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BEYOND DETERRENCE: RETHINKING UK SECURITY DOCTRINE

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Things have changed a great deal since Oxford Research Group first started dialogue and discussion with nuclear weapons decision-makers in the UK, the USA, China, France and the then Soviet Union. This was in the late 1980s and continued through 2000. The UK Ministry of Defence (MoD) has recognised the growing complexity of issues faced, and accepted that insight can come from many sources. Congratulations are in order on the distance moved, balanced with expectation that this reflects a continued commitment to evolution, rather than a return to the bad old days. There has also been substantial progress within the movements opposed to nuclear weapons – there is more effort to understand, engage, and treat seriously the strategic issues involved.

Nevertheless, hopes raised by Obama's Prague Speech in 2009 and the preceding Kissinger, Schultz, Perry and Nunn op-eds have translated to little movement beyond the 2010 Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START), essentially a treaty that recognised existing realities and maintained an inspections regime. The extensive Action Plan agreed at the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) Review Conference just a month later has also achieved little in the subsequent five years, and the last Review Conference earlier this year failed even to reach agreement to keep this slow momentum up. Arms control, an already deeply flawed and limited exercise, has run aground. The faith in multilateral disarmament, wheeled out by the governments of nuclear weapon states to balance their successive investments in nuclear systems, has turned out to be empty rhetoric.

A series of crises (primarily Ukraine) has now brought the utility of nuclear weapons back into discourse and planning. Cold War theorists are to be observed coming out of the woodwork in response to Putin, dusting off the old Mutual Assured Destruction – MAD - strategies. Some strategists are starting to talk about the possibility of war with Russia, and the need for 'credibility' in response to Putin's threats.

In this article I shall explore whether the single greatest barrier to progress is *the continued role of nuclear deterrence in British security thinking*. I'll start with the counter-productive effects of deterrence as a doctrine, then consider the opportunities that are blocked by deterrence, take a look at what might replace deterrence as a doctrine, and add a final note on the necessity of understanding the nature of our prejudices and of our effect on others, and how we can now train people in the skills of effectively transforming conflict without using superior force.

Whether as reader you agree with me or not on this line of thinking, whether you think that the benefits of deterrence still outweigh the undeniable costs, please keep your mind open to consider the strength of the case to review deterrence in the context of emerging realities.

1. Counter-productive Effects of Deterrence as a Doctrine

Contagion. The doctrine is, in the words of the UN Secretary-General, "highly contagious". As long as states with nuclear weapons use every opportunity to stress how crucial these weapons are to their security or to their influence in the world, *they make a powerful case for other states to wish to acquire them*. If deterrence continues, it will lead to greater proliferation in forthcoming decades.

Deterrence is offensive on a global scale. The threat to attack with nuclear weapons as a strategy to coerce or contain other states is often presented as a defensive strategy, but this is an Orwellian self-deception. Deterrence entails the willingness to decide to directly incinerate millions of men, women and children, and obliterate the eco-systems upon which human beings depend for our survival.

Deterrence is fallible. Any informed observer would agree that deterrence can fail, and will fail at some point. Deterrence depends upon fallible human beings acting in an ultra-rational manner when under pressure in crisis, at a time when their capacity for rationality is at its lowest. Recent research reveals just how often deterrence has failed and led to the brink of nuclear use.[i] This was not just the case during the Cold War. In fact, the risk is increasing as we speak, in our more technologically advanced 21st century because of the exponential number of cyber attacks from which nuclear systems are not immune.

Cyber attacks. Gen. James Cartwright, previous head of US Strategic Command, was responsible for more than 5,000 nuclear weapons targeted at cities around the globe. Speaking last month he said that the US nuclear strategy "makes no sense," because US nuclear forces are now hit by countless cyber attacks. He warned that there are only two realities in the modern, interconnected world: "You've either been hacked and not admitting it, or you're being hacked and don't know it."

He referred to the hundreds of missiles kept by the US and Russia on (his words) "hair-trigger" alert — a vestige of the Cold War that enables the *launch on warning* of fully armed nuclear weapons in under 15 minutes. The Minuteman silos can withstand nuclear blasts, but Cartwright doubts if they can withstand the 10 million hacking attempts launched daily at the agencies in charge of US nuclear weapons. US officials have assured the public that they defeat the vast majority of these attacks. But computer experts agree: no matter how sophisticated your defences, a determined foe can break in. Cartwright concluded: "It just makes no sense to keep our nuclear weapons online 24 hours a day". Sooner or later, something terrible will happen.

2. Opportunities Blocked by Deterrence Doctrine

Deterrence doctrine interferes with efforts to address the grave transnational threats facing the planet in the 21st century: climate change, environmental degradation, resource scarcity, demographic change, extreme poverty, migration, pandemic disease, and terrorism - to name a few.

Deterrence is not simply incapable of *addressing* these threats, the doctrine actually prevents the type of unprecedented global cooperation now needed to *curb* these threats. Such cooperation is difficult, if not impossible, when countries continue to threaten each other with massive nuclear retaliation.

Here Jonathan Granoff's words, as President of the Global Security Institute, are instructive: "*Twenty first century security challenges are numerous, complex, and more often than not inter-connected. At their core, each of these most pressing challenges requires co-operation and collective action. Persistent military competition and violence, along with less-than-adequate international security architecture, undermine efforts to cooperatively address these challenges. While the world's economies and businesses have long adapted to globalisation, the political and security structures, debates and frameworks remain mired in the past.*"[ii]

3. Replacing Deterrence as a Doctrine

I acknowledge that deterrence is still so embedded in security thinking, and is regarded as such a crucial underpinning of the global security infrastructure, that we cannot expect simply to remove it (by some miraculous U-turn to achieve global nuclear disarmament) without putting something in its place. The Geneva Centre for Security Policy's 2013 study *Security in a World without Nuclear Weapons* can be useful in this regard, examining some of the cooperative security mechanisms that could and can replace deterrence.

In this context it is important to examine what may be learned from many of the roughly 180 states that handle their security without nuclear weapons, including those that previously relied on nuclear weapons but have relinquished such policies. It could also be important to learn from the regional non-nuclear cooperative security frameworks that many of these countries have erected, especially those that have established regional nuclear weapon-free zones.

Gen Cartwright asserts that there is an easy interim fix: unplug. "*The Cold War is over. We no longer have to be ready to launch a nuclear holocaust in minutes. We can reduce our forces — and the Russians' — to a few hundred weapons, and keep those weapons on modified alert, with missiles offline and warheads removed. If needed, they could be ready for use within hours, but no one could launch them by mistake or by cyber sabotage.*"

In a report co-authored with his former Russian military counterparts, Cartwright recommends that both nations "shed vulnerable forces and depend upon leaner, smaller but highly survivable nuclear forces as we explore their complete elimination".

This seems a better plan than a new nuclear arms race urged by many currently complaining, against all the evidence, that the US nuclear arsenal is in decay. Indeed, the US government is expected to spend more than $1 trillion recapitalising a new generation of missiles, bombers and subs. The Russians and Chinese are building new systems, too. Cartwright's common sense approach can stop this arms race before it gets out of control, "*and before we lose control of our own weapons and someone hacks their way into Armageddon*".

4. Understanding Meaning and Psychology

My final point has to do with language. The word "deterrent" is frequently used to describe a nuclear weapons system, for example Trident. The problem is that the term "deterrent" is laden with meaning. The designation of a nuclear weapons system as a "deterrent" is invariably accompanied by the implication that it indeed does what the term suggests—that it deters. By using such terms, we tacitly acquiesce to this belief and invest considerable purpose and meaning into these inanimate instruments, as a way to shape people's thinking on the utility, legality and acceptability of such a system.

Just consider the difference in the following two ways to ask about the British Trident programme: (1) Should the UK give up its nuclear deterrent? (2) Should the UK give up its thermonuclear bombs? The use of "deterrent" makes the former practically a leading question, while the latter is factually more correct. Answers will undoubtedly vary.

My own experience over the past 10 years, working with those tackling hot conflict at the sharp end through Peace Direct demonstrates to me how few people adequately understand the nature of our prejudices and of our effect on others. We fall into traps of framing the world in

terms of good guys (us) and bad guys (them), failing to realise that others find it just as easy to do the reverse.

When dealing with such massively destructive weapons, it is essential that we understand a great deal better how others see us. In the case of ISIS, we may appear as Goliaths to be felled by their Davids, believing themselves to be acting nobly against injustice and oppression. In the case of Russia, we would do well to imagine how humiliated NATO nations would have felt had the Cold War ended differently; imagine for example if the Warsaw Pact had spread its influence, its weapons and its troops right up to the Channel. In all our research on armed violence, humiliation is the most powerful driver. The best antidote to humiliation is respect. NATO would have done well to remember this in the 1990s during its expansion eastwards, encouraging and accepting former Soviet republics into membership.

Some strategists still appear to believe that massive threats of offensive force will serve to cow others into submission. In the case of nuclear weapons, this could do the very opposite. The explosion of research into human psychology over the past 30 years has demonstrated beyond doubt that we delude ourselves if we assume human beings to be rational. *Deterrence theory assumes human beings to be rational.* To base a strategy employing unimaginable destructive power on a false assumption is inexcusably dangerous. It should be wrapped in its opaque shroud, given a decent burial, and put to rest without delay.

5. What would a more effective policy include?

The immediate question remains of how we can stand up to a bully without the threat of nuclear war spiralling out of control with horrific consequences. Actually, I believe the relevant question is how we avoid being a bully ourselves, or being seen to be a bully. The most immediate challenge is to develop strong positive relations with other states so that no-one has the temptation to become a bully. In relation to Russia we are called not to give in, nor to accept Russia's control of neighbouring states, nor to threaten catastrophe if Putin does not give in, but rather to give Russia some significant stake in the governance of a wider Europe, possibly a partnership in a strengthened OSCE based upon shared values and conflict resolution.

The most effective teacher of conflict transformation in my experience is Nelson Mandela. Working with him and Archbishop Tutu in setting up The Elders, I experienced the tangible energy of integrity that he developed over 27 years on Robben Island with his fellow prisoners. They honed the patience, forbearance and understanding needed to negotiate and undertake the transition from one of the world's most oppressive regimes to democratic elections – and to manage this largely without violence, avoiding the civil war that many observers had feared would slaughter millions.

We are now faced with challenges demanding similar courage and integrity. Nuclear deterrence doctrine emerged to freeze power structures after 1945 and to contain the ideological ambitions of 'the other'. Now it is not only out-dated, but undermines the international cohesion and cooperation essential for managing the growing strategic threats to our way of life. By bolstering an image of the West having over-powering force at its disposal, and being seen to be using deterrence to enforce the current world order, it may actually contribute to driving the terrorism we face today. We have much work to do.

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About the Author

Dr Scilla Elworthy founded the Oxford Research Group in 1982 to develop effective dialogue between nuclear weapons policy-makers worldwide and their critics, work which included a series of dialogues between Chinese, Russian and western nuclear scientists and military. For this work she has been three times nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize and awarded the Niwano Peace Prize in 2003. She founded Peace Direct in 2002 to fund, promote and learn from local peace-builders in conflict areas. She was adviser to Peter Gabriel, Archbishop Desmond Tutu and Sir Richard Branson in setting up 'The Elders' and co-founded Rising Women Rising World to develop policies for a future that will work for all. She advises the leadership of selected international corporations and teaches young social entrepreneurs. Her latest book is Pioneering the Possible: Awakened leadership for a world that works *(North Atlantic Books, 2014). Her TED talk on non-violence has been viewed by over 1,000,000 people.*

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[i] **See Eric Schlosser, *Command and Control*, (Allen Lane, September 2013), and Patricia Lewis, Heather Williams, Sasan Aghlani and Benoit Pelopidas, *Too Close for Comfort: Cases of Near Nuclear Use and Options for Policy*, (Chatham House, April 2014).**

[ii] **'Nuclear deterrence and changing the framework of the debate: obtaining national self-interests by advancing global public goods' in *Nuclear Abolition Forum, Issue 2.***