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## **Trident: What is it For? Challenging the Relevance of British Nuclear Weapons**

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# **Trident: What is it *For*?**

## Challenging the Relevance of British Nuclear Weapons

Dr. Nick Ritchie



Bradford Disarmament Research Centre

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## About this briefing

This briefing paper is the second in a series to be published during 2007 and 2008 as part of the Bradford Disarmament Research Centre's programme on *Nuclear-Armed Britain: A Critical Examination of Trident Modernisation, Implications and Accountability*. It is supported by an in-depth research report available at [www.brad.ac.uk/acad/bdrc/nuclear/trident/researchreport1.html](http://www.brad.ac.uk/acad/bdrc/nuclear/trident/researchreport1.html)

The first briefing, entitled *Trident: The Deal Isn't Done – Serious Questions Remain Unanswered*, is available to download at [www.brad.ac.uk/acad/bdrc/nuclear/trident/briefing1.html](http://www.brad.ac.uk/acad/bdrc/nuclear/trident/briefing1.html)

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## About the author

Nick Ritchie is a Post-Doctoral Research Fellow at the Department of Peace Studies, University of Bradford. He is lead researcher on the *Nuclear-armed Britain* programme. He previously worked for six years as a researcher at the Oxford Research Group on global security issues, in particular nuclear proliferation, arms control and disarmament. His PhD thesis examined the evolution of US nuclear weapons policy from 1990-2004. Recent publications include *The Political Road to War with Iraq* with Paul Rogers (Routledge, 2007), *Replacing Trident: Britain, America and Nuclear Weapons*, Contemporary Security Policy, Vol. 28 No. 2 (August 2007), and *Replacing Trident: Who Will Make the Decisions and How?* (Oxford Research Group report, August 2006).

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# Trident : What is it *For*?

## Challenging the Relevance of British Nuclear Weapons

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### Summary

In December 2006 the Government presented its case for replacing Britain's Trident nuclear weapons system when it reaches the end of its service life and effectively retaining nuclear weapons well into the 2050s. The decision to begin the process of replacing Trident was endorsed by Parliament in March 2007. In March 2008 the Government released its first ever *National Security Strategy* that stressed the long-term complexity and interdependence of threats to British security for which the devastating bluntness of a British nuclear attack appears to have little relevance.

The Government's case for renewing Trident and keeping nuclear weapons for the long-term hinges on the concept of nuclear deterrence and the idea that nuclear weapons provide a form of 'insurance' against nuclear threats from other countries. This briefing paper examines the relevance of British nuclear deterrent threats to Britain's security, particularly the contention that nuclear weapons are needed to provide a general, global deterrent to defend a broad range of British 'vital interests' in an uncertain future. It argues that:

- ◆ The 'logic' of nuclear deterrence is fallible, British nuclear weapons do not provide an 'insurance' or guarantee of protection against nuclear threats, and deploying a 'deterrent' does not ensure that others will be 'deterred'.
- ◆ Only Russia and China are likely to be major nuclear powers with the capability and possible future intention to threaten Britain and Western Europe with nuclear weapons. Yet the trend in relations with both is positive and conflict with either would be deeply destabilising, costly and counter-productive regardless of the threat to use or actual use of nuclear weapons.
- ◆ The credibility and legitimacy of threatening nuclear destruction with British nuclear weapons in response to the use of WMD by 'rogue' states is highly questionable. British nuclear weapons offer no guarantee that military intervention against a WMD-armed 'rogue' can be kept at a conventional level. Nuclear retaliation would cause widespread destruction, massive civilian casualties, be of little military value, counter-productive to Western political objectives and shatter the long-standing international 'taboo' against nuclear use.
- ◆ Nuclear weapons have no role to play in deterring acts of nuclear terrorism whether state-sponsored or not. Incontrovertible evidence of state sponsorship of nuclear terrorism will be hard to ascertain, terrorist groups may actively seek nuclear retaliation, and killing thousands of civilians in a sponsoring state would be massively disproportionate and counter-productive.
- ◆ Britain is unlikely to face a cascade of nuclear proliferation in the future and there is no automatic link between nuclear weapons and potential capabilities in other countries and an essential necessity for a British nuclear capability
- ◆ The British political and defence establishment insists on keeping nuclear weapons 'just in case' because the future security environment appears so uncertain. But nuclear deterrent threats and the use of nuclear weapons by Britain cannot hope to offer any useful solution to the symptoms of that uncertainty – complex future conflicts characterised by diverse and interdependent sources of insecurity and 'hybrid' wars that may threaten British 'vital interests'.

**Dr. Nick Ritchie**

*April 2008*

Bradford Disarmament Research Centre  
Department of Peace Studies  
University of Bradford

## 1. What is Trident *For*?

**“The Cold War threat has been replaced by a diverse but interconnected set of threats and risks... driven by a diverse and interconnected set of underlying factors, including climate change, competition for energy, poverty and poor governance, demographic changes and globalisation.”<sup>1</sup>**

So reads the Government’s new *National Security Strategy of the United Kingdom: Security in an Interdependent World*, released in March 2008. The *complexity* of the future security landscape and the *interdependence* of threats to British security are the strategy’s watchwords.

In January 2008 Prime Minister Gordon Brown pledged that “in the run-up to the Non-Proliferation Treaty review conference in 2010 we will be at the forefront of the international campaign to accelerate disarmament amongst possessor states, to prevent proliferation to new states, and to ultimately achieve a world that is free from nuclear weapons”. This followed Foreign Secretary Margaret Beckett’s vision of the UK as a “disarmament laboratory” set out in June 2007.<sup>2</sup>

So where does the threat to kill tens if not hundreds of thousands of people with British nuclear weapons fit into the *National Security Strategy*’s view of the world? Where does the steady march to replace the current Trident nuclear weapon system and effectively retain nuclear weapons well into the 2050s fit into a world free from nuclear weapons? What relevance is an instrument of such wholesale destructiveness to threats defined by complexity and interdependence?

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**Where does the threat to kill tens if not hundreds of thousands of people with British nuclear weapons fit into the *National Security Strategy*’s view of the world?**

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The Government argues that its nuclear weapons are purely defensive and “are not designed for military use during conflict”.<sup>3</sup> However, seemingly ‘defensive’ nuclear deterrent threats cannot be divorced from concrete plans for the actual ‘offensive’ use of nuclear weapons. If such threats are considered a rational tool of policy then nuclear war itself must also be considered rational.<sup>4</sup> So under what circumstances would the use of British nuclear weapons constitute a ‘rational’ contribution to its security? In 2006 the House of Commons Defence Committee urged the Government to consider just such questions, including “whether the concept of nuclear deterrence remains useful in the current strategic environment and in the context of the existing and emerging threats to the security of the country”.<sup>5</sup>

The Government has not addressed these questions. Instead it has *asserted* in its 2006 White Paper on *The Future of the United Kingdom’s Nuclear Deterrent* that the logic of nuclear deterrence still pertains in four broad areas.

- Deterrence against aggression towards British/NATO vital interests or nuclear coercion/blackmail by major powers with large nuclear arsenals.
- Deterrence against nuclear coercion or blackmail by regional ‘rogue’ states to enable military intervention in the name of regional and global security.
- Deterrence against state-sponsored acts of nuclear terrorism.
- General deterrence to preserve regional and global security directed towards ‘whomever it may concern’.<sup>6</sup>

The Government asserts that British nuclear weapons are therefore not only meant to deter possible threats from other nuclear forces, but also the threat from chemical and biological weapons and general threats to British ‘vital interests’ anywhere in the world. This broad and controversial remit for nuclear weapons extends far beyond extreme threats to the survival of the nation to include the deterrence of threats to the security of the European continent, global economic interests based on the free flow of trade, overseas and foreign investment and key raw materials, the safety and security of British citizens living and working overseas and its Overseas Territories, and general international stability.<sup>7</sup>

When these rationales are pushed a little further the Government reverts to a fall-back position that it is impossible to know what the future holds over the next 30-40 years and therefore it would be ‘prudent’ to keep nuclear weapons just in case, regardless of the political and economic costs.<sup>8</sup> In this uncertain and complex international security environment it seems that the Labour Government and the wider British defence establishment is certain about one thing: having the capability to annihilate potential enemies with nuclear weapons is an essential part of the solution to dealing with future security threats.

Questions about exactly *how* British nuclear weapons can and will contribute to British and international security beyond assertions that they do are deflected by the Government’s policy of ‘deliberate ambiguity’ about the conditions under which Britain might contemplate using nuclear weapons. This ambiguity is based on the argument that greater clarity might somehow “simplify the calculations of a potential aggressor” and it prevents a solid assessment of likely nuclear threats and appropriate responses.<sup>9</sup>

The truism that the future is unpredictable cannot be disputed, but does this provide a sound basis for keeping nuclear weapons? Defence analyst Michael Fitzsimmons warns that overemphasising future uncertainty risks “clouding the rational basis for making strategic choices”. Whilst accepting that the future will be full of surprises, “uncertainty must be considered within the context of an environment where some significant threats are relatively clear and where known contingencies are important to plan for”.<sup>10</sup> We may not know what the future holds, but robust parameters can be outlined and a detailed analysis of the relevance of British nuclear deterrent threats in the four areas set out by the Government can be undertaken. That task is the purpose of this briefing paper, which is supported by a more detailed research report available at [www.brad.ac.uk/acad/bdrc/nuclear/trident/researchreport1.html](http://www.brad.ac.uk/acad/bdrc/nuclear/trident/researchreport1.html).

Nuclear advocates will ask what if your assessment is wrong? What if we find ourselves in situation wishing we had nuclear weapons? The answer must be to insist they demonstrate how British nuclear weapons can and will contribute to British and international security above and beyond our extensive conventional armed forces and why 180 of the world’s nations are content to live with future uncertainty without wrapping themselves in a nuclear security blanket.

**Britain currently deploys four nuclear-powered *Vanguard*-class ballistic missile submarines. It has a stockpile of 50 American designed and built Trident submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs) and 160 operational nuclear warheads. At least one submarine is at sea at all times armed with up to 48 warheads on 12-14 missiles. Most of these have a yield of 100 kilotons with a few carrying so-called ‘sub-strategic’ warheads thought to have a yield of around 10kt. By comparison, the nuclear bomb that destroyed Hiroshima in August 1945 was approximately 14kt.**

## 2. Deterrence

The Government's case for renewing Trident and keeping nuclear weapons for the long-term hinges on the concept of nuclear deterrence and the idea that nuclear weapons provide a form of 'insurance' or a guarantee of protection against nuclear threats from other countries.<sup>11</sup> Nuclear deterrent threats are designed to change an aggressor's calculation of the costs and benefits of aggressive actions to the extent that they desist.<sup>12</sup> The logic of nuclear deterrence therefore maintains that if we can threaten to annihilate country X with nuclear weapons then X won't threaten us with nuclear attack in the first place. If we decide to intervene in a conflict against country X with our conventional military forces then X won't use nuclear weapons against us, or even other "weapons of mass destruction" such as biological or chemical weapons, because we can threaten a nuclear attack in return. Deterrent targets may include military elements, civilian infrastructure, leadership assets, or the state itself through conquest or occupation.

The problem with the Government's 'insurance' claim is that nuclear deterrence is not an exact science and success is far from assured for several reasons. First, simply deploying a 'deterrent' does not automatically ensure that others will be 'deterred' because deterrence is a *process* in which varying degrees of military threats are implicitly or explicitly communicated to an adversary who decides whether or not to be deterred. It is not a quality intrinsic to nuclear weapons as material objects and the Government is misleading when it refers to British nuclear weapons as 'the deterrent'.<sup>13</sup>

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**Nuclear deterrence is not an exact science and success is far from assured**

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Second, successful deterrence rests fundamentally on the perceived credibility of the deterrent threat both *in the eyes of the deterring state and the deteree*. If nuclear deterrent threats lack credibility they will be increasingly ineffective.<sup>14</sup> Credible threats require the capability and robust plans to deliver a devastating attack; the political will to act given perceived interests at stake; the ability to communicate this capability and will to an aggressor; and an understanding of what will likely deter a particular aggressor. Credibility also depends on the legitimacy and proportionality of a retaliatory or pre-emptive nuclear response to aggressive actions.<sup>15</sup> Deterrence is unlikely to work if a state or non-state actor such as a terrorist group is determined to carry out aggressive actions; if it does not consider a deterrent threat to be credible; if it thinks it can survive an attack and is prepared to absorb a retaliatory or pre-emptive strike; is unmoved by the potential devastation that may follow their actions; or thinks it can eliminate the deterrent threat by destroying an opponent's military forces first.

Third, nuclear deterrence is not a rational, objective and logical theory. The absence of empirical evidence about the functioning of nuclear deterrence and the use of nuclear weapons in conflict has allowed purportedly 'rational' theories of nuclear deterrence based on probabilistic game theory to dominate nuclear doctrine and criteria for credible nuclear deterrent threats.<sup>16</sup> Such criteria are, however, based on subjective political judgements. This led to constant questioning of the credibility of nuclear threats throughout the Cold War and in the post-Cold War world different states, regimes, and leaders may interpret the dynamics of nuclear deterrence and the credibility of nuclear threats quite differently in any given situation leading to misunderstandings and miscalculation. Deterrent threats may also have the reverse effect of galvanising the deteree to resist the deterrer for issues of national pride and domestic or international status.<sup>17</sup>

In the United States the George W. Bush administration expressed considerable loss of confidence in America's ability to deter WMD-armed 'rogue' states with its Cold War-era nuclear weapons.<sup>18</sup> The

solution set out in its 2001 *Nuclear Posture Review* was a set of new capabilities that could be used for pre-emptive attacks, including extensive ballistic and cruise missile defences, new low-yield nuclear warheads and conventional 'global strike' strategic weapons such as conventionally-armed Trident missiles.<sup>19</sup> The right to engage in pre-emptive attacks was asserted by the administration in its September 2002 *National Security Strategy* and December 2002 *National Strategy to Combat Weapons of Mass Destruction*.<sup>20</sup> The British government says that its 'sub-strategic' Trident warheads are designed to lend extra credibility to threats of nuclear retaliation.<sup>21</sup>

### 3. Detering major nuclear powers

The first of the Government's four areas of deterrence is to deter aggression by major nuclear powers and prevent major wars that may threaten the survival of the nation. No major direct nuclear threat currently exists and hasn't for a decade since at least 1998 according to the Government.<sup>22</sup> Only two nuclear-armed major powers are likely to have the capability and conceivably the intention in the future to threaten Britain and Western Europe with nuclear weapons: Russia and China. Yet the overall trend in relations with both countries has been extremely positive since the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and following a resumption of relations with Beijing in the early 1990s after the Tiananmen Square massacre.

The primary focus of this first area is deterrence of a future resurgent and aggressive Russia, which still deploys thousands of nuclear weapons.<sup>23</sup> It is based on the assumptions that: 1) The Soviet Union/Russia was successfully deterred with the threat of nuclear attack, including from British nuclear weapons, during the Cold War and can be deterred with nuclear weapons again if necessary; 2) There is a genuine risk that a resurgent and aggressive Russia, or indeed China, will threaten Britain or Europe with nuclear weapons over the coming decades.

The first assumption is plagued by problems. First, the Cold War nuclear confrontation was not a stable, predictable relationship of 'mutual assured destruction'. It was highly dangerous, plagued by uncertainty, fear, constant concerns about the perceived credibility of the threat to use nuclear weapons, repeated exaggerations of the other's capabilities and intentions and very serious risks of a major inadvertent nuclear exchange through accident or miscalculation.<sup>24</sup> Nuclear deterrent threats were often not perceived as defensive and benign but as provocative and at times highly destabilising and self-fulfilling with supposedly defensive actions mistaken for aggressive intentions.<sup>25</sup>

Second, it was often assumed that the Soviet leadership shared Western understandings of nuclear deterrence. This was based on "heroic assumptions about the adversary – its ability to think dispassionately, process information, and make the 'right' decision under the most challenging of conditions".<sup>26</sup> Former head of America's Strategic Command, General Lee Butler, described the Cold War nuclear deterrence relationship as "a dialogue of the blind with the deaf".<sup>27</sup> This created an enduring danger of inadvertent nuclear Armageddon resulting from a combination of the background hostility of the Cold War, mutual misunderstandings and an unforeseen chain of events such as those leading to the 1962 Cuban missile crisis and NATO's Able Archer exercise in 1983.<sup>28</sup>

Third, standard nuclear deterrence theory insists that nuclear deterrent threats prevented the Cold War turning hot and will continue to prevent war between the major powers. It is based on the image of the Soviet Union as a relentlessly expansionist empire intent on subverting Western capitalism and democracy and imposing its particular authoritarian brand of Marxism-Leninism around the world by force where possible, including the use of nuclear weapons. A number of important works now argue



that it was the sheer scale of destruction that accompanied World War II through conventional weaponry that deterred future global war between the major industrialised nuclear powers.<sup>29</sup> Butler also affirms that “nuclear weapons did not and will not, of themselves, prevent major wars.”<sup>30</sup> This is supported by a post-Cold War reappraisal of the Soviet Union as “a generally status quo, risk-averse adversary” rather than an empire set on world domination, according to America’s 2002 National Security Strategy.<sup>31</sup>

Fourth, British nuclear weapons were largely peripheral to Soviet nuclear strategy. Moscow was primarily concerned with preventing a nuclear attack by America, not by the UK or for that matter France.<sup>32</sup> This continues today with a discourse on post-Cold War nuclear weapons dynamics at the major power level that invariably focuses on a tri-polar relationship between Russia, America and China. British and French nuclear capabilities are an afterthought.<sup>33</sup>

The second assumption about future Russian or Chinese strategic nuclear threats is also problematic. The Soviet Union was perceived in the West as an ideologically driven, aggressive, expansionist state. Russia today, and for the foreseeable future, is quite different. Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov stated in 2007 that after the Cold War Russia “renounced an ideology of imperial and other ‘great plans’ in favour of pragmatism and common sense”.<sup>34</sup> Robert Levgold, professor of political science at Columbia University, finds that a new Cold War is the least realistic of future possible paths between Russia and the West.<sup>35</sup> China’s gradual rise and integration into the global economy, the slow evolution of China’s nuclear forces and the distant geographical location of potential regional security crises involving China also suggest that British nuclear weapons have no foreseeable role to play in its relationship with Beijing or future regional crises in East Asia.

Both Russia and China are, and will likely remain, broadly satisfied with the current international status quo and exhibit no desire to refashion the current international order to suit their own national interests, values and desires through use or threat of military force. Both countries are becoming ever more integrated into the global economy and continue to rely heavily on Western export markets to support economic growth and stability. Russia is now integrated into the globalised international economy, is in final talks to join the World Trade Organisation and tied into a range of international political and economic agreements and institutions including the 1975 Helsinki Final Act and its Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE); the G8 which it joined in 1997; and a major Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) with the EU. The British government has repeatedly stated that close engagement with Russia is essential and that “where obstacles and disagreements exist, our aim will continue to be to seek to resolve them by means of a transparent, open and honest dialogue”.<sup>36</sup> It is also clear that Britain’s policies and actions are not a priority for Russia in Europe where Germany and France are considered to lie at the heart of the EU.<sup>37</sup>

China’s history of the past several decades suggests that Beijing will continue to prioritise economic development and that it will continue to steadily integrate into the global economy and international political system exemplified by its membership of the World Trade Organisation in 2001, and its role in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations Regional Forum (ARF) and the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum.<sup>38</sup> As the European Commission’s 2006 Communication *EU-China: Close Partners, Growing Responsibilities* states, “China is, with the EU, closely bound to the globalisation process and becoming more integrated into the international system”.<sup>39</sup> Relations between Britain and China have steadily improved since the early 1990s and are in the “best shape ever” according to Foreign Secretary Margaret Beckett in 2007.<sup>40</sup> Relations between the EU and China have been transformed. David Shambuaugh writes that “the breadth and depth of Europe-China relations are impressive, and the global importance of the relationship ranks it as an emerging axis in world affairs...a comprehensive and multidimensional relationship – even strategic partnership”.<sup>41</sup> There are currently twenty separate dialogues and working groups on a range of issues and in January 2007 negotiations began on a new EU-China Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA).<sup>42</sup>

Their long-term integration into the global economy and prevailing political order mean that the costs of major power aggression are now enormous in terms of the destabilisation of the global economy, and the impact on the GDP of all potential parties with or without nuclear deterrent threats. “Major interstate wars will be unlikely”, the Ministry of Defence’s Development, Concepts and Doctrine Centre (DCDC) argued in 2007, “because of the increasing economic interdependence of states in a globalized economy and the need to confront the symptoms of a challenging range of transnational problems, which *will* enhance the requirement for cooperative governance and action”.<sup>43</sup>

At the strategic security level Britain’s relationship with Moscow is subsumed by Russia’s relationship with the EU, OSCE and NATO.<sup>44</sup> Both NATO and Russia have accepted that engagement and partnership is the only sustainable path for lasting security.<sup>45</sup> Russia is party to the 1997 NATO-Russia Founding Act and 2002 NATO-Russia Council that commits both parties to a stable, peaceful and undivided Europe and has participated in NATO exercises and NATO-led joint operations. In 2002 NATO opened a Military Liaison Mission in Moscow and in 2007 the Alliance stated that “the threat of general war in Europe has virtually disappeared”.<sup>46</sup> Dmitri Trenin argues that the same applies in Russia: “from Moscow’s perspective, deterring NATO’s two other nuclear powers, France and Britain, is practically no longer relevant. Russia’s relations with the nations of the European Union are de facto demilitarized”.<sup>47</sup> Military cooperation with China is also increasing: Britain has initiated an annual ‘strategic dialogue’ with China; Chinese military officers are being trained in British military staff colleges; and in 2004 the Royal Navy held its first joint military exercise with the Chinese Navy.<sup>48</sup>

In America the Bush administration articulated a strong desire to establish “a new strategic framework” with Russia in 2002 to formally mark the end of “the era in which the United States and Russia saw each other as an enemy or strategic threat”.<sup>49</sup> This was reaffirmed in April 2008.<sup>50</sup> America has also initiated a new round of strategic dialogue with China since 2005 that now includes a programme of high-level dialogue, working-level talks and military exchanges despite concerns in Washington about China’s conventional military modernisation.<sup>51</sup> A major report in 2007 on US-China relations by the Council on Foreign Relations concluded that “China’s overall trajectory over the past thirty-five years of engagement with the United States is positive. Growing adherence to international rules, institutions, and norms – particularly in the areas of trade and security – marks China’s global integration”. It recommended sustained and systematic official dialogue on military affairs.<sup>52</sup>

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**The economic costs of major power aggression are now enormous with or without nuclear deterrent threats**

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Both countries are modernising their nuclear forces but China has kept its arsenal deliberately small and Russia is keen to reduce its arsenal much further if a new agreement can be reached with America. Modernisation of Moscow’s aging strategic nuclear missile forces is designed to ensure they can overcome American missile defences and maintain nuclear parity with America under the 2002 Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty (SORT) that will see deployed strategic nuclear warheads reduced to between 1,700 and 2,200 by 2012.<sup>53</sup> It is ironic that it is Britain’s primary ally that has resisted reaching a binding agreement with Russia to significantly reduce strategic nuclear forces to 1,000 warheads or even lower.<sup>54</sup>

Beijing’s overwhelming military focus is on ensuring Chinese sovereignty, national unity and national development and preparing for contingencies involving Taiwan, including the possibility of American intervention.<sup>55</sup> Western intelligence estimates have long predicted a major expansion of Chinese strategic nuclear forces that has failed to materialise and Beijing has kept its total nuclear forces at a low level of around 200 warheads. Chinese nuclear doctrine is based on ‘minimum deterrence’ and a declaratory policy of ‘no-first use’ of nuclear weapons in a conflict.<sup>56</sup> None of its 20 long-range inter-continental nuclear missiles are believed to be on alert and their warheads are stored at a separate location near the missiles.<sup>57</sup> Chinese and Russian nuclear forces are intended to deter attack from

each other and America. NATO nuclear forces, including those of the United Kingdom, are of little relevance to Moscow's or Beijing's relationship with Europe.

Nevertheless, the long-term trends of Russian nationalism and the rise of China on the world stage will inevitably bring both countries into confrontation with others on a range of issues including human rights, military capabilities, regional stability, trade policies, global energy markets and territorial disputes with their neighbours, particularly Beijing's long-standing disputes over the status of Taiwan and islands in the South China Sea.<sup>58</sup> There is also a powerful constituency in America that continues to view both Russia and China as rival powers to be contained politically and militarily for the foreseeable future unless and until they fully align with the West.<sup>59</sup> Despite future tensions, disagreements and political crises, some of which may have military dimensions, it is barely conceivable that British nuclear deterrent threats and consideration of using nuclear weapons against Russia or China will ever be part of the solution to future confrontations, particularly in the absence of ideological enmity. The future strategic trajectory of both countries is not certain, but the near misses of the Cold War and the uncertainties and expense of what is now often mistakenly recalled as a stable deterrent relationship between the USSR/Warsaw Pact and America/NATO warn against a repeat of the Cold War nuclear stand-off. In fact the extent to which Russia and China may feel compelled to brandish nuclear threats in the future will be a function of their perception of Western, particularly NATO, strategic encirclement that ignores their interests. Russian and Chinese fears of a long-term containment strategy can only be overcome through continued engagement with both countries by Britain and the West.<sup>60</sup>

## 4. Deterring 'rogue' states

The Government's second area of deterrence focuses on deterring the use of nuclear weapons or other WMD by so-called 'rogue' states. The branding of a particular group of states as 'rogues' occurred soon after the Cold War when America began to reconfigure its armed forces to deal with the proliferation of nuclear, biological and chemical weapons and advanced conventional weaponry to the Third World, particularly to despotic regimes. It was argued that this new breed of 'rogue' states, particularly Iran, Iraq and North Korea, would attempt to use WMD to deter America from taking action against them on issues affecting vital American interests. They were soon labelled the primary strategic threat to national security after the collapse of the Soviet Union, a view that was reinforced by Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in August 1990, events throughout the 1990s and later the attacks of 9/11.<sup>61</sup> 'Rogue' states are likely to remain a primary feature of American national security discourse well into the future.

British foreign and defence policy has followed America's post-Cold War and post-9/11 focus on 'rogue' states, international terrorism and WMD.<sup>62</sup> The response has been to prepare to "coerce, disrupt or destroy international terrorists or the regimes that harbour them" and counter WMD proliferation. This requires expeditionary forces to intervene against terrorist groups and 'rogue' states that can operate alongside American forces and be rapidly and frequently deployed abroad.<sup>63</sup> It is highly likely that the UK will continue to intervene in regional crises over the coming years with conventional military forces that might bring it into conflict with WMD-armed adversaries. For this reason, the Government argues, Britain needs to keep its nuclear weapons in order to deter a 'rogue' state from using its WMD against Britain or its 'vital interests' and to resist 'nuclear blackmail' or coercion by a 'rogue' state attempting to "deter us and the international community from taking the action required to maintain regional and global security".<sup>64</sup> Future scenarios involving the use or threat of use of WMD by 'rogue' states therefore invariably involve threats to use them in response to Western military intervention rather than a surprise, entirely unforeseen 'bolt from the blue' WMD attack.

There are major problems with this rationale: 1) the credibility and legitimacy of British deterrent threats to use nuclear weapons against a regional 'rogue' is highly questionable; 2) the risk of escalation to the use of nuclear weapons is real; 3) the effect of using just a handful of British nuclear weapons would be devastating and deeply counter-productive; 4) 'nuclear blackmail' or coercion has rarely worked in practice.

**1) The credibility of a nuclear response:** The credibility of the threat to use high-yield nuclear weapons in retaliation for the use of 'rogue' WMD suffers from the fact that their use would likely be a disproportionate and indiscriminate response, deeply counter-productive to Western political objectives and would be seen as such at home and abroad. This is exacerbated if the regime has much more to lose than Western interveners. The stakes in such a conflict are likely to be far greater for the 'rogue' regime if its survival is threatened and will reduce its options considerably. America and Britain, on the other hand, will almost certainly have far less to lose since their national survival is very unlikely to be at stake.<sup>65</sup> They will also have many more options stemming from their possession of advanced conventional military capabilities that can inflict major devastation within a relatively short period in response to limited use of WMD, including a primitive nuclear weapon.

The credibility and legitimacy of a nuclear response is further undermined if the regional 'rogue' uses relatively unsophisticated WMD to attack Western intervening forces or homelands that do not cause massive casualties and social breakdown. Nuclear weapons cause levels of destruction far beyond chemical and biological weapons (although advances in biotechnology present dangerous new opportunities for highly destructive biological weapons). According to Ivan Oelrich of the Federation of American Scientists the "problem with using the threat of nuclear retaliation to deter CBW [chemical and biological weapons] attacks on the homeland is not that nuclear weapons are inadequate to the task, but that they are excessive, thus raising the question of proportionality, and hence the credibility, of their use".<sup>66</sup> MOD also accepted in 2001 that "Deterrence policies may not prove effective against small scale use of CW or BW, especially attacks on deployed troops."<sup>67</sup> The effect of the use of CBW by a 'rogue' state is further diminished by the degree to which British and American forces are increasingly able to operate in a CBW environment thereby .

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**Possession of nuclear weapons cannot provide any guarantee of a safe umbrella for major conventional military actions that avoids escalation to the use of WMD.**

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**2) The dangers of intervention:** If a 'rogue' state possesses more advanced WMD including nuclear weapons that can reach Britain, Western Europe or the United States then the wisdom of pursuing a strategy of regional intervention using conventional forces with or without insertion of ground troops would be open to serious question. In particular it would be dangerous to assume that British nuclear deterrent threats could keep a conflict at the level of conventional weaponry with a 'rogue' state in possession of more capable WMD and the means to deliver them.

If the survival of the 'rogue' regime is threatened then the asymmetry of the stakes involved becomes deeply destabilising in a nuclear environment. Given such asymmetrical stakes it is unlikely (and certainly cannot be in any way assured) that nuclear deterrent threats would prevent the use of WMD by a regime facing imminent termination by Western conventional forces in "a desperate bid to save what seems to be a lost cause".<sup>68</sup> This can easily be exacerbated by the difficulties of understanding the behaviour of 'rogue' regimes and problems of mutual incomprehension of motives, values and perceptions of 'rational' behaviour that were a factor in the Cold War's near misses.<sup>69</sup> Major military intervention would likely be judged too dangerous regardless of whether Britain had nuclear weapons or not. As MOD's Development, Concepts and Doctrine Centre warns: "An increase in the number of nuclear-armed states *will* affect the ability of the world's leading military powers to undertake intervention operations. Operations that threaten the personal or regime security of autocratic

leaderships in nuclear-armed states *will* entail particular risk.”<sup>70</sup> In fact Western possession of nuclear weapons cannot provide any guarantee of a safe umbrella for major conventional military actions that avoids escalation to the use of WMD.<sup>71</sup> The Government’s insistence that possession of nuclear weapons will “ensure no aggressor can escalate a crisis beyond UK control” must be treated with scepticism.<sup>72</sup>

During the Cold War McGeorge Bundy, National Security Advisor to Presidents Kennedy and Johnson, stated in a *Foreign Affairs* article in 1969 that “in the real world of real political leaders...a decision that would bring even one hydrogen bomb on one city of one’s own country would be recognized in advance as a catastrophic blunder”.<sup>73</sup> The same logic holds today in the context of ‘rogue’ states and the detonation of a single ‘rogue’ nuclear bomb in British or allied city must be recognised in advance as a terrible political calamity.

**3) The legitimacy of a nuclear response:** The legitimacy of actually using nuclear weapons in a conflict is also undermined by their disproportionately devastating effect. Western governments and armed forces regularly stress their desire to avoid civilian casualties through a combination of precision guided weaponry and detailed battlefield intelligence. It is accepted that indiscriminate killing of civilians in warfare is counter-productive to war aims and political support in Western capitals and can undermine the case for military intervention that is routinely framed as defending “civilised” international values and global peace and security.<sup>74</sup> Western governments are unwilling to contemplate inflicting massive and indiscriminate loss of life upon a ‘rogue’ nation’s population for the actions of its leadership in the name of defending the ‘liberal peace’ given that the national survival of the Western intervening powers is unlikely to be under threat.<sup>75</sup>

Nuclear deterrent threats in a regional conflict and therefore consideration of the actual use of nuclear weapons depends not on how much damage they can do but how little.<sup>76</sup> Yet the use of even relatively low-yield or limited use of British nuclear weapons in a regional conflict with a ‘rogue’ state would be devastating and indiscriminate. The use of even one or two ‘sub-strategic’ 10kt Trident warheads would likely kill and severely injure tens of thousands of people. The blast, heat flash, radiation and incendiary firestorm effects of one or two 100kt standard Trident warheads could kill hundreds of thousands.<sup>77</sup> The two bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki were 14kt and 20kt respectively and between them killed around 200,000 people. Douglas Holdstock and Liz Waterston state that “a single nuclear explosion over a medium-sized city would overwhelm the health services of even a developed country, and an attack with multiple weapons would disrupt the whole country’s economic and social structure”.<sup>78</sup>

If Britain did choose to cross the nuclear threshold alone or with America it would not do so for the use of just one or two nuclear weapons for limited military objectives given the power that can now be unleashed with conventional forces. War plans involving the use of nuclear weapons in regional conflicts generally involve the use of tens, if not hundreds, of weapons to destroy a country’s WMD, military and governing infrastructure.<sup>79</sup> Nuclear use in the Middle East, North East Asia or other regional conflict zones would be an unprecedented disaster with massive humanitarian, political, environmental and economic costs and deeply counter-productive to Western political values and objectives. This must be accepted at the highest levels of government. Even if a nuclear or other WMD attack by a ‘rogue’ state has occurred an indiscriminate and devastating British nuclear retaliatory strike would not undo the damage done but would in likelihood make things considerably worse.<sup>80</sup>

Use of nuclear weapons by Western powers for anything other than national survival would also likely terminate the international norm against the use of nuclear weapons that has held since 1945. This would give rise to a considerable danger that nuclear use by Western and non-Western states could become legitimate and routine leading to further nuclear proliferation. Crossing the nuclear threshold and breaching the nuclear ‘taboo’ would place Britain in a far less stable and predictable world and would strip it of international legitimacy and authority.<sup>81</sup>

**4) Nuclear coercion:** The British government argues that its “continued possession of a nuclear deterrent provides an assurance that we cannot be subjected in future to nuclear blackmail”.<sup>82</sup> Would the absence of nuclear weapons then leave Western nations open to nuclear coercion or blackmail by a nuclear or CBW-armed ‘rogue’ state? First, possession of nuclear weapons has not *prevented* regional aggression against the interests of nuclear weapon states, for example Argentina’s invasion of the Falklands/Malvinas islands.<sup>83</sup> In the context of WMD-armed regional ‘rogue’ states it is America’s and the wider West’s conventional military forces that provide the most significant military deterrent, not its nuclear weapons.<sup>84</sup> Second, nuclear coercion has rarely worked in practice and is generally done by the strong to the weak. Michael MccGwire argues that “despite theorists’ best efforts, there is still no example of nuclear compellence. This inherent constraint applies to the rogue state that acquires a minimal capability”.<sup>85</sup>

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**Possession of nuclear weapons has not prevented regional aggression against the interests of nuclear weapon states**

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Third, major Western powers, including Britain, will continue to have significant conventional military, economic and political power to resist nuclear coercion by a ‘rogue’ state armed with sophisticated WMD regardless of whether they possess nuclear weapons. The Government itself insists that “The investment required to maintain our deterrent will not come at the expense of the conventional capabilities our armed forces need.”<sup>86</sup> Limited Western military objectives may be achievable even if a ‘rogue’ state with relatively sophisticated WMD attempts to deter Western intervention aimed at restoring the *status quo ante*. However, a longer-term strategy of political, military and economic containment, isolation and perhaps engagement from a position of considerable conventional military, diplomatic and economic strength will likely provide an appropriate solution, such as the isolation of Iraq from 1991-2003 and North Korea since the early 1990s. The experience of the 2003 invasion of Iraq should demonstrate the dire consequences and enormous political and economic cost of full-scale regional intervention regardless of the use of WMD.<sup>87</sup>

## 5. Deterring nuclear terrorism

The Government’s third deterrence area for British nuclear weapons is deterrence of state-sponsored acts of nuclear terrorism. The ‘state-sponsored’ codicil is important and the Government acknowledges that Trident “is not designed to deter non-state actors” acting alone.<sup>88</sup> Nevertheless, the prospect of deterring even state-sponsored terrorist groups, or ‘non-state actors’, that receive substantial support from a host country and the credibility and utility of the threat is questionable.

Terrorist groups, state-sponsored or not, are extremely difficult to deter because they are inherently revisionist and may regard even failed attacks as superior to inaction.<sup>89</sup> Plausible deniability, the limits of nuclear forensics, the difficulty of determining and demonstrably establishing linkages between non-state actors and state sponsors make the prospect of an immediate retaliatory nuclear strike incredible.<sup>90</sup> The nebulous nature of al-Qaeda and the A. Q. Khan nuclear smuggling network and questions over exactly how much Saddam Hussein knew about the state of Iraq’s WMD programmes prior to the invasion in 2003 raise serious questions about the degree of certainty with which a ‘rogue’ leadership could be directly and immediately implicated in a terrorist nuclear attack.<sup>91</sup>

Only where there was *incontrovertible* evidence of state sponsorship of nuclear terrorism could a major military response be immediately considered, and a nuclear response would undoubtedly be difficult, indiscriminate and counter-productive for three reasons. First, as Oelrich argues, finding targets of

value to terrorist groups to threaten with destruction is difficult “and the targets almost certainly would not be best attacked with nuclear weapons”.<sup>92</sup> Second, a retaliatory nuclear response would likely kill thousands of innocent civilians. Once again, the prospect of killing thousands of innocent people for the actions of a terrorist group that may have received direct or indirect assistance from a ‘rogue’ regime would be massively disproportionate and probably illegal.<sup>93</sup> Third, as Professor Malcolm Chalmers argues, terrorist groups “would be delighted to provoke a Trident retaliation, fully aware of the global opprobrium that this would bring on Britain”. A nuclear response could therefore play into terrorists’ hands and lead to further terrorist attacks against Britain.<sup>94</sup>

## 6. Nuclear weapons for general uncertainty

The Government’s final area of deterrence for British nuclear weapons is to provide a general deterrent threat to defend a range of ‘vital interests’ in an uncertain future characterised by two trends over the next 30-40 years: the spread of nuclear weapons and an increase in complex, regional conflicts that could threaten Britain’s ‘vital interests’. The Government argues that these conflicts are likely to revolve around weak and failing states, international terrorism, pressure on key resources such as oil and water, population growth, climate change, the proliferation of military technologies and a general increase in international instability.<sup>95</sup> Britain must keep its nuclear weapons because nuclear proliferation is likely to continue and when combined with an increasingly complex and challenging global security environment *could* “lead to an increased risk of conflict involving a nuclear-armed state”.<sup>96</sup> The inability to “accurately predict the global security environment over the next 20 to 50 years” means such scenarios cannot be ruled out.<sup>97</sup> Sir Michael Quinlan describes this as a general threat addressed ‘to whom it may concern’ over the coming decades.<sup>98</sup> This rationale unfortunately provides a strong incentive for nuclear proliferation since any government can adopt this ‘just in case’ argument for acquiring or retaining nuclear weapons.

The argument rests on the assumptions that: 1) general nuclear proliferation *will* pose a threat to Britain; and 2) British nuclear weapons are an *essential* and *credible* tool for dealing with potential nuclear threats in a complex and uncertain world.<sup>99</sup> We must therefore ask: how likely is a cascade of future nuclear proliferation; is there an automatic connection between further nuclear proliferation and a solid case for keeping our own; what relevance will British nuclear weapons have to future, complex conflicts; and how do the constraints on nuclear use from the network of international declarations, treaties and agreements that define the current global nuclear order undermine the concept of a ‘general deterrent’? Exploring these questions reveals that far from offering a ‘general deterrent’ in a complex and uncertain future security environment, nuclear deterrent threats would be of little relevance and utility and the use of nuclear weapons would be an unprecedented disaster.

**1) General deterrence for general nuclear threats?** The Government suggests that the existence of nuclear weapons in the hands of others is a decisive factor for retaining British nuclear weapons regardless of who has them, how many, where and for what reasons. The vast majority of current nuclear arsenals and potential nuclear weapon capabilities present no threat to the UK. In total eight countries *might* pose a strategic nuclear threat to the UK over the medium- to long-term future: Russia, China, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Libya, North Korea, Iran and Syria.<sup>100</sup> A British strategic nuclear arsenal *may* be relevant to the current and potential future capabilities of these countries according to the logic of nuclear deterrence, rather than any and all actual or potential current and future nuclear weapon capabilities anywhere in the world. Russia and China have been addressed above. Libya abandoned its WMD programmes in 2003 after a long period of behind-the-scenes dialogue with the UK and USA.<sup>101</sup> North Korea also appears to be on a path towards a ‘strategic

decision' to abandon its nuclear capability after five years of extensive dialogue between China, Russia, North Korea, Japan, South Korea and America.<sup>102</sup> This much more specific list undermines the Government's assertion that Britain's security will automatically be diminished if it relinquishes nuclear weapons simply because nuclear weapons or the potential to develop weapon capabilities exist elsewhere in the world.

This list of countries may change over the lifetime of Trident and its proposed successor, but the history of nuclear proliferation suggests that it is unlikely to do so dramatically.<sup>103</sup> A recent report for the Pentagon's Defense Threat Reduction Agency concluded that: "nuclear proliferation is not a wildfire – only a few states are wilful proliferants – but regional powers seeking to counter US military superiority may turn to weapons of mass destruction".<sup>104</sup> It remains the case that the vast majority of states that could develop nuclear weapons have chosen not to and that since the dawn of the nuclear age many states have abandoned nuclear weapon programmes or surrendered their nuclear arsenals.<sup>105</sup> Professor Jacques Hymans argues that the decision to go nuclear is a revolutionary "leap in the dark" and for the very great majority of states and their leaders the development and deployment of nuclear weapons offers little temptation. He dispels the myth of a 'tipping point' domino theory in which the acquisition of nuclear weapons by one or two 'rogue' states will necessarily lead to a cascade of nuclear proliferation: "the typical assumption that underlies the dark prognostications of 'life in a nuclear-armed crowd' simply do not stand up against the empirical record. They are, in short, myths".<sup>106</sup>

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**British nuclear deterrent threats cannot provide a general deterrent 'to whom it may concern'**

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**2) Constraints on the use of British nuclear weapons:** British nuclear deterrent threats cannot provide a general deterrent 'to whom it may concern' because such threats are constrained by a number of international agreements, treaties and resolutions that constitute vital parts of the rules-based international nuclear order. There are currently five nuclear weapon-free zones covering Africa, Latin America, South-East Asia, the South Pacific and Central Asia. Britain has ratified protocols to the zones in Africa, Latin America and the South Pacific and in doing so has agreed not to deploy or use or threaten to use nuclear weapons in these geographic areas. Agreement has yet to be reached on a protocol to the 1996 treaty covering South-East Asia and the 2007 treaty covering Central Asia. Britain has also issued formal 'negative security assurances' that it will not use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear members of the NPT unless such states invade or attack the UK in association or alliance with a nuclear-weapon state or if such states are in 'material breach' of their own non-proliferation obligations under the NPT.<sup>107</sup>

The Government also insists that Britain would only ever use nuclear weapons in "extreme circumstances of self-defence".<sup>108</sup> This phrase comes from the 1996 International Court of Justice (ICJ) Advisory Opinion on the "Legality of the Threat or Use of Nuclear Weapons". The ICJ has confirmed that requirements for the use of force in self-defence should be proportional to the armed attack, necessary to respond to it, distinguish between combatants and non-combatants (civilians) and not cause unnecessary suffering are intransgressible rules of customary international law.<sup>109</sup> The Court concluded that "the threat or use of nuclear weapons would generally be contrary to the rules of international law applicable in armed conflict, and in particular the principles and rules of humanitarian law" applicable in armed conflict because the destructive blast, incendiary and radiation effects of nuclear weapons cannot be contained either in space or time. In fact the Court judged that the use of nuclear weapons "seems scarcely reconcilable" with these principles and rules.<sup>110</sup> It could not, however, "conclude definitively whether the threat or use of nuclear weapons would be lawful or unlawful in an *extreme circumstance of self-defence, in which the very survival of a State would be at stake*" (emphasis added).<sup>111</sup>

The British government accepted this ruling and does not dispute that international humanitarian law applies to nuclear weapons. Britain has ratified the 1949 Geneva Conventions and their 1977



Additional Protocol that form the core of intentional humanitarian law. Use of British nuclear weapons would therefore only be legal if their use constituted a proportionate response to aggressive actions, was a necessary response to an attack, discriminated between combatants and non-combatants, did not cause unnecessary suffering and was consistent with the protocols to the nuclear weapon-free zones that Britain has signed as well as the 'negative security guarantee' it reaffirmed in 1995. This dramatically reduces the scope of 'general' British nuclear deterrent threats and, when combined with likely potential future nuclear adversaries, depicts a very narrow possible area of application for future British nuclear threats.

**3) Rethinking national security and the relevance of nuclear threats:** The Government insists that British nuclear deterrent threats will provide a crucial defence of its 'vital interests' in a complex, uncertain future international security environment in which the UK is likely to find itself in regional conflicts with nuclear-armed adversaries. On closer inspection it is extremely difficult to deduce what positive contribution British nuclear weapons could make as a 'general deterrent' to protect the country's 'vital interests' and address complex future crises.

The concept of national security has shifted considerably since the end of the Cold War, becoming both broader and deeper. It now includes complex and interlinked issues of environmental security particularly the effects of climate change, mass poverty and economic injustice, global pandemic diseases, mass migration and refugee flows, international terrorism, asymmetric warfare including cyber-warfare, the spread of WMD and advanced conventional military technologies, ethnic and sectarian nationalism and competition over access to key resources such as oil and water.<sup>112</sup> The Labour Government accepts this formulation of global security threats and challenges.<sup>113</sup>

A crucial implication of the interdependence of environmental, economic, military and political sources of insecurity is that future conflicts will be complex and diverse. They will not be susceptible to purely military solutions and the use of military force in regional crises will be messy, indeterminate and of limited value. The Prime Minister's Strategy Unit stresses that "there will be less distinction between conflict and non-conflict situations, and operating environments will become more demanding. Military action alone will not be enough: integrated civilian and military solutions will be needed". MOD's Development, Concepts and Doctrine Centre's report on *Global Strategic Trends* over the next 30 years cautions that "the future is characterised by a bewildering number of variables and all trends inter-relate with each other and inter-react in dynamic ways"... "conflict and crisis *will* become increasingly complex and unpredictable, both in their incidence and character".<sup>114</sup> Military solutions to crises must now factor in the effect of the use of force on non-military dimensions of security. A purely military response to a crisis that exacerbates the negative impact of non-military factors on British and international security will be counter-productive.

Nuclear deterrent threats do not fit this paradigm for two important reasons. First, it is extremely unlikely that the interaction of this myriad of security factors will yield a military threat to the very survival of the British state, even though British and wider Western political and economic interests will undoubtedly be threatened and future British governments may feel compelled to use military force in some instances.

Second, it is far more likely that future conflicts will take the form of 'hybrid wars' – a combination of international and civil war that blends "terror, insurgency and war... sparking myriad, hybrid forms of conflict".<sup>115</sup> These will be characterised by the absence of front lines and no clear distinction between civilians and combatants. They will be based on a fragmentation and decentralisation of organised violence that avoids major battles and directs most violence against civilians. Zones of peace and conflict will co-exist and it will not be possible to contain such wars territorially. Conflict will probably be fuelled by clashing political identities operating at local, national and transnational levels, expanding urban populations, poverty and sectarian politics.<sup>116</sup> They will also be characterised by guerrilla, counter-insurgency warfare and "endemic urban-based, irregular conflict", according to

*Global Strategic Trends*, that will bear witness to extreme levels of violence, social collapse and ethnic cleansing.<sup>117</sup> Iraq and Darfur are cited as contemporary examples of ‘hybrid’ or ‘new’ wars.<sup>118</sup>

The use of British military force will have to be selective, flexible and minimise collateral damage if it is to be effective in hybrid wars and not alienate local populations through indiscriminate slaughter. Stability, security, peace-building and reconstruction tasks will become core military missions alongside or even in place of combat operations.<sup>119</sup> Nuclear deterrent threats and the possible use of nuclear weapons can play no conceivably useful role in addressing the complex challenges of future hybrid wars. They will not create essential spaces for political processes, they will not bring stability to zones of war and peace, they will not in any way address the many non-military causes of insecurity, and they will offer no means of control in future crises.

Their use would in all likelihood cause massive and indiscriminate casualties and the collapse of local social infrastructure; increase regional security problems from mass movements of refugees, economic disruption and radiation contamination of food and water sources; undermine disease prevention, poverty reduction, sustainable development and education initiatives and other UN Millennium Development Goals to which the Labour Government has committed itself; inspire insurgent and terrorist reprisals in the region and at home; and purge Britain of any international moral authority in its efforts to advance an international framework of sustainable development and sustainable security on which Britain’s long-term security ultimately depends.<sup>120</sup>

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**Nuclear deterrent threats can play no conceivably useful role in addressing the complex challenges of future hybrid wars**

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Nuclear weapons cannot therefore be considered a ‘general deterrent’ to counter future nuclear proliferation and they cannot be considered a ‘general deterrent’ to the uncertainties and future instabilities of an increasingly integrating/fragmenting globalised world. They have no relevance to transnational and sub-national security threats, they provide no solution to the vulnerabilities Britain and the West will face from the types of conflict and insecurity resulting from these diverse, interdependent sources of insecurity. The threat to use nuclear weapons in the context of tomorrow’s uncertain and complex security landscape must be dismissed.

## Conclusion

This report challenges the Government’s claim that nuclear deterrent threats will be relevant to the four broad areas of deterrence it describes, particularly the contention that nuclear weapons are needed to provide a long-term ‘general deterrent’ for an uncertain future. It rests on three crucial facts: 1) the effectiveness of nuclear deterrent threats depends on the credibility of the threat in the eyes of both the deterrer and the deteree; 2) nuclear deterrent threats offer no guarantees of protection; 3) such threats cannot be separated from the intention to actually use nuclear weapons.

Russia and China are the only major powers likely to have the capability and possibly the intention in the future to threaten Britain and Western Europe with nuclear weapons over the coming decades. Yet the trend in relations with both major powers has been very positive since the end of the Cold War; both countries are becoming ever more integrated into the global economy and prevailing international order; and their nuclear arsenals, which Russia is keen to reduce and China has kept deliberately small, have little relationship to Britain’s. Confrontations and crises will undoubtedly occur but British nuclear deterrent threats will have little role to play in addressing and resolving them. Conflict between the major powers, including between Russia and Britain or China and Britain,

will be deeply destabilising, costly and counter-productive regardless of the threat to use or actual use of nuclear weapons.

Threats to use nuclear weapons against the long-term threat from WMD-armed 'rogue' states are problematic. Limited use of 'rogue' WMD weapons will not threaten the survival of Britain or Western Europe, thereby possibly justifying use of nuclear weapons as a last-resort. British conventional forces will also be capable of major retaliation and the use of nuclear weapons will almost certainly be disproportionate, of little military value and counter-productive to Western political objectives. Limited military objectives may be achievable against 'rogues' with more sophisticated WMD but containment, isolation or engagement will generally represent a more productive strategic choice. It will be dangerous to assume that British nuclear deterrent threats will successfully keep a conflict at the level of conventional weaponry, particularly if the survival of the 'rogue' regime is threatened whose intentions, values and understandings are less than clear. British nuclear weapons will *not* offer the degree of crisis control the Government claims. The credibility, legitimacy and domestic and international political implications of threatening major, indiscriminate civilian casualties whether deliberately or as a consequence of 'collateral damage' for the activities of a 'rogue' leadership is also highly questionable. Nuclear retaliation can also be expected to involve tens of British nuclear weapons rather than one or two causing widespread destruction and shattering the long-standing international nuclear 'taboo'.

Similar reasons undermine the role British nuclear weapons can play in deterring state-sponsored acts of nuclear terrorism. Incontrovertible evidence of state sponsorship of nuclear terrorism would be difficult to ascertain, terrorist groups might actively seek nuclear retaliation for their attacks, and killing many thousands or tens of thousands of civilians in the sponsoring state would be massively disproportionate and counter-productive.

The validity of the pervasive 'general deterrent for future uncertainty' justification for continued possession of British nuclear weapons is undermined on three counts. First, Britain is unlikely to face a future cascade of nuclear proliferation and there is no automatic link between nuclear weapons and potential capabilities in other countries and an essential necessity for a British nuclear capability. Second, use of British nuclear weapons is heavily constrained by nuclear weapon-free zone treaties, negative security assurances and the 1996 International Court of Justice Advisory Opinion on the legality of the threat or use of nuclear weapons that form part of the international nuclear order of great long-term value to British security. Third, nuclear deterrent threats and the use of nuclear weapons by Britain cannot hope to offer any useful solution to complex future conflicts characterised by diverse and interdependent sources of insecurity set out in the March 2008 *National Security Strategy* and 'hybrid' wars that are not susceptible to purely military solutions and that are unlikely to threaten the survival of the British state. The use of British nuclear weapons in the Middle East, East Asia or other regional conflict zones must be recognised in advance as an unprecedented disaster with massive humanitarian, political, environmental and economic costs to the region and the West that would run totally counter to the 'responsibility to protect' framework that is regularly used to justify military intervention. Far from being essential to dealing with future unknown security threats, British nuclear weapons will be of little relevance and utility now and in the future.

In sum, nuclear weapons contribute very little to British security and the Government should rethink its decision to replace the current Trident nuclear weapon system. The British political and defence establishment's fall-back position is that we must keep nuclear weapons 'just in case' because the future security environment appears so uncertain. This makes no sense if British nuclear threats offer no solution to the symptoms of that uncertainty, do not provide enduring 'stability' between nuclear-armed major powers, offer no 'insurance' or guarantee of protection against future 'rogue' nuclear threats, and the use of which would be deeply counter-productive to British security. 180 other countries on the planet do not feel compelled to have a nuclear crutch to lean on as they face the future, many of whom find themselves in far more precarious security environments than Britain.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> *The National Security Strategy of the United Kingdom*, Cm 7291, Cabinet Office, London, p. 3.
- <sup>2</sup> Margaret Beckett, “A World Free of Nuclear Weapons?”, Carnegie International Nonproliferation Conference, Keynote Address, June 25, 2007; Gordon Brown, “Speech at the Chamber of Commence in Delhi”, January 21, 2008.
- <sup>3</sup> Ministry of Defence (MOD) and Foreign & Commonwealth Office (FCO) *The Future of the United Kingdom’s Nuclear Deterrent*, Command 6994, The Stationery Office: London, December 2006, p. 17.
- <sup>4</sup> William Schwartz and Charles Derber, *The Nuclear Seduction: Why the Arms Race Doesn’t Matter – and What Does*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1989, p. 31.
- <sup>5</sup> *The Future of the UK’s Strategic Nuclear Deterrent: the Strategic Context*, House of Commons Defence Committee report HC 986, The Stationery Office, London, July 2006, p. 15.
- <sup>6</sup> MOD and FCO, *The Future of the United Kingdom’s Nuclear Deterrent*, pp. 5, 18, 19; Geoff Hoon, “Intervening in the new Security Environment”, speech by the Secretary of State for Defence, Foreign Policy Centre, November 12, 2002; Jeremy Stocker, *The United Kingdom and Nuclear Deterrence*, Adelphi Paper 386, Routledge for IISS, London, 2007, p.33.
- <sup>7</sup> Ministry of Defence, *Strategic Defence Review*, Command 3999, 1998, The Stationery Office, London, chapter two, paras 18-20; *Delivering Security in a Changing World*, Command 6041-I, Ministry of Defence, London, 2003, p. 4.
- <sup>8</sup> *National Security Strategy*, Cabinet Office, pp. 31, 44.
- <sup>9</sup> MOD and FCO, *The Future of the United Kingdom’s Nuclear Deterrent*, p. 18.
- <sup>10</sup> Michael Fitzsimmons, “The Problem of Uncertainty in Strategic Planning”, *Survival* 48(4) Winter 2006-07, pp. 131, 134.
- <sup>11</sup> MOD and FCO, *United Kingdom’s Nuclear Deterrent*, p. 5; Michael Quinlan, “The Future of United Kingdom Nuclear Weapons”, *International Affairs*, 82(4), 2006, p. 631.
- <sup>12</sup> Michael Quinlan, “Deterrence and Deterrability”, in Ian Kenyon and John Simpson (eds), *Deterrence and the New Global Security Environment*, Routledge, London, 2006; Stocker, *Nuclear Deterrence*, p.44.
- <sup>13</sup> Stocker, *Nuclear Deterrence*, p. 43.
- <sup>14</sup> *Non-Nuclear Strategic Deterrence of State and Non-State Adversaries*, DFI International for the Defense Threat Reduction Agency, Washington, D.C., October 2001, p. 15.
- <sup>15</sup> Quinlan, “Deterrence and Deterrability”, pp. 4-6; Wyn Bowen, “Deterrence and Asymmetry: Non-State Actors and Mass Casualty Terrorism”, in Ian Kenyon and John Simpson (eds), *Deterrence and the New Global Security Environment*, Routledge, London, 2006, pp. 50-51; Scott Sagan, “The Commitment Trap”, *International Security*, 24(4), 2000. pp. 97-98.
- <sup>16</sup> Philip Lawrence, “Strategic Beliefs, Mythology and Imagery”, in Little, R. and Smith, S. (eds.), *Belief Systems and International Relations*, Basil Blackwell Inc, Oxford, 1988, p. 143. Robert Jervis, *The Meaning of the Nuclear Revolution: Statecraft and the Prospect of Armageddon*, 1989, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, pp. 38, 183; Robert Jervis, *The Illogic of American Nuclear Strategy*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1984. p. 54.
- <sup>17</sup> *US Coercion in a World of Proliferating and Varied WMD Capabilities: Final Report for the Project on Deterrence and Cooperation in a Multi-tiered Nuclear World*, DFI International/SPARTA, Inc, for the Defence Threat Reduction Agency, Washington, D.C., February 2001, p. 21.
- <sup>18</sup> Excerpts available at <http://www.globalsecurity.org/wmd/library/policy/dod/npr.htm>. See *Statement of Douglas J. Feith Under Secretary of Defense for Policy*, Hearing before the Senate Committee on National Security, February 14, 2002, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C.
- <sup>19</sup> *Report of the Defense Science Board Task Force on Future Strategic Strike Forces*, U.S. Department of Defense, Washington, D.C., February 2004, p. 5.11.
- <sup>20</sup> *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, The White House, Washington, D.C, 2002; *National Strategy to Combat Weapons of Mass Destruction*, The White House, Washington, D.C., 2002.
- <sup>21</sup> *The Future of the UK’s Strategic Nuclear Deterrent: The White Paper: The Government’s Response to the Committee’s Ninth Report of 2006-07*, House of Commons Defence Committee report HC 551, The Stationery Office, London, May 22, 2007, p. 7.
- <sup>22</sup> *National Security Strategy*, Cabinet Office, p. 12.
- <sup>23</sup> MOD and FCO, *United Kingdom’s Nuclear Deterrent*, p. 14.
- <sup>24</sup> Paul Rogers, *Losing Control*, Pluto Press, 2000, pp. 11-38; Shaun Gregory, *The Hidden Cost of Deterrence: Nuclear Weapons Accidents*, Brassey’s UK, London, 1990; Scott Sagan, *The Limits of Safety: Organizations, Accidents, and Nuclear Weapons*, Princeton University Press, 1993; Michael Wallace, Brian Crissey and Linn Sennott, “Accidental Nuclear War: A Risk Assessment”, *Journal of Peace Research*, 1986, 23(1), pp. 9-27; Bruce Blair, *The Logic of Accidental Nuclear War*, The Brookings Institution, Washington, D.C., 1993; Michael MccGwire, “Is there a Future for Nuclear Weapons?”, *International Affairs*, 7(2), 1994, p. 228.
- <sup>25</sup> James Lebovic, *Deterring International Terrorism and Rogue States*, Routledge, London, 2007, p. 5; Stephen Cimbala, *Nuclear Strategizing – Deterrence and Reality*, Praeger Publishers, New York, 1988, p. 21; Richard Ned Lebow and Janice Gross Stein, *We all Lost the Cold War*, Princeton University Press, 1994, p. 92; Robert Green, *The Naked Nuclear Emperor*, The Disarmament and Security Centre, Christchurch, New Zealand, 2000, p. 51.

- <sup>26</sup> Lebovic, *Deterring International Terrorism and Rogue States*, p. 4.
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Bradford Disarmament Research Centre  
Department of Peace Studies  
University of Bradford  
Richmond Road  
Bradford  
West Yorkshire, BD7 1DP

Tel: +44 (0)1274 232323  
Email: [n.ritchie@bradford.ac.uk](mailto:n.ritchie@bradford.ac.uk)  
Web: [www.brad.ac.uk](http://www.brad.ac.uk)





## **Trident: What is it For?**

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### **Challenging the Relevance of British Nuclear Weapons**



***“ British nuclear weapons offer no ‘insurance’ or guarantee of protection against future nuclear threats”***

This briefing paper argues that the British Government’s case for retaining nuclear weapons and replacing the current Trident nuclear weapons system based on the ‘logic’ of nuclear deterrence is flawed. It argues that:

- ◆ British nuclear weapons do not provide an ‘insurance’ or guarantee of protection against nuclear threats or enduring stability between nuclear-armed adversaries.
- ◆ The long-term trend in relations with Russia and China, the two nuclear-armed major powers that might threaten the UK, is positive and conflict with either would be deeply destabilising, costly and counter-productive.
- ◆ The credibility and legitimacy of threatening nuclear destruction in response to the use of WMD by ‘rogue’ states is highly questionable.
- ◆ Nuclear weapons have no role to play in deterring acts of nuclear terrorism whether state-sponsored or not.
- ◆ British nuclear weapons offer no useful solution to complex future conflicts characterised by diverse and interdependent sources of insecurity and ‘hybrid’ wars.

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**Bradford Disarmament Research Centre**

**Department of Peace Studies  
University of Bradford, UK**