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## Why Britain must keep the nuclear deterrent

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IT IS not always possible to take the British nuclear deterrent seriously. We once had a truck-mounted atomic land mine which the MoD christened Brown Bunt. We've also had nukes called - and I kid you not - Fishfryer, Green Bamboo, Kobkerry, Purple Passion and Tony. For the record, the last was before Mr Blair's time and was intended as the warhead for the Bloodhound surface-to-air missile.

The future of Britain's nuclear deterrent, and of nuclear proliferation in general, is certain to dominate the political debate over the next few years. Now that we've got the election out of the way, it is time to discuss a serious subject which the politicians have been avoiding for all they are worth.

What is the state of our nuclear arsenal? Back in 1998, we scrapped our last free-fall atomic bombs, putting the RAF out of the nuclear game. Our deterrent now consists of four newish Trident submarines and around 200 warheads.

Trident subs were originally designed to fend off nuclear blackmail from Soviet Russia. With the end of the Cold War, their mission status has been severely downgraded. Only one is on station at any time.

Theoretically, each can carry 16 missiles, every one loaded with multiple warheads. However, Tony Blair decreed that our single sentry boat should go to sea with less than its full weapons capacity - experts reckon they carry much fewer than 50 warheads. None of the missiles is programmed with pre-set targets so it would take a few days to set the software if we wanted to lob them at anyone.

The warheads themselves have also been downgraded in lethal power - though that's a relative matter. Informed opinion suggests that some missiles are armed only with "tiny" bombs of around 0.3 kilotons - about one-fiftieth the size of the weapon used on Hiroshima. (You'd need 60 Second World War Lancasters carrying Gland Slam bombs to equal that kind of blast.)

Overall, Britain's nuclear deterrent, though hardly negligible, represents a 70 per cent reduction in explosive power since the end of the Cold War. As a result, we are way behind the French. They have more atomic warheads, and deploy them on land-based and carrier-based aircraft as well as missile subs. Call that their revenge for Trafalgar.

Two questions leap to mind. One, why keep a nuclear deterrent now that the Red Army is not poised to sweep through to the Channel? Two, if we do need nuclear weapons, is it not daft to be spending an arm and a leg to maintain a Trident submarine fleet at half-cock, when the odd cruise missile would do the same job at a fraction of the cost?

These might have stayed theoretical debating points but for a dangerous confluence of technology and politics. On the hardware side, our Trident subs are only designed to last until circa 2025. But on past experience, developing a new deterrent system takes a long time - from the point Mrs Thatcher decided on Trident, it took 14 years to put it into service. Which means that sometime in the new parliament we will need to make up our minds on replacing Trident, or going non-nuclear.

This is compounded by the nuclear Non Proliferation Treaty, of which the UK is a signatory. Under the NPT, no nation can supply nukes to another. Britain leases American Trident missiles, but it has to build its own warheads. So, while we are making up our minds on what comes after Trident, we need to maintain a bomb factory.

British nukes are designed at the Atomic Weapons Establishment at Aldermaston. In 2000, the government renegotiated the contract with the AWE, which is owned by the MoD but run by a private consortium, including British Nuclear Fuels and the US defence contractor Lockheed Martin. This deal extended the contract for 25 years, at a cost of £5.3 billion.

In itself, this does not pre-empt a decision on what comes after Trident. Atomic bombs are in constant need of repair, and Aldermaston is also our repair shop. For instance, nukes need stuff called tritium (which we used to make at Chapelcross, near Dumfries) to vary the blast. You have to replace the tritium at regular intervals. Nevertheless, the



AWE is an expensive bit of kit unless you really have a strategic requirement for it.

Politics is also forcing Labour's nuclear hand. Nuclear weapons are proliferating like wildfire. India and Pakistan - not signatories to the NPT - have recently acquired the capacity to nuke each other over Kashmir. Iran is lying through its teeth about its frenzied desire to go nuclear, while the mad North Koreans are using the threat of acquiring the bomb to blackmail everybody.

THIS poses a dilemma. Why, ask the Iranians, should we not have the bomb if the British, French and (especially) the Israelis have it? In response, a number of leading non-nuclear countries - Sweden, New Zealand and South Africa - argue that the existing "legal" nuclear states should cut their stocks of atom bombs, if not scrap them altogether. America has cut its own stockpile by some 13,000 warheads since 1988 - it was always a ridiculous overkill, anyway - but the US is hardly going to go conventional. On the other hand, Britain offering to get out of the nuclear game altogether could have a huge diplomatic impact, and not just in moral terms.

A British offer to renounce nuclear weapons could be traded for a much-needed revision of the NPT. Stupidly, the latter allows countries voluntarily renouncing atomic weapons access to advanced nuclear technology for civil purposes (provided they accept UN inspection). Guess what? The Iranians and North Koreans lied and cheated in order to get their hands on the machinery to manufacture weapons-grade fissile material, while the UN inspectors proved embarrassingly incompetent.

Imposing new restrictions on access to such technology is desperately necessary. One view is that a UK decision to scrap its own nuclear weapons might make such a consensus easier to achieve.

OK, that's the case for the prosecution. Now the case for the defence. Nuclear proliferation is a fact of global life. Anyone who really thinks Britain giving up its nuclear stockpile will persuade the Iranians to play ball is hopelessly naive and probably lives in New Zealand (which no-one is going to nuke anyway). For that reason, I think Britain should hang on to a minimum nuclear deterrent until there's enough democracy around to feel safer.

The truth is that deterrence worked during the Cold War. It forced both sides to compete in non-military ways. And the guys who export democracy, make-up, fridges and Hollywood movies always win out over the Spartan ideologues and religious fanatics.

However, it is also clear that Trident is expensive and overblown for this purpose. Especially when we need more in the way of flexible conventional response, which means a new generation of large aircraft-carriers to project power globally.

Better, then, to put small nuclear warheads on cruise missiles deployed on our hunter-killer subs and warships. And reacquire the ability to drop nuclear bombs from aircraft. That way, we do not need to waste billions on dedicated delivery systems - the planes and cruise missiles can be used for conventional strikes as well.

But the one thing we should never do again is come up with a codename like Brown Bunty.

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