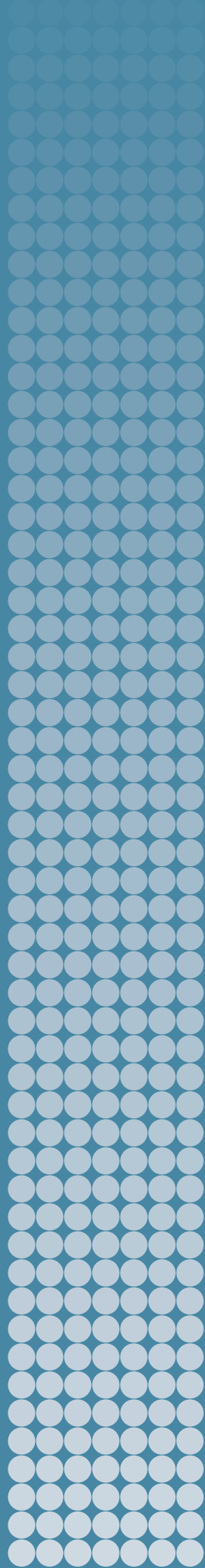


# THE BRITISH BOMB AND NATO:

Six decades of contributing to NATO's  
strategic nuclear deterrent

IAN DAVIS



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**STOCKHOLM INTERNATIONAL  
PEACE RESEARCH INSTITUTE**

**NET Nuclear  
Education Trust**

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## Acknowledgements

This report started out as a request from the Nuclear Education Trust in early 2014 for a background paper on the linkages between the UK's Trident nuclear weapon system and NATO. The aim was to publish it in advance of the NATO Wales Summit in September 2014. For many reasons the report fell by the wayside, but all parties agreed to resurrect the project this year, timed as a contribution to the UK's forthcoming Strategic Defence and Security Review. I would like to thank Peter Burt and Dave Webb, as well as several anonymous reviewers, for their invaluable comments on earlier drafts. Special thanks go to the Nuclear Education Trust for the support it provided for the endeavour and John Batho at SIPRI for a very helpful edit of the manuscript. Any errors or omissions in the report are my own.

Ian Davis, November 2015

## Executive summary

**The British Government and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) Nuclear Planning Group (NPG) should clarify in public statements how they see the United Kingdom's nuclear weapons contributing to NATO's continuing effectiveness and deterrent capability. In particular, the 2015 Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR) provides the perfect opportunity for the British Government to explain how it sees the proposed Trident replacement system contributing to NATO going forward. This discussion should be part of a wider debate on the future of deterrence.**

One of the most controversial issues to be considered in the UK's 2015 SDSR is the future of its nuclear weapons (specifically the proposed Trident replacement). Strategic arguments for the UK retaining nuclear weapons have tended to fall into three broad categories: use in the last resort to deter a nuclear attack or nuclear blackmail; to provide reassurance in a potential future with many nuclear powers; and to enhance the deterrent posture of NATO.

The first two rationales have been the subject of countless discussions, analyses and studies, but the third—that an independent UK nuclear weapon system is necessary for the UK's role in NATO—has received far less attention. This paper reviews this issue and explores the extent to which NATO policy on nuclear weapons influences UK policy and vice versa.

### **UK nuclear weapons in NATO**

The UK's role in NATO has been a rarely questioned and bipartisan centrepiece of the UK's defence strategy since NATO was founded. The idea of a 'contribution' to the NATO deterrent first appeared in UK Defence White Papers in 1956. However, defining a role within NATO for British nuclear weapons that would not be more adequately met by the United States' nuclear forces has always been problematic. The strategic rationale constructed by British officials during the cold war was that UK nuclear weapons gave NATO a separate centre of decision making in Europe, which the Soviets would need to take into account. NATO policy documents and communiqués regularly endorse the British nuclear contribution, but the current importance of a 'second decision-making centre' is harder to quantify.

### **The 1962 Nassau Agreement**

The agreements that Britain concluded with the USA and NATO in the 1960s established the modalities for the command and control of the UK's strategic nuclear forces that continue to this day. Under the 1962 Nassau Agreement, US Polaris missiles were made available to the UK, but only on condition that the British force would be 'assigned as part of a NATO nuclear force and

targeted in accordance with NATO plans'. Since that 1962 agreement, all UK nuclear forces have been assigned to NATO under the terms outlined in it.

The *command and control* arrangements that were devised in the early 1960s and subsequently adopted for both the Polaris and Trident missile fleets were premised on a system operating under ultimate British political and military authority. However, the extent to which the British Government would be capable of acting without US assistance in providing targeting information or whether it would be willing to undertake an independent launch in the face of US opposition remain controversial issues. Today, the UK's submarine-based nuclear weapons continue to be formally assigned to NATO and a dual NATO–UK national system devised in the 1960s governs their use. This includes the UK 'two-man rule', which requires the British prime minister and a senior deputy to transmit a use request to the submarine commander.

### **NATO's role in UK targeting policy**

Official information on British nuclear targeting remains limited, but it is known to involve two distinct target sets: *the NATO target set*, which included more than 18 500 targets during the cold war, and *the UK target set*, which was based on the so-called Moscow Criterion. Since the end of the cold war the quantity and type of targets that must be threatened by Trident as part of a 'minimum deterrent' have become more ambiguous. When UK nuclear forces were formally de-targeted in 1994, US–UK joint nuclear targeting through NATO effectively ended at the operational level but it still continues at the planning level. Moscow remains the primary, informal targeting of the British Trident force today.

### **NATO and the decision to withdraw UK sub-strategic nuclear weapons**

UK nuclear weapon types reduced from double figures in the mid-1950s to just two designs by the end of the 1960s: the Polaris missile warhead and three types of WE 177 gravity bombs. In addition, the US B61 gravity bombs remained at US airbases in the UK until about 2006 and continue to be stationed elsewhere in Europe as part of NATO's nuclear sharing arrangement. During 1991–93, NATO reduced its sub-strategic weapons in Europe by 80 per cent. The UK also managed by 1996 to retire about 80 per cent of its WE 177s and in 1998 announced that the remaining 50 gravity bombs would be decommissioned and dismantled. However, their NATO sub-strategic roles were nominally transferred to the UK Trident submarine force. Since 2006, the term 'sub-strategic' has disappeared from UK nuclear doctrine to be replaced by strategic ambiguity, which is thought to enhance the deterrent effect.

### **NATO–UK reactions to the Prague nuclear disarmament initiative**

Since the end of the cold war, NATO has significantly reduced its reliance on nuclear forces. In the aftermath of President Barack Obama's landmark Prague speech in April 2009 proclaiming support for the vision of working towards a

world free of nuclear weapons, several European NATO member states made clear their strong support for this effort. The UK was also very active both pre- and post-Prague, with high profile interventions at multilateral meetings. However, the resulting UK 2010 SDSR, 2010 NATO Strategic Concept and 2012 NATO Deterrence and Defence Posture Review effectively maintained the nuclear status quo. Similarly, the 2014 NATO Wales Summit Declaration failed to recognize the contradictions between the non-proliferation commitments in the United Nations Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and the proliferation by NATO member states arising from nuclear modernization plans. The logic of nuclear deterrence continues to trump the logic of nuclear disarmament within the UK and NATO.

### **Implications for NATO–UK relations from non-replacement of Trident**

The implications for NATO and the UK's relationships with the USA (and other NATO allies) of the UK not possessing an operational delivery system are hotly contested. Proponents of Trident argue that abandoning British nuclear weapons would have at least three major negative consequences: the US Government may interpret the decision as a major ally further reducing its defence capability at a particularly awkward time (although if Trident resources were to be redirected towards conventional capabilities the fallout could be mitigated); it would be strongly criticized by many NATO allies in close proximity to Russia, mainly for the political signal it would send rather than the loss of useful capability; and leaving France as the only nuclear weapon power in Europe would be unwelcome by European allies (although the political significance of UK nuclear weapons within NATO may be exaggerated).

### **Conclusions**

UK strategic nuclear weapons have been a constant contribution to NATO nuclear doctrine since the late 1950s, but the exact nature of that contribution has become increasingly obscure since the end of the cold war. The current deteriorating relations between the West and Russia may herald a new nuclear era and the escalation of nuclear rhetoric and planning on both sides is a far cry from two years ago when Russia had a seat at the NATO table. This new NATO-Russia crisis will almost certainly be used to justify a 'business as usual' approach to Britain's strategic deterrent in the 2015 SDSR, including a reiteration of the claim that it enhances the deterrent posture of NATO.

This latter belief has always remained unquestioned in the public debates on the UK's nuclear deterrent. However, this paper questions several of the assumptions that underpin that belief. The importance given to nuclear weapons in both UK national security and NATO collective security thinking, suggests that both the British Government and NATO would be willing to set out in some detail how they see the UK's nuclear weapons contributing to NATO's continuing effectiveness and deterrent capability. Regrettably, on past form it seems highly unlikely that there will be any such comprehensive consideration of the British bomb and NATO in the SDSR.



## Abbreviations

BASIC	British American Security Information Council
CD	Conference on Disarmament
CONPLAN	Contingency Plan
DCA	Dual-capable aircraft
GDP	Gross domestic product
HLG	High Level Group (within NPG)
Kt	Kiloton
MOD	Ministry of Defence
NAC	North Atlantic Council
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NOP	Nuclear Operations Plan
NPG	Nuclear Planning Group (within NATO)
NPT	Non-Proliferation Treaty
NSS	National Security Strategy (UK)
OPLAN	Operations Plan (US)
PSA	Polaris Sales Agreement
RAF	Royal Air Force (UK)
SACEUR	Supreme Allied Commander Europe
SACLANT	Supreme Allied Commander Atlantic
SDR	Strategic Defence Review
SDSR	Strategic Defence and Security Review (UK)
SHAPE	Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe
SIOP	Single Integrated Operational Plan (US)
SNOWCAT	Support of Nuclear Operations With Conventional Air Tactics
TNW	Tactical nuclear weapons
WMD	Weapons of mass destruction

# 1. Introduction: the Trident, SDSR and NATO nexus

The United Kingdom's latest Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR) is underway and its completion is expected in November 2015. In the past, British defence reviews were irregular affairs, usually forced upon governments by major shifts in international relations or economic pressures. However, with a nod to the United States' Quadrennial Defence Review process, the British Coalition Government elected in 2010 opted for regular defence and security reviews. Following the UK's change to fixed-term parliaments in 2011, an SDSR is now undertaken at the beginning of each five-year parliamentary term, with some of the groundwork started at the end of the previous term.

The Conservative Government elected in 2015 faces the combined challenges of several unresolved issues from the 2010 SDSR and continuing austerity measures.<sup>1</sup> This is likely to make the 2015 SDSR a difficult and contentious undertaking—especially as it seems likely that the UK defence budget will drop below the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO) 2 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP) target during this parliament.<sup>2</sup> In sum, the 2015 SDSR will help determine the shape of British defence policy and the budget for the foreseeable future.

One of the most controversial issues within the context of the 2015 SDSR is the future of the UK's nuclear weapons. The system, widely referred to as Trident, will require a fleet of new submarines to begin entering into service in 2028 with the Main Gate investment decision expected in 2016 according to the 2010 SDSR. The controversy has less to do with the current political configuration in the British Parliament, which is heavily in favour of Trident replacement, and more to do with the very nature of the weapons and the prominent part they have played in UK foreign policy debates since the 1960s. Hence, the issue of replacement is contentious due to the destructive and untargeted nature of strategic nuclear weapons, the projected cost, the extent to which replacement is compatible with the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty

<sup>1</sup> British Government, *Securing Britain in an Age of Uncertainty: The Strategic Defence and Security Review*, Cm 7948 (The Stationery Office: Norwich, Oct. 2010). For a critique of SDSR 2010 in the context of the upcoming SDSR 2015 see Cornish, P. and Dorman, A. M., 'Fifty shades of purple? A risk-sharing approach to the 2015 Strategic Defence and Security Review', *International Affairs*, vol. 89, no. 5 (Sep. 2013), pp. 1183–1202.

<sup>2</sup> Page, R., 'Defence expenditure: NATO 2% target', House of Commons Library, Briefing Paper CBP 7343, 21 Oct. 2015; and Stacey, K., 'UK defence spending to fall below NATO target, says research', *Financial Times*, 15 June 2015.

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(NPT), and the strategic need for the weapon system.<sup>3</sup> The latter is arguably the main issue in contemporary debates.

Strategic arguments for the UK retaining its own nuclear weapon system have tended to fall into three broad categories. First, that it could be used in the last resort to deter a nuclear attack or nuclear blackmail (a threat associated with the Soviet Union during the cold war, but now largely attributed to potential coercion by China and Russia). Second, that it provides reassurance in a potential future with many nuclear powers, including ‘rogue states’ armed with weapons of mass destruction (WMD)—the so-called nuclear hedge. And third, that it enhances the deterrent posture of NATO.

The first two rationales have been the subject of countless discussions, analyses and studies, but the third—that an independent UK nuclear weapon system is necessary for NATO and the UK’s role in NATO—has received far less attention. This paper reviews the literature on this issue and explores the extent to which NATO policy on nuclear weapons (e.g. refusal to adopt a ‘no first use’ policy) influences UK policy and vice versa. More specifically, it seeks to address the following issues:

- Section 2: Which political and military structures within NATO influence whether the UK retains or replaces its nuclear weapons? To what extent, if at all, does NATO exert military control over UK nuclear weapons?
- Section 3: How does the assignment of UK nuclear weapons to NATO under the terms of the Polaris Sales Agreement influence UK nuclear weapons policies, including targeting, control and doctrine on their use?
- Section 4: What part (if any) did NATO play in the decision to ‘de-target’ UK Trident missiles in 1994, and what role would NATO structures, such as the Nuclear Planning Group (NPG) and SHAPE (Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe), play in any re-targeting?
- Section 5: What view (if any) did NATO have on withdrawal from service of the UK’s WE 177 tactical nuclear weapon? What role (if any) did NATO play in shaping the 2010 SDSR? Do the past or present policies of other NATO members provide any kind of precedent that would support the UK in a decision to abandon its nuclear weapons? What opportunities exist for influencing the NATO political process to reduce the role of nuclear weapons in NATO’s policy? If the UK decided not to replace Trident, what implications

<sup>3</sup> Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (Non-Proliferation Treaty, NPT), opened for signature 1 July 1968, entered into force 5 Mar. 1970, INFCIRC/140, 22 Apr. 1970. On the cost of the successor to Trident see Fraser, D., ‘Reality check: how much would Trident replacement cost?’, BBC News, 9 Apr. 2015; and for a general overview of the key issues see ‘UK Trident replacement: the facts’, British American Security Information Council (BASIC) Fact sheet, June 2014.

would there be for NATO and the UK's role in that organization?

In a final section, the paper draws some conclusions and calls on the British Government and the NATO NPG to clarify in public statements how they see the UK's nuclear weapons contributing to NATO's continuing effectiveness and deterrent capability. In particular, SDSR 2015 provides the perfect opportunity for the British Government to explain how it sees the proposed Trident replacement system contributing to NATO going forward.



## 2. The NATO political and military structures that influence UK nuclear weapons policy

The 2006 White Paper on the future of the UK's nuclear deterrent, set out four deterrent roles for UK nuclear weapons:

- To deter against the re-emergence of a major direct nuclear threat to the UK or its NATO allies, and to prevent major war which threatens the British state;
- To deter against the use of WMD by a rogue state during a regional intervention in which UK forces were involved, allowing the UK to continue to be able to intervene militarily around the world without fear of 'nuclear blackmail' or coercion;
- To deter against state-sponsored acts of nuclear terrorism; and
- To act as an insurance against emerging threats to the UK's vital interests, and the uncertainties and risks of the future.<sup>4</sup>

Most recently, the British MOD explained that the UK nuclear deterrent:

is there to prevent, at the extreme, any threat to national existence, or nuclear blackmail from a nuclear-armed state against the UK homeland or our vital interests. However, [. . .] the use of nuclear weapons is only appropriate to deter the most extreme threats. [. . .] Nuclear weapons are therefore just one element of the total capability to maintain/achieve the deterrent effect the UK seeks. To be most effective, deterrence requires the knitting together of both conventional (including, increasingly, asymmetric capabilities such as cyber) and nuclear capabilities in a carefully graduated tapestry, supported by clear strategic messaging.<sup>5</sup>

As for the UK's contribution to NATO, the MOD said, 'the UK's nuclear deterrent makes a substantial contribution to NATO's deterrent posture, supporting collective defence of the Alliance as a whole', adding:

The UK's nuclear declaratory policy makes clear the restrained nature of our deterrence posture. The UK has long been clear that they would only be used in extreme circumstances of self defence, including the defence of our NATO Allies, and would not use any weapons contrary to international law. Our focus is on preventing nuclear attack or coercion that cannot be countered by other means. While the UK does not rule in or out the first use of nuclear weapons, in order not to simplify the calculations of a potential aggressor by defining more precisely the circumstances in which the UK might consider the use of nuclear capabilities, UK

<sup>4</sup> British Government, *The Future of the United Kingdom's Nuclear Deterrent*, Cm 6994 (The Stationery Office: Norwich, Dec. 2006).

<sup>5</sup> House of Commons Defence Committee, *Deterrence in the Twenty-First Century: Eleventh Report of Session 2013–14*, vol. I, HC 1066 (The Stationery Office: Norwich, Mar. 2014), para. 29.

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nuclear doctrine is exclusively one of deterrence. Maintaining ambiguity over when, how and at what scale nuclear weapons might be used enhances the deterrent effect.<sup>6</sup>

The UK is a key player in NATO, both in its own right and within the context of the so-called special relationship with the USA. Since the USA has always been the dominant power within NATO, NATO has effectively become yet another dimension of that relationship. In turn, the UK's role within NATO has been a rarely questioned and bipartisan centrepiece of the UK's defence strategy since NATO was founded. Over the years, the MOD has regularly described NATO, and the UK's commitment to it, as the 'cornerstone of UK defence policy'—most recently in evidence to the House of Commons Defence Committee inquiry into deterrence in the 21st century.<sup>7</sup>

### 2.1. NATO's Nuclear Planning Group

Since the mid-1950s, the UK's nuclear forces have been regularly described as contributing to NATO's strategic nuclear deterrent. In the early 1960s, for example, British V-bombers were formally assigned to NATO and were targeted with US forces stationed at the Strategic Air Command at Omaha, Nebraska. The UK's contribution is made in conformity with concepts of collective deterrence worked out in the North Atlantic Council (NAC) and the NPG. Established in 1966, the NPG meets annually in defence ministers format at 27 (i.e. the defence ministers of all member states with the exception of France, which is not a participant of the NPG) and when necessary at the level of ambassadors. The NPG is chaired by the NATO Secretary General and acts as the senior body on nuclear matters within NATO.

The work of the NPG is prepared by an NPG Staff Group that meets at least once a week. The group is made up of members of the national delegations of all participating member countries. The senior advisory body to the NPG on nuclear policy and planning issues is the NPG High Level Group (HLG), which was established in 1977. In 1998, the HLG also took over the responsibilities of the former Senior Level Weapons Protection Group, which was charged with overseeing nuclear weapons safety, security and survivability matters. The US chairs the HLG, which is composed of national policy makers (at policy director level) and experts from allied capitals. It meets several times a year to discuss aspects of NATO's nuclear policy, planning and force posture. Although the nuclear threat is much reduced since the end of the cold war, these regular meetings still take place.

It has always been assumed that the voices of the nuclear powers and those directly involved in nuclear policy carried more weight in the NPG and HLG. Officials refer to an informal hierarchy consisting of the NPG's two nuclear powers (the UK and the USA), the four dual-capable aircraft (DCA)

<sup>6</sup> House of Commons Defence Committee (note 5), para. 31.

<sup>7</sup> House of Commons Defence Committee (note 5), para. 9.

countries—Belgium, Germany, Italy and the Netherlands—as well as Turkey (and formerly Greece), followed by other members who have various degrees of involvement in the support operations known as SNOWCAT (Support of Nuclear Operations With Conventional Air Tactics).<sup>8</sup>

## **2.2. The nature and scope of the contribution—the second decision-making centre**

The idea of a ‘contribution’ to the NATO deterrent first appeared in UK defence White Papers in 1956.<sup>9</sup> In that year, the contribution was to be ‘substantial—commensurate with our standing as a world power’. The following year, the UK’s contribution alongside that of the USA was only going to be ‘modest’, but in 1958 it had become ‘increasingly significant’. Between 1958 and the late 1970s, when contributions were mentioned in White Papers, their source rather than magnitude was stressed.

However, moving beyond such vague declarations and defining a role within NATO for the UK’s nuclear weapons that would not be more adequately met by US nuclear forces has always been problematic. As Lawrence Freedman wrote in 1980, the problem has been to identify ‘a distinctive contribution that a small, European nuclear power might make to a NATO strategy when the dominant alliance power had sufficient capability to perform all necessary nuclear missions’.<sup>10</sup>

During the cold war, nuclear proponents tended to argue in response that as a ‘European’ force, the UK deterrent was more likely to be responsive to European/UK interests and that this extra nuclear decision-making centre within NATO added uncertainty to Soviet calculations. As former UK Defence Secretary Denis Healey said of the 1964 decision to continue the Polaris programme, ‘if you are inside an alliance you increase the deterrent to the other side enormously if there is more than one centre of decision for the first use of nuclear weapons’.<sup>11</sup>

This quickly became acknowledged as one of the best available ‘nuclear weapons establishment’ rationales for the UK’s nuclear force.<sup>12</sup> A 1974 memo from the MOD, for example, explained how a Polaris force:

<sup>8</sup> Dual-capable aircraft (DCA) are aircraft tasked and configured to perform either conventional or theatre nuclear missions. Turkey stores DCA with B61 gravity bombs on its territory but has no DCA. Greece stopped hosting US nuclear weapons in 2001. For a discussion on SNOWCAT see Lunn, S., ‘NATO nuclear policy: reflections on Lisbon and looking ahead to the DDPR’, eds S. Andreasen and I. Williams, *Reducing Nuclear Risks in Europe: A Framework for Action* (Nuclear Threat Initiative: Washington, DC, 2011), p. 28.

<sup>9</sup> Freedman, L., *Britain and Nuclear Weapons* (Macmillan: London, 1980), p. 26.

<sup>10</sup> Freedman (note 9), p. 25.

<sup>11</sup> Cited by Reed, B. and Williams, G., *Denis Healey and the Policies of Power* (Sidgwick & Jackson: London, 1971), p. 169. The Polaris programme was the predecessor to Trident and was entirely replaced by the latter in 1996. For further details see section 3 of this report.

<sup>12</sup> ‘The establishment’ generally denotes a dominant group or elite that holds power or authority in a nation or organization. In the context of the ‘British nuclear weapons establishment’, it includes a range



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gives NATO a separate centre of decision-making in Europe which the Soviets must take into account (the French strategic deterrent is not committed to the alliance); it increases the credibility of the overall NATO deterrent; and it provides an element of insurance, and reassurance to our European allies, against any weakening of the United States nuclear guarantee.<sup>13</sup>

In 1980, then Conservative Defence Secretary Francis Pym provided the following explanation of these twin decision centres to the House of Commons:

The nuclear decision, whether as a matter of retaliatory response or in another circumstance, would, of course, be no less agonising for the United Kingdom than for the United States. But it would be a decision of a separate and independent Power, and a Power whose survival in freedom might be more directly and closely threatened by aggression in Europe than that of the United States. This is where the fact of having to face two decision-makers instead of one is of such significance.

Soviet leaders would have to assess that there was a greater chance of one of them using its nuclear capability than if there were a single decision-maker across the Atlantic. The risk to the Soviet Union would be inescapably higher and less calculable. This is just another way of saying that the deterrence of the Alliance as a whole would be the stronger, the more credible and therefore the more effective.<sup>14</sup>

This argument was not without flaws, especially since the deterrent effect of a second decision centre potentially undermined two key NATO nuclear policy assumptions. First, it questioned the credibility and reliability of the US nuclear guarantee (and potentially put the UK in the same camp as France, which had taken the decision to develop its own *force de frappe* nuclear forces and withdraw from NATO's Integrated Military Command). Second, it hinted at alliance disloyalty, since NATO's nuclear policy functioned on the basis of consultative mechanisms and joint targeting plans that were supposed to ensure that allies acted in agreement in a crisis.

This tension in identifying circumstances in which UK interests might diverge from those of NATO allies (or that would involve raising embarrassing questions as to the quality of the US nuclear guarantee) was something the British nuclear weapons establishment preferred to ignore. Or as Freedman put it, 'the response to the dilemma of constructing a strategic rationale that was plausible but did not undermine the fundamental articles of faith of NATO came to an embarrassed and resolute silence'.<sup>15</sup>

of stakeholders with an interest in maintaining UK nuclear forces, including leading politicians, senior civil servants in the MOD and Foreign Office, Chiefs of Staff within the armed forces, as well as senior scientists and corporate leaders within specific nuclear weapons-related government agencies and private companies, such as the Atomic Weapons Establishment and BAE Systems.

<sup>13</sup> British Ministry of Defence (MOD), Memorandum by MOD (SC OE/73/1) *Second Report from the Expenditure Committee*, Session 1975-7, (1974), para. 32.

<sup>14</sup> Pym, F., Secretary of State for Defence, Speaking before the House of Commons, *Hansard*, vol. 977, 24 Jan. 1980, columns 678-9.

<sup>15</sup> Freedman (note 9), p. 30.

The second decision-making centre argument continues to be asserted today (but with less candour, as discussed below), even though it remains inconceivable that Trident might be used in the face of US opposition. During a speech at Chatham House in 2010, for example, Franklin Miller, former US Special Assistant to the President for Defense Policy and Arms Control, claimed that, during the cold war, the British and US governments ‘believed that two centres of [nuclear] decision complicated Soviet decision making thus enhancing deterrence’. He added that:

Russian nuclear policy and acts of nuclear saber-rattling and intimidation make fairly self-evident that the need for ‘the second centre of decision’ is still with us and will be for a long time. Although the US government remains bound to the defence of the United Kingdom by treaties and by history, we cannot be 100% confident that an aggressive Russian leadership will recognise that the US would provide a nuclear umbrella over the UK in a future crisis if the UK did not possess nuclear weapons. [...] Faced with a credible independent British deterrent, however, we can be confident that that same Russian government would understand that there could be no possible scenario in which an attack on the United Kingdom would not draw a retaliatory blow—and thus it would be deterred from such an attack in the first place.<sup>16</sup>

### **2.3. How does NATO value the contribution?**

In 1974 NATO formally approved the British and French nuclear forces, but in a less than ringing endorsement noted that they were ‘capable of playing a deterrent role of their own’.<sup>17</sup> Successive versions of NATO’s Strategic Concept in 1991, 1999 and 2010 have explicitly stated that the UK’s nuclear forces contribute to the security of its allies. The UK’s contribution is noted in the 2010 NATO Strategic Concept, for example, in the following terms:

the supreme guarantee of the security of the Allies is provided by the strategic nuclear forces of the Alliance, particularly those of the United States; the independent strategic forces of the United Kingdom and France, which have a deterrent role of their own, contribute to the overall deterrence and security of the Allies.<sup>18</sup>

Other NATO communiqués also occasionally endorse the UK’s nuclear contribution. The Final Communiqué of the Ministerial Meeting of the Defence Planning Committee and the NPG held in Brussels in June 2007, for example, states that ‘we noted with appreciation the continuing contribution

<sup>16</sup> Miller, F., ‘The future of the UK’s nuclear deterrent: a view from the US’, Transcript, Chatham House, 27 May 2010.

<sup>17</sup> NATO, North Atlantic Council, Declaration on Atlantic Relations (The Ottawa Declaration), approved in Ottawa 19 June 1974, opened for signature in Brussels 26 June 1974, para. 6.

<sup>18</sup> NATO, Active Engagement, Modern Defence, Strategic Concept for the Defence and Security of the Members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization Adopted by Heads of State and Government at the NATO Summit in Lisbon 19–20 Nov. 2010, para. 18.

made by the United Kingdom's independent nuclear forces to deterrence and the overall security of the Allies, and reaffirmed the value of this capability'.<sup>19</sup>

Today, potential US disengagement from NATO continues to be cited as a hypothetical possibility to justify an independent UK nuclear deterrent, while other proponents of Trident often conflate its value to NATO with its value to the USA. Miller suggested in 2008, for example, that the UK's nuclear weapons contribute in general terms to NATO through the role they play in providing the USA with political 'cover' as an ally on the international stage:

Carrying the burden of NATO's nuclear deterrent—it's an intellectual burden, it's a policy burden, it's an international burden, it's being the only guy at the CD [Conference on Disarmament] with a nuclear deterrent because the Chinese and the Russians sit there with the Third World and say what a terrible thing nuclear weapons are and what a terrible thing space arms are, and so who's in the dock? It's always useful to have someone else in the dock with you.<sup>20</sup>

Nonetheless, the problem of identifying any distinctive role for British nuclear forces within NATO has, if anything, been accentuated in recent years. The 2014 Trident Commission report, based on an independent, cross-party inquiry into UK nuclear weapons policy, acknowledges that 'UK nuclear weapons still play a role in the UK's formal and informal alliance relationships'. However, in terms of the cold war role of a 'second decision-making centre' it concludes that 'How important this would be in future is a matter for discussion'.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Cited by BASIC in evidence to the House of Commons Defence Committee in House of Commons Defence Committee, *The future of NATO and European Defence, Ninth Report of Session 2007-08*, HC 111 (The Stationery Office: Norwich, 4 Mar. 2008), p. Ev 133.

<sup>20</sup> Miller, F., Interview with the Center for Strategic Studies and International Studies Project on Nuclear Issues, 28 Jan. 2008.

<sup>21</sup> The BASIC Trident Commission, *The Trident Commission Concluding Report* (BASIC: July 2014).

### 3. The Polaris Sales Agreement and the assignment of UK nuclear weapons to NATO

Even before nuclear weapons became an important factor in NATO planning and command issues, the UK's preference was for exclusive, bilateral 'top-table' arrangements with the USA. Other NATO allies were effectively relegated to second-tier involvement. The British mind-set at the time of NATO's inception and for a number of years thereafter, was one of 'scepticism about committing forces to international planning, command and control outside bilateral arrangements with the United States'.<sup>22</sup> For example, in 1957, when the British Government was faced for the first time with planning and command issues for the potential deployment of US-manufactured Thor intermediate-range ballistic missiles on UK soil, it was reluctant to countenance placing them within a NATO planning and command framework.

While NATO had been a peripheral influence on these early US–UK negotiations, within a decade, it had become a central factor in the discussions. Indeed, the agreements eventually reached established the modalities for the command and control of the UK's strategic nuclear forces that continue to this day. In negotiations with the USA in the early 1960s, the British Government began to talk about 'earmarking' Polaris as a 'contribution to NATO', with the heavy caveat that in practice, and as a last resort, these forces could be withdrawn by the British Government from their NATO role.<sup>23</sup>

#### 3.1. The Nassau Agreement

A seminal development in the relationship between the UK's nuclear forces and NATO resulted from the conference between US President John F. Kennedy and British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan, which took place in Nassau in the Bahamas in December 1962.<sup>24</sup> At the Nassau conference Kennedy agreed to make US Polaris missiles available to the UK (paragraph 8 of the Statement on Nuclear Defence Systems), thus giving a huge boost to the UK's nuclear capability, but only on condition that the British force would be 'assigned as part of a NATO nuclear force and targeted in accordance with NATO plans' (paragraph 6) alongside 'at least equal

<sup>22</sup> Smith, M., 'British nuclear weapons and NATO in the cold war and beyond', *International Affairs*, vol. 87, no. 6 (Nov. 2011), pp. 1387–88.

<sup>23</sup> Smith (note 22), p. 1391.

<sup>24</sup> Kennedy J. F. and Macmillan, H., Statement on Nuclear Defence Systems, Nassau, 21 Dec. 1962, available online at: <[http://www.cvce.eu/obj/communique\\_of\\_john\\_f\\_kennedy\\_and\\_harold\\_macmillan\\_on\\_nuclear\\_defence\\_systems\\_nassau\\_21\\_december\\_1962-en-0123721b-f829-4bb1-b581-68ca4b5127ee.html](http://www.cvce.eu/obj/communique_of_john_f_kennedy_and_harold_macmillan_on_nuclear_defence_systems_nassau_21_december_1962-en-0123721b-f829-4bb1-b581-68ca4b5127ee.html)>.

United States forces’ as part of ‘a NATO multilateral nuclear force’ (paragraph 9).<sup>25</sup>

Macmillan accepted the terms, agreeing that ‘except where her Majesty’s Government may decide that supreme national interests are at stake, these British forces will be used for the purposes of international defence of the Western Alliance in all circumstances’ (paragraph 9).<sup>26</sup>

Notably, the Nassau Agreement was presented as ‘an opportunity for the development of new and closer arrangements for the organization and control of strategic Western defence’ which, by drawing both UK and US nuclear forces within the NATO framework, ‘would make a major contribution to political cohesion among the nations of the Alliance’ (paragraph 5).<sup>27</sup> Indeed, since that 1962 agreement, all UK nuclear forces have been assigned to NATO under the terms outlined in it.

### 3.2. Command and control

The command and control arrangements that were devised for the V-bombers (earmarked for NATO from 1963) and subsequently adopted for both the Polaris and Trident missile fleets were premised on a system operating under ultimate British political and military authority. This could be seen clearly in a secret memo from Defence Secretary Denis Healey to Prime Minister Harold Wilson in 1967 (and subsequently published in 2007):

SACEUR [Supreme Allied Commander Europe] has been given a firm assurance that, in accordance with the Nassau Agreement, our POLARIS missiles will be assigned to him as soon as the first submarine becomes operational, i.e. in 1968. Ultimate United Kingdom control of the Polaris force will not be affected, since control of the firing chain will remain in UK hands; in particular, no submarine commander will be authorised to fire the POLARIS weapons without the Prime Minister’s specific authority.<sup>28</sup>

The memo also confirmed that the Polaris command headquarters would be at Northwood in Middlesex, where a three-way communications system would provide direct links to Downing Street, SHAPE and the Polaris submarines. Under this arrangement, the commander-in-chief at Northwood required specific authority from the prime minister in order to instruct the submarine commander to fire. Thus, the view of the Wilson Government was that while this arrangement allowed NATO’s SACEUR to potentially influence the decision-making process, the direct ‘firing chain’—political and military—would remain wholly in British hands.<sup>29</sup> It is not clear that this would have

<sup>25</sup> Kennedy and Macmillan (note 24).

<sup>26</sup> Kennedy and Macmillan (note 24).

<sup>27</sup> Kennedy and Macmillan (note 24).

<sup>28</sup> Hennessy, P., *Cabinets and the Bomb* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2007), pp. 213–15.

<sup>29</sup> Smith (note 22), p. 1392.

been the case in practice, however, and certainly the picture became more opaque once the detailed terms of assignment were discussed (see below).

While the British nuclear force was certainly assigned to NATO, successive governments continued to reserve the right to use the weapons independently in an emergency. In 2006, for example, the British MOD stated that:

The UK Trident system is *fully* operationally independent of the US or any other state. Decision-making and use of the system remains entirely sovereign to the UK. Only the Prime Minister can authorise the use of the UK's nuclear deterrent, even if the missiles are to be fired as part of a NATO response. [. . .] All the command and control procedures are totally independent.<sup>30</sup>

Similarly, in keeping with this practice, Prime Minister Tony Blair in a letter to President George W Bush in December 2007 stipulated that these weapons 'will be used for the purposes of the international defence of the Atlantic Alliance in all circumstances', except where the British Government may decide that 'supreme national interests are at stake'.<sup>31</sup>

However, the extent to which the British Government would be capable of doing so without US assistance in providing targeting information or whether it would be willing to undertake an independent launch in the face of US opposition remain controversial questions.<sup>32</sup> As mentioned above, Macmillan first asserted this national interest right during negotiations with the US Administration in 1962 for the Polaris submarine system. A more technical 1963 Polaris Sales Agreement (PSA) followed the Nassau Agreement and deals mainly with contractual arrangements over the supply of missiles.

As a result of the Nassau Agreement (as subsequently applied to Trident and the current discussions on a successor to Trident), all UK submarine-based nuclear weapons are formally assigned to NATO. In 1963 these were due to be assigned to SACEUR, a US officer. However, when the British MOD negotiated the details of the assignment of its future Polaris force to SACEUR in the later 1960s it realized that the submarines, as opposed to the missiles, would have to be under the command of the Supreme Allied Commander Atlantic (SACLANT), a US Navy officer, as SACEUR had no direct authority over NATO naval forces and operating areas.<sup>33</sup>

The end product—a dual NATO–UK national system—was an untidy technical command and control procedure whereby orders for use of the missiles were to be transmitted by SACEUR (after consulting the US

<sup>30</sup> House of Commons Defence Committee, *The Future of the UK's Strategic Nuclear Deterrent: The Strategic Context: Government Response to the Committee's Eighth Report of Session 2005–06*, Ninth Special Report of Session 2005–06, HC 1558 (The Stationery Office: Norwich, 26 July 2006), Appendix, para. 12.

<sup>31</sup> Hennessy (note 28), pp. 333–34.

<sup>32</sup> See e.g. Beach, H., Written evidence from General (retired) Sir Hugh Beach to the House of Commons Defence Committee Inquiry on 21st Century Deterrence, Sep. 2013.

<sup>33</sup> Stoddart, K., *Losing an Empire and Finding a Role: Britain, the USA, NATO and Nuclear Weapons, 1964–70* (Palgrave Macmillan: Basingstoke, 2012), pp. 121–28.

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president) to SACLANT's regional deputy—a UK naval officer who would consult the British prime minister before allowing any order to be given to the submarines to launch their missiles. Thus, according to these rules, the use of British nuclear weapons can only be ordered according to the UK's 'two-man rule', which requires the prime minister and a senior deputy to transmit a 'use request' to the submarine commander.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>34</sup> Stoddart (note 33), p. 899.

## 4. NATO's role in UK targeting policy

John Simpson, an international expert on nuclear non-proliferation, concludes that the arrangements (described in section 3) 'for a specific number of UK missiles and warheads to be assigned to SACEUR have continued to this day and enable a UK Prime Minister to block action demanded of him by SACEUR, though in practice the differences between SACEUR's targeting plans and any UK national ones remain obscure'.<sup>35</sup> While official information on British nuclear targeting remains limited, informed analysts suggest that the essentials of this dual NATO–national system, devised in the 1960s, continued to govern the command and control of the UK's strategic nuclear forces for the remainder of the cold war era and beyond. The literature also suggests that, over time, the arrangement led to the development of two distinct target sets: one agreed on behalf of NATO and the other based on national interests.

### 4.1. The NATO target set

The first target set was agreed on behalf of NATO, but in effect was a bilateral arrangement with the USA, with some input from SACEUR in his own dual role as both a NATO and US commander. All member states contribute forces and equipment to NATO, which constitute its integrated military structure. These forces and assets remain under national command and control until called upon by NATO. The UK's nuclear targeting and operations fell within NATO's Nuclear Operation Plan (NOP), which was a nuclear war plan (or General Strike Plan) developed by the Nuclear Activities Branch at SHAPE.<sup>36</sup>

In turn, the NOP was developed in conjunction with the US Single Integrated Operational Plan (SIOP), which was the USA's own general plan for nuclear war from 1961 to 2003.<sup>37</sup> Included in the NOP were a Priority Strike Programme (for vital targets such as rival nuclear forces) and a Tactical Strike Programme (aimed at targets of tactical importance such as logistic support facilities).<sup>38</sup> During the cold war, the NOP was thought to include more than 18 500 targets, 10 per cent of which were priority targets.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>35</sup> Simpson, J., *Options for the United Kingdom's Nuclear Weapons Programme: Deterrence, Disarmament, Non-Proliferation and UK Trident*, Discussion Paper 4 of the BASIC Trident Commission (BASIC: London, Mar. 2013), p.8.

<sup>36</sup> Cheng, T-C., 'Britain's nuclear command, control and operations 2009', *復興崗學報*, vol. 87 (Dec. 2009), <<http://www.fhk.ndu.edu.tw/mediafile/833/fdownload/254/341/2009-12-1-1-50-45-341-nf1.pdf>>, p. 371.

<sup>37</sup> Freedman, L., 'British nuclear targeting', eds D. Ball and J. Richelson, *Strategic Nuclear Targeting* (Cornell University Press: Ithaca, NY, 1986), p. 119.

<sup>38</sup> Ball, D., 'Targeting for strategic deterrence', *Adelphi Paper*, no. 185 (International Institute for Strategic Studies: London, June 1983), p. 16.

<sup>39</sup> Cheng (note 36), p. 372.



There are also suggestions that when the UK committed its nuclear ballistic missile submarines to NATO, targets were assigned from the US SIOP, rather than from the NOP.<sup>40</sup> The main purpose of SIOP was to coordinate the targeting plans of US nuclear forces at a time when the US Air Force, Navy and Army all had their own nuclear delivery systems (i.e. to ensure that they were not all selecting the same targets). UK nuclear weapons would have probably been providing double coverage—rather than substituting for US nuclear weapons—thereby ensuring that multiple weapons were trained on the main targets (i.e. Moscow, in the case of UK submarine-launched nuclear weapons). In comparison, historically, the NOP would have been much more complicated, incorporating as it did, a much wider set of nuclear delivery systems and many more targets, some of them on the battlefield and others in rear areas.

If British strategic nuclear weapons were targeted according to US rather than NATO plans (although it seems likely that both were fully compatible), and also assuming that this remains the case today, the UK targets would currently be assigned according to the latest US Operation Plan (OPLAN).<sup>41</sup> It would also confirm the sense of NATO strategic targeting being a predominantly, probably an exclusively, Anglo-American arrangement, even though NATO guidelines for the use of nuclear weapons agreed in 1962 (and known as the Athens Guidelines) require the USA and the UK to consult with allies before using them.<sup>42</sup>

After the end of the cold war the concepts of ‘forward defence’ and ‘flexible response’ (which meant defending Germany as far forward as possible, and NATO responding to attack by escalating from conventional to nuclear weapons, with limited nuclear strikes against advancing Soviet troops without resort to strategic nuclear weapons) no longer applied in Europe and the focus of NATO targeting policy became more ambiguous, but also undoubtedly much simpler given the much narrower set of delivery systems. As discussed below, serious differences within NATO now exist as to the type of challenge that nuclear forces may be required to face. The flexibility and mobility of the current NATO defence posture is partly designed to address challenges and risks posed by more general WMD proliferation (including biological and

<sup>40</sup> Gregory, S., *Nuclear Command and Control in NATO* (Macmillan Press: London, 1996), p. 68.

<sup>41</sup> OPLANs are the successors to SIOPs. This possibility was stated at a discussion under the Chatham House Rule by a former Royal Navy–US liaison officer.

<sup>42</sup> The regular Spring Ministerial Session of the NATO Council was held in Athens from 4–6 May 1962. The meeting, which was attended by NATO foreign and defence ministers, agreed to set up special procedures to enable all NATO members to exchange information concerning the role of nuclear weapons within NATO, so that all member states could play their part in consultations on nuclear policy. NATO, Final Communiqué of the Spring Ministerial Session of the NATO Council, Athens, 4–6 May 1962.

chemical weapons) and their means of delivery, although the crisis in Ukraine has led to some calls for nuclear deterrence to be re-focused on Moscow.<sup>43</sup>

#### 4.2. The UK target set

The second target set reflected a national UK planning focus, and was assumed to be based on the so-called Moscow Criterion, which stipulated that the UK had to be able to destroy Moscow and the Soviet command and control system centralized in and around the city, plus between 5 and 10 other major Soviet/Russian cities, in a retaliatory nuclear attack. (During the cold war, the UK also had a wider range of nuclear tasks at the sub-strategic level, including battlefield tasks assigned to British forces in Germany.) During the 1980s, however, as the cold war was coming to an end, the strategic targeting strategy shifted towards a more specific focus on the Soviet and Russian command and control infrastructure. The national targets were decided by the British Chiefs of Staff on the basis of a recommendation of a special committee in the MOD.<sup>44</sup>

Throughout the cold war, the UK's two sets of nuclear targets remained little changed, although technological progress provided the UK with more accurate and lower yield nuclear weapons. Since the end of the cold war the quantity and types of targets that must be threatened by Trident as part of a 'minimum deterrent' have become more ambiguous. Successive government documents have set out a vague set of general guidelines for the deterrence of 'strategic threats', but as Michael Quinlan argues, 'It is possible, given now the very general "to-whom-it-may-concern" character of UK nuclear deterrence, that there is currently little or no such planning in specific terms'.<sup>45</sup>

Similarly, when UK nuclear forces were formally de-targeted in 1994 (as discussed in section 4.3 below), the command and control relationship with the US SIOP (and its successors: OPLAN 8022; CONPLAN, contingency plan, 8022; and an expanded CONPLAN 8044) also became looser—and effectively ended with NATO, at least at the *operational* level. Whereas targets had formerly been assigned to the British force as part of what was at least on paper a NATO process (but in reality was dominated by the USA), this is no longer the case: for the straightforward reason that there is currently no NATO process. The previous system has been replaced by a vague political assumption, based on previous agreements and precedent, that the British

<sup>43</sup> See e.g. Joseph, R., (Ambassador), former Under Secretary of State for Arms Control and International Security and US Special Envoy for Nuclear Non-proliferation, Remarks to the Exchange Monitor's Annual Nuclear Deterrence Summit, 18 Feb. 2015, Washington, DC, as published in 'A perspective on the future of nuclear deterrence', *Policy Outlook*, George C. Marshall Institute, Feb. 2015.

<sup>44</sup> Freedman (note 37), p. 115.

<sup>45</sup> Quinlan, M., 'The British experience', ed. H. Sokolski, *Getting MAD: Mutual Assured Destruction, its Origins and Practice* (Strategic Studies Institute, Army War College: Carlisle, PA, Nov. 2004), p. 265.

nuclear force would be made available for NATO targeting in a future crisis, if required.<sup>46</sup>

While the UK's strategic nuclear warheads are no longer aimed at specific targets, US–UK joint nuclear targeting through NATO or bilaterally does continue at the *planning* level and the warheads can still be used both independently and under the aegis of NATO against Russia and potentially other targets. (While Trident was initially deployed in a multi-purpose role, including a sub-strategic mission, the current line seems to be that the weapons only have a single strategic deterrent purpose, as discussed below.) The British Government's 1998 Strategic Defence Review (SDR), for example, states that the Trident submarines 'are routinely at a notice to fire measured in days'.<sup>47</sup>

It is also reasonable to conclude that the primary, informal targeting of the British Trident force today is still Moscow. As Michael Clarke argued over a decade ago, 'the ABM defences around Moscow remain the logical yardstick against which British strategic nuclear weapons are judged, since this represents the only defensive screen they might be required to penetrate in the foreseeable future'.<sup>48</sup>

#### 4.3. NATO's absence from the decision to 'de-target' UK Trident missiles

NATO appears to have had little or no role in the UK's decision in 1994 to de-target its nuclear weapons, meaning that they were no longer assigned to specific targets in peacetime. The agreement was a bilateral one between the UK (Prime Minister John Major) and Russia (President Boris Yeltsin), announced at a press conference in Moscow in February 1994. It followed an earlier de-targeting agreement in January between the USA (President Bill Clinton) and Russia (Yeltsin). Others have followed between China and Russia, and the USA and China. In addition, a statement by the NPT nuclear weapon states at the 2000 NPT Review Conference, committed all five states to de-target their nuclear weapons.<sup>49</sup>

While de-targeting is a step in the right direction, its significance should not be overestimated, since the missiles can be re-targeted in a matter of minutes. Thus, while British missiles no longer hold real target data, this does not mean

<sup>46</sup> House of Commons Defence Committee, *The Future of the UK's Strategic Nuclear Deterrent: the Strategic Context, Eighth Report of Session 2005–06*, HC 986 (The Stationery Office: Norwich, 30 June 2006), para. 44.

<sup>47</sup> British MOD, *Strategic Defence Review: Modern Forces for the Modern World*, 'Deterrence, arms control, and proliferation', Supporting Essay 5 (MOD: London, July 1998), para. 12.

<sup>48</sup> Clarke, M., 'Britain's strategic vision of its security environment: de-alerting and the UK nuclear deterrent', *Centre for Defence Studies Bulletin* (Oct. 1998), p. 8.

<sup>49</sup> Statement by the delegations of France, the People's Republic of China, the Russian Federation, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and the United States of America, Review Conference of the Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, NPT/CONF/2000/21, 1 May 2000.

that the UK nuclear force has no target plans. It is almost certain that the Trident submarines on patrol carry electronic plans that can be implemented if the commander receives authorization. Indeed, with no indication to the contrary, the UK (as stated above) probably continues to follow US/NATO nuclear war planning procedures, largely still based on cold war assumptions, such as the need for early massive strikes on nuclear forces and their command-and-control systems. Clearly, the Moscow Criterion remains despite the end of the Soviet Union.<sup>50</sup>

<sup>50</sup> See e.g. Campbell, M., 'Time to abandon the "Moscow Criterion"', *Financial Times*, 17 May 2012; and Parker, G. and Blitz, J., 'UK in cold war doctrine rethink', *Financial Times*, 17 May 2012.



## 5. NATO–UK political processes and nuclear reductions

The relationship between NATO and the UK in relation to nuclear weapons policy making can be further explored through the lens of nuclear reductions and disarmament. Four specific areas are explored in this section:

- the decision to withdraw UK tactical nuclear weapons at the end of the cold war;
- the UK 2010 SDSR;
- the Prague nuclear disarmament initiative in 2009; and
- the implications for NATO–UK relations from a decision, however unlikely on current political projections, of the non-replacement of Trident.

### 5.1. NATO and the decision to withdraw UK tactical (sub-strategic) nuclear weapons

Tactical nuclear weapons (TNW), also known as sub-strategic nuclear weapons, are generally defined as nuclear weapons that are associated with short-range delivery systems of various types, although there is considerable debate as to which weapons fall into the TNW/sub-strategic category.<sup>51</sup> A relatively independent role for sub-strategic nuclear weapons persisted throughout the cold war in NATO and the UK planning, principally as part of the ‘flexible response’ doctrine.

UK nuclear weapon types reduced from double figures in the mid-1950s to just two designs by the end of the 1960s: the Polaris missile warhead and three types of WE 177 gravity bombs—the WE 177A (a tactical fission bomb with a yield of approximately 10 kilotons); the WE 177B (a relatively high yield H-bomb with a maximum yield of 450 kt); and WE 177C (again a relatively high yield H-bomb with a maximum yield of 200 kt).<sup>52</sup> The A and B versions entered service with the Royal Air Force (RAF) in 1966, while the Royal Navy deployed version C in 1971 as a strike/depth bomb.

The stockpile of advanced WE 177 gravity bombs grew considerably from the mid 1960s—when their role was switched from a non-NATO warfighting role to support deterrence of a conventional attack on NATO territory in

<sup>51</sup> The depth and breadth of the definitional problem can perhaps be simplified by acknowledging the special psychological properties of nuclear weapons (regardless of yield and range) and the fact that detonation of any nuclear weapon, including a tactical nuclear weapon, would be a strategic event.

<sup>52</sup> The V bombers with Blue Steel missiles armed with the Red Snow warhead remained in service until Polaris took over at the end of the 1960s. For further details on the WE 177 variants see ‘History of the British nuclear arsenal’, nuclearweaponarchive.org, 30 Apr 2002, <<http://nuclearweaponarchive.org/Uk/UKArsenalDev.html>>.

Europe—to about 270 by the 1980s. Accordingly, the RAF WE 177s were integrated into NATO's joint air and land battle plans, and the Royal Navy's were used for defending the NATO naval areas around the UK.<sup>53</sup>

The end of the cold war led to unilateral decisions by Russia and the USA to withdraw and dismantle many of their non-strategic nuclear weapons, and to reduce strategic stockpiles under the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START).<sup>54</sup> Also at this time, US nuclear weapons (maritime depth bombs, atomic demolition mines, short-range nuclear missiles and nuclear artillery) earmarked for UK use in the event of a major European war, were progressively withdrawn from UK and European bases. However, the US B61 gravity bombs remained at US airbases in the UK until about 2008 and continue to be stationed elsewhere in Europe as part of NATO's nuclear sharing arrangement.<sup>55</sup>

NATO's 1991 Strategic Concept made it clear that NATO continued to require sub-strategic nuclear forces, albeit at a significantly reduced level, as an essential link between conventional and strategic nuclear forces.<sup>56</sup> During 1991–93, NATO reduced its sub-strategic weapons in Europe by 80 per cent.<sup>57</sup> Within this new geopolitical framework, the UK also managed by 1996 to retire about 80 per cent of its WE 177s, while the 1998 SDR announced that the remaining 50 or so RAF 10 kt WE 177A gravity bombs would be decommissioned and dismantled.<sup>58</sup> The SDR also tasked the Atomic Weapons Establishment at Aldermaston, which is responsible for the design, manufacture and support of the UK's nuclear warheads, to use them to conduct practical studies into how processes of nuclear disarmament might be verified. However, the NATO non-strategic or sub-strategic roles of the WE 177 bombs did not disappear, but were nominally transferred to the UK Trident submarine force.

In 1999, then Defence Secretary Geoffrey Hoon clarified this sub-strategic role as 'an essential component of a nuclear deterrence policy. In extreme circumstances of self-defence, a capability for more limited use of nuclear weapons would allow us to signal to an aggressor that he has miscalculated our resolve, without using the full destructive power that Trident offers'.<sup>59</sup>

<sup>53</sup> Cheng (note 36), p. 378.

<sup>54</sup> Treaty on the Reduction and Limitation of Strategic Offensive Arms (START I), opened for signature 31 July 1991, entered into force 5 Dec. 1994, expired 5 Dec. 2009.

<sup>55</sup> The USA withdrew the B61s from RAF Lakenheath air base without making any official announcement. The withdrawal marked the end to more than 50 years of US nuclear weapons deployment to the UK since the first nuclear bombs arrived in 1954. Kristensen, H., 'U.S. nuclear weapons withdrawn from the United Kingdom', FAS Blog, 28 June 2008.

<sup>56</sup> NATO, The Alliance's New Strategic Concept Agreed by the Heads of State and Government participating in the Meeting of the North Atlantic Council, Rome, 7–8 Nov. 1991.

<sup>57</sup> Cheng (note 36), p. 382.

<sup>58</sup> British MOD (note 47).

<sup>59</sup> House of Commons Defence Committee, *Third Special Report: The Future of NATO: Government Reply to Defence Select Committee's Third Report of Session 1998–99, HC 39, HC 459, Annex A* (The Stationery Office: Norwich, 19 May 1999), para. 13.

Since 2006, however, the term ‘sub-strategic’ has disappeared from UK nuclear doctrine (e.g. the 2006 White Paper and the 2010 SDSR), presumably to emphasize that there is no longer a ‘war fighting’ role for British nuclear weapons. Instead, one of the most recent government statements says that ‘maintaining ambiguity over when, how and at what scale nuclear weapons might be used enhances the deterrent effect’.<sup>60</sup> This ‘strategic ambiguity’ is meant to enhance deterrence because potential enemies of the British state will be unsure as to how the UK would respond in a crisis. The potential contradictions in this position are discussed further in the conclusions below.

There is little evidence that the withdrawal of UK tactical nuclear weapons was a source of significant concern to other NATO members. Many of them were probably not overly keen on the alleged benefits of a British nuclear force, even during periods of heightened East–West tension. Moreover, up until very recently, the post-cold war period has been characterized by a deliberate process of de-emphasizing the role of nuclear weapons of all kinds in NATO policy and strategy, without ever coming close to eliminating them altogether. By 1999, as one senior official put it, member states had effectively decided that nuclear weapons should be ‘put in a small box somewhere in the corner, and that is where they should stay’.<sup>61</sup>

However, events are now conspiring to have NATO’s nuclear weapons removed from the metaphorical box. The crisis in Ukraine and other allegations of Russian escalatory activities are leading to a reappraisal of the role of nuclear forces within NATO. Indeed, at the most recent NATO Defence Ministerial Meeting in October 2015, UK Defence Secretary Michael Fallon called for a return to cold-war style planning exercises to test NATO readiness to escalate from conventional to nuclear war—as discussed further in the conclusions below.<sup>62</sup>

## 5.2. NATO and the 2010 Strategic Defence and Security Review

The SDSR previous to the 2015 iteration currently under consideration was announced by the newly formed Coalition Government in May 2010, and published on 19 October 2010. The preceding major review of UK defence posture was the 1998 SDR, updated in a 2003 White Paper entitled *Delivering Security in a Changing World*.<sup>63</sup> As well as updating security policy, the 2010 SDSR had the aim of addressing the MOD’s £38 billion overspend.<sup>64</sup>

<sup>60</sup> House of Commons Defence Committee (note 5), para. 31.

<sup>61</sup> Unnamed senior official quoted in ‘Knights in shining armour? A survey of NATO’, *The Economist*, 24 Apr. 1999, p. 18.

<sup>62</sup> Holehouse, M. and Foster, P., ‘Britain backs return of “Cold War” nuclear drills as NATO hardens against Russia’, *The Telegraph*, 19 Oct. 2015.

<sup>63</sup> British MOD, *Delivering Security in a Changing World*, Defence White Paper, Cm 6041-I (The Stationery Office: Norwich, Dec. 2003).

<sup>64</sup> ‘MPs critical of Ministry of Defence overspend’, BBC News, 14 Dec. 2010.



Published alongside the SDSR was a National Security Strategy (NSS), *A Strong Britain in an Age of Uncertainty*, which outlined threats to the UK and strategies required to combat them. The NSS emphasizes the risks posed by terrorism, cyberwarfare, natural disasters and international military crises. In addressing those threats, however, the document only makes passing reference to the value of NATO and Trident, and then only in respect of the latter category (responding to an international military crisis):

No state currently has the combination of capability and intent needed to pose a conventional military threat to the territorial integrity of the United Kingdom. Yet history shows that both capability and intent can change, sometimes in a matter of only a few years. Our aim is to deter direct threats, including through our membership of NATO and, ultimately, our independent nuclear deterrent.<sup>65</sup>

The NSS does, however, reiterate the centrality of the US–NATO partnership:

The main building blocks of our national security are enduring. The UK benefits from a tried and successful approach to collective security using a wide set of alliances and partnerships. Our relationship with the US will continue to be essential to delivering the security and prosperity we need and the US will remain the most powerful country in the world, economically and in military terms. Through NATO, the EU and other alliances we share our security needs and gain collective security benefits.<sup>66</sup>

Similarly, the SDSR refers to NATO as the:

bedrock of our defence for over 60 years. Our obligations to our NATO Allies will continue to be among our highest priorities and we will continue to contribute to NATO's operations and its Command and Force Structures, to ensure that the Alliance is able to deliver a robust and credible response to existing and new security challenges. Key to NATO's future will be the agreement and implementation of its new Strategic Concept which will set out its enduring purpose, its fundamental security tasks and guidance to Allies.<sup>67</sup>

In a separate section on the UK's nuclear deterrent, the SDSR outlines Trident's role within NATO:

It is also important to recognise that the UK's nuclear deterrent supports collective security through NATO for the Euro-Atlantic area; nuclear deterrence plays an important part in NATO's overall strategy and the UK's nuclear forces make a substantial contribution.<sup>68</sup>

This passing reference to the Trident–NATO relationship was partly a reflection of the fact that Trident was excluded from the SDSR (and instead

<sup>65</sup> British Government, *A Strong Britain in an Age of Uncertainty: The National Security Strategy*, Cm 7953 (The Stationery Office: Norwich, Oct. 2010), p. 30.

<sup>66</sup> British Government (note 65), p. 15.

<sup>67</sup> British Government (note 1), p. 62.

<sup>68</sup> British Government (note 1), p. 37.

was the subject of a separate value-for-money review).<sup>69</sup> But it was also in keeping with a general post-cold war downgrading of the role of nuclear weapons (within both NATO and the UK), including the traditional ‘second decision centre’ rationale, which had featured so prominently in the past. The 2006 White Paper setting out the Blair Government’s case for proceeding with a Trident follow-on, for example, did not make reference to the second centre—the UK was described as an ‘independent centre of nuclear decision-making’—and neither did the 2010 SDSR.<sup>70</sup>

The downplaying of the alliance dimension of Trident and its potential successor in the 2010 SDSR was to some extent mirrored in the NATO Strategic Concept agreed in Lisbon a month later.<sup>71</sup> The Strategic Concept reconfirmed NATO’s core mission—the territorial defence of all allies—but also stressed the need for NATO to modernize its defence concepts and capabilities in view of new security challenges. There were a number of commonalities in the new NATO and British strategy documents, including a greater emphasis on conflict prevention. However, while both NATO and the UK set out more enlightened conceptual thinking, their operational responses remained largely wedded to classical military strategy: conventional and nuclear deterrence in response to the risk of Russian intransigence or military incursions, and military-led ‘out of area’ counterterrorism and counterinsurgency for tackling international terrorism.

Just as the 2010 SDSR—the UK’s first defence review for 13 years—left many questions over kit and personnel unanswered, with some contentious decisions (including the number of US F-35 Joint Strike Fighters to be ordered, base closures and the future of reserve forces) put off to a subsequent review, NATO’s 2010 Strategic Concept also pushed back a number of thorny issues, including the contentious nuclear weapons issue. While the Strategic Concept did reconfirm ‘that, as long there are nuclear weapons in the world, NATO will remain a nuclear Alliance’, a consensus could not be reached on changes to NATO’s nuclear sharing arrangements.<sup>72</sup> Despite pressure from several member states to change NATO policy and remove the forward-deployed US B61 nuclear bombs from European bases, the lack of agreement led to the issue being deferred to a 2012 review of NATO’s Deterrence and Defence Posture.

As part of this review, allies and outside experts looked at how conventional, nuclear and missile defence forces interact and the role of arms control and disarmament. Their disappointing conclusion was that existing arms control and disarmament agreements ‘have not yet fully achieved their objectives, and the world continues to face proliferation crises, force

<sup>69</sup> British Government, ‘Fact sheet 10: Trident value for money review’, Fact sheet, [n.d.].

<sup>70</sup> British Government (note 4), p. 18.

<sup>71</sup> NATO (note 18).

<sup>72</sup> NATO (note 18), p. 5.

concentration problems, and lack of transparency'. The review also stressed that:

Nuclear weapons are a core component of NATO's overall capabilities for deterrence and defence alongside conventional and missile defence forces. The review has shown that the Alliance's nuclear force posture currently meets the criteria for an effective deterrence and defence posture.

The circumstances in which any use of nuclear weapons might have to be contemplated are extremely remote. As long as nuclear weapons exist, NATO will remain a nuclear alliance.<sup>73</sup>

### 5.3. NATO–UK reactions to the Prague nuclear disarmament initiative

Since the end of the cold war, NATO has significantly reduced its reliance on nuclear forces. During the cold war, NATO's nuclear forces played a central role in the 'flexible response' strategy. Nuclear weapons were integrated into the whole of NATO's force structure and NATO maintained a variety of targeting plans that could be executed at short notice. NATO's reduced reliance on nuclear forces has resulted in major decreases in the number of nuclear weapons and storage facilities. NATO has also ended peacetime nuclear contingency planning and, as a result, NATO's nuclear forces no longer target any country.

In recent years there have also been several important developments in nuclear weapons issues, including the 2010 US Nuclear Posture Review, the signing in 2010 of the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) agreement by Russia and the USA, and a moderately successful outcome of the 2010 NPT Review Conference.<sup>74</sup>

Moreover, the vision of working towards a world free of nuclear weapons initially gained significant political momentum around the globe, although that momentum is widely acknowledged to have now stalled—as witnessed by the unsuccessful 2015 NPT Review Conference.<sup>75</sup> In the aftermath of US President Barack Obama's landmark Prague speech in April 2009 proclaiming support for the vision, several European NATO member states made clear their strong support for US efforts to reinvigorate the nuclear disarmament agenda.<sup>76</sup>

The UK was also very active on this issue both pre- and post-Prague, with high-profile interventions at multilateral meetings (e.g. in June 2007 by the

<sup>73</sup> NATO, Deterrence and Defence Posture Review, 20 May 2012; and Meier, O., 'NATO sticks with nuclear policy', Arms Control Association, 31 May 2012.

<sup>74</sup> For further details of the US Nuclear Posture Review see <<http://www.defense.gov/News/Special-Reports/NPR>>. Treaty on Measures for the Further Reduction and Limitation of Strategic Offensive Arms (New START, Prague Treaty), opened for signature 8 Apr. 2010, entered into force 5 Feb. 2011.

<sup>75</sup> See e.g. Jaramillo, C., 'NPT Review Conference: no outcome document better than a weak one', *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 3 June 2015; and 'NPT Review 2015', SIPRI, [n.d.], <<http://www.sipri.org/research/disarmament/nuclear/npt-review-2015>>.

<sup>76</sup> Obama, B., Remarks in Hradcany Square, Prague, 5 Apr. 2009.

then Foreign Secretary Margaret Beckett) and a significant London event in March 2009 with then Prime Minister Gordon Brown giving the keynote address.<sup>77</sup>

In the end, however, despite five European states (Belgium, Germany, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and Norway) calling for a discussion on how NATO could reduce the role of nuclear weapons and move closer to the objective of a world free of nuclear weapons, the resulting 2010 Strategic Concept and 2012 Deterrence and Defence Posture Review effectively maintained the nuclear status quo within NATO.

This was partly due to a number of other significant NATO member states, including France and several of NATO's new member states, urging caution in relation to any steps that might be seen as undermining US extended deterrence in Europe, especially in the absence of significant reciprocation from Russia. Concerns regarding the spread of nuclear weapons and the threat of nuclear terrorism, as well as NATO discussions on the broad requirements of deterrence and defence and the need for reassurance under NATO Article 5, frame the current discussion within NATO on the role of nuclear weapons in NATO security policy.<sup>78</sup>

The issue of nuclear arms control has long been a factor in NATO, and it does offer a unique forum for informal, off-the-record consultations among officials and experts from allies, partners, and other nations and organizations. However, NATO is never going to be where ideas are developed to advance nuclear disarmament. Rather, it is the place where allies discuss the relationship between proposals that are being advanced elsewhere (either by the allied governments themselves or by others) and collective defence. Hence, with the wider discussions on nuclear disarmament stalled at present, and even appearing to be going backwards in the light of events in Ukraine, the absence of any substantive review of these issues at the NATO Summit in Wales in September 2014 was hardly surprising.<sup>79</sup>

The Wales Summit Declaration did acknowledge the significance of the NPT but failed to recognize the contradictions between the non-proliferation commitments in the UN treaty and the acts of proliferation by NATO member states, arising from nuclear modernization plans. European countries, whose

<sup>77</sup> Borger, J., 'Gordon Brown has put Trident on the table', *The Guardian*, 17 Mar. 2009.

<sup>78</sup> In essence, Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty provides that if a NATO ally is the victim of an armed attack, each and every other member of NATO will consider this act of violence as an armed attack against all members and will take the actions it deems necessary to assist the ally attacked. This is known as the principle of collective defence. The North Atlantic Treaty, opened for signature 4 Apr. 1949, entered into force 24 Aug. 1949.

<sup>79</sup> There were 5 official NATO documents released during the Wales Summit: Wales Summit Declaration on Afghanistan Issued by Heads of State and Government of Allies and their International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) troop contributing partners, 4 Sep. 2014; Armed Forces Declaration by the NATO Heads of State and Government, 4 Sep. 2014; Joint Statement of the NATO–Ukraine Commission, 4 Sep. 2014; Wales Summit Declaration Issued by the Heads of State and Government participating in the Meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Wales, 5 Sep. 2014; and The Wales Declaration on the Transatlantic Bond, 5 Sep. 2014.

pilots are trained to deliver US free-fall B61s to their targets, are facing expensive decisions as to whether to replace their existing aircraft with the US F-35 Joint Strike Fighter. The new aircraft are expected to carry a modified B61 bomb that will be more accurate and potentially more useable.<sup>80</sup> The projected cost of turning the B61s into precision-guided nuclear bombs is likely to exceed \$10 billion.<sup>81</sup> This amounts to an expensive nuclear escalation almost by default. In short, the logic of nuclear deterrence continues to trump the logic of nuclear disarmament within NATO (and within the UK, as discussed below).<sup>82</sup>

#### **5.4. Implications for NATO–UK relations from non-replacement of Trident**

The life of the Vanguard-class submarines that carry the UK nuclear warheads and missiles has been extended, and replacement submarines, currently known as the Successor programme, are expected to enter service in 2028. The British Parliament voted in 2007 to ‘maintain the strategic nuclear deterrent beyond the life of the existing system’ and the previous year the British Government published a White Paper outlining its intention to build a new class of submarines.<sup>83</sup> The government decided in the 2010 SDSR to delay the main investment decision (i.e. Main Gate) until 2016. Initial Gate was passed in 2011, releasing funds for a five-year assessment phase. The government will decide at Main Gate how many boats to procure: one option discussed has been to reduce the number of nuclear-armed submarines from four to three.

While both the Conservative Party and the Labour Party have previously committed to maintaining a continuous-at-sea deterrent, the recent election of a new Labour leader, Jeremy Corbyn, who is personally opposed to the renewal of the Trident programme, has brought the future of the UK’s nuclear weapon system into question.<sup>84</sup> Opposition in Scotland to nuclear deterrence also challenges the political consensus for Trident replacement.<sup>85</sup> While a decision to abandon nuclear weapons still remains an unlikely outcome, it is worth reflecting on the implications for NATO and the UK’s relationship with the USA (and other NATO allies) of the UK not possessing an operational delivery system.

<sup>80</sup> Kristensen, H., ‘General Cartwright confirms B61-12 bomb “could be more useable”’, FAS Blog, 5 Nov. 2015.

<sup>81</sup> Letman, J., ‘The cost of teaching an old nuclear weapon new tricks’, Truthout, 6 Aug. 2014.

<sup>82</sup> For a discussion on the potential impact on NATO of the prohibitions that might be included in a nuclear weapons ban treaty see Snyder, S., *Dealing with a Ban: Implications of a Nuclear Weapons Ban Treaty on NATO* (PAX: Utrecht, Apr. 2015).

<sup>83</sup> British Government (note 4).

<sup>84</sup> Watt, N., ‘Jeremy Corbyn defiant on Trident and urges opposition to austerity’, *The Guardian*, 29 Sep. 2015.

<sup>85</sup> Walker, W., ‘Trident replacement and the survival of the United Kingdom’, *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy*, vol. 57, no. 5 (Oct–Nov. 2015), pp. 7–28.

The consequences of UK nuclear disarmament are hotly contested. On the one hand, NATO statements routinely refer to the strategic nuclear weapons of the USA and UK as providing the ultimate guarantee of alliance security. Proponents of Trident argue, therefore, that abandoning British nuclear weapons would have at least three major negative consequences. First, the US Government may well interpret the decision as a major ally further reducing its defence capability at a particularly awkward time. In particular, the fear is that there would be a loss in the privileged access that the UK currently enjoys to US military and technical knowledge, not just in the nuclear field, but in intelligence and conventional fields. The more or less full access to US intelligence assessments is a huge asset that the UK could never replicate in any other way. Absent the nuclear dimension and the UK may well lose this access.

If, however, Trident resources were to be redirected towards conventional capabilities, the fallout could well be mitigated or even gain some support from the US administration. Indeed, there have been reports of some US officials quietly urging the UK to drop its nuclear weapons programme, with one unnamed senior official quoted as saying ‘Either they can be a nuclear power and nothing else or a real military partner’.<sup>86</sup> Former US Defense Secretary Robert Gates has also pointed out that ‘With the fairly substantial reductions in defence spending in Great Britain, what we’re finding is that it won’t have full spectrum capabilities and the ability to be a full partner as they have been in the past’.<sup>87</sup> Gates has also warned that ‘too many allies have been unwilling to fundamentally change how they set priorities and allocate resources’ and called for NATO spending to be allocated ‘wisely and strategically’.<sup>88</sup>

Both Gates’s successor as US Defense Secretary, Leon Panetta, and former NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen have reiterated these concerns, stressing the need for NATO members to focus on what is really necessary and highlighting the need for increased cooperation on areas such as unmanned surveillance drones, intelligence gathering and air-to-air refuelling.<sup>89</sup> Of course, Gates et al. are unlikely to ever recommend that the UK eliminate its nuclear forces—their remedy is for the UK to spend more on defence generally and continue to carry out both nuclear and conventional missions. Nonetheless, a UK decision to downscale or cancel its nuclear weapons programme need not, therefore, meet with disapproval from the USA or NATO allies provided it is accompanied by a strategically focused commitment to deploy defence spending elsewhere.

<sup>86</sup> Erlanger, S., ‘Shrinking Europe military spending stirs concern’, *New York Times*, 22 Apr. 2013.

<sup>87</sup> ‘Military cuts mean “no US partnership”, Robert Gates warns Britain’, BBC News, 16 Jan. 2014.

<sup>88</sup> Gates, R., *Reflections on the Status and Future of the Transatlantic Alliance*, Security and Defence Agenda, Brussels, 10 June 2011.

<sup>89</sup> Brunnstrom, D., ‘U.S. warns NATO over spending cuts, security’, Reuters, 5 Oct. 2011.

Second, a UK decision to eliminate nuclear forces at this moment in time would be strongly criticized by many NATO allies in close proximity to Russia, mainly for the political signal it would send rather than the loss of useful capability.

Third, it is often suggested that leaving France as the only nuclear weapon power in Europe would be unwelcome by European allies, and prejudice the UK's chances of shaping European and transatlantic security policy.

On the other hand, some analysts argue that the political significance of UK nuclear weapons within NATO is exaggerated. By the time the decision to procure the Trident system was taken in the early 1980s, for example, it was apparent that British strategic nuclear weapons were viewed by many NATO member governments as being of relatively limited importance.

As discussed above, the lack of enthusiasm among successive British Governments for any serious European allied input into the making of NATO and UK strategic nuclear policy has probably left the UK bereft of support within NATO (with the principal exception of the USA and more recently NATO allies in the Baltics and Eastern Europe) on this issue. Defence Secretary John Nott's memoirs hint at the difficulty he had in trying to obtain a statement supporting the Thatcher Government's decision on Trident at a NPG meeting in 1982. The government was seeking endorsement to counter rising domestic opposition to nuclear weapons, but instead received a lukewarm reaction. This is unsurprising given that the government did not brief the NAC in advance about the Trident decision and only did so shortly after it was made in July 1980. The NAC's formal response was confined to 'expressing its appreciation' for this post facto briefing.<sup>90</sup>

Remarkably, the same story emerges with the Blair Government's decision to proceed with Trident replacement. In evidence to the House of Commons Defence Committee in February 2007, Mariot Leslie, a senior Foreign Office official, indicated that NATO allies were only informed about the decision after it had been announced within the UK. Moreover, the contact with NATO was purely informational and did not seek to solicit opinion or dialogue that might be fed into an evolving UK decision-making process.<sup>91</sup>

Freedman's conclusion on this issue over three decades ago probably still holds true today, despite the profound geopolitical changes that have occurred since then. In his analysis of British nuclear strategy and policy he argued that, in the NATO context, 'the nuclear force's current political role is not particularly constructive or destructive. It neither contributes much [to] nor detracts from NATO strategy'.<sup>92</sup>

However, turning this indifference into support for nuclear disarmament has proved to be elusive. There is little or no visible support among other NATO

<sup>90</sup> Smith (note 22), p. 1396.

<sup>91</sup> Smith (note 22), p. 1398.

<sup>92</sup> Freedman (note 9) p. 141.

members for the UK to abandon its nuclear weapons. This is partly due to intra-alliance divisions on nuclear issues in the post-cold war era, with only a handful of NATO members seeking to challenge or alter the cold war inheritance (and then only in relation to nuclear sharing arrangements).<sup>93</sup> Having had little direct or meaningful political, institutional or operational involvement with NATO strategic nuclear forces, there has been no impetus for change among the UK's European NATO allies.

<sup>93</sup> See e.g. Kamp, K-H. and Remkes, R., 'Options for NATO nuclear sharing arrangements', eds Andreasen and Williams (note 8), pp. 76–95.





## 6. Conclusions

The role of nuclear weapons in Europe has changed several times over the past six decades, along with the size and shape of the nuclear forces in NATO countries. It can be argued that there have been four distinct ‘nuclear eras’: strategic air power; mutual assured destruction; flexible response; and post-cold war marginalization/minimum deterrence. UK strategic nuclear weapons have been a constant contribution to NATO nuclear doctrine throughout the last three nuclear eras, but the exact nature of that contribution has become increasingly obscure since the end of the cold war.

There are suggestions that the deteriorating relations between the West and Russia may herald a new nuclear era and, while unlikely, it is a scenario that cannot be ruled out. Despite those tensions, NATO has emphasized mainly non-nuclear weapon-related measures going forward. At the NATO Wales Summit, for example, military initiatives were extended to Georgia, Jordan and Moldova. More pressure has been applied against Russia, with NATO content to bring its military forces closer to the Russian border. In addition to increased air patrols over the Baltics and naval deployments in the Black Sea, a new Readiness Action Plan will create an enhanced Rapid Response Force.<sup>94</sup> It is hard to disagree with Christian Trippe, writing in *Deutsche Welle*, when he says that ‘the old terms are now back in play: deterrence and containment, the language of the Cold War’.<sup>95</sup> NATO leaders have made it clear to Russia that their red line is the border of the NATO alliance, and if Russia violates that border, NATO would respond with force. Defining what exactly would constitute such a breach remains an open question: a full-on tank invasion or something more understated, such as a cyberattack perhaps?

James Bissett, a former Canadian diplomat writes that the crisis in Ukraine threatens global security ‘and at worst has the potential for nuclear catastrophe. At best it signals a continuation of the Cold War’.<sup>96</sup> In the 12 months since the Wales Summit, the situation has remained tense, with the nuclear ante upped further by Russia’s announcement that it is developing 40 new nuclear-capable ballistic missiles and NATO indicating that it is preparing to re-evaluate its nuclear weapons strategy.<sup>97</sup>

In June 2015, it was reported that among potential topics on the agenda of the next NATO NPG meeting would be discussions about enhancing the role

<sup>94</sup> For further details of NATO’s Readiness Action Plan see <[http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics\\_119353.htm](http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_119353.htm)>.

<sup>95</sup> Trippe, C., ‘NATO at a loss’, *Deutsche Welle*, 6 Sep. 2014.

<sup>96</sup> Bissett, J., ‘NATO at the heart of a new Cold War, says former ambassador’, *Ottawa Citizen*, 9 Sep. 2014.

<sup>97</sup> Bolton, D., ‘Tensions grow in Eastern Europe as Russia and NATO accuse each other of cold war-style military intimidation’, *The Independent*, 17 June 2015.

of nuclear weapons in NATO military exercises.<sup>98</sup> Further details emerged at the October 2015 NATO Defence Ministers meeting, where the UK called for a return to cold war-style planning exercises. These exercises would test NATO readiness to ‘transition up the escalatory ladder’ from conventional to nuclear war, according to Sir Adam Thomson, the UK’s ambassador to NATO. The UK’s recommendation to change the policy is now under ‘active consideration’.<sup>99</sup>

Two years ago, Russia had a seat at the NATO table; today instability and violence are back in vogue, not only between East and West, but also in many other points of the compass. Within that context, the 1962 assignment of the UK nuclear force to the NATO SACEUR appears to be of little significance. However, the new NATO–Russia crisis caused by the turmoil in Ukraine will almost certainly be used to justify a ‘business as usual’ approach to the UK’s strategic deterrent in the forthcoming 2015 SDSR, including a reiteration of the claim that it enhances the deterrent posture of NATO.

This latter belief has always remained unquestioned in the public debates on the UK’s nuclear deterrent. However, this paper questions several of the assumptions that underpin that belief. The importance given to nuclear weapons in both UK national security and NATO collective security thinking suggests that the British Government and the NATO NPG would be willing to set out in some detail, and in a publically available format, how they see the UK’s nuclear weapons contributing to NATO’s continuing effectiveness and deterrent capability. Indeed, the 2015 SDSR provides an opportunity for the British Government to do just that. Regrettably, on past form it seems highly unlikely that there will be any such comprehensive consideration of the British bomb and NATO in the SDSR.

Similarly, when the NATO NPG meets to discuss updating its nuclear doctrine, such discussions will remain classified. As will any talks on the UK nuclear contribution. But given that scrutinizing national security policies, plans and budgets is an important task for national parliaments, parliamentarians in the UK should be pressing for proper scrutiny of this important dimension of national and collective security. If security building is to be a truly collective and shared enterprise, parliamentarians need to make their voices heard in the debate and discussion over what the UK nuclear contribution to NATO means in contemporary conditions.

Such a discussion should also be part of a wider debate on the future of deterrence. Under the UK’s current policy of ‘strategic ambiguity’ potential ‘enemies’ (as well as the British public and allies) are not informed in advance of what a potential nuclear response would look like in a crisis. This is said to enhance deterrence, but the ambiguity cuts both ways. Potential ‘enemies’

<sup>98</sup> MacAskill, E., ‘NATO to review nuclear weapons policy as attitude to Russia hardens’, *The Guardian*, 24 June 2015; and Dyer, G. and Barker, A., ‘Nuclear deterrent on NATO agenda amid rise in Russian rhetoric’, *Financial Times*, 25 June 2015.

<sup>99</sup> Holehouse and Foster (note 62).

may well take a view that they are free to make asymmetric and other attacks on the UK on a scale that would always fall below the nuclear rung of the UK's escalatory response ladder. Alternatively, some non-state jihadist groups might even welcome provoking the UK into a nuclear response. It is far from clear that the UK has the right doctrine, the right forces—nuclear and conventional—and the right declaratory policies for today's geopolitically and technologically complex world. Similarly, NATO's nuclear messaging and assurance role is also being questioned, with growing calls for NATO to embark on a re-evaluation of the concept of deterrence.<sup>100</sup> Both NATO and the British Government could start by being more transparent about their respective nuclear doctrines and declaratory policies, and the role of Trident replacement within those strategies.

<sup>100</sup> See e.g. Durkalec, J., 'NATO must adapt to address Russia's nuclear brinkmanship', European Leadership Network, 30 Oct. 2015; and Kubiak, K. and Meier, O., 'Updating NATO's nuclear posture: Necessary? Feasible? Desirable?', European Leadership Network, 12 Nov. 2015.





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