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We must update the nuclear debate

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When Tony Blair was asked during the general election campaign about modernising Britain's nuclear arsenal he seemed almost puzzled that the question should be put. Of course Britain should retain a nuclear capability beyond the lifetime of its Trident submarines. Such was the prime minister's certitude, it seemed almost impertinent to ask why.

Gordon Brown, to whom as heir apparent the final decision may yet fall, took much the same tack. With a fleeting nod to the present review of the non-proliferation treaty at the United Nations, the chancellor remarked that: "The issue in the world is not whether the existing powers cease to be nuclear . . . I think the issue is whether we can prevent proliferation."

I will return later to the glaring tension in that last sentence. It is worth pointing out first, though, that the government's attitude is rooted in the politics of the past rather than in any strategic analysis. New Labour was shaped by the wilderness years of the 1980s. Nuclear disarmament was as much an emblem of Labour's unelectability as public ownership or supertaxing the rich. Mr Brown might just as well nationalise the banks as allow the possibility of relinquishing Britain's weapons of mass destruction.

A decision on a replacement for Trident has to be taken during the present parliament. The submarines, each carrying up to 48 thermonuclear warheads, will probably last another 20 years. But such is the lead time for such projects that work on a new system must start quite soon.

As far as I can tell, it has already started. The 1958 mutual defence agreement that facilitates uniquely close nuclear co-operation with the US was renewed last autumn for another 10 years. George W. Bush was explicit that the aim was to allow Britain to maintain its capability. (We make our own bombs but rely on the US for the missiles.) The weapons research centre at Aldermaston has been recruiting physicists to design warheads. And within the military establishment a debate has been under way on the relative merits of ballistic and cruise missile-fitted warheads.

Officials are also rehearsing, albeit *sotto voce*, the arguments for spending – at a time of general cutbacks in the defence budget – something upwards of £10bn or £15bn to acquire this new version of the bomb: we live in an uncertain world. North Korea already has a nuclear capability and it may soon be joined by Iran. Who can predict the threats we might face in 2025? The deterrent is at the heart of our special relationship with the US. Or, to the contrary, if the chips were down would the Americans risk New York to save London? We cannot leave France as the sole European nuclear power. We need the bomb to keep our seat at the top table of world leaders. This last, of course, is calculated to appeal to the vanity of the occupant of 10 Downing Street.

Elegantly glossed over is the fact that the end of the cold war robbed our nuclear force of what was its most compelling argument – that Britain had to play its role in deterring the Soviet Union. As Margaret Thatcher once said, Moscow might doubt America's will to come to Britain's aid but the Soviet Union could not risk direct nuclear retaliation. Now, Trident prowls the ocean deep with its missiles untargeted. Where is the enemy so threatening that we might one day be obliged to eviscerate it?

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If Mr Blair has the answer, he has not shared it. Instead he has allowed Geoff Hoon, defence secretary until the election, to suggest that Britain might lower the threshold at which it would use nuclear weapons. More than once Mr Hoon has hinted that they could be fired in a first strike against non-nuclear states. This, terrifyingly, takes us part way down the American road of "usable nukes". It also explodes Mr Brown's suggestion that the efforts of non-nuclear states to acquire their own weapons can be neatly separated from the behaviour of those who already have the bomb. How can Britain expect others to abandon their ambitions without the security guarantees that assure them they will never be subject to nuclear attack? What happened to the old doctrines of containment and deterrence?

The answer, I think, is that the government has not thought through the priorities for Britain's security in coming decades – just as it has refused to acknowledge that a foreign policy shaped by Harold Macmillan more than 40 years ago might need some updating in the post-cold war world. Saying that of course Britain will continue to need nuclear weapons in 20 or 30 years time is instead a crude political reflex – a way for Messrs Blair and Brown to exorcise a past attachment to the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament.

Mr Blair has been right in saying that a nexus of Jihadist terrorism, nuclear proliferation and hostile states represents the greatest potential threat to our future security. What he has not done is explained how a hugely expensive programme to modernise Britain's nuclear weapons would make us any safer.

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