

store many more targets and can be rapidly retargeted. Contracts issued in the US show that the software in the computers on British submarines is created in America.

Target plans can be created in the Nuclear Operations and Targeting Centre in the MoD. This is more than just picking a number of coordinates on a map. The processes involved are complex. The shore-based target planning system duplicates many of the calculations performed in the fire-control system on the submarine. The data is supplied in a format that the fire-control system can understand. Given that the fire-control system software is American, it is likely that the software used in the Targeting Centre also comes from the US. A contract issued earlier this year revealed the targeting models, at the heart of the British system, are made in America. It also showed that the difference between the British and American Trident software was that some components and data are removed from the version supplied to Britain, because it is too highly classified. Computer game manufacturers often supply free version of their programmes – but in a light version – either with key parts missing, or that will only work for 30 days. The software supplied for the British Trident system is cut-down versions of the programmes used by the US Navy.

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It is possible that this software could be modified in such a way as to limited the capability for Britain to use Trident independently. For example – it would not be unreasonable for the US to inject into the programme a few lines which would mean that Trident missiles could not be launched against North America. The software could be adjusted in other ways - to substantially restrict Britain's capability to use Trident. There is no evidence that this has been done – but it could be, without anyone in this country knowing. So the degree of independence that Trident has is determined in Washington.

The official line is that there are two ways that British nuclear weapons could be used – under NATO, or independently. ~~But~~ the third possibility – using British weapons as part of a bilateral Anglo-American nuclear attack – is not mentioned, even though it is more likely than either a NATO or an independent strike. At the start of the attack on Iraq the US used many cruise missiles. A small number were also fired from British submarines. The only conceivable way in which British nuclear weapons could be used is in the same way – as a small part of an American assault – to share the blame and in an attempt to give it legitimacy.

But this is not something that is acknowledged by the Government – we don't hear John Reid saying that Britain will need to have nuclear weapons in 20 years time so that we can prop up a US nuclear attack.

What we do hear is that we need nuclear weapons because the world is an uncertain place – we do not know the threats that we are likely to face in 2025. A stark illustration of the irrelevance of nuclear weapons is the stockpile of over 400 nuclear bombs which the US still keeps in Europe. They are on months notice to be used. A series of American military reports have argued that they can have no military purpose. But yet they are retained. In 1991 most American nuclear weapons were withdrawn from Europe – these bombs slipped through the net – and no-one in Washington has yet been able to acknowledge that they are no more than a legacy of the Cold War. The same is true of the British Trident force.

101 reasons to have the bomb

The world is an uncertain place

Roughly translated this means - there is no conceivable reason why Britain should have nuclear weapons today - but who knows, maybe one day something will crop up. This approach is totally irresponsible - the message it sends to every other nation in the world is - you too should have the bomb - just to be on the safe side - you never know what the future will bring.

There is a danger from terrorists

When John Reid says the world is an uncertain place he knows full well that the general public will interpret this as an allusion to the threat from terrorists. The fact that his advisers will tell him that nuclear weapons have no direct role to play against terrorists is ignored. The reality is that Osama bin Laden would not be deterred by the threat of an Anglo-American nuclear attack - far from it he would welcome it - and even provoke it. We could never use Trident to stop Al Qaeda from acquiring WMD. All that we are doing is fuelling the proliferation of nuclear weapons by the example we set to other nations.

Russia still has thousands of nuclear weapons

There is a lot of talk in America about "useable" nuclear weapons and new threats, but if you follow the money then it is clear that the US nuclear establishment remains primarily focused on Russia. The current budget allocates billions of dollars to sustaining until 2040 very large numbers of high yield long range nuclear weapons - the only scenario this force could be used in is an attack on the old enemy.

For Britain's part the historical argument was that the Soviet tanks were revving up ready to storm across Western Europe and we needed to be ready to push the button to stop them. But the perceived threat has long vanished. The nuclear element of the Cold War has partially frozen.

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The government repeatedly claims that Britain has only a minimum deterrent. But if the intention was to attack a country that had only one or two WMD, then the 144 warheads available would be excessive. "Minimum" refers to how many warheads would be needed for an attack on Russia. Yet we are told that Russia is no longer a threat, nor likely to become one in the future. It would be optimistic to expect that if Britain gave up nuclear weapons Russia would immediately follow our example – but this would have a positive effect on our relationship with the old enemy.

The new draft US nuclear doctrine openly speaks about pre-emptive strikes with nuclear weapons and using them to target chemical and biological weapons. The new mission of Strategic Command is full spectrum global strike – this is the ability to launch an attack with all means – nuclear, conventional and information warfare – anywhere in the world at short notice.

The signs are that the British nuclear establishment does not share the new American approach. I think that any signals that we give about an independent use of nuclear weapons in response to a chemical or biological attack – are largely bluff. Tim Hare, a former Director of Nuclear Planning, and Michael Quinlan have openly criticised the US warfighting approach and the concept of useable nuclear weapons. They talk about "preventing war" and "future uncertainties". But the reality is that we are tied into a US system that plans for nuclear warfighting – anywhere at a few hours notice.

There is no coherent rational for British nuclear weapons and there are substantial costs and risks in retaining them. There are major benefits that would flow from not replacing Trident. This would contribute to tackling proliferation. It would reinforce the taboo on the use of nuclear weapons and free up valuable resources. It would also send a clear signal that this country is not willing to support an aggressive US nuclear policy.