

May 22, 2012 2:22 am Letter to Financial Times

UK cannot afford to be complacent

From Sir David Omand, Sir Kevin Tebbit and Mr Franklin Miller.

Sir, We are responding to our friend Sir Menzies Campbell's opinion piece "It is time for Britain to abandon the 'Moscow criterion'" (May 18). Sir Menzies' argument rests on deeply flawed assumptions.

At the outset he asserts that it is "unthinkable" that a crisis could arise in the future in which the UK might find itself in a serious confrontation with Russia that could threaten war.

We hope that degree of confidence might be justified one day. But crucial to this would be the policies of a future Russian government should a deep and serious crisis arise.

We point out, however, that while the UK (and the US and the Nato alliance) have deliberately reduced their reliance on nuclear weapons over the past three years, the Medvedev-Putin administrations have moved in the opposite direction, placing reliance on nuclear weapons at the very centre of Russian security policy; threatening pre-emptive strikes against future Nato ballistic missile defence sites; designating Nato a military threat; simulating nuclear attacks against Poland and practising nuclear intimidation against the Baltic states; accelerating deployments of new strategic nuclear systems; and repeatedly sending nuclear bombers into UK and allied airspace. We hope that the future will see these Russian trends demonstrably, verifiably, and unalterably reversed. Until substantial multilateral disarmament can be achieved based on a fundamental improvement in international confidence then the responsible course is for a prudent British government to continue to maintain its independent nuclear deterrent.

Today, UK nuclear weapons are not targeted against any state or based on the criteria of the cold war but they are and must continue to be based on holding at risk what any potential adversary's leadership would value most (and, in the Russian case, Moscow has, of course, always represented the very centre of state power).

That is a policy of minimum nuclear deterrence, contributing to Nato's strategy of defence and deterrence with the noble purpose of keeping war unacceptable as a way of resolving disputes between the major powers. It is continuing strong deterrence that makes war "unthinkable" not the other way round.

Furthermore, this is not a matter of deterring one particular country at a specific moment in time, but of preserving our security into the mid-21st century, pending success, meanwhile, in our efforts to reduce and eliminate the threat of force as a means of settling disputes between major countries.

Finally, with respect to the two other May 18 Financial Times articles on the future of the British deterrent ("Review doubts need for cold war firepower to obliterate Moscow" and "Lib Dems search for Trident alternative"), we are quite confident that once all the analysis is complete, it will be clear that maintaining Trident is the least costly and most effective option.

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