

## FOCUS: Nuclear Weapons and Strategic Stability

# Nuclear Disarmament *Versus* Peace in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

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In the closing stages of the Second World War, a series of terrible blows rained down on the Japanese homeland. City after city was attacked and civilian casualties were measured in the tens of thousands. Still, the Japanese did not surrender – any more than had the Germans, under a similar weight of bombardment, until overrun by the Allied armies. When the atomic bombs were used against two more Japanese cities, however, the shock effect on the country's rulers was decisive, even though initially the numbers of casualties were no greater than those inflicted by the conventional attacks against Tokyo and elsewhere. The real change brought about by the atomic bomb was not the scale of the destruction it could inflict, but the absolute certainty that that destruction would be inflicted and could not be avoided.

By contrast, when the thousand-bomber raids had been launched against German and Japanese cities, a whole variety of possible outcomes might have resulted. At one end of the spectrum, the mass bomber formations might have achieved their aim, destroyed their target and returned to base with very few losses. At the other end of the spectrum, the bombers might have been intercepted and attacked, diverted from their target, which remained unscathed, and forced to suffer very heavy losses themselves, as happened on the infamous Nuremberg raid.

There was no way of knowing in advance how such encounters would work out – prior to the coming of the atomic bomb. Let us imagine that the Germans and the Japanese had known in advance that their potential victims, the democracies, would develop nuclear weapons before the end of the wars

they were about to unleash. Is it likely that they would have proceeded to do so in the certain knowledge of total destruction? The theory that they would not had already been formulated before the atomic bomb was tested. In a report for the Chiefs of Staff in June 1945, Professor Sir Henry Tizard concluded that the only answer which he and other senior defence scientists could see to the atomic bomb was to be prepared to use it in retaliation:

*A knowledge that we were prepared, in the last resort, to do this might well deter an aggressive nation. Duelling was a recognised method of settling quarrels between men of high social standing so long as the duellists stood twenty paces apart and fired at each other with pistols of a primitive type. If the rule had been that they should stand a yard apart with pistols at each other's hearts, we doubt whether it would long have remained a recognised method of settling affairs of honour.<sup>1</sup>*

This argument was only the latest in a long line of similarly hard-headed but hopeful views. The motto: 'If you want peace, prepare for war' was essentially the same, as was the statement in the early days of aviation: 'When German bombers can destroy London and British bombers can destroy Berlin, Germany and Britain will never again go to war'. Alfred Nobel – of Peace Prize fame – was likewise convinced that his invention of dynamite would make war too destructive for countries to contemplate.

Why the Tizard scenario of peace through the threat of mutual destruction stood the test of time

better than the earlier arguments was because of the factor of certainty (or 'assuredness') which atomic weapons for the first time guaranteed. Earlier explosives, like dynamite, and earlier means of delivery, like manned bombers, still left the outcome of the encounter in doubt. Even where both sides were similarly armed, there remained enough of a chance that one of them would suffer total defeat whilst the other enjoyed total victory to make the gamble of waging war seem worthwhile. There was, in short, too much uncertainty as to what the outcome would be.

thing to do: to possess the weapons and avoid anyone being attacked, or to renounce them and lay yourself open to aggression? The central problem which has to be faced by those who argue that the mere possession of, or the threat to use, nuclear weapons in retaliation is morally unacceptable, is the extreme level of destructiveness which conventional warfare had reached before the atomic bomb was invented. If it is the case that possessing a deadly weapon or being willing to threaten to use it in retaliation will avert a conflict in which millions would otherwise die, can it seriously be claimed that the

Moral choices are, as often as not, choices to determine the lesser of two evils. In the case of possessing and threatening to use a horrifying weapon, or renouncing it with the result that such weapons are actually used against one's own society, only the purest pacifist can be in any doubt as to which course to follow.

### Predictability

Many who oppose Britain's retention and replacement of nuclear weapons in the twenty-first century also advocated unilateral nuclear disarmament, despite the level of the Soviet threat, during



### The Ethical Paradox

The dawning of the atomic age was thus accompanied by what seemed to be an extreme ethical paradox: peace could apparently best be maintained by the possession of, and the threat to use, weapons which could obliterate tens of thousands of people in an instant. Simply because nuclear weapons, *if used*, would cause hideous destruction and loss of life, it has often been argued that there is something immoral in their very possession. Yet no weapon is moral or immoral in itself. Ethics enter the equation only when one considers the motivation for possessing weapons and the uses to which they are put.

If the consequence of possessing a lethal weapon is that nobody uses lethal weapons, whilst the consequence of not possessing a lethal weapon is that someone else uses his lethal weapons against you, which is the more moral

more ethical policy is to renounce the weapon and let the millions meet their fate? Even if one argues that the threat to retaliate is itself immoral, is it as immoral as the failure to forestall so many preventable casualties?

This is, in reality, a variation on the argument against absolute pacifism which the late Leonard Cheshire illustrated when such issues were being debated twenty years ago. He set out the scenario of a security guard who is the only person in a position to prevent a terrorist from opening fire on a queue of passengers in an airport lounge. According to most people's values, not only is it morally correct for him to shoot the armed terrorist, it would be profoundly unethical for him to decline to do so. This is without prejudice to the fact that the security guard might well be right to feel that it was a tragedy that he had to take anyone's life at all.

the Cold War. There are, however, significant numbers who believe that what was necessary then no longer applies now. This brings us to the central problem of *predictability*.

From time to time wars break out in circumstances which were anticipated; but, more often than not, they arise totally unexpectedly. The Yom Kippur War in 1973 took even hypersensitive Israel by surprise. The Falklands War, nine years later, took Britain by surprise. The invasion of Kuwait in 1990 took everyone by surprise. And the attacks of 11 September 2001 took the world's only superpower by surprise. There was nothing new in any of this – as a detour into the archives strikingly illustrates: from August 1919 until November 1933 British foreign and defence policy was hamstrung by a prediction that the country would not be engaged in a war with another major power for at least a

decade. This had a dangerously adverse effect on necessary rearmament when the international scene darkened. Arguing against the continuation of this so-called 'Ten Year Rule' in January 1931, when Secretary of the Committee of Imperial Defence, Sir Maurice Hankey, observed:

*As a nation we have been prone in the past to assume that the international outlook is in accordance with our desires rather than with the facts of the situation... We are also apt to forget how suddenly war breaks out. In 1870, a fortnight before the event, we were not in the least expecting the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian War. The same was true in 1914. A fortnight after the murder of the Austrian Archduke, a debate took place in the House of Commons on foreign affairs. The European situation was hardly referred to at all. More attention was given to the preparations for the next Peace Conference!... There was no statement made on the subject of the European crisis in Parliament until July 27... We really had, at the outside, not more than ten days' warning.<sup>2</sup>*

The onset of armed conflicts is inherently unpredictable. This is why it makes sense to keep in being an army, a navy and an air force during long periods of peace. The same applies a *fortiori* to the nuclear deterrent. Investment in armed forces in apparently peaceful times is analogous to the payment of premiums on insurance policies. No one knows when the accident or disaster may happen against which one is insuring; if one did, one could probably avoid it and save oneself the cost of the premiums.

With the benefit of hindsight, the Second World War is often regarded as a disaster predetermined by mistakes made at the end of the First World War. Yet in the decade of the 1920s, there was so little sign of an obvious enemy that each of Britain's three Armed Services prepared its hypothetical contingency plans against an entirely different potential enemy. In those days, the choice of possible enemy would seriously affect the nature of the

defence policy designed to meet the threat. Fortunately, the British strategic nuclear deterrent is less dependent than conventional armed forces upon the correct identification of the enemy in advance. Any country which emerges as a potential aggressor with mass-destruction weapons, in the next three or four decades, will be vulnerable to retaliation from Trident or its successor – and this is the sort of time scale which we have to consider.

Each generation of the strategic nuclear deterrent functions for a period of thirty years or more. The actual replacement of the Trident system, if it occurs, will not even begin for at least another fifteen years. No one can possibly foretell what dangers will face us between the years 2020 and 2050, just as the threats facing us today would have seemed bizarre to politicians and military planners at the height of the Cold War. During periods of peace, democratic states naturally tend to scale down their conventional fighting services, but they try to do so in a way which is reversible should the international scene deteriorate. This option does not apply to the nuclear deterrent, which has always been set at the minimum level regarded as essential for credibility. There can be no more assurance that a nuclear or major chemical or biological threat will not arise in the next half-century than that major land, sea or air threats will not have to be faced. If it is right to insure against the latter, it is essential to insure against the former.

### New Threats

Apart from those who have always opposed British nuclear weapons, irrespective of the level of threat, some politicians, some churchmen and commentators, and even some military figures who used to support it, have now changed their minds. This is primarily because the Cold War is over, America appears to be the dominant world power and the principal threats today emanate from rogue regimes and stateless terrorist groups. Let us consider each of these in turn.

First, the ending of the Cold War removes the danger of nuclear confrontation with Russia for as long as

that country continues to tread, however hesitantly, the democratic path. Indeed, it is striking to note that many prophets of nuclear doom during the 1970s and 1980s have been all but silenced by the change in East-West relations, even though enough nuclear weapons remain in US and Russian hands to destroy the world's main population centres with many warheads to spare. This illustrates the fact that it is not the weapons themselves which we have to fear but the nature of the governments that possess them. As soon as Russia turned away from totalitarianism, the main concern about her nuclear arsenal shifted from those devices under the control of the Kremlin to those which might leach out from Russian stockpiles and fall into the hands of other regimes which remained more hostile.

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One concept which advocates of nuclear disarmament have traditionally ignored is the propensity for dictatorships to go to war with dictatorships, and for democracies and dictatorships to clash, whilst few – if any – examples exist of liberal democracies attacking each other. This suggests that it is quite right to have fewer qualms about the possession of deadly weapons by democracies, though regarding their possession by dictatorships as wholly unacceptable. There is no comparison between the two, and it is a constant failing of the disarmament lobby to try to ascribe values of reasonableness, tolerance, goodwill and peaceful intent to states under the control of despots, fanatics and dictators.

Secondly, the current period of America's solo superpower status in no way diminishes the case for an independent British deterrent. Nuclear

weapons, by their very nature, have devastating potential even in very small numbers. Quite apart from the prospect of unpredictable major threats in the longer term, the current enmity towards Britain by near-nuclear regimes like Iran suggests that unilateralism would be fraught with danger. It used to be pointed out that the British Polaris fleet had done nothing to deter Argentina from invading the Falkland Islands. Certainly, there was never a prospect of democratic Britain threatening to use its ultimate weapon except in response to a mortal threat against the cities of the United Kingdom. What would have been the case, though, if the Argentine junta had possessed even a few atomic weapons or other mass-destruction devices? Without a nuclear force of her own, would Britain then have dared to respond to the occupation militarily, despite her superiority in conventional forces?

Time and again, the United Kingdom and the United States have stood side-by-side in international conflicts. If this pattern continues, the prospect could arise of a nuclear-armed enemy regarding it as safer to threaten or attack the smaller of the two allies. The danger would then arise of a possible miscalculation by an aggressor thinking that the US would not respond in kind to an attack with mass-destruction weapons on British cities. If this were a miscalculation, the attacker would discover it only when it was too late for all concerned, instead of having been deterred at the outset by the knowledge that Britain could respond in kind on her own behalf.

These considerations clearly bear on the third issue: that of rogue regimes. Several of them are already nuclear powers or on the verge of becoming so. The notion that they will abandon such a course indefinitely in response to unilateral British nuclear disarmament is totally unrealistic. Those who subscribe to it continually make the error of projecting civilized values onto extremist governments which actually hold them in contempt.

Turning, fourthly, to the current emergence of non-state terrorist groups, it is absolutely correct that strategic nuclear weapons are of no relevance whatsoever. Neither are aircraft carriers,

main battle tanks, guided-missile destroyers or any other heavy-weight military equipment. The presence of a serious terrorist threat is clearly an argument in favour of expanded counter-insurgency forces and security and intelligence services. It is no argument at all for the abolition of those military capabilities which are designed to meet other types of threat which this country has faced in the past and may well face again in the future.

### Utopian NPT Obligations

Does proliferation make Britain's continued possession of nuclear weapons unethical? There might be a case for arguing this if it could be shown that there were a causal link between our continued possession of a strategic nuclear deterrent and the decision of one or more identifiable countries to acquire nuclear weapons. During the Cold War era, the proliferation argument was often used by one-sided nuclear disarmers in their campaign against Polaris, Trident and the deployment of cruise missiles. Yet whenever asked to *name* a specific nuclear or near-nuclear country which would be likely to abandon its nuclear ambitions if we unilaterally renounced ours, the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament and its fellow travellers were notably unforthcoming. Countries make the decision whether or not to seek to acquire mass-destruction weapons according to hard-headed calculations of their own strategic interests. A quixotic renunciation by democratic Britain is not very likely to encourage any undemocratic state to follow suit. On the contrary, it is more likely to encourage any such state which views Britain as a potential enemy to redouble its efforts to join the WMD club, given that we would no longer have the means to threaten retaliation against nuclear, biological or chemical aggression.

What does the Non-Proliferation Treaty actually commit the United Kingdom to do? Article VI of the NPT is often referred to, but seldom quoted in full. This is what it states:

*Each of the Parties to the Treaty undertakes to pursue negotiations in good faith on effective measures*

*relating to cessation of the nuclear arms race at an early date and to nuclear disarmament, and on a Treaty on general and complete disarmament under strict and effective international control.*

There are thus three obligations, only the first of which is time-limited. This is to end 'the nuclear arms race' at 'an early date'. Given that the United Kingdom – and, for that matter, France and China – have never engaged in a nuclear arms race, their policy of each having a minimum strategic nuclear deterrent does not fall foul of this provision. None of these countries has ever sought to match the nuclear stockpiles of Russia or the United States. Each has been content to possess a much smaller nuclear capability, provided that it is adequate to threaten an unacceptable level of retaliation if attacked. The same would apply to any replacement system for Trident.

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It is true that Article VI aspires to both 'nuclear disarmament' and 'a Treaty on general and complete disarmament' as well – but this is nothing more than a double aspiration for the indefinite future. What it amounts to is nothing less than a world completely disarmed of all weapons of every description 'under strict and effective international control'. This utopia would require several things to happen: the creation of a World Government; the establishment of foolproof methods of preventing clandestine rearmament; and, above all, a revolution in the minds of men so that warfare became redundant.

### Conclusion

During the inter-war years, the process of disarmament was taken to new heights of complexity, but it achieved

only this: the peace-loving democracies disarmed each other and themselves, while the rogues, the villains, the bandits, the dictators and the tyrants re-armed in secret, threatened democracy and destroyed the peace of the world. After the final defeat of the Nazis, the democratic states faced a new challenge and a variation on an old dilemma. The challenge was that of confrontation with Soviet communism; the dilemma was whether to try to defuse it by disarmament or to contain it by deterrence.

The fact that the Third World War did not break out is not, of itself, conclusive proof that containment by deterrence was successful. It is of the nature of deterrence that, whenever it works, its opponents can always argue that the war would not have happened in any case. Yet the fact that there were

so many small but deadly wars fought between client states of the superpowers (but not between the superpowers themselves) strongly suggests that the mutual threat of nuclear annihilation had something to do with the restraint exercised by the superpowers themselves.

***The possession of the deterrent may be unpleasant, but it is an unpleasant necessity***

The purpose of the British nuclear deterrent remains what it has always been: to minimize the prospect of the United Kingdom being attacked by mass-destruction weapons. It is not a

panacea and it is not designed to forestall every type of threat. Nevertheless, the threat which it is designed to counter is so overwhelming that no other form of military capability could manage to avert it. The possession of the deterrent may be unpleasant, but it is an unpleasant necessity, the purpose of which lies not in its actual use but in its nature as the ultimate 'stalemate weapon' – and, in the nuclear age, stalemate is the most reliable source of security available to us all. ■

**NOTES**

1. CAB 80/94: COS(45)402(0), 'Future Development in Weapons and Methods of War', 16 June 1945.
2. CAB21/2093: 19/10/201, 'The Basis of Service Estimates', 9 January 1931.



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