

Report on RUSI conference on "the future of strategic deterrence for the UK" 6 July 2005

There were around 160 people at the conference. The breakdown of participants was as follows: 35 industry, 34 MoD, 21 academics, 15 media, 10 Aldermaston, 9 RUSI, 7 Faslane, 7 anti-nuclear lobbying organisations, 6 overseas, 4 Foreign Office, 2 Cabinet Office, 2 political, 10 others. The MoD did not put up any speakers for the conference and their delegates did not play an active role in formal discussion. There were opportunities to speak to delegates during breaks.

Rear Admiral Richard Cobbold, Director of RUSI, introduced the conference. He said "momentous decisions of this kind should not be made behind closed doors."

Session one

Admiral Sir Raymond Lygo, former Chief of Naval Staff, chaired this session. He had been involved in the Chevaline upgrade of Polaris. Because of the problems with this upgrade the Navy had questioned the "Moscow criteria" on which it was based, but the politicians insisted on it. Admiral Lygo said that for the deterrent to work it was essential that you demonstrated the will to use it. He also said it should be submarine-based.

The speakers were Professor Sir Lawrence Freedman and Professor Michael Clarke, both from Kings College. Lawrence Freedman has written extensively on British nuclear strategy for several decades. Michael Clarke's speech was a summary of a recent article on Trident replacement.

Lawrence Freedman explained that the traditional British nuclear approach was that we were confident that the US would use its nuclear weapons in support of Europe, but if an opponent misunderstood this the second centre of decision making, in London, would increase uncertainty. Nuclear deterrence is easier in practice than in theory. In addition to the potential role of nuclear weapons in a future conflict, they have a current effect on Britain's status as a great power and relationship with the US. They provide an entrée to US decision-making.

Michael Clarke noted that a recent statement from John Reid referred to a decision on whether to "modify, replace or diminish" Trident. He said that possessing nuclear weapons has some deterrent effect, whether or not they are deployed. Not only were nuclear weapons not effective against terrorists but there was a danger that terrorists could deliberately try to provoke a nuclear response. Conventional deterrence had become more effective. Nuclear weapons are in a different league from chemical or biological weapons.

He argued that a proper debate on the role of nuclear weapons could help to crystallize wider questions on British defence and foreign policy. He anticipated that the early round of a debate would repeat sterile arguments from the past and that this would be followed by a "bean-counting" exercise within the MoD.

In discussion it was said that cost should be capped at a level relative to the threat from Russia or China - "what we should pay as an insurance policy?". Lawrence Freedman said that the value of the nuclear deterrent was not as great as in the 1980s. Britain sought inter-dependence in the nuclear relationship with the US. It was suggested that a future weapon system could be more independent than Trident.

Michael Clarke said that if there was no clear decision by 2008 then there would likely to be a life extension programme for Trident by default.

Malcolm Savidge suggested that the real concern was to have a deterrent against the Sun, and how the media would portray any decision. In reply Lawrence Freedman said that the approach taken by the tabloid media was not predictable.

Lawrence Freedman explained that when Harold Wilson was Prime Minister there was a brief period when the relevance of nuclear weapons to threats other than Russia was considered, particularly with regard to conflict between India and China, but this was otherwise not a major factor in the past. It was noted that Israel's nuclear weapons were not relevant to the major threats which it faces.

Session two

The speakers were Professor Ken Young from the University of London and Dr Bruno Tertrais from the Foundation for Strategic research in Paris.

Ken Young spoke about the nuclear deterrent and US/UK relations between 1945 and 1965. The British saw themselves as a civilising influence in the relationship with the US over nuclear policy.

Bruno Tetrais explained the French approach to nuclear deterrence. As with Britain, if France did not already have nuclear weapons they would not decide today to acquire them. In the Cold War the arguments used in France were political, today there is more emphasis on military arguments. The argument that France needs nuclear weapons to keep its seat on the UN Security Council is not relevant. The idea that France has nuclear weapons for prestige and Britain as a second centre for deterrence is an oversimplification – both apply to both countries. French policy has included the idea of using some nuclear weapons as a final warning. All French nuclear weapons are strategic. Nuclear weapons are not a political asset for France, they are a burden in dealing with proliferation. Nuclear weapons amount to 20 % of the defence equipment budget. The French nuclear programme has many small decisions to make rather than one major replacement decision. A new French missile will be in service before Britain's Trident reaches the end of its life. Existing nuclear warhead designs are adapted rather than creating a new design. There is a glass ceiling for Anglo-French nuclear co-operation. There is the hypothetical possibility of Britain and France pooling their forces, having fewer submarines and only having one on patrol between them.

Session three

The speakers were Lord Garden, Liberal Democrat defence spokesperson, Julian Lewis, Conservative Defence spokesperson, Professor Malcolm Chalmers, Bradford School of Peace Studies and Richard Norton Taylor, the Guardian.

Lord Garden explained that the Liberal Democrat position was that Trident is affordable at present and a minimum deterrent. A decision on a replacement should take account of concerns about proliferation, the cost/benefit analysis and the prevailing security climate. The decision should be approved by Parliament. He questioned why any decision was needed in the life of this parliament, before 2010, and suggested that the decision should be left until as late as possible. The issue carries political baggage with Labour, and to some extent Liberal Democrats, not wanting to appear to be unilateralist.

Malcolm Chalmers asked if the situation was similar to in the 1950s and 1960s when several options were possible, or the 1970s when there was only one option, or to wind down. The rationale for keeping nuclear weapons today is less straightforward than in the past and affects the choice of system, state of alert and numbers. There is a Scottish dimension to the question. Changes in the relationship between London and Edinburgh could have an impact. He also questioned why a decision was needed in the life of this Parliament.

Julian Lewis argued that the nuclear deterrent is an insurance policy against an unpredictable threat. Opinion polls showed that around 65% of the population felt that Britain should retain nuclear weapons if other countries have them.

TLA or Trade
→ WLC or Mini Det

In a discussion on why the decision was need in this time scale John Trewby (ex Navy) argued that there capability to build submarines had to be retained at Barrow, after the Astute class were completed.

Session Four

The speakers were Tim Hare, Duncan Lennox, Chris Maddock and Michael Codner. Tim Hare is a former director of nuclear policy at the MoD and has written an article on Trident replacement for the RUSI journal.

Tim Hare said that there was no military rationale for nuclear weapons, they had no role in meeting military objectives. It was difficult to create a realistic scenario where nuclear weapons may have a role. He was concerned about the irreversibility of giving up nuclear status. Expertise would be lost quickly. Cost would be a pivotal issue. The public were comforable with the current capabilities so long as they were affordable. £10 billion might be acceptable. With regard to the NPT the UK only had a minimum deterrent which was detargeted and there was transparency about nuclear stocks. The UK retains independence with regard to targeting, command and control. The following table was shown as a slide to illustrate replacement options:

	Land	Air	Sea
Warhead	new	new	replacement
Missile system	new	new	Trident
Launch platform	new	convert	new SSBN / hybrid
System infrastructure	new	new	current
Command & control	new	new	current

For any land-based system cost and local opposition would be major factors. A hybrid vessel would be multirole. The government will probably commission studies to look at these options.

Duncan Lennox said that friends can become enemies, such as Afghanistan and Iraq. There can be nuclear surprises such as in Israel, Pakistan and South Africa. We don't know what the threat will be in future. Regime change in a country which could trade WMD for energy is one scenario which is a concern. The deterrent needs to be global. Cruise missiles are not an option.

Chris Maddock argued that an air-launched capability had drawbacks but might be cheaper. To adjust the existing warhead for cruise would require detailed study and adjustments. When the replacement options for Polaris were being considered the options were narrower than appeared to the public.

Michael Codner suggested that there could be a robust nuclear deterrent in the short term and in the longer term we might be able to do without. If nuclear weapons have no military function, then perhaps they should be funded from outside the defence budget. The political roles of nuclear weapons included providing grandeur and global influence and contributing to the relationship with the US. The Anglo-American relationship will fluctuate in future. The process of the review will involve the MoD down-selecting the options.

In discussion it was noted that future policy on nuclear energy would have an impact. When questioned on the US nuclear warfighting mentality Tim Hare said that British policy does not always reflect US policy and the operational posture was different. Chris Maddock pointed out that a large number of cruise missiles would be needed to match the power of Trident. Tim Hare said that nuclear-armed cruise were not a strategic weapon, could be vulnerable to air defences and that putting them on Astute class would be difficult. Michael Codner pointed out that, with regard to submarine reactors, the US showed Britain how to make their first one, then after that Britain was

on its own. It was said that there is unlikely to be sufficient progress with Missile Defence technology for this to be a factor in the choice of future systems.

A representative from the Foreign Office, speaking personally, questioned whether retaining nuclear weapons was the best way to deal with future fears and that there were political costs from keeping the bomb, including the effect on proliferation. Tim Hare said that the Cabinet Office coordinate nuclear policy issues between departments including the Foreign Office, MoD, and the Treasury.

A member of the audience asked why on the one hand there was a danger of many countries easily making nuclear weapons, and on the other if Britain gave them up it would be very hard to restore them. Tim Hare replied saying that building a bomb was only the first stage. Being able to use it in an effective weapon system was difficult.

Admiral Cobbalt concluded saying that RUSI would take stock and think how to go on. He pointed out that the US was confident in the potential for missile defence but yet we were confident that we could overcome missile defences.