Stepping down the nuclear ladder
Options for UK nuclear weapons policy

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British Nuclear Policy, NATO and the US

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1. Introduction

The purpose of this short paper is to analyse the ways and extent in which considerations relating to firstly, NATO nuclear strategy and policy and secondly, the UK's strategic and political relationship with the US, shape the environment within which decisions on the British strategic nuclear force have been taken. Notwithstanding much received wisdom, it will be suggested that neither is likely to prove a decisive restraint on a future government potentially making major changes to the established British policy and/or posture.

NATO has been at least a background factor for the whole of the period in which the UK has been a nuclear-armed state since the early 1950s. For the first decade however, it was not much more than this and British nuclear weapons were not assigned to or integrated with NATO in any meaningful way. Indeed they were scarcely even mentioned in NATO official communiqués prior to the early 1960s.

2. The road to Nassau

Three factors helped bring about an apparent change in this situation from 1962. The first concerned the ongoing intra-alliance debates about various schemes for some kind of American 'sharing' of nuclear weapons with the European allies. The second was the coming to power of the Kennedy administration and the fresh ideas on nuclear strategy which were being increasingly pushed by Kennedy's Defense Secretary, Robert McNamara. The final key factor was the Macmillan government's decision, for technological and financial reasons, not to persevere with efforts to develop a British-made long-range nuclear missile delivery system and instead to seek to purchase one from the US.

McNamara's basic approach, increasingly reflected in NATO strategy and policy from 1962, was to find ways of increasing European input into US nuclear decision-making within a NATO framework, in return for European governments foreswearing national nuclear forces and focusing instead on building up their conventional forces in order to facilitate the adoption of a flexible response strategy. His ideas were perhaps most clearly – and famously – set out in a speech in Ann Arbor, Michigan in June 1962. Here, McNamara said of European nuclear forces that:

> limited nuclear capabilities, operating independently, are dangerous, expensive, prone to obsolescence and lacking in credibility as a deterrent. Clearly, the United States nuclear contribution to the Alliance is neither obsolete nor dispensable.

In a less often quoted part of his text, McNamara went on to argue that:

> the general strategy I have summarized magnifies the importance of unity of planning, concentration of executive authority and central direction. There must not be the contingency of nuclear war. We are convinced that a general nuclear war target system is indivisible, and if, despite all our efforts, nuclear war should occur, our best hope lies in conducting a centrally controlled campaign against all of the enemy's vital nuclear capabilities, while retaining reserve forces, all centrally controlled.[1]

McNamara's views are set out in some detail because it is important, in the context of the discussion here, to appreciate the extent to which they formed a key part of the context for the crucial Kennedy-Macmillan summit meeting at Nassau in the Bahamas in December 1962. As is well-known, Macmillan's principal objective at Nassau was to secure US agreement to provide the UK with a missile system to replace the recently-cancelled *Skybolt* programme, to which the British government had turned once it had decided that attempts to develop its own delivery system would be too costly and complex.

The main outcome of the Nassau summit – the US decision to sell the *Polaris* missile system to the UK – has been presented by British commentators as a triumph for the UK and for Macmillan personally and it is also cited as a prime example of the alleged benefits of the Anglo-American 'special relationship'. An appreciation of the context in which the meeting took place and a close examination of the text of the Nassau Agreement suggests that a different interpretation is possible. This sees the agreement as being the product of an unsentimental effort on the part of the Kennedy administration not to perpetuate an independent British nuclear force, but rather to bind the UK into a 'centrally controlled' – i.e. US-led – nuclear planning arrangement of the kind outlined by McNamara six months previously.

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[1] Quotations from the text of the speech: *"No Cities" Speech by Sec. of Defense McNamara 1962*. Available at http://www.radiochemistry.org/speech_archives/text/04_mcnamara.shtml. Accessed August 2009.

Those who subscribe to what may be called the 'British establishment view' of Nassau almost always refer to the so-called 'supreme national interests' clause of the agreement, whereby Macmillan asserted the theoretical right to authorise nuclear use out with the NATO context. It is clear from a reading of the agreement as a whole however that its predominant emphasis lay elsewhere. The American side appeared scarcely to disguise the extent to which the UK's supplicant status vis-à-vis *Polaris* afforded an unprecedented opportunity to advance their interest in centralised control. Clause 5 of the agreement stated that:

> *They [i.e. Kennedy and Macmillan] reached the conclusion that this issue created an opportunity for the development of new and closer arrangements for the organization and control of strategic Western defense and that such arrangements in turn could make a major contribution to political cohesion among the nations of the Alliance.*

Following-on from this, Clause 7 stated clearly that:

> *Returning to Polaris the President and the Prime Minister agreed that* ***the purpose of their two governments with respect to the provision of the Polaris missiles must be the development of a multilateral NATO nuclear force in the closest consultation with other NATO allies****. They will use their best endeavours to this end* [emphasis added].

The US also insisted on an operational down-payment from the UK. It was agreed in Nassau, and subsequently confirmed by the NATO Council in May 1963, that the UK's *existing* strategic nuclear forces, based on the RAF's V-bombers, would from henceforth 'be assigned as part of a NATO nuclear force and targeted in accordance with NATO plans'.[2]

3. The decline of the Nassau regime

The Nassau Agreement, far from reflecting an American desire to keep the UK in the nuclear business as an independent actor, represented instead an overt attempt to place existing and future British nuclear capabilities within a centrally-directed US/NATO framework. Subsequent history suggests that this effort was unsuccessful however.

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[2] Quotations from the text of the Nassau Agreement: *Joint Statement Following Discussions With Prime Minister Macmillan – The Nassau Agreement.* Available at John T. Woolley and Gerhard Peters, *The American Presidency Project* [online] http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=9063. Accessed August 2009.

The main reason for the failure to entrench what may be called the 'Nassau regime' (whereby British nuclear weapons would be viewed first and foremost as being clearly and firmly integrated into an overall NATO capability) lay in the subsequent failure to create any actual 'NATO capability' in the strategic nuclear arena. The various ideas for nuclear sharing which had been discussed within NATO from the late 1950s came increasingly to be focused on *theatre* (i.e. shorter-range) forces rather than strategic ones. McNamara was successful in engineering the creation of the NATO Nuclear Planning Group (NPG) in 1966-67 and while discussions within the NPG formally embraced both strategic and theatre nuclear weapon issues, it became clear from an early stage that the centre of gravity would be very much based on the latter.

Genuine multilateral policy-shaping consultations between European and American representatives did take place within the NPG on theatre nuclear forces and a concurrent sense developed that these were therefore 'NATO' weapons in a meaningful way.[3] Nothing comparable developed with regard to strategic weapons, including the UK's V-bomber, and later *Polaris*, forces. As a consequence the Nassau Agreement's terms were never significantly operationalised or institutionalised. 'Consultations' about *Polaris* and later *Trident* in the NATO context generally took the form of simple briefings – often *ex post facto* – about UK policy and decisions, with no real scope for input from allies.

Probably the most consequential indicator of the UK's move away from the substance of the Nassau Agreement can be seen in its gravitation towards French ideas about the role of 'independent deterrents' from the late 1960s. These ideas were set out most clearly by General André Beaufre. His argument was based on the Gaullist premise that 'a nuclear centre of decision cannot be international in character. If it is to be credible, it can only be national'.[4] On this basis Beaufre argued, *contra* Robert McNamara and his supporters, that the existence of three nuclear centres of decision in NATO from the early 1960s (i.e. the US, UK and France) was an asset rather than a liability. In Beaufre's view, this was because:

> different methods must simultaneously be used to keep the enemy's mind in that **state of uncertainty** which alone can render deterrence effective; thus, to enable several methods of deterrence to be used simultaneously, **there must be several centres of decision** [emphases in the original].[5]

The British government effectively adopted this approach from the mid-1960s, making only a symbolic, though not wholly unimportant, rhetorical adjustment. Rather than the French emphasis on 'independent' centres of decision, the preferred British formulation stressed

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[3] The academic literature in this area is enormous. For the author's own analysis – and references to key literature – see Martin A. Smith, *NATO in the First Decade after the Cold War* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic 2000), ch.2.

[4] André Beaufre, 'The Sharing of Nuclear Responsibilities', *International Affairs* 41 3 July 1965, p.417.

[5] *Ibid.*, p.416.

the UK role as a *second* centre of decision, i.e. within NATO. As Lawrence Freedman noted however, this formulation never received more than muted support from NATO and the US, with the latter not even finding official expression until the end of the Carter administration in 1980.[6] Freedman's conclusion in 1981 was valid for the later Cold War years as a whole: 'it is difficult to avoid the impression that such endorsements [were] more a matter of diplomatic etiquette than of conviction'.[7]

4. The contemporary situation

i. NATO

Lawrence Freedman has rightly argued that the current doctrinal and policy bases of the UK's strategic nuclear weapons capability 'could have been offered at any time over the previous forty years'.[8] There has been little real difference between post-Nassau Cold War formulations about the role of the UK's strategic nuclear weapons in the NATO context, and contemporary ones. This point can be illustrated by comparing the 1974 NATO Ottawa Declaration (when NATO, in the official British view, formally accepted the UK's 'second centre of decision' role) and the 2006 Defence White Paper on the *Trident* follow-on.

The relevant section of the Ottawa communiqué stated that:

> The European members.....two of whom possess nuclear forces capable of playing a deterrent role of their own contributing to the overall strengthening of the deterrence of the Alliance, undertake to make the necessary contribution to maintain the common defence at a level capable of deterring and if necessary repelling all actions directed against the independence and territorial integrity of the members of the Alliance.[9]

The comparable passage in the 2006 White Paper stated that:

> the UK's nuclear deterrent supports collective security through NATO for the Euro-Atlantic area. Nuclear deterrence plays an important part in NATO's

[6] Lawrence Freedman, 'Britain: The First Ex-Nuclear Power?', *International Security* 6 2 Fall 1981, p.93.
[7] *Ibid.*, p.94.
[8] Lawrence Freedman, 'British Perspectives on Nuclear Weapons and Nuclear Disarmament' in Barry Blechman (ed.), *Unblocking the Road to Zero: Perspectives of Advanced Nuclear Nations – France and the United Kingdom* (Washington DC: Stimson Center 2009), p.45.
[9] Quotation from the text of the communiqué: 'Declaration on Atlantic Relations' in *NATO Final Communiques 1949-1974* (Brussels: NATO Information Service n.d.), p.319.

> overall defensive strategy, and the UK's nuclear forces make a substantial contribution.[10]

Both these texts are essentially assertions that, because the UK's strategic nuclear force exists and because the UK is a member of NATO, *ipso facto* British nuclear weapons contribute to NATO's security. The clear implication of such statements is that this has been and remains the case regardless of whether the UK's nuclear capability is operationally or doctrinally integrated into NATO in any real way.

One important practical consequence of this posture has been that the British government under Tony Blair and Gordon Brown has evidently seen no contradiction between maintaining a declaratory NATO commitment and formally abandoning the traditional 'second centre of decision' formula. The 2006 White Paper replaced this with a more French-sounding 'independent centre of nuclear decision-making' formulation.[11]

In part this re-formulation may reflect the fact that the British strategic nuclear force is now formally de-targeted and is thus no longer assigned to a US/NATO nuclear operations plan in peacetime, as it was during the Cold War after 1962.[12] If so the decision to de-target *Trident*, however desirable it may be overall, has effectively eviscerated the only means ensuring that the 'commitment' of the UK's strategic nuclear weapons to NATO after 1962 was not entirely nominal.

The rationale for nuclear deterrence outlined in the 2006 White Paper has been accurately characterised as deterrence directed 'to whom it may concern'. This bears comparison to the original French nuclear posture in De Gaulle's era, when this formed a key part of his strategy of defence *a tous azimuths*, literally: defence 'in all directions'. In the NATO context, many might consider it supremely ironic if the UK's nuclear posture is moving further towards that of Gaullist France, given De Gaulle's growing antipathy towards NATO in the 1950s and 1960s, culminating in the French withdrawal from most of its integrated military structures in 1966.[13] British governments, on the other hand, have traditionally positioned the UK as the most loyal European ally of the US.

This traditional positioning was clearly in evidence under the Major government in the early 1990s. During this period, the most significant public exposition of British nuclear policy came in a speech delivered by then Defence Secretary Malcolm Rifkind in November 1993. It was clear from Rifkind's speech that the Major government saw post-Cold War nuclear deterrence strategy evolving within a NATO context, premised primarily against the possibility of a recidivist Russia. Far from betraying signs of a move towards a French-style

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[10] *The Future of the United Kingdom's Nuclear Deterrent* Cmnd 6994 (London: The Stationery Office 2006), p.18.
[11] *Ibid.*, p.18.
[12] On this point see House of Commons Defence Committee, *The Future of the UK's Strategic Nuclear Deterrent: the Strategic Context* HC 986 (London: The Stationery Office 2006), p.13 para.44.
[13] Although the disengagement has been substantially reversed under Presidents Chirac and Sarkozy.

posture, if anything it was apparent that the Major government was applying itself to trying to entice France more firmly into a NATO-led deterrence framework. To this end an Anglo-French Joint Nuclear Commission had been established in 1992. According to Rifkind, his government saw the main purpose of this Commission as follows:

> By demonstrating an identity of interest and of purpose between NATO's European powers we aim to strengthen the specific European contribution to the deterrence which underpins the collective security of the whole [NATO] Alliance.....it is.....difficult to conceive within the Atlantic Alliance of a substantial threat to one country which would not also be a threat to the other.[14]

This emphasis has not been followed-through by the New Labour governments since 1997. As noted earlier, the current emphasis of British nuclear policy is on defence *a tous azimuths* and, specifically, little has been heard from or about the Joint Nuclear Commission. Notwithstanding the vague and generalised references to collective security in the 2006 White Paper, there is little evidence that NATO concerns – or the views of NATO allies – have played any significant role in shaping contemporary British nuclear policy. Revealingly in this context Mariot Leslie, a senior FCO official, told the House of Commons Defence Committee in February 2007 that 'all our NATO allies' had been 'briefed' on the contents of the White Paper only *after* it had been presented to Parliament by the Prime Minister.[15] As suggested earlier, reluctance to consult NATO allies *before* strategic nuclear policy has been finally formulated has been a long-term characteristic of the British approach, stretching back deep into the Cold War era.

In summary: the discussions in this paper have identified a long-term pattern of strictly limited multilateral consultation and discussion about British strategic nuclear weapons within NATO. This in turn has ensured that the formal status of these weapons as 'assigned to NATO' has been largely nominal for other NATO members, with the possible – and admittedly significant – exception of the United States. Changes to the UK's posture since the end of the Cold War have thus had no real impact on NATO and there is little evidence of individual NATO members taking much of an interest in them. In February 2007, Mariot Leslie merely noted 'a gratifying degree of understanding' for the conclusions of the 2006 White Paper on the part of NATO allies. This suggested little if anything in the way of substantial exchanges or discussions.

ii. Anglo-American relations

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[14] See the text of Rifkind's speech, reprinted as 'The Role of Nuclear Weapons in UK Defence Strategy', *Brassey's Defence Yearbook 1994* (London: Brassey's 1994), p.27.

[15] House of Commons Defence Committee, *The Future of the UK's Strategic Nuclear Deterrent: the White Paper* (Vol.II) HC 225-II (London: The Stationery Office 2007), Ev.71 Q.392.

If it can be concluded that recent and prospective changes in British nuclear strategy and policy are unlikely to have much of an effect on NATO as a whole, the same cannot necessarily be said for the specific Anglo-American relationship. In the British establishment view it has become an article of faith that, in the words of Michael Codner *et al*: 'Anglo-American co-operation on military nuclear technology remains one of the most stable and significant facets of the "special relationship"'.[16]

This is not necessarily how things have been seen on the US side however.

It was suggested earlier that characterisations of the 1962 Nassau Agreement and the birth of Anglo-American nuclear collaboration in its present form as representing a pinnacle of the 'special relationship' are contestable. The text of the agreement suggested that the primary concern of the American side was to strengthen NATO, and the UK's position at the time as a nuclear *demandeur* offered a tempting pretext for attempting (albeit ultimately unsuccessfully) to enlist it in this effort. It may also be recalled in this context that it was not until 1980 that an American administration publicly accepted the UK's preferred 'second centre of decision' formula.

More recently, two developments allow the suggestion to be made that the traditional UK view that 'Britain's nuclear weapons serve a vital role in allowing Britain to remain Washington's primary military ally'[17] is increasingly open to challenge. The first concerns the rising demands being made on both US and UK conventional forces in Afghanistan, where the two states' armies are bearing the brunt of some of the fiercest fighting. Even before the recent ramping up of official attention to the situation in Afghanistan, it was being argued that, in the post-9/11 security environment 'Britain's conventional force capabilities are far more relevant to US strategists than the UK nuclear deterrent, as the latter adds nothing to America's defence or security'.[18]

The Blair government seemingly took such views at least partly into account in its 2006 White Paper when pledging that a *Trident* replacement programme would not take up resources to the detriment of the UK's conventional forces. Since 2006, increasing concerns over the security situation in Afghanistan are likely to have strengthened perceptions amongst officials on both sides of the Atlantic that the essential currency of Anglo-American relations today is *conventional* military capability.[19]

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[16] *Ibid*., Ev.116.
[17] In the words of Nick Ritchie. See *The Future of the UK's Strategic Nuclear Deterrent: the White Paper*, Ev.145.
[18] James Wither, 'An Endangered Partnership: The Anglo-American Defence Relationship in the Early Twenty-first Century', *European Security* 15 1 March 2006, p.57.
[19] In British military circles this general perception has been supplemented by concerns that criticism from the American military over alleged counter-insurgency failures during the British Army's occupation of southern Iraq from 2003-09 reflects a more general decline in respect for the Army's capabilities by its American counterpart. Source: private communications with the author.

The second relevant factor has been the Obama administration's declared interest in nuclear disarmament and a final goal of a nuclear weapon-free world. Whilst it is too early to assess the likely impact of this in detail, it is surely no coincidence that, within weeks of Obama's inauguration in January 2009, the FCO rushed into print with its own effort to put flesh on the bones of a comparable statement of interest on the part of the UK.[20]

5. Conclusion

The conclusion suggested by the discussions here is that: i) the impact of future changes in the UK's nuclear capability or posture is unlikely to be significant for NATO; and ii) neither is it very likely to significantly undermine Anglo-American relations in the current environment. The 'NATO commitment' has, in reality, never been much more than nominal. It has long been assumed as received wisdom that changes will likely have a negative impact on Anglo-American relations. This proposition has seldom been subject to rigorous scrutiny however and the discussions here suggest that it is, if anything, increasingly open to question.

[20] *Lifting the Nuclear Shadow: Creating the Conditions for Abolishing Nuclear Weapons* (London: Foreign & Commonwealth Office 2009).