

Two competing forces which influence British nuclear policy are: an institutional resistance to change, and pressure to make progress towards disarmament. The first is summed up by Tim Hare in his phrase "more of the same".<sup>1</sup> The former director of nuclear policy has presented arguments why the nuclear posture that we inherited from the Cold War is the most appropriate one for the future. Opponents of change in any institution can be well-placed to marshal years of tradition in an attempt to block any departure from what has been done before.<sup>2</sup>

The conflicting pressure comes from the demands, both overseas and at home, that the UK must make progress towards disarmament in order to reduce the danger of proliferation and to fulfil our obligations under the Non Proliferation Treaty. Today these obligations include accelerating concrete progress towards disarmament and reducing the salience of nuclear weapons in defence policies.

The 2006 White Paper set out three potential nuclear risks in an uncertain future. The type of nuclear force recommended in the report is not based on the possible threat from "emerging nuclear states" or "state-sponsored terrorism". The recommendation that Britain requires a sizeable nuclear arsenal and CASD relates to only one of the three risks - "re-emergence of a major nuclear threat". This was regarded as an unlikely scenario, but one which could not be entirely ruled out.

The assumption is that if there were a repeat of the Cold War then the case for a Trident-style force with CASD would be unchallengeable. However the archives reveal that the rationale for British nuclear weapons was never clear cut, even at the height of the Cold War.

A 1967 review of policy pointed out that "it was not easy to foresee the precise circumstances in which our deterrent would be needed."<sup>3</sup>

In 1978 Sir Clive Rose, working in the Cabinet Office, wrote a paper on the Politico-Military Requirement for British nuclear weapons as part of a major policy review. His initial draft concluded:

"It can be said with assurance that if the United Kingdom did not already possess nuclear weapons the case against developing them would be virtually overwhelming ... What is at issue is whether or not we should now abandon the position of NWS [Nuclear Weapon State] which we have held at least since the early 1960s".<sup>4</sup>

Rose set out the case for and against Britain having nuclear weapons. His "case against" stressed Britain's obligations under the NPT. The Treaty was "rightly and inevitably regarded by the NNWS [Non Nuclear Weapon States] as discriminatory" and a decision to replace Polaris would signal that

<sup>1</sup> What Next for Trident? Tim Hare, RUSI journal, Vol 150 No 2, April 2005,

<sup>2</sup> The force of institutional pressure is illustrated by the Navy's moves, between 1975 and 1977, to circumvent a ministerial ban on any study into a replacement for Polaris. A number of papers were produced and only circulated within the Navy Department. One of these had a covering note which pointed out - "a political veto on the subject was imposed in the well-practiced tradition of Canute, and officially it still applies." Longer Term Basis of UK Deterrent, James Clarke, head of PPAG, 27 May 1977.

<sup>3</sup> Evolution of British Strategic Nuclear Capability, Richard Mottram, 9 March 1978, DEFE 68-405 e6

<sup>4</sup> The Politico-Military Requirement for a UK Nuclear Deterrent, 28 June 1978, DEFE 68-405 e23

“we intended to perpetuate the existing discrimination”.<sup>5</sup> This would reduce the UK’s ability to influence states which were contemplating acquiring nuclear weapons. It would also “be damaging to our credibility in disarmament negotiations.”<sup>6</sup>

Other points he made were that the British nuclear contribution to NATO was “insignificant”, that US/Russian nuclear arms reductions could have an impact on the British force and that the US commitment to NATO was more likely to be assured by improving conventional forces than by spending money on nuclear weapons. All of these are still relevant today.

The 2006 White Paper appears to set out both sides of similar arguments for today. But it is not objective. It was drafted to persuade the House of Commons to support an agreed Government position.<sup>7</sup>

Rose’s “case for” repeated established arguments for a second-centre of decision making and the independent defence of national interests. He also said that “our possession of nuclear weapons gives us a standing in world affairs which we would not otherwise have” and that “the abandonment of this status would be irrevocable and would be regarded internationally as a momentous step in British history”.<sup>8</sup>

In recent years there has been a reluctance to acknowledge the “status” argument in official government statements. The 2006 White Paper denies that it plays any role.

But John McTernan, a special adviser to Tony Blair and Des Browne, said bluntly that it does - “If we didn’t have Trident we’d be Belgium. Some people would find that a comfortable place to be. I wouldn’t. If Britain is going to be a major power, Britain should have the kinds of weapons a major power has”.<sup>9</sup>

In his autobiography Tony Blair described the basis of his decision to renew Trident:

“I could see clearly the force of the commonsense and practical arguments against Trident, yet in the final analysis I thought giving it up too big a downgrading of our status as a nation, and in an uncertain world, too big a risk for our defence. ... on simple, pragmatic grounds, there was a case either way. ... It is true that it is frankly inconceivable we would use our nuclear deterrent alone, without the US ... but it’s a big step to put that beyond your capacity as a country ... Imagine standing up in the House of Commons and saying I’ve decided to scrap it. We’re not going to say that, are we ?”<sup>10</sup>

The central point, underlying Britain’s retention of nuclear weapons, is that it would be “too big an ask” to get rid of them. This has its basis in issues of status and domestic politics. An honest

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<sup>5</sup> The Politico-Military Requirement for a UK Nuclear Deterrent, 28 June 1978, DEFE 68-405 e23. This draft was subsequently amended. The strength of the “case against” was diluted by dispersing the key points among various paragraphs in the final report.

<sup>6</sup> The Politico-Military Requirement for a UK Nuclear Deterrent, 28 June 1978, DEFE 68-405 e23

<sup>7</sup> The Future of the United Kingdom’s Nuclear Deterrent, Cm 6994, December 2006

<sup>8</sup> The Politico-Military Requirement for a UK Nuclear Deterrent, 28 June 1978, DEFE 68-405 e23. These points are repeated in the final version of Part I of the report on Factors Relating to Further Consideration of the Future of the United Kingdom Nuclear Deterrent.

<sup>9</sup> Who Needs Trident, BBC Scotland, 23 February 2011

<sup>10</sup> Tony Blair A Journey, September 2010

appraisal of this situation would place the debate about what kind of nuclear weapons, if any, Britain should have in a different context. If we only keep a nuclear arsenal because the political assessment is that complete disarmament is “too big a step”, then it doesn’t really matter how few weapons we have, or whether they are vulnerable.

## Certainty

Tim Hare argues that “a potential adversary can be *absolutely certain* of retaliation in the event of nuclear aggression” and “with a CASD posture there is no doubt”.<sup>45</sup>

However this approach is misleading. There was no requirement for absolute certainty in former policy. Even in the ultimate situation, a massive Soviet nuclear attack, a nuclear response was only a possibility -

“there can be no certainty that a Government would take a deliberate decision to launch this act involving the killing of large numbers of enemy civilians but serving no rational purpose for their own country.”

“what is essential ... is that the Soviet Government should believe that there is a real possibility of a British Government ordering such retaliation.”<sup>46</sup>

## CASD

CASD has its origin in the belief that it was essential to have an Assured Second Strike Capability.

Today the possibility of a bolt from the blue attack is not credible. Even during the Cold War this form of attack was not considered as likely. It was just regarded as something that could not be ruled out -

“It is unlikely that the Soviet Union would ever launch a ‘bolt from the blue’ attack ..... On the other hand, Soviet doctrine certainly requires the maximum use of surprise in launching an attack, so that the worst case possibility of an attack without warning cannot be ruled out.”<sup>47</sup>

## Command system vulnerability

CASD is only one component of an Assured Second Strike Capability. The second is an invulnerable Command and Control system –

“Both the launch platform *and the command and control arrangements* for ensuring that nuclear release was carried out on the basis of positive political control needed to be able to withstand a pre-emptive attack.”<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Nuclear Policy at Sea: A part-time deterrent will not do ! RUSI Journal Vol 154 No 6, December 2009. Italics in the original.

<sup>46</sup> Factors Relating to Further Consideration of the Future of the United Kingdom Nuclear Deterrent, Part I The politico-military requirement, 30 November 1978, DEFE 68-406 e21, paras 11 & 12. Underlined by hand in the original.

<sup>47</sup> Factors Relating to Further Consideration of the Future of the United Kingdom Nuclear Deterrent, Part II Criteria for Deterrence, Annex C Other Criteria, 30 November 1978, DEFE 68-406 e21

<sup>48</sup> Criteria for Deterrence, Note of a meeting held in Sir Antony Duff's room, Foreign and Commonwealth Office on 15 March 1978 at 9.30 am, DEFE 68-405 e8

Russia built and retains a network of deep command bunkers and airborne command posts. It has a complex system for automating control from central facilities, or delegating to lower command posts if necessary. Despite this, the Russian military have been concerned that this network could be knocked-out by a pre-emptive strike from America. The US also has a sophisticated and wide ranging nuclear C3 network with multiple redundancy. In comparison, the nuclear C3 facilities which are under British sovereign control are limited and very vulnerable. A handwritten letter from the Prime Minister in the safe is not really the same as a survivable C3 system.

The "assurance" of a second strike capability depends on the strength of the weakest link in the chain, which in Britain's case is the C3 system.

*This hints at an essential dilemma, then and now. The case for having nuclear weapons was not strong enough for Britain to acquire them anew from scratch, so a decision to give them up would be irrevocable. As a result, abandoning our nuclear status was an even greater step than would otherwise be the case.*

The National Archives have in recent years released documents which provide a narrow but important window into British nuclear-weapons' policy making between 1977 and 1982. These show that the criteria which have been inherited by the Ministry of Defence were not cast in stone but were regarded, at the height of the Cold War, as matters of judgement.

This is tied to the unmentionable belief that nuclear weapons give the holder enhanced status.

A study of the Rationale for the UK Strategic Nuclear Deterrent Force in 1970 pointed out that "our position in NATO and in Europe would be very different if we were a non-nuclear power. It would be undesirable for France to be the only such power in Europe."<sup>49</sup> The Duff-Mason report said that status was one of the advantages of having nuclear weapons – "Our possession of nuclear weapons gives us a standing in world affairs which we would not otherwise have".<sup>50</sup>

The 2006 White Paper states that the UK does not retain nuclear weapons for reasons of status but, in the light of Tony Blair's comments in his biography, this disclaimer is not convincing.

If we approach the issue from the honest perspective that the successive British governments have only retained nuclear weapons because they can't bring themselves to get rid of them, then all the arguments about criteria lose their significance.

The archives show that nuclear policy included highly classified "damage criteria". These set the basis for defining the level of damage which the Soviet Union was likely to regard as unacceptable. However these damage criteria were not static.

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<sup>49</sup> The conclusions of the 1970 study are summarised in Evolution of British Strategic Nuclear Capability, Richard Mottram, 9 March 1978, DEFE 68-405 e6, para 13

<sup>50</sup> Factors Relating to Further Consideration of the Future of the United Kingdom Nuclear Deterrent, Part I The politico-military requirement, 30 November 1978, DEFE 68-406 e21

In response to an early debate on whether Britain should be able to destroy 5 or 20 cities in the Soviet Union, Lord Home (?) said that what mattered was what the American's would think.

1947 – "It is not possible to assess the precise number which we might require but we are convinced we should aim to have as soon as possible a stock in the order of hundreds rather than scores".

For Polaris and Chevaline the criterion was to destroy Moscow.<sup>51</sup> From 1975 to 1982 the Polaris force was unable to meet this Moscow criterion when only one submarine was on patrol because of improvements in Russia's ABM defences. An alternative of attacking several cities, excluding Moscow, was adopted on a temporary basis.

"We conclude that there is a strong case for continuous deployment of a strategic force to minimise the risk of pre-emption and to maintain the full credibility of the threat we are posing. But the extent, if any, to which risks might be run in this area must ultimately be a matter of judgement, taking account of such factors as cost".<sup>52</sup>

The argument that we should either have a force like Trident or nothing belies a rejection of the possibility of disarmament. It is based on a fear that salami-cut reductions in Britain's nuclear capability will result in disarmament. If we take one significant step, taking Trident off patrol, then further steps towards disarmament become possible.

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<sup>51</sup> Polaris Improvements, letter from Roy Mason to Harold Wilson 18 September 1975

<sup>52</sup> Factors Relating to Further Consideration of the Future of the United Kingdom Nuclear Deterrent, Part II Criteria for Deterrence, Annex C Other Criteria, 30 November 1978, DEFE 68-406 e21

Duff group meeting March 1978 -

"Both the launch platform *and the command and control arrangements* for ensuring that nuclear release was carried out on the basis of positive political control needed to be able to withstand a pre-emptive attack"<sup>53</sup> – for assured second strike capability

"It could be argued that the Russians would never launch a bolt from the blue attack and advantage could therefore be taken of a warning period to bring the capability to full readiness. There were, however, serious objections to this approach. A decision to bring the capability to full readiness would become known to the Russians and Ministers might be reluctant to authorise until it was too late what could be interpreted as a provocative act. And certain forms of enhancing readiness, such as maintaining aircraft on airborne alert only during a period of tension, could not be concealed from the public and the possibility of a public outcry might also weaken the resolve of ministers."<sup>54</sup>

Duff Mason Report part 2 –

"If a credible deterrent threat is to be posed, a potential aggressor must perceive that he cannot count on being able to neutralise the threat by pre-emptive attack. We therefore believe that the strategic force, and its system of control, must offer a high probability that they will be able to remain effective in the face of such an attack".<sup>55</sup>

"It is unlikely that the Soviet Union would ever launch a 'bolt from the blue' attack ..... On the other hand, Soviet doctrine certainly requires the maximum use of surprise in launching an attack, so that the worst case possibility of an attack without warning cannot be ruled out".<sup>56</sup>

"we might face an awkward decision in a period of heightened tension between adopting what they might regard and designate as a provocative act or denying ourselves our full capability. Secondly, a deterrent posture which could be sustained at full readiness for only a limited period would be vulnerable in any crisis which lasted longer than this period. These possibilities could weaken the deterrent effect of our forces both to the Soviet Union and in our own eyes."<sup>57</sup>

ie even in 1978 CASD was not considered an absolute

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<sup>53</sup> Criteria for Deterrence, Note of a meeting held in Sir Antony Duff's room, Foreign and Commonwealth Office on 15 March 1978 at 9.30 am, DEFE 68-405 e8

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<sup>55</sup> Factors Relating to Further Consideration of the Future of the United Kingdom Nuclear Deterrent, Part II Criteria for Deterrence, Annex C Other Criteria, 30 November 1978, DEFE 68-406 e21

<sup>56</sup> Factors Relating to Further Consideration of the Future of the United Kingdom Nuclear Deterrent, Part II Criteria for Deterrence, Annex C Other Criteria, 30 November 1978, DEFE 68-406 e21

<sup>57</sup> Factors Relating to Further Consideration of the Future of the United Kingdom Nuclear Deterrent, Part II Criteria for Deterrence, Annex C Other Criteria, 30 November 1978, DEFE 68-406 e21



2006 – “A deterrent system **must** be able to function irrespective of any pre-emptive action that might be taken by a potential aggressor”.<sup>58</sup>

Damage Criteria as a moveable feast:

Concern that discussion of Duff criteria could undermine spending on Chevaline. The Chancellor had argued that if the Moscow criterion was unnecessary then Chevaline should be cancelled.<sup>59</sup>

“The view taken in Tony Duff’s report that the credibility of the deterrent could be maintained if we had the ability to cause unacceptable damage to certain cities and other targets in Russia, excluding Moscow, seems to me to call the requirement for Chevaline into question.”<sup>60</sup>

“deterrent criteria for damage required are not absolute in either scale or probability”<sup>61</sup>

Handwritten note by Richard Mottram to Michael Quinlan:

- a. Our present criterion is to attack Moscow as a city.
- b. For the future something better (Option 1) would offer surest deterrence but Option 2 (better than we currently do) or Option 3a (10 cities) would we believe deter.
- c. We cannot now chose the targeting option for 16 years hence. Our aim should be to buy flexibility.
- d. On this argument – and cost and risk – C4 MIRV is best ”<sup>62</sup>

Critique of Owen 1 million dead:

“If we reduce dramatically, comparison with the French standard (and our own former standard) will be a major component of the subsequent evaluation our allies and our adversaries make”<sup>63</sup>

This would be “a strike of relatively modest proportions” in the light of Soviet deaths in World War II.<sup>64</sup> It was questionable whether this would give a British government confidence to act resolutely in a dangerous situation.

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<sup>58</sup> The Future of the United Kingdom’s Nuclear Deterrent, Cm 6994, December 2006

<sup>59</sup> Criteria for Deterrence, Draft Minute from Sir John Hunt to Jim Callaghan, July 1978, DEFE 23-219 e71

<sup>60</sup> Criteria for Deterrence, letter from Douglas Wass, Treasury, to Sir John Hunt, 27 June 1978, DEFE 23-219 e57

<sup>61</sup> Criteria for Deterrence, letter from DUS(P) [Michael Quinlan] to PUS, 20 June 1978, DEFE 23-219 e55

<sup>62</sup> The Successor to Polaris, Letter from Michael Quinlan, 29 October 1979, DEFE 23-221 e47

<sup>63</sup> Nuclear Matters, letter from Michael Quinlan to PS to Secretary of State for Defence, 18 December 1978, DEFE 25-433 e21

In November 1979 Francis Pym, the Conservative Defence minister, wrote to Mrs Thatcher recommending the procurement of Trident C4 and a fleet of 5 submarines. This made the following comment on the damage criteria:

“we can never be sure what is required to deter, but I believe that a force capable of threatening Soviet central government would have on any Soviet leadership a more certain effect than one that is limited to threatening centres of population”.<sup>65</sup>

Criteria for deterrence with regard to Chevaline:

“an assured and continuous capability to inflict damage unacceptable to the Russians by credibly threatening to destroy Moscow”.<sup>66</sup>

A 10% reduction in the level of damage for breakdown, from 50% to 40% was under discussion in 1977 and adopted by 1978.<sup>67</sup>

With regard to a *British nuclear response* to anything less than a devastating Soviet nuclear attack on Britain -

“We do not believe it is possible to engender in a potential adversary certainty that the process of escalation will inexorably occur at every point unless he backs off. But, for deterrence, the risk of escalation, provided it is not so small that it can be discounted, will suffice.”<sup>68</sup>

“[The Soviet leader] would certainly be entitled to entertain substantial doubt about whether the UK would set its foot on the nuclear ladder. But ... he could not easily conclude that the probability was zero”.<sup>69</sup>

*BNDSG contemplated reducing the threshold to 10 cities, or to 5, and concluded that 15 would be appropriate.*<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> *ibid*

<sup>65</sup> The Successor to Polaris, letter from Francis Pym to Margaret Thatcher, 1 November 1979, DEFE 25-434 e80

<sup>66</sup> Polaris Improvements, letter from Roy Mason to Harold Wilson 18 September 1975

<sup>67</sup> Future Strategic Systems, report of a Navy Department working group, 1977, DEFE 19-271 e42

<sup>68</sup> Factors Relating to Further Consideration of the Future of the United Kingdom Nuclear Deterrent, Part I The politico-military requirement, 30 November 1978, DEFE 68-406 e21, para 11-14. Underlined by hand in the original.

<sup>69</sup> The credibility of an independent British contribution to NATO deterrence, informal note by Michael Quinlan, 15 July 1981, DEFE 25-435 e22

<sup>70</sup> Ambiguity and Deterrence: British Nuclear Strategy 1945-64, John Baylis, OUP 1995, p 50,52, 368-9