

## Trident: Should we keep it ?

*Arguments presented by Michael Clarke, Director of the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI), in a mock trial at the Royal Society of Edinburgh on 23 June 2011.*

### Initial presentation

It used to be said that abolitionists were soft-headed and that those who supported deterrence were realists. Now it is the other way round. There is a lack of clear thinking on the part of those who argue that Britain should maintain nuclear weapons.

Deterrence during the Cold War was not as safe as we thought it was. There were near misses as late as the 1980s. The Cold War was based on a particular situation. Both sides held similar views. There were two players from a Judeo-Christian tradition. My own view is deterrence is like throwing carrots in the High Street to keep the elephants away – its supporters claim that there are no elephants in the High Street so the carrots must work. But, if I was to accept that deterrence did work in the past, then we are heading to a very different situation, a complex world of multiple nuclear players – Pakistan/India/China/Russia ... They don't all share the same thinking. For example China takes a different view of certainty. China announced that it would invade Vietnam, and then did.

Deterrence was always a rationalisation. When we could only hit cities, deterrence was about attacking cities. When we were able to hit military forces then it was argued that this was better for deterrence. At first Mutual Assured Destruction was best. When more adaptable weapons were developed, Flexible Response was said to be a more effective deterrent. When ABM were not feasible they were bad for deterrence. As they became a reality, then they were good for deterrence. Deterrence is whatever we say it is.

When the SALT treaty was being negotiated we said it didn't apply to British weapons because they were tactical, not strategic. Later, when the INF treaty was proposed we said it didn't apply to Britain because our weapons were strategic, not tactical.

The term "minimum deterrent" is applied to whatever we have. Whatever we say, it is the minimum.

Various arguments are presented: it gives us more credibility with the US; prestige; a seat on the UN Security Council; we can't leave France as the only nuclear power in Europe; jobs; technology; and a public sense that Britain should have nuclear weapons. None of these are strategic arguments. If we take all of these arguments together and multiply them by ten – Is this worth the risk of millions of deaths from miscalculation ?

Stable deterrence is like astrology.

We have a limited window of time to take action. When we reach 20 or 30 Nuclear Weapon States it will be far harder. Between now and 2020 we could limit the number of nuclear weapons in the world. 2015 is likely to be a turning point – new/re-elected leaders in Russia and America, Iran at or across the nuclear threshold, British general election, and a decision on Trident replacement in 2016.

Britain can be a force for good or bad. If we say we must have nuclear weapons, then everyone can say they must have them. We say we need nuclear weapons because of "uncertainty". But if we applied the same approach to other aspects of policy then we would be building far more hospitals in case there was a return of the black death.

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If we were to scrap Trident this would be the most significant nuclear decision the world had ever seen. We can't expect others to simply follow, but the UK would be getting out of an unstable scenario of multiple Nuclear Weapon States.

We should ask whether we want this country to be one Nuclear Weapon State in a world of 30-40 Nuclear Weapon States, or to be a Non-Nuclear Weapon State in a world of 3-4 Nuclear Weapon States. Even if Britain was one Non-Nuclear Weapon State in a world of 30-40 Nuclear Weapon States, this would still be better.

The question is – should we get out of this fraudulent deterrence game ?

### Summing Up

Thinking about nuclear weapons is based on a misplaced understanding of deterrence in the Cold War – which we were lucky to come through. With regard to the risks we would take if we didn't have nuclear weapons – lots of Non-Nuclear Weapon States take that risk, what is so special about the UK that we can't take that risk ? It is not inconceivable to think of a world with less Nuclear Weapon States, even a non-nuclear world. The present is not risk free. We face significant problems – from climate change and a growing world population. If we do nothing, we are heading for problems, and we need to change.

Michael Quinlan said – "if we were not already a nuclear power, then we would probably not become one."

The UK has never been as safe as we are today. When could there be a better time for Britain to become non-nuclear ? There is a window of opportunity while there are 9-10 Nuclear Weapon States. This is a good time to take an imaginative step.

The UK without nuclear weapons would be no less safe than other Non Nuclear Weapon States.

We should break the alchemy of thinking about deterrence and break the metaphysical chimera.

I expect that the world is moving towards a nuclear disaster, but it doesn't have to be that way.