codification of the transformation of the Cold War environment through reductions in the size and role of nuclear arsenals and substitution of some nuclear missions with conventional capabilities that leave the logic of nuclear deterrence and nuclear prestige largely untouched. The latter views devaluing as a reconceptualization of the logic of nuclear deterrence itself in ways that progressively restrict conceptions of minimum deterrence, and steadily diminish the positive values assigned to possession and deployment of nuclear weapons. The majority of current and former British policy-makers interviewed for this research associated devaluing with a steady marginalization of nuclear weapons in national security strategy. A broader conception of devaluing that encompasses the delegitimation of nuclear weapons was, unsurprisingly, firmly rejected, viewed as wholly negative, and incommensurate with the necessity and legitimacy of the practice of nuclear deterrence. Nevertheless, in order to continue this exploration of the concept of devaluing nuclear weapons, this section explores some of the requisite conditions and processes for deep devaluing of British nuclear weapons across the domains identified, some of which are in the United Kingdom's policy ambit, some of which are not.

The above analysis tells us that the values assigned to nuclear weapons are a function of social, political, and economic constructions, relationships, and trends within and across domestic and international politics. These values are, ultimately, intersubjective and subject to direct and indirect processes of change. Direct processes of change refer to policy initiatives to actively diminish the values assigned to

nuclear weapons. This could involve, for example, material changes in force structure and posture such as de-alerting nuclear forces to signal a revised conception of minimum deterrence in which national security is no longer judged to require nuclear forces permanently postured for swift retaliation. It could also involve more modest rhetorical signals, such as the Obama administration's shift in emphasis from strategic nuclear antagonism with Russia to nuclear security in its 2010 Nuclear Posture Review, or Defence Secretary Des Browne's decision to excise the term 'sub-strategic' from the United Kingdom's nuclear lexicon in 2007. Here Browne stated that 'The UK has in fact never sought to use our nuclear weapons as a means of provoking or coercing others. We will never do so. Nor are our weapons intended or designed for military use during conflict. Indeed, we have deliberately chosen to stop using the term "sub-strategic Trident", applied previously to a possible limited use of our weapons. I would like to take this opportunity to reaffirm that the United Kingdom would only consider using nuclear weapons in the most extreme situations of self-defence'.⁸⁴ Nuclear weapons policy is by its very nature a secretive process with policy-making power vested in the highest levels of executive political authority. Direct devaluing will require the highest levels of political support for new initiatives that will have to be framed as broadly consistent with prevailing conceptions of national identity and national interest. Indirect processes of change, in contrast, refer to contextual changes in the broader set of constructions, relationships, and trends that shape the values assigned to nuclear weapons. These might be pursued actively by government, resisted by government, or evolve incrementally over time. Direct and indirect processes of devaluing nuclear weapons in a British context are outlined below.

In the domestic domain a process of devaluation rests on three related areas conditioned by the current controversial Trident replacement programme and party political perceptions of electoral liabilities associated with different nuclear weapons postures, including disarmament. First, a sustained shift in public opinion on the continued value of nuclear possession in ways that support substantial nuclear retrenchment or even nuclear disarmament *such that* continued party political support for the nuclear status quo becomes an electoral liability, or at least not an electoral necessity. Unambiguous public support for nuclear deterrence in democratic polities has never been forthcoming and its legitimacy remains qualified and contingent.⁸⁵ Second, a positive assessment of a limited and manageable impact on the United Kingdom's sovereign nuclear-powered submarine building industry and local economies and associated political costs. Third, organizational resistance to the nuclear status quo within the MoD and the Treasury based on the opportunity costs for MoD's future equipment programme in an age of austerity and significant downward pressure on defence budgets manifest as pressure for disarmament or a further scaling back of the United Kingdom's nuclear weapons enterprise.⁸⁶

Devaluing in the institutional/governance domain centres on a much broader process of restructuring of the United Nation's disarmament and security machinery to dilute the actual and perceived political privileges accorded to the P5-N5 NWSs. This requires reform of the UN Security Council to terminate the connection between permanent Council membership and nuclear statehood. It means breaking a powerful

circle of political legitimacy between N5 nuclear possession legitimated by the NPT and P5 membership of the Security Council as the highest legitimate supranational authority. It also requires reform of the Conference on Disarmament to diminish the institutional power of the NWSs and facilitate progress on nuclear disarmament reflective of the demands of the majority of its members.⁸⁷ More broadly it means diminishing notions of prestige, hierarchy, and status assigned to nuclear weapons and the pernicious conflation of the practice of nuclear deterrence with the successful demonstration of military and political power through the threat of extreme nuclear violence.⁸⁸ These changes are beyond the remit of the United Kingdom, subject to grindingly slow debate, and implicate all five NWSs.

The structural and relational domains are differentiated by a respective focus on deterrence structure and deterrence agency. A structural account of nuclear value from a British perspective predicates devaluing on radical changes within (and perhaps of) the anarchic states system of international politics to diminish the structural deterrent value assigned to nuclear weapons as an essential pillar of an enduring negative peace between the major powers and continuity of the post-1945 international order. A more optimistic analysis identifies the post-Cold War acceleration of complex interdependence and the changing nature and distribution of global power as constituting the 'radical change' required. Both Barkenbus's and Garrity's analyses highlight the devaluation of nuclear weapons precipitated by changing geopolitical contexts that shift the meanings assigned to nuclear weapons. This view argues that systemic changes are indeed occurring characterized by the empowerment of the non-West and a shift away from neo-colonial hierarchic gradations of national status; the declining utility and legitimacy of military force; a burgeoning need for institutionalized international cooperation for global security public goods; and the salience of economic power, discursive power, and the capacity to align fluid networks of actors around preferred policy outcomes.

These developments undermine the structural imperatives of nuclear possession and the efficacy of nuclear deterrent threats in mitigating future strategic risk.⁸⁹ Devaluing nuclear weapons in this context rests on a less determinedly realist reading of the global security environment. It requires a reconceptualization of the value of nuclear weapons in perpetuating a comparatively stable international order and ensuring the security of the state in an era of complex globalization. Such a transition has been underway in British national security discourse since the mid 1990s and has begun to infiltrate nuclear policy in terms of a more restrictive declaratory policy, though one conditioned by the 'nuclear insurance' narrative outlined above.⁹⁰

Devaluing in the relational domain refers to a transformation of adversarial relationship(s) through political processes that dilute the relative value of nuclear possession in the context of that relationship. The focus here is on devaluing nuclear weapons within a specific adversarial context and the belligerents' strategic and political cultures as opposed to universal prescriptions or conditions for devaluing nuclear weapons as a category of weaponry. Value in relational contexts is assigned primarily to deterrence as a process between actors. We can situate the value of nuclear weapons in this context on a nuclear conflict resolution spectrum from adversary to partner. Russia remains the primary source of relational value assigned to

British nuclear weapons despite the transformation of relations between the United Kingdom, NATO, and Russia since the demise of the Soviet Union. The threat of a Russian nuclear strike may seem 'entirely remote' according to the Labour government's 2002 public consultation paper on missile defence, but 'Russia maintains a substantial nuclear arsenal, to which our own strategic deterrent continues to provide an important counter-poise'.⁹¹ This view continues to hold great sway in Whitehall, evidenced in May 2012 in Sir David Omand, Sir Kevin Tebbit, and Frank Miller's contention that 'a crisis could arise in the future in which the United Kingdom might find itself in a serious confrontation with Russia that could threaten war' and therefore it is imperative that the United Kingdom retain a nuclear capability capable of destroying the centre of Russian state power – eerily reminiscent of the Conservative government's 1980 public document on *The Future United Kingdom Strategic Nuclear Deterrent Force*.⁹² Diminishing this core relational value of British nuclear weapons would require deliberate steps to dilute the relevance of nuclear deterrent threats in the United Kingdom/NATO–Russia relationship, such as those outlined in the US State Department's International Advisory Board report on *Mutual Assured Stability*.⁹³ This would, in effect, require further dismantling the residual intersubjective deterrence belief system that doggedly pollutes these relationships, or even a unilateral withdrawal from that belief system comparable to Gorbachev's withdrawal from the intersubjective strategic culture and practices of the Cold War (or what Lavoy terms the politics of nuclear myth making that traps mythmakers in their own rhetoric).⁹⁴

Devaluing in an ontological context would likely require a shift in national identity conceptions in ways that diminish the value assigned to nuclear weapons but retain core identities. Steadily extracting nuclear possession from national role conceptions will be difficult as dominant identities can become institutionalized, resistant to change, and underpinned by a strong desire to maintain stable role identities.⁹⁵ If evolution rather than revolution is the key to ideational change, and experience suggests it is, then the public and policy elite will need to accept that steps to strip away the values assigned to nuclear weapons are necessary to reproduce the United Kingdom's identity as a progressive, responsible sovereign committed to the international rule of law, but that concurrently will not undermine that identity by signifying a major rethink and 'downgrading' of Britain's role in the world, abrogation of its international responsibilities, or a diminution of its political and military credibility and influence in Washington.⁹⁶ The humanitarian challenge to the values assigned to Britain's nuclear weapons poses a particular challenge as pressure builds to delegitimize the use of nuclear weapons under any circumstances on humanitarian grounds.⁹⁷ It brings British national identity as a nuclear armed provider of international peace and security into heightened tension with its identity as a stalwart upholder of international law.

Scottish independence is a wildcard here. A majority of Scots are opposed to the basing of the United Kingdom's Vanguard submarines on the Clyde and support a nuclear weapons-free Scotland.⁹⁸ Indeed this is a central policy and central to the *identity* of the Scottish National Party (SNP), which gained a majority in the Scottish Parliament in May 2007, and is reflected, too, in its opposition to the Iraq War. In

December 2010, for example, SNP MSP Bill Kidd brought a members' business debate in the Scottish Parliament calling for the establishment of a Scottish nuclear weapons-free zone (NWFZ).⁹⁹ In June 2007 the Scottish Parliament voted overwhelmingly against the British government's decision to replace Trident by a vote of 71 to 16 with 39 abstentions and in October that year the Scottish government hosted a summit on *A National Conversation: Scotland's Future without Nuclear Weapons* to discuss the implications of the British government's decision to replace the Trident system.¹⁰⁰ The Scottish Parliament currently has no say in national defence matters, a subject that was 'reserved' in the devolution settlement set out in the 1998 Scotland Act but that could change in 2014. The SNP comfortably won a second term in 2011 in a historic victory and announced its intention to hold a referendum on Scottish independence, now scheduled for autumn 2014. If successful, the SNP is almost certain to request the withdrawal of Trident from the Clyde Naval Base.¹⁰¹ Indeed, SNP leader Alex Salmond has stated:

The SNP government will be bringing forward a white paper on independence, which proposes a written constitution for an independent Scotland, and that constitution will have to be ratified by the Scottish Parliament elected in 2016 ... The SNP position on this is that the constitution should include an explicit ban on nuclear weapons being based on Scottish territory. This reinforces the SNP's unshakeable opposition to nuclear weapons.¹⁰²

It is clear that the SNP and a majority of Scottish members of parliament assign little or no value to the United Kingdom's nuclear weapons, viewing them more as a liability than an asset. A vote in favour of independence would raise important questions about the identity of the rest of the United Kingdom (RUK), its national role conceptions, and what form of nuclear capability and posture it will continue to deploy, if at all.¹⁰³

Operational devaluing is associated with risk to operational safety and security by reducing operational tempo and practice and thereby undermining deterrence credibility and deterrence value, whether in the systemic or relational domain. Devaluing in this domain will rest on evolved conceptions of minimum deterrence that progress towards a concept of existential deterrence that places less deterrence value on the operation of nuclear forces and more on their possession per se.¹⁰⁴ Any such transition to diminish the value assigned to nuclear weapons by virtue of their *modus operandi* will have to assure elected officials and nuclear custodians of the long-term safety and security of an 'operationally devalued' arsenal and the credibility of latent reconstitution processes in the event of a long-term deleterious transformation of the international security environment.

This article's focus on discourse, identity, and strategic culture as a source of the values assigned to nuclear weapons has important ramifications for how we conceptualize the *possibilities* for changes in nuclear policy and practice that would signify a change in the values assigned to nuclear weapons. In particular, it means challenging the regime of nuclear truth that shapes contemporary understandings of what nuclear weapons are, what they can do, and the exercise of power rendered legitimate by that regime of truth. Social constructivist theory suggests that dominant ideational

frameworks that assign particular meanings to issues, events, actors, and material capabilities and shape appropriate responses can become naturalized, or reified, as social facts and become resistant to change, in this case the values assigned to nuclear weapons. Pouliot, for example, highlights how entrenched, rigid meanings assigned to, or embodied by, nuclear weapons become conflated with their materiality such that 'in becoming part of social relations, material objects acquire a form of agency of their own, making people do things they would not have done themselves' by virtue of their continued existence.¹⁰⁵ Technological path dependency, embedded role conceptions, and the inertia of cultural nuclearism are significant forms of resistance to change.¹⁰⁶ Martin's structural realist account in this symposium also highlights the limits of norm-driven change even if the norms in question enjoy widespread public support, and she is right that some norms can have few, if any, political teeth in terms of punishing transgressors or generating political momentum to move recalcitrant actors towards significant policy change. The 'national interest' will always prevail, she argues (though this bypasses the constructivist argument that changes in identity driven by normative pressures can shift conceptions of the 'national interest' and appropriate policy actions).

But constructivism also suggests that institutionalized frameworks of intersubjective understandings can fracture for a variety of reasons. The advent of new technologies, an accumulation of minor changes in shared images within society, new policy-makers who hold different shared understandings about national security policy, and dramatic events such as the end of the Cold War or September 11, can all challenge existing identities, interests, and understandings.¹⁰⁷ Consensus about appropriate interpretations and responses can splinter and dominant identities, interests, and strategies can become unclear, contested, and reappraised, often through divisive debate.¹⁰⁸ Change can then occur through the acceptance and internalization of a different interpretation of core identities and interests and consequently new understandings, expectations, and practices.¹⁰⁹ The literature on epistemic communities, for example, presents such communities as 'agents of change' that are involved in policy innovation and diffusion. Such communities can reframe politically controversial issues, redefine state identities and interests, set standards of appropriate action, and diffuse alternative ideas and expectations into the policy process.¹¹⁰ This is particularly salient for nuclear weapons policy given the absence of empirical data on the functioning of nuclear deterrence, the use of nuclear weapons in a crisis, and the impact and credibility of nuclear threats in international politics.¹¹¹ We know that 'surface' devaluing-as-marginalizing and partial delegitimation *has* transpired since the end of the Cold War and the above analysis demonstrates that there are multiple avenues for change with the potential to diminish the values assigned to nuclear weapons.

In sum, devaluation can occur as a purposeful, normative process of policy change led by a policy elite and/or as a consequence of wider contextual changes in the social, economic, and political constructions, relationships, and trends in which the values assigned to nuclear weapons are embedded. These broader changes can also be purposefully pursued (or resisted) by government, though generally through multilateral fora, or constitute a gradual evolution of background

political conditions. Contextual changes, be they incremental or sudden, provide vital opportunities for recalibrating the values assigned to nuclear weapons by a policy elite even as we acknowledge the institutionalization of dominant understandings of what nuclear weapons are and what they can do – Foucault's 'regime of truth'. The key thing here is the contingency of nuclear value and with it the scope for change and the potential to move along a spectrum of devaluing that connects deterrence and disarmament, not in a linear manner perhaps, but in a messy, long-term, idiosyncratic, reversible, subjective process that is both circumstantial and learned.

Conclusion

The concept of devaluing nuclear weapons has steadily crept into global discourses of nuclear order, particularly through the NPT process. This article was inspired by the absence of a robust analytical treatment. It has attempted to unpack what 'devaluing' might mean through a detailed analysis of the values assigned to nuclear weapons in order to delineate the holistic 'regime of value' in which nuclear weapons are embedded and thereby better understand what devaluing is likely to entail. This article defines devaluing as a set of inter-related processes that diminish the perceived positive effects of the possession and operation of nuclear weapons. It encompasses two key related terms of marginalizing and delegitimizing, but goes beyond them to include a range of processes with the potential to reduce the value of nuclear weapons across a number of socio-political domains. In the British case study these were labelled domestic, ontological, institutional, systemic, relational, and operational. The methodology practised here could be usefully applied to the other nuclear armed states to develop a keener understanding of the multiple ways in which nuclear weapons are valued, to identify commonalities and divergence, and to assess the implications for local, regional, and global initiatives to diminish those values as a necessary part of any long-term programme of nuclear disarmament.

The argument here highlights just how embedded nuclear weapons are in our political and strategic cultures legitimated by a contingent regime of truth that fixes nuclear weapons in a value regime. Devaluing nuclear weapons is clearly a challenging and international task complicated by conceptions of an irreducible minimum below which it is not considered safe or 'responsible' to diminish the values assigned to these weapons. The argument suggests that advocates of nuclear disarmament focus on direct and indirect processes of diminishing the values assigned to nuclear weapons as a necessary part of the disarmament process. Direct measures include changes in nuclear posture to reduce alert status and declaratory policy changes that further restrict the conditions for nuclear violence.

Force reductions remain essential to the disarmament process, but in and of themselves constitute a form of *surface devaluing*. *Deep devaluing*, in contrast, is likely to require longer-term contextual changes including, *inter alia*, a cumulatively substantial shift in nuclear discourse and strategic culture that further restricts the size and readiness of nuclear forces and the compass of nuclear deterrence scenarios, an evolution of the United Nations' institutional disarmament machinery, a transformation of current elite national role conceptions such that deployment of nuclear weapons is no

longer an explicit or implicit requirement for the reproduction of those roles, initiatives that progressively denuclearize antagonistic and adversarial inter-state relations, and deeper legal-normative restraints on circumstances of nuclear use. More specifically, deep devaluing will require reform of the UN Security Council (a challenging, long-term, and equally glacial process as nuclear disarmament), cooperative integration of China and Russia into regional security apparatus, and sustained engagement of civil society organizations and policy elites with the makers and shapers of regimes of nuclear truth to steadily shift national identity narratives away from the possession and deployment of nuclear weapons. Of course, one cannot rule out a transformative global event that singularly undermines the legitimacy and value of nuclear possession.

For the United Kingdom this means adjusting the discourses and practices that assign value to British nuclear weapons across the six domains identified, in particular framing reduced readiness nuclear postures as politically and strategically permissible, challenging the efficacy of nuclear deterrent threats in relations with Russia and Iran, addressing the economics of reproducing the current nuclear capability, defining British national role conceptions in non-nuclear terms, and fostering elite acknowledgement of the dubious prestige of threatening extreme nuclear violence on other societies. Of course, the ultimate devaluation of nuclear weapons would involve a decision not to replace the current Trident nuclear weapons system at the end of its service life and withdraw from the nuclear weapons business altogether.

Framing steps to devalue nuclear weapons as responsible nuclear practice, or 'responsible nuclear sovereignty' to use William Walker's phrase, is particularly salient to the British case.¹¹² The theme of responsibility, and indeed a contested ethics of nuclear responsibility, pervades British nuclear weapons discourse. On the one hand there is an acknowledged legal, moral, and prudential-strategic responsibility to disarm (with assorted conditions and caveats) as a necessary means of managing long-term global nuclear risk that frames the permanent valuing of nuclear weapons as irresponsible. In the interim, nuclear weapon states (NWSs) should operationalize nuclear restraint through minimum deterrence as 'responsible' members of the NPT through low numbers, refutation of nuclear war-fighting, and demonstrable progress to meeting international NPT commitments. On the other hand, the values assigned to the continued possession of nuclear weapons are constructed as responsible government action, including a responsibility to provide national security insurance to cover the safety and security of British citizens; to practise nuclear deterrence properly as a 'responsible' steward of nuclear weapons, necessitating a continuous-at-sea deterrence (CASD) posture (a non-CASD posture signifies gaps in protection, risk of strategic instability, loss of operational skills, and therefore irresponsible nuclear sovereignty); and to constitute a 'responsible' upholder of global peace and security and 'force for good' as a permanent member of the UN Security Council legitimated by the NPT's legal endorsement of nuclear possession. Prescriptive, normative steps to devalue nuclear weapons are only likely to gain political traction when they are internalized as responsible nuclear sovereignty in Britain's and other NWSs' nuclear discourse and strategic culture.

The extent to which the contested ethics of responsible nuclear sovereignty err on the side of cumulative and multilateral nuclear restraint will have an important, perhaps decisive, effect on the prospects for a sustained process of devaluing nuclear weapons.

International conceptions of responsible nuclear sovereignty have been constituted by successive NPT Review Conferences, most recently in the *2010 Action Plan*. This now includes specific commitments to devaluing nuclear weapons, framed as steps '[t]o further diminish the role and significance of nuclear weapons in all military and security concepts, doctrines and policies'.¹¹³ The context of the argument outlined in this article is nuclear disarmament and how thinking about disarmament as a process of radical devaluing provides a different set of understandings and priorities for nuclear policy change. Devaluing nuclear weapons as a process and a concept will become ever more important as we approach the next key nuclear disarmament forum in 2015 at the next NPT Review Conference, where NWSs will be called to account on their 2010 commitments.

NOTES

1. *World Publics on Eliminating All Nuclear Weapons* (College Park, MD: World Public Opinion, 9 December 2008); *Global Public Opinion on Nuclear Weapons* (Vancouver, BC: The Simons Foundation, 2007).
2. For example, James Acton and George Perkovich, *Abolishing Nuclear Weapons*, Adelphi Paper 396 (Abingdon: Routledge, for the International Institute of Strategic Studies, 2008), which explores contemporary international political challenges to abolition, verification, managing the nuclear industry, enforcement, and potential reconstitution of nuclear arsenals.
3. There is a rich tradition here, for example Steven Flank, 'Exploding the Black Box: The Historical Sociology of Nuclear Proliferation', *Security Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (Winter 1993/1994), pp. 259–94; H. Mehan, C.E. Nathanson, and J.M. Skelly, 'Nuclear Discourse in the 1980s: The Unravelling Conventions of the Cold War', *Discourse and Society*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (1990), pp. 133–165; Donald MacKenzie, *Inventing Accuracy: A Historical Sociology of Nuclear Missile Guidance* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990); David Mutimer, 'Reimagining Security: The Metaphors of Proliferation', in K. Krause and M.C. Williams (eds), *Critical Security Studies: Concepts and Cases* (London: UCL Press, 1997); Laura McNamara, 'TRUTH is Generated HERE: Knowledge Loss and the Production of Nuclear Confidence in the Post-Cold War-Era', in Bryan Taylor, William Kinsella, Stephen Depoe, and Maribeth Metzler (eds), *Nuclear Legacies: Communication, Controversy, and the U.S. Nuclear Weapons Complex* (New York: Lexington Books, 2007), pp. 167–98; Anne Harrington de Santana, 'Nuclear Weapons as the Currency of Power: Deconstructing the Fetishism of Force', *The Nonproliferation Review*, Vol. 16, No. 3 (2009), p. 340.
4. For example, Patrick Garrity, 'The Depreciation of Nuclear Weapons in International Politics: Possibilities, Limits, Uncertainties', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 4 (1991), pp. 463–541; and Jack Barkenbus, 'Devaluing Nuclear Weapons', *Science, Technology & Human Values*, Vol. 14, No. 4 (1989), pp. 425–40.
5. William Walker, 'The UK, Threshold Status and Responsible Nuclear Sovereignty', *International Affairs*, Vol. 86, No. 2 (2010), pp. 447–64.
6. 'De-valorizing' is an alternative term for devaluing, though one used infrequently.
7. For example Garrity, 'The Depreciation of Nuclear Weapons' (note 4); Michael Quinlan, 'The Future of Nuclear Weapons: Policy for Western Possessors', *International Affairs*, Vol. 69, No. 3 (1993), pp. 485–96.
8. NPT 1995 Final Document Part II, document NPT/CONF.1995/32 (Part II), p. 64.
9. *Legality of the Threat or Use of Nuclear Weapons*, Advisory Opinion at the Request of the UN General Assembly, ICJ Reports, 8 July 1996, para. 95.
10. 2000 NPT Review Conference Final Document Parts I & II, NPT/CONF.2000/28 (Parts I and II), p. 15.

11. NPT/CONF.2005/WP.27, Working Paper on nuclear disarmament for Main Committee I, New Agenda Coalition, 4 May 2005.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 20.
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42. Stephen Roscow, 'Nuclear Deterrence, State Legitimation, and Liberal Democracy', *Polity*, Vol. 21, No. 3 (1989), p. 568.
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44. This reflects the paper's critical constructivist methodology (Weldes, Laffey, and Gusterson, *Cultures of Insecurity* [note 38]) which draws on social constructivist (Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999]; Emmanuel Adler, 'Seizing the Middle Ground: Constructivism in World Politics', *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 3, No. 3 [1993], pp. 319–63) and critical security studies (Ken Booth [ed.], *Critical Security Studies and World Politics* [London: Lynne Rienner, 2005]; Krause and Williams, *Critical Security Studies* [note 3]) theorizing about the construction of national security concepts and narratives and the relationships between identities, values, and interests. It frames discourses as systems of signification that construct social realities and reproduce accepted ways of being and acting in the world whilst silencing others (Milliken, 'The Study of Discourse' [note 34]). It directs the researcher to interrogate policy texts based on two contentions: what is understood as reality is socially constructed, including the reality of the value of nuclear weapons; and constructions of reality reflect, enact, and reify relations of power, in particular the socio-political power to shape discourses of value. It directs the project to ask how and why particular intersubjective conceptions of the value of nuclear weapons are constructed and institutionalized in socio-political power structures by the UK whilst others are excluded or resisted (Neil Cooper, 'Putting Disarmament Back in the Frame', *Review of International Studies*, No. 32 [2006], pp. 353–76; Karin Fierke, *Critical Approaches to International Security* [Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007]); how these hegemonic 'systems of meaning' or 'codes of intelligibility' (Fierke, 'Critical Methodology and Constructivism' [note 34]) are reproduced over time; and how they shape understandings of appropriate nuclear policy practice and deterrence doctrine and dismiss proposals to further devalue nuclear weapons (Larsen, *Foreign Policy and Discourse Analysis* [note 35]).
45. For example Nick Ritchie, 'Relinquishing Nuclear Weapons: Identities, Networks and the British Bomb', *International Affairs*, Vol. 86, No. 2 (2010), pp. 465–87; Nick Ritchie, 'Deterrence Dogma? Challenging the Relevance of British Nuclear Weapons', *International Affairs*, Vol. 85, No. 1 (2009); and Nick Ritchie and Paul Ingram, 'A Progressive Nuclear Weapons Policy: Rethinking Continuous-at-Sea Deterrence', *RUSI Journal*, Vol. 155, No. 2 (2010), pp. 40–45.
46. Ministry of Defence (MoD) and Foreign & Commonwealth Office (FCO), *The Future of the United Kingdom's Nuclear Deterrent*, Cm 6994 (London: HMSO, 2006).
47. Nick Ritchie, *A Nuclear Weapons-Free World? Britain, Trident and the Challenges Ahead* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).
48. 2010 Review Conference of the Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons: Final Document Volume 1, NPT/CONF.2010/50 (Vol. I) (New York: United Nations Organization, 2010), p. 18.

49. Walker, 'The UK, Threshold Status' (note 5), pp. 446–63.
50. Blix, *Weapons of Terror* (note 13), p. 90.
51. See, for example, Tim Hare, 'Nuclear Policy all at Sea: A Part Time Deterrent Will Not Do!', *RUSI Journal*, Vol. 154, No. 6 (2009), pp. 54–8.
52. This is based on the qualitative coding methods developed by Matthew B. Miles and A. Michael Huberman, *Qualitative Data Analysis* (London: Sage Publications, 1994) that involve generation of a provisional *a priori* list of codes through initial research; coding historical, empirical, and ideational categories, themes, and processes in interview and documentary data; clustering, sorting, and reducing the coded data; linking the data and developing relationships through matrices and network diagrams; delineating 'deep structure' and integrating categories, relationships, and processes into an explanatory conceptual framework; and finally identifying gaps in the logic of the framework and revisiting data to improve the analysis and generate credible and applicable research findings.
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54. Ritchie, 'Relinquishing Nuclear Weapons' (note 45).
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56. These are explored in more detail in Ritchie, 'Relinquishing Nuclear Weapons' (note 45).
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76. See the debate on CASD in the *RUSI Journal*: Ritchie and Ingram, 'A Progressive Nuclear Weapons Policy' (note 45); Hare, 'Nuclear Policy all at Sea' (note 51); Frank Miller, 'The Future of the United Kingdom's Nuclear Deterrent', *RUSI Journal*, Vol. 155, No. 2 (2010), pp. 34–9.

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