

Stepping down the nuclear ladder

Options for UK nuclear weapons policy

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Trident and Trust-Building¹

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In any discussion as to the future of the British nuclear deterrent, it is important to consider the wider relationship between national nuclear postures and trust-building in an international context. This paper considers how any movement towards a reduced British nuclear posture – including abolition - might contribute to building trust among the ‘permanent five’ (P-5) as well as between these five recognised nuclear weapon states (NWS) under the 1968 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and the non-nuclear weapon states (NNWS).² For the purposes of this paper, the idea of what Nick Ritchie has called Trident-lite is defined as Britain continuing with a submarine based nuclear force but one that is significantly reduced beyond the current force level in terms of either the warhead/missile inventory and/or the number of submarines in the force.³

The starting point for the paper is the proposition that there is a growing crisis of legitimacy in the NPT, and that at the heart of this is what we call a ‘trust deficit.’ We explore with a view to securing a positive outcome from the NPT Review Conference in 2010 whether stepping down the British nuclear ladder could help to repair this trust deficit in the NPT regime. Our argument is that whilst such moves would represent a step towards reassuring the NNWS as to the UK’s commitment to nuclear abolition, it is unlikely to be seen as the

¹ Some of the ideas in this paper draw from Nicholas J. Wheeler’s inaugural lecture, *Nuclear Abolition: Trust-Building’s Greatest Challenge?* Wheeler, Aberystwyth University, 9 March 2009, vidcast available at <http://www.aber.ac.uk/interpol/en/research/DDMI/audiocvideo.html>

² For the purposes of this paper, we are defining trust as existing ‘when two or more actors, based on the mutual interpretation of each other’s attitudes and behaviour, believe that the other(s) now and in the future, can be relied upon to desist from acting in ways that will be injurious to their interests and values’ (Ken Booth and Nicholas J. Wheeler, *The Security Dilemma: Fear, cooperation and trust in world politics* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), p. 230 and pp. 228-257.

³ Nick Ritchie, *Stepping down the nuclear ladder: options for trident on a path to zero*, (Bradford disarmament research centre, May 2009), p. 5.

kind of 'leap of trust' that appears necessary to restore the credibility of the commitment to global nuclear disarmament that the NWS made in Article VI of the NPT.⁴

1. Building trust among the P5

The British Government's approach to building trust between the P-5 has been to explore the prospects for a new P-5 dialogue on Confidence and Security Building Measures (CSBMs) in the nuclear field. Speeches from a number of high ranking ministers over the last two years have proposed a range of CSBMs relating to verification and transparency, as well as seeking to put political momentum behind the search for an agreement on a Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) and Fissile Material Cut-off Treaty (FMCT).⁵ The Prime Minister has recently renewed his own commitment to building confidence through steps towards nuclear disarmament⁶, and most recently the UK hosted a conference of officials from the P-5 in London. This meeting was aimed at legitimating the idea of an on-going P5 dialogue on nuclear issues, and led to a joint statement. But it remains to be seen how far this will secure the continued support of Russia and China whilst 'big-ticket' items like the future of missile defences remain unaddressed. Against this background, the question is would a decision to move to some form of Trident-lite significantly contribute to the process of developing a new P5 dialogue?

The proposition that reductions in UK force size or operational readiness would decisively affect the calculations of the other NWS is largely unconvincing. Such reductions might strengthen the UK's claims to be a 'disarmament laboratory',⁷ but it seems highly unlikely that France or China would join the UK in similar moves. Beijing already operates what it defines as a minimum deterrent and any reductions in its force size would be critically dependent on Washington agreeing to constrain missile defences. Moreover, as India fulfils its ambition to develop a Triad of nuclear forces with the deployment of its first SSBN, China will most likely require some reassurance from New Delhi that any cuts in its force would be

⁴ Article VI of the NPT requires that 'Each of the Parties to the Treaty undertakes to pursue negotiations in good faith on effective measures relating to cessation of the nuclear arms race at an early date and to nuclear disarmament, and on a Treaty on general and complete disarmament under strict and effective international control'.

⁵ Margaret Beckett, Secretary of State for Foreign & Commonwealth Affairs, *Keynote Address: A World Free of Nuclear Weapons?*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace Non-Proliferation Conference, Washington D. C. (25 June 2007); Des Browne, Secretary of State for Defense, *Speech to the Conference on nuclear disarmament*, Geneva (5 February 2008). See also: House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee, *Conclusions and recommendations* (6).

⁶ *The Road to 2010: Addressing the nuclear question in the twenty first century*, Presented to Parliament by the Prime Minister, by Command of Her Majesty, July 2009, Cm 7675.

⁷ This term was first publicly employed in Margaret Beckett's Carnegie speech.

matched by equivalent restraint from its nuclear neighbour. At the same time, the impact of British reductions is likely to be negligible on the other three NWS outside the NPT - Israel, Pakistan, and North Korea – who have come to view nuclear weapons as essential to their security.⁸ It will require successful and sustained processes of nuclear trust-building in the regions of Northeast Asia, South Asia, and the Middle East before these powers will be ready to relinquish their arsenals.

If the United Kingdom is serious about having a major impact on the process of nuclear disarmament among the NWS, then this would probably require a decision to abolish the British deterrent rather than reduce it. Even then it is unclear what impact such a momentous decision in British political terms might have on the wider non-proliferation and disarmament landscape. The idea that the United Kingdom should bring its deterrent into future disarmament talks has been accepted by the Labour Government, though no details have been given as to the government's thinking here. The crucial issue is whether London is prepared to give up the deterrent to secure major reductions in the nuclear arms of the other nuclear powers knowing that those states would remain nuclear-armed whilst Britain divested itself of these weapons. The Liberal Democrats party leader, Nick Clegg, recently announced that he viewed the Trident modernisation decision as giving Britain leverage in future negotiations.⁹ He did not specify what he had in mind here, but it seems reasonable to presume that he was thinking in terms of the United Kingdom giving up the 'Bomb' as part of achieving even bigger reductions in US-Russian nuclear weapons. In a post-'START Follow on' agreement in which Moscow and Washington might have no more than 1000 weapons each, Britain's limited stockpile along with that of France and China begins to assume growing significance, as of course do the nuclear weapons held by those states outside of the NPT.

The question that would loom large for any future British Government in such a strategic environment is whether by abandoning its nuclear status, the United Kingdom would decisively push forward the process of achieving radical nuclear disarmament. Such a decision would require London to finally abandon the deeply held belief that has guided British nuclear policy since the dawn of the atomic age which is that the United Kingdom could not afford to be without a nuclear weapon in a nuclear-armed world. Moreover, given the current obstacles to finalising a successor to START, the United States and Russia are unlikely to agree on reductions down to 1000 or below before London has to make the decision whether to commit the major investment that would be necessary for a Trident replacement.

⁸ Michael Quinlan, 'The future of United Kingdom Nuclear Weapons: Shaping the debate', *International Affairs*, 82:4 (2006), p. 633.

⁹ Patrick Wintour and Nicholas Watt, 'Nick Clegg says Lib Dems won't replace Trident because world has moved on', guardian.co.uk, Tuesday 16 June 2009 21.30 BST.

The current timetable set out by the British Government for modernising Trident forecloses the possibility of extending the operating life of the submarines (reactor life is the key element here). The great advantage from a disarmament perspective of such a move is that it would create a window in which the United Kingdom could explore the potential for negotiating away its nuclear force whilst keeping the door open to the possibility of Britain still deciding to modernise the force should the expectations for radical nuclear reductions prove illusory in the years ahead.

The official position is that it is not possible to extend the life of the submarines and maintain satisfactory safety standards. However, this assumes that the existing Trident fleet continues its existing patrol patterns which, in turn, are dictated by the belief that the United Kingdom must operate a policy of what is known as 'Continuous at Sea Deterrence' (CASD). If the key assumption underpinning CASD that at least one submarine is always on station ready to fire is relaxed, then it is argued that it becomes possible to change the operating patterns of the force in such a way as to increase the operational life of the submarines. Abandoning CASD is controversial and it would depend upon giving up the shibboleth that has dominated UK nuclear thinking since the 1950s that the United Kingdom must be secure from a nuclear 'bolt from the blue.'¹⁰ But the great merit of moving to a posture of reduced nuclear readiness through the abandonment of CASD is that the UK could maintain a deterrent capability (assuming that the deterrent requirement is not defined in terms of making the force invulnerable from a nuclear attack that comes without any warning) whilst sending a positive signal that it remained open to the possibility of abandoning Trident if there was significant progress towards global nuclear disarmament.

2. Overcoming the trust deficit in the NPT

The British Government has played an important role in the last few years in advancing the debate on global nuclear disarmament. This 'norm entrepreneurial' role has been aimed at promoting what William Walker has called an international nuclear 'order of restraint'.¹¹ This involves the careful management of nuclear deterrence alongside persistent efforts to embed restraint through institutional arrangements and international law. Britain has been one of the most responsible NWS, operating a relatively small nuclear arsenal with a high degree of survivability in the event of a nuclear attack against the United Kingdom. Alongside this posture of 'minimum deterrence', the British government has made, and

¹⁰ Nick Ritchie, *Stepping down the nuclear ladder: Options for Trident on a path to zero* (Bradford disarmament research centre, May 2009), p. 14. We are also grateful to Paul Ingram for his contribution to our thinking here.

¹¹ William Walker, *The UK, responsible nuclear sovereignty and the disarmament threshold*, Paper prepared for the Nobel Institute's Symposium on Peace, Stability and Nuclear Order, Oslo (25-27 June 2009), pp. 20-3.

continues to make, significant efforts towards promoting non-proliferation norms and rules, crucially though its contribution to the NPT regime.

Nevertheless, Britain possesses and plans to modernise its small nuclear force so that it continues to be a nuclear power into the second half of this century. Leaving aside the controversial question as to whether such a decision breaches its strict legal obligations under Article VI of the NPT, there is no doubt that such a commitment rests uneasily in the eyes of many non-nuclear states with the leading role that London has taken, especially under Gordon Brown's premiership, as an advocate for 'global zero.' The problem is that one of the key rationales – if not the fundamental *raison d'être* - adduced for a UK deterrent is that it provides a hedge against an uncertain world in which it is not possible to be certain that the United Kingdom might not one day find itself facing an aggressor that was prepared to threaten or use nuclear weapons. This bedrock conviction that Britain cannot afford to be nuclear-free in a nuclear-armed world was clearly expressed in former Prime Minister Tony Blair's justification for replacing Trident. He argued that the United Kingdom should continue as a nuclear weapons state, for at least the next 50 years, because 'the one certain thing about our world today is its uncertainty.'¹² As long as Britain argues that it needs nuclear weapons as an insurance policy against a nuclear-armed world, the invitation will always be there for that growing number of states that have the technological capability to develop nuclear weapons to apply the same reasoning. This is the fundamental flaw in the government's case to be taken seriously as an advocate for global nuclear disarmament.

Britain's position is reflective of the broader tension between the NWS and NNWS which has grown as those who agreed to give up the right to develop nuclear weapons feel increasingly aggrieved at what they view as the failure of the NWS to live up to their Article VI commitment. Although further reductions in the UK's nuclear force would go some way to showing the British Government's commitment to disarmament, this is not going to seriously address the trust deficit at the heart of the NPT. The problem is that Trident-lite serves to reproduce the increasingly discredited two-tier nuclear world in which some states are seen as retaining the right to possess nuclear weapons into perpetuity whilst others are expected to continue with their vow of nuclear abstinence.

The British Government hopes that its commitment to further reducing the size of the British nuclear force will minimise the criticism that it is not living up to its disarmament obligations under Article VI.¹³ The various models of Trident-lite that have been proposed might also be viewed as a way of persuading the NNWS to continue to support the NPT regime. Yet Trident-lite is unlikely to quash the suspicions of the NNWS that Britain's

¹² Tony Blair statement to the House of Commons on replacing the UK Trident system, 4 December 4 2006.

¹³ Prime Minister Gordon Brown's speech on nuclear energy and proliferation to the International Nuclear Fuel Cycle Conference at Lancaster House, 17 March 2009. <http://www.number10.gov.uk/Page18631>

commitment to a nuclear-free world is one that is contingent on the United Kingdom remaining a nuclear power until all the other nuclear powers have agreed to disarm.¹⁴ The value of Trident-lite for trust-building between the NNWS and NWS therefore remains at best marginal, and at worst irrelevant. This is because, as Jonathan Schell has argued, 'A double-standard regime is a study in futility...De-emphasising nuclear weapons will not be enough to repair these cracked foundations, nor will deep cuts.'¹⁵

By contrast, a British decision to leave the nuclear club would fundamentally challenge the double-standard. It would also honour the disarmament commitment that Britain entered into when it signed Article VI of the NPT. South Africa's decision to abandon nuclear weapons in the early 1990s undoubtedly strengthened the NPT, and played a role in the key decision at the 1995 NPT Review Conference to extend the Treaty indefinitely. A British decision to give up nuclear weapons would surely have an even greater positive impact on the NPT regime at a time when the Treaty is widely seen to be in considerable danger. With a US President in the White House committed to abolition, it is conceivable that a 'leap of trust'¹⁶ of this kind by the United Kingdom would catalyse the nuclear disarmament process between the United States and Russia. The hope being that a British leap of this kind, as against the more modest moves associated with Trident-lite, might challenge the other nuclear powers to fundamentally rethink the role of nuclear weapons in their national security policies.

3. Conclusion

Despite the potential benefits of abolition in terms of promoting radical nuclear disarmament, it is evident that a unilateral decision by Britain to leave the strategic nuclear business when Trident reaches the end of its operational life remains an unlikely one. The Liberal Democrats have come closest to this position in the current debate, but it is not clear if they are ready to abandon the deterrent itself as against a Trident replacement. Successive governments have committed themselves when in office to maintaining an effective deterrent given anxieties about an uncertain strategic future, and it will take a brave leader to break with this nuclear mindset. On the other hand, a policy of Trident-lite is not convincing as a solution to the growing crisis of trust in the NPT.

Reduced nuclear force options might help at the margins but they do nothing to fundamentally address the existence of a two-tier nuclear world. Perhaps such a world is

¹⁴ *The Road to 2010: Addressing the nuclear question in the twenty first century*, Presented to Parliament by the Prime Minister, by Command of Her Majesty, July 2009, Cm 7675.

¹⁵ Jonathan Schell, *The Seventh Decade: The New Shape of Nuclear Danger* (London: Metropolitan Books/Henry Holt & company, 2007), pp. 210-11.

¹⁶ The concept of a leap of trust is explored in Booth and Wheeler, *The Security Dilemma*, pp. 234-7; 246-7.

sustainable into the future as it has been since the late 1960s, but the steady pace of proliferation and the growing problem of nuclear latency – epitomised by the case of Iran – within the NPT suggests that the old bargains will not hold in the decades to come. The result could be a collapse of the Treaty and a world of many more nuclear armed states. We have no precedents for what life would be like in what Albert Wohlstetter once called ‘a nuclear armed crowd’. If Britain has retained its arsenal during this period of new nuclear states emerging, many will no doubt look back from say the middle of this century and argue that it was right to replace Trident in the early 2000s. But others might pause to ask whether the logic of nuclearism¹⁷ - the belief that nuclear weapons are the ultimate insurance policy in an uncertain world - was not ultimately to blame for creating a world of perhaps 40-50 nuclear weapon states.

Abolition would be a leap of trust because there are clearly risks in adopting such a policy. No one can predict the future and it is impossible to guarantee that a non-nuclear Britain might not one day face a nuclear-armed foe. But if protecting against this uncertainty is the fundamental rationale for the British nuclear arsenal, it has to be asked whether there will ever be a world in which the British Government feels able to eliminate its nuclear capabilities (or potential capabilities thinking of a disarmed nuclear world).

The way to break this logic of nuclearism is to recognise that whilst there is no escape from uncertainty, the latter is not incompatible with a world free of nuclear weapons provided that each step on the road to abolition is conceived as a process of nuclear trust-building.¹⁸ We would argue that Britain deserves credit for pushing this trust-building process forward in view of the initiatives it has developed in the last few years. However, the question is whether it could advance the nuclear disarmament process even more significantly by deciding not to modernise the existing Trident force. We do not want to exaggerate the UK’s role here, and perhaps such a decision by the United Kingdom would have little impact on the other players in the nuclear game. There is also the question as to whether Britain could achieve more in terms of strengthening the NPT by remaining inside the tent of the NWS as against being outside of it. Nevertheless, we would argue that on balance Britain should be prepared to give up the deterrent and that the timing of this should be done in such a way as to maximise its impact in disarmament terms. In the absence of some equivalent dramatic frame-breaking move by one or more of the NWS, it is hard to see how the trust deficit will be overcome in the NPT. And if the latter continues to grow, the prospects for a nuclear free-world - whatever the rhetorical aspirations to the contrary on the part of the NWS - will grow dimmer in the years ahead.

¹⁷ The idea of a culture of ‘nuclearism’ is explored in Ken Booth and Nicholas J. Wheeler, ‘Beyond nuclearism’, In Regina Cowen Karp (ed.), *Security without nuclear weapons* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).