Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists

The "Doomsday Clock," a symbol of nuclear danger since 1947, currently stands at seven minutes to midnight.
Learn more »

The magazine of global security news and analysis: current issue | past issues | nuclear weapons data | web only content | archive

home | about us | contact us | press center | subscriptions | support us

Britain: Her Majesty's new nukes

By Andy Oppenheimer
March/April 2003 pp. 16-18 (vol. 59, no. 02)

As the United States articulates a preemptive nuclear strategy in the "war on terrorism," how far in line with that policy is America's number one ally, Britain?

The U.S. Nuclear Posture Review (NPR), leaked to the press back in early 2002, allows for the use of nuclear weapons in three scenarios: against targets able to withstand attacks by non-nuclear weapons (such as underground bunkers); in retaliation for an attack with nuclear, biological, or chemical weapons; and "in the event of surprising military developments," such as an "Iraqi attack on Israel or its neighbors, or a North Korean attack on South Korea, or a military confrontation over the status of Taiwan."

Sometime after the leak of the NPR, a widely reported speech by Britain's Defence Secretary Geoff Hoon came strikingly close to the Bush administration stance. "They [rogue states] can be absolutely confident that in the right conditions we would be willing to use our nuclear weapons," Hoon told a parliamentary defense committee on March 20. "Although the Cold War is over, we face new, emerging threats. It is right that we consider all possible elements of a comprehensive strategy."

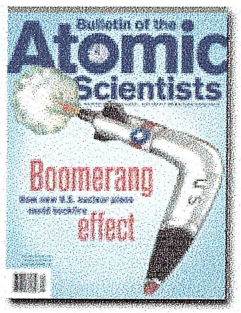
Hoon added, however, that he was not confident that nuclear weapons would deter "states of concern"--a reference to Iraq in particular--from threatening or attacking Britain with weapons of mass destruction. He later insisted that the government "reserved the right" to use nuclear weapons if Britain or British troops deployed abroad were threatened by chemical or biological weapons. A senior defense official said later that Hoon had "gone further than people have before."

On January 6, 2003, Foreign Secretary Jack Straw, speaking to a gathering of British ambassadors on the new priorities of British foreign policy, highlighted the danger of "rogue states" passing on weapons of mass destruction to terrorist groups. British ministers had hitherto regarded global terrorism and the spread of weapons of mass destruction as separate issues. Straw's comments indicate that Britain has now moved much closer to the Bush analysis of the main threat to Western security.

British bunker-busters

It emerged in June that the British government was investing more than £2 billion in the British Los Alamos--the atomic weapons establishment at Aldermaston, Berkshire. Apart from supporting the maintenance of the nuclear weapon stockpile without further underground nuclear tests, a planned expansion will make possible the design and production of so-called "mini-nukes "--low-yield nuclear weapons designed to destroy underground targets such as facilities where weapons of mass destruction may be manufactured, or command bunkers. Mini-nukes could also be used to destroy airstrips, or even against battlefield troops--most likely on Third World battlefields.

The yield of a mini-nuke could be as small as one-tenth of a kiloton (the bomb dropped on



Hiroshima, for comparison, had a yield of around 15 kilotons), but is more likely to be 5 kilotons. Other new weapons may include "tailored"-and "enhanced"-effects warheads; electromagnetic pulse and high-powered microwave weapons; and insertable nuclear components or "generic" warheads. The Aldermaston plan therefore coincides with an apparent decision to radically alter Britain's nuclear doctrine.

Aldermaston scientists have also been stepping up their visits to nuclear laboratories in the United States. Visits to the nuclear test site in Nevada rose from nine in 1999 to 40 in 2001. There are now 16 joint working groups on weapon issues including warhead physics, nuclear counterterrorism technology, and nuclear weapon code development.

In Parliament, Junior Defence Minister Lewis Moonie denied Aldermaston was being expanded in order to develop mini-nukes. He told members: "Work going on in Aldermaston is no secret and is in order to maintain the reliability of our nuclear deterrent faced with the fact that we no longer test these weapons." He claimed that the work would ensure that Britain's nuclear deterrent "is reliable and capable of being deployed."

Defense officials pointed out that the Strategic Defence Review of 1998 said Britain needed the capability to produce a successor to the Trident nuclear missile system. However, officials at Aldermaston insist that there are currently no plans to design a Trident successor or any new nuclear weapons--although they admit the expanded plant will make it possible for the laboratory to produce mini-nukes or nuclear warheads for cruise missiles as soon as they are given the go-ahead.

Trident tested?

The scope of U.S.-British cooperation on nuclear policy reflects the continued importance of the "special relationship." Current collaborative efforts include warhead design and safety (Britain's Trident warhead is closely based on one of the U.S. Trident warheads, the W76), the leasing of missiles (Britain has access to--but does not own--a pool of Trident II D-5 missiles manufactured by Lockheed Martin), research (Britain has cooperative programs with all three major U.S. nuclear weapons laboratories, including assistance with stockpile stewardship), and doctrine (since the purchase of the Polaris submarine, Britain's strategic nuclear force has been "committed to NATO and targeted in accordance with Alliance policy and strategic concepts under plans made by the Supreme Allied Command Europe"). NATO's concept of nuclear deterrence is, in turn, based predominantly on U.S. nuclear doctrine.

The sole weapon system in Britain's deterrent arsenal, the Royal Navy Trident submarine-launched ballistic missile system, equipped with British warheads, went into service in 1994. Britain's total warhead stockpile is under 200, which makes its arsenal the smallest of the five official nuclear weapon states, with possibly even fewer weapons than Israel. Britain's Trident submarines will begin being decommissioned soon after 2020, and a decision on whether or not to replace them will have to be taken by about 2010.

The government has declined to enter into any debate about nuclear weapons policy, refusing to explain what it meant when it referred in the Strategic Defence Review to a "sub-strategic" role for the Trident missile. (The smallest nuclear weapon that Britain's Trident can now deliver has a yield of 100 kilotons--making it a "city destroyer.")

One Trident submarine out of a total of four is always supposed to be on patrol, in a secret location, at any time. The government will only say that the number of warheads the patrols routinely carry does not exceed 48. With a yield of 100 kilotons for each warhead, each sub has a destructive power equivalent to 300 Hiroshimas.

Treaties

Assuming the United States goes ahead with developing new nuclear weapons, how will it affect

existing nuclear agreements between the United States, Britain, and NATO? A recent Foreign Affairs Select Committee report on U.S.-British relations states that "the United Kingdom has agreed with the United States to a review of the 'counter-proliferation toolbox,' with a view to countering the spread of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and missiles." This calls into question whether London will be able to maintain its current, more progressive, stance on both the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty.

While the Bush administration is conducting its policy review with some level of public scrutiny and debate, there is very little public discussion in Britain. Moreover, access to information and parliamentary scrutiny of nuclear policy has, if anything, become more difficult under Tony Blair's government than under the Major and Thatcher governments. Until 1995, the Trident program was subjected to detailed scrutiny by the Defence Select Committee's annual inquiries on "Progress of the Trident Program." These annual inquiries were introduced after the Chevaline program upgrading Polaris, which involved the expenditure of £1,000 million over 10 years, without Parliament being properly informed of its existence or its escalating costs.

After the 1997 election, the government abandoned the publication of the annual "Statements on the Defence Estimates," which during the 1980s and early 1990s provided regular information on nuclear policy. Instead, a range of documents are published as part of the Ministry of Defence reporting cycle, including performance reports, investment strategies, and occasionally a Defence White Paper.

Last year--the year of Queen Elizabeth's Golden Jubilee--a report by Pugwash, marking the fiftieth anniversary of Britain's first nuclear test, argued that Britain should abandon nuclear weapons when the Trident missile system reaches the end of its life, and that the government should set up a public inquiry into nuclear weapons policy. Pugwash called for Britain to oppose apparent U.S. moves to incorporate low-yield nuclear weapons into areas of conventional defense planning. However, it looks like neither Britain's nuclear weapons nor its monarchy will be abolished in the foreseeable future.

Back to top ^

Andy Oppenheimer is a London-based writer and defense consultant specializing in nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons; Northern Ireland; and terrorism.

March/April 2003 pp. 16-18 (vol. 59, no. 02) © 2003 Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists

Back to top ^