"for the sake of humanity - we must get rid of *all* nuclear weapons"

Professor Joseph Rotblat (1908 – 2005)

Acknowledgements

Thanks to Greg Mello (Los Alamos Study Group), Robert Aldridge (Pacific Life Research Centre), Dr Christopher Watson (Pugwash) and Carol Naughton (WMD Awareness Programme) for their assistance and comments, to the Scottish Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament for its support and to the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust for funding the publication of this report.

Author

John Ainslie studied nuclear strategy while a student of international relations at Keele University. After serving in the army he left as a conscientious objector to become a minister in the Church of Scotland. He has carried out research into nuclear issues, particularly the British Trident system, and is employed as coordinator of the Scottish Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament.

Purpose

The purpose of this report is to contribute to a comprehensive debate on the future of British nuclear weapons. The intention is to identify and clarify key issues from a perspective of opposition to the bomb. The report brings together technical information on Trident and nuclear planning systems in order to understand the current situation.

Published by the WMD Awareness Programme, 63A Great Russell Street, London, WC1B 3BJ. www.comeclean.org.uk The WMD Awareness Programme is supported by Abolition 2000 UK, Atomic Mirror, BASIC, British Pugwash Group, CND, Greenpeace UK, Medact, Movement for the Abolition of War, Oxford Research Group, Pax Christi, Quaker Peace and Social Witness, Youth/Student Pugwash, Acronym Institute for Disarmament Diplomacy and the World Court Project.

Printed by Clydeside Press, 37 High Street, Glasgow

October 2005

Front Cover
Left – RVs arriving at their target in the final stage of a Trident missile test; Ben Drummond, Lockheed Martin Space Systems, Strategic Missile Production, SWS Modeling & Simulation Symposium, Washington, 29-30 October 2002.
Right – Grapple Z British nuclear test

Nuclear independence

The special relationship

France has developed a range of nuclear capabilities with limited assistance from America. It has tried to retain not only operational independence but also nuclear self-reliance. Belgium, along with Germany, Italy and Holland, has aircraft that could be armed with US nuclear bombs. American forces secure the weapons and keep the codes needed to arm them. Britain's nuclear capable forces are more independent than those of Belgium and less independent than those of France.

The US has provided Britain with information on nuclear weapons, a range of essential hardware and assistance with nuclear material. In return British nuclear forces are constrained by two agreements. The Mutual Defence Agreement of 1958 says that the information and material provided by the US can only be used for mutual defence purposes. The Polaris Sales Agreement, reached in Nassau in 1963, says that British nuclear forces are assigned to NATO, except "where her Majesty's Government may decide that supreme national interests are at stake".[7]

Sir John Slessor, Chief of the Air Staff criticised the decision to buy Polaris. He condemned the way the agreement had been reached and the role of the Chief Scientific Adviser, Solly Zuckerman, whose background was in zoology. Sir John said, "It is a really appalling thought that a couple of Ministers and a zoologist can slip off to the Bahamas and, without a single member of the Chiefs of Staff Committee present, commit us to a military monstrosity [ie Polaris] on the purely political issue of nuclear independence – which anyway is a myth."[8] His statement was influenced by his own desire to resurrect the abandoned Skybolt system, nevertheless it revealed an awareness, at the highest levels, of the reality of nuclear dependence. Field Marshall Carver later argued that there was no point in Britain having an independent nuclear capability.[9]

It is almost inconceivable that the US would be neutral about a British nuclear strike. Any such attack would be so critical that the US would have a view about it. There are two types of situation in which British nuclear weapons might be used: where the action would be supported by the US and where it would be opposed by the US.

There is no doubt that British nuclear weapons could be used if London and Washington were in agreement. British weapons have almost certainly been incorporated into US nuclear attack options. An attack plan created in London would receive valuable practical support from the US Navy and Strategic Command (STRATCOM), if Washington endorsed it.

The critical issue is whether Britain could use its nuclear forces in a situation where the US was opposed to their use. If America objected then the attack would not be in both parties interest and would be in breach of the Mutual Defence Agreement. The US would be likely to use strong-arm tactics to dissuade Britain from acting. The technical dependence, outlined below, would constrain any independent attack.

Behind the scenes the US has not always been fully supportive of the British nuclear force. The McMahon Act (1946) restricted nuclear co-operation for a decade. Prior to the Nassau Agreement President Kennedy drafted a letter saying that he hoped to use his influence "in the direction of a gradual phasing down of the British nuclear commitment".[10] A few years later the State

---

[7] Polaris Sales Agreement 1963

[8] Solly Zuckerman, Monkey, Men and Missiles: an autobiography 1946-88, Collins, 1988, p254.

[9] Similar views were expressed in 1961 by Cabinet Secretary Sir Norman Brook who said "there is no great need for an independent British contribution to the strategic nuclear deterrent of the West", Memorandum by the Secretary of the Cabinet, 18 Jan 1961, "Some Aspects of Our Relations with the United States", File 52665, CAB 133/244 PRO, in Midshipman J B Solomon, The Multilateral Force: America's nuclear solution for NATO (1960-1965) 1999, US Naval Academy Annapolis.

[10] Draft of a letter from President Kennedy to the US Ambassador in Paris, May 1963. The letter was never sent. Ian Clark, Nuclear Diplomacy and the Special Relationship, 1994, p 300.

Annex A United States Nuclear Policy

The Old Enemy

According to President George W Bush, "Russia is not our enemy".[133] Condalice Rice has said "America's security is threatened less by Russia's strength than by its weakness and incoherence".[134] Today's problems are the conflict in Chechnya and the danger of Russian nuclear weapons falling into the hands of terrorists. In 2001 the Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) said, "The U.S. will no longer plan, size or sustain its forces as though Russia presented merely a smaller version of the threat posed by the former Soviet Union."[135]

However these statements mask the extent to which Russia remains the real focus of the US nuclear posture. The planners are still concerned about Russia's strength. It is "the only nation that we can conceive of with the potential to threaten the US national existence".[136] Bruce Blair, Director of the Centre for Defense Information, says of the Russian issue – "The dirty little secret of America's current nuclear policy is that 99 percent of the nuclear weapons budget, planning, targeting, and operational activities still revolves around this one anachronistic scenario".[137]

Planners assume that relations with Russia will change only slowly.[138] They think that Russia will retain a substantial nuclear arsenal, but is unlikely to become a peer competitor with the US.[139] It has been suggested that Russia might try to improve its conventional forces.[140] Paul Robinson, as Chair of the Strategic Advisory Group, uses the term Capability One to describe Central Deterrence, the main focus of which will continue to be Russia.[141] For this America will continue to have forces on short notice to deter any possible sudden attack, try to reduce the stockpiles of strategic nuclear weapons held by each side, and retain a "hedge". This hedge is an ability to rearm should the threat from Russia increase.

The NPR adopts a capabilities-based approach. [142] The US will prepare to respond to the types of forces an enemy may have, rather than to specific adversaries. But the scale of the potential threat from Russia is unique. The capabilities-based approach only really applies to wider threats.

There have been calls for a more radical realignment of US nuclear forces. A review of Future Strategic Strike Forces calls for weapons systems to be modified so that they are more suitable for use against new WMD threats. It says that plans to develop low-yield weapons should be accelerated and there should be new conventional weapons for long-range strategic attacks. It advocates cutting back spending on high-yield weapons to pay for the new capabilities. This criticism of the NPR shows that it was not the radical document that it claimed to be.

The vast majority of the nuclear weapons budget from 2005 to 2009 is allocated to sustaining existing high-yield weapons. Although the numbers are falling, there is no substantial adjustment of the types of nuclear forces. Current US strategic nuclear forces remain designed for use against Russia, while some of these forces could also be used in a Counter Proliferation role.

Paul Robinson said that the US "employs a counterforce strategy that targets military assets that could inflict damage on our national interests".[143] The NPR said that US nuclear weapons would be targeted on "leadership and military capabilities, particularly WMD, military command facilities

---

[133] Baker Spring, Nuclear Posture Review and Extended Deterrence, p 2
[134] C Paul Robinson, A White Paper: Pursuing a New Nuclear Weapons Policy for the 21st Century, SNL, 22 March 2001, p2
[135] Nuclear Posture Review, 31 December 2001, www.globalsecurity.org
[136] Robinson White Paper
[137] Experts warn of accidental US Russian missile launches; report on the NPRI conference in January 2004,www.nti.org/d_newswire/issues/2004_1_28.html#C80DE2E1
[138] Robinson White Paper p7
[139] G C Buchan, Future Roles of US Nuclear Forces, RAND, 2003, p 2-10.
[140] Stephen Younger, Nuclear Weapons in the 21st Century, Deputy Director, Los Alamos, 200.
[141] Robinson White Paper
[142] Nuclear Posture Review 2001
[143] Robinson White Paper, p7

Introduction

The need for a decision

The Defence White Paper in December 2003 reported that, while a decision on whether to replace Trident would not be needed in the lifetime of the current parliament, it was expected during the next parliament. This was repeated in subsequent statements. On the eve of the 2005 General Election the Independent reported that the decision to replace Trident had already been taken. In June 2005 the New Statesman said the matter was already a done deal - the decision had been taken to replace Trident, all that remained was to choose which system should be adopted.[1] In its election manifesto the Labour Party said they were committed to retaining the independent nuclear deterrent. It is not correct to deduce from this that the replacement decision has already been made. The statement in the manifesto was a repeat of the established position, not the result of any major review. The Defence Minister, John Reid, said in July 2005 that he had not yet begun to consider the issue. In September 2005 he was reported as opening the debate on the issue.[2]

Some commentators have argued that there is no need for the decision to be made in the life of this parliament. Lord Gardner, Liberal Democrat defence spokesperson, has said that there is still substantial life left in the Trident system and that the issue will not need to be tackled before 2010.[3] The timescale may be determined by the expected life of Trident submarines. The official hull life of each vessel is 25 years and the first submarine, HMS Vanguard, will reach this in 2019. The warheads will need to be either refurbished or replaced from around 2017.[4] A new submarine or an alternative system would require a long lead-time. It is likely that there will be a review within the life of this parliament, before 2010.

The decision making process

Resolution class submarines had an initial life expectancy of 20 years. In 1977, eleven years before the end of this planned life, a sub-group was set up to consider a replacement for Polaris. At the time it was anticipated that the life of the system could probably be extended. The sub-group, consisting of the Prime Minister, Chancellor, Foreign Minister and Defence Secretary, established two working groups of officials: one, led by the Foreign Office, looked at military and international implications, the other, led by the MoD, looked at alternative systems. Two studies were presented to ministers in November 1978. It was agreed that a decision should be taken before the end of 1980 and that the replacement was likely to be a submarine-based system.[5] Jim Callaghan raised the issue with President Carter in January 1979. His successor, Mrs Thatcher, set up Cabinet subcommittee MISC 7 and reached agreement with President Regan in 1980. The Defence Select Committee examined the future of strategic nuclear weapons after this decision had been made. The initial proposal, to acquire Trident C4, was revised in 1982 and the D5 system was procured. The first Trident submarine entered service in December 1994.

Opening a conference on the Future of Strategic Deterrence for the UK, in July 2005, Rear Admiral Richard Cobbolt, Director of the Royal United Services Institute, said, "momentous decisions of this kind should not be made behind closed doors."[6] The issue is significant not only in defence terms, but also because of its financial, diplomatic and moral implications. There should be break from past practice, a meaningful process of consultation and proper Parliamentary scrutiny.

There is a danger that a review will look only at whether to extend the life of Trident or replace it with some alternative. It might not fully consider the non-nuclear alternative. Failing to give this proper attention will undermine the process. Any review has to address the issue of what British

---

[1] Robert Fox, Trident: the done deal, New Stateman, 13 June 2005

[2] Patrick Wintour & Martin Kettle, Britain faces long-term nuclear threat and must plan for it, says Reid, Guardian 13 September 2005

[3] The future of the UK strategic deterrent, RUSI,conference, 6 July 2005.

[4] The warheads are being refurbished from 2005. The plan is probably for 12 years service before and after this. Annex I. The 25 year contract for AWE (2000-2025) "covers the expected life of the Trident system", AWE annual report 2002.

[5] Lawrence Freedman, Britain and Nuclear Weapons, Macmillan, 1980, p 52f

[6] RUSI deterrent conference

nuclear weapons are for. It is possible that this question will not be fully considered - for fear that this could lead to a non-nuclear conclusion.

Nuclear independence

The special relationship

France has developed a range of nuclear capabilities with limited assistance from America. It has tried to retain not only operational independence but also nuclear self-reliance. Belgium, along with Germany, Italy and Holland, has aircraft that could be armed with US nuclear bombs. American forces secure the weapons and keep the codes needed to arm them. Britain's nuclear capable forces are more independent than those of Belgium and less independent than those of France.

The US has provided Britain with information on nuclear weapons, a range of essential hardware and assistance with nuclear material. In return British nuclear forces are constrained by two agreements. The Mutual Defence Agreement of 1958 says that the information and material provided by the US can only be used for mutual defence purposes. The Polaris Sales Agreement, reached in Nassau in 1963, says that British nuclear forces are assigned to NATO, except "where her Majesty's Government may decide that supreme national interests are at stake".[7]

Sir John Slessor, Chief of the Air Staff criticised the decision to buy Polaris. He condemned the way the agreement had been reached and the role of the Chief Scientific Adviser, Solly Zuckerman, whose background was in zoology. Sir John said, "It is a really appalling thought that a couple of Ministers and a zoologist can slip off to the Bahamas and, without a single member of the Chiefs of Staff Committee present, commit us to a military monstrosity [ie Polaris] on the purely political issue of nuclear independence – which anyway is a myth."[8] His statement was influenced by his own desire to resurrect the abandoned Skybolt system, nevertheless it revealed an awareness, at the highest levels, of the reality of nuclear dependence. Field Marshall Carver later argued that there was no point in Britain having an independent nuclear capability.[9]

It is almost inconceivable that the US would be neutral about a British nuclear strike. Any such attack would be so critical that the US would have a view about it. There are two types of situation in which British nuclear weapons might be used: where the action would be supported by the US and where it would be opposed by the US.

There is no doubt that British nuclear weapons could be used if London and Washington were in agreement. British weapons have almost certainly been incorporated into US nuclear attack options. An attack plan created in London would receive valuable practical support from the US Navy and Strategic Command (STRATCOM), if Washington endorsed it.

The critical issue is whether Britain could use its nuclear forces in a situation where the US was opposed to their use. If America objected then the attack would not be in both parties interest and would be in breach of the Mutual Defence Agreement. The US would be likely to use strong-arm tactics to dissuade Britain from acting. The technical dependence, outlined below, would constrain any independent attack.

Behind the scenes the US has not always been fully supportive of the British nuclear force. The McMahon Act (1946) restricted nuclear co-operation for a decade. Prior to the Nassau Agreement President Kennedy drafted a letter saying that he hoped to use his influence "in the direction of a

---

[7] Polaris Sales Agreement 1963

[8] Solly Zuckerman, Monkey, Men and Missiles: an autobiography 1946-88, Collins, 1988, p254.

[9] Similar views were expressed in 1961 by Cabinet Secretary Sir Norman Brook who said "there is no great need for an independent British contribution to the strategic nuclear deterrent of the West", Memorandum by the Secretary of the Cabinet, 18 Jan 1961, "Some Aspects of Our Relations with the United States", File 52665, CAB 133/244 PRO, in Midshipman J B Solomon, The Multilateral Force: America's nuclear solution for NATO (1960-1965) 1999, US Naval Academy Annapolis.