

Deterrence irrelevance: Trident, Britain and nuclear weapons

Nick Ritchie outlines the serious flaws in the logic of nuclear deterrence upon which the proposed replacement of Trident is based

In December 2006, the British government released a White Paper announcing its intention to begin the process of replacing the current Trident nuclear weapons system, thereby enabling it to retain nuclear weapons well into the 2050s.¹ The government's case rested on the continuing relevance of the logic of nuclear deterrence for long-term British security. Particularly prominent was the assertion that nuclear weapons provide an insurance, or guarantee of protection, against future strategic threats to the country and its 'vital interests'.

The logic of nuclear deterrence elaborated by US strategists as the Cold War unfolded asserted that an adversary could be successfully persuaded to refrain from or to halt its aggressive actions through the threat to inflict unacceptable and inescapable damage with a retaliatory nuclear strike. The threat of nuclear devastation would decisively alter the aggressor's calculation of the costs and benefits of its actions causing it to change its behaviour.² Proponents of nuclear deterrence argue that it is the possibility of nuclear retaliation that has kept the peace between the major powers since the Second World War by making the costs of aggression prohibitively high.³

Despite the apparent simplicity of this logic, theorists and policy-makers have struggled to devise credible policies to deter adversaries with the threat of a retaliatory nuclear attack. Interpretations of nuclear deterrence and its translation into strategy, force structure and command and control processes have varied considerably.

Problems with deterrence

The problem with the government's undimmed faith in the logic of nuclear deterrence is that it is not an exact science. The seemingly straightforward cause-and-effect equation at its heart is unreliable and success is far from assured for a number of reasons.⁴ First, simply deploying a 'deterrent' does not automatically ensure that others will be 'deterred' because nuclear deterrence is a process rather than a quality intrinsic to nuclear weapons. The government is misleading when it refers to its nuclear weapons as 'the deterrent'.⁵

Second, the effectiveness of deterrent threats is based on the perceived credibility of the threat in the eyes of the deterrer and the deteree. Nuclear deterrent threats need not be 100 per cent credible

to be effective, but the less credible the threat the less effective it will be.⁶ The credibility of nuclear deterrent threats was questioned repeatedly throughout the Cold War leading to regular revisions of nuclear strategy.⁷

Third, nuclear deterrence in practice does not automatically stabilise relations between nuclear-armed opponents as is often claimed. Different governments and leaders may interpret the dynamics of nuclear deterrence, its cost-benefit calculus and the credibility of nuclear threats quite differently.⁸ This can lead to dangerous misunderstandings, miscalculation or determined resistance to deterrent threats.⁹

Finally, it cannot be unequivocally asserted that nuclear deterrent threats were the primary reason the Cold War did not turn hot. Powerful arguments can be made that the sheer scale of destruction with conventional weaponry that accompanied the Second World War was sufficient to deter future global war between the major industrialised powers.¹⁰ The advent of nuclear weapons intensified the reluctance of major powers to engage in mass war but it did not establish it.¹¹

Trident replacement: flaws in the use of the deterrence argument

The government claims in its 2006 White Paper that nuclear deterrence still pertains in four broad areas:

- 1) deterrence against aggression towards British/NATO vital interests or nuclear coercion by major powers with large nuclear arsenals;
 - 2) deterrence against nuclear coercion or blackmail by regional 'rogue' states armed with weapons of mass destruction (WMD);
 - 3) deterrence against state-sponsored acts of nuclear terrorism; and
 - 4) a general residual deterrent to preserve peace and stability in an uncertain world.¹²
- All four claims have serious problems.

1) The only major powers likely to have the capability, and possibly the intention, in the future, to threaten Britain and Europe with nuclear attack are Russia and China. Yet the long-term, post-Cold War trend in relations with both major powers has been positive, current tensions with Russia not withstanding. Both countries are becoming ever more integrated into the global economy and the prevailing international order. Their nuclear arsenals, which Russia is keen to reduce and China has kept deliberately small, have little relationship with Britain's. Confrontations and crises will undoubtedly occur, some of which may have military dimensions, but it is barely conceivable that British nuclear deterrent threats and

consideration of using nuclear weapons against Russia or China will ever be part of the solution to future confrontations, particularly in the absence of Cold War ideological enmity.

2) Threats to use nuclear weapons against WMD-armed 'rogue' states are highly problematic. Limited military objectives may be achievable if Britain gets involved in future military interventionist activities against a 'rogue' state in possession of advanced WMD. Nevertheless, it will be dangerous to assume that British nuclear deterrent threats will keep a conflict at the level of conventional weaponry, particularly if the survival of the 'rogue' regime is threatened and whose intentions, values and understandings are less than clear. Containment, isolation or engagement will likely represent a more productive strategic choice. Furthermore, the credibility and legality of threatening major, indiscriminate civilian casualties through the use of British nuclear weapons in retaliation for a WMD attack by a 'rogue' leadership is highly questionable and would have deleterious long-term consequences for British security. Does this leave Britain open to the much-feared nuclear coercion? No. Nuclear coercion, or 'blackmail', has rarely worked in practice. As Michael MccGwire argues, "Despite theorists' best efforts, there is still no example of nuclear compellence. This inherent constraint applies to the rogue state that acquires a minimal capability".¹³

3) Similar reasons undermine the role British nuclear weapons can play in deterring state-sponsored acts of nuclear terrorism. Effective nuclear deterrent threats or retaliation with British nuclear weapons will require incontrovertible evidence of state sponsorship of nuclear terrorism that will be hard to ascertain. Terrorist groups may also actively seek nuclear retaliation for their attacks, and killing many thousands, or tens of thousands, of civilians in the sponsoring state would be massively disproportionate and counter-productive.

4) The government's insistence that British nuclear weapons provide a general deterrent to threats against its 'vital interests' in a complex, uncertain future international security environment is also highly problematic. First, the government's emphasis on nuclear weapons as a form of insurance is dubious. Nuclear weapons provide no insurance in the generally accepted understanding of the term, i.e. as a guarantee of reimbursement for loss under the terms of an agreement. They can only provide some assurance of revenge rather than an insurance, or guarantee of protection, against attack and the two should not be conflated. Furthermore, possession of

nuclear weapons has failed to provide an 'insurance' against threats to the 'vital interests' of nuclear weapon states in the past. Argentina's invasion of the Falklands/Malvinas is an important example.¹⁴

Second, threats to Britain's 'vital interests' from 'future uncertainty' are increasingly likely to arise from a complex and interdependent mix of environmental, economic, military and political sources of insecurity, including the effects of climate change, mass poverty, global pandemic diseases, weak and failing states, international terrorism, the spread of WMD and advanced conventional military technologies, ethnic and sectarian nationalism, and

competition over access to key resources such as oil and water.¹⁵ Such threats will not be susceptible to purely military solutions and the use of military force in regional crises will be messy, indeterminate and of limited value.¹⁶ British nuclear deterrent threats and the use of a devastatingly blunt instrument like a nuclear weapon cannot hope to offer any useful solution to such complex threats and conflicts. The government's argument that we must keep nuclear weapons 'just in case' because the future security environment appears so uncertain makes no sense if British nuclear threats offer no solution to the causes or symptoms of that uncertainty.

In summary: it is very difficult to make a compelling case for British possession of nuclear weapons based on the continuing relevance of the logic of nuclear deterrence, and the necessity of being able to threaten to kill tens, if not hundreds, of thousands of people for long-term British security. In fact, nuclear weapons offer very little to British security and the current or future government should seriously rethink the decision to replace the current Trident system.

Dr Nick Ritchie is a Research Fellow at the Department of Peace Studies, University of Bradford.

Trident replacement timeline

The government has stated that the first new submarine should enter service in 2024. The Ministry of Defence (MOD) procures new weapon systems according to its CADMID cycle of Concept, Assessment, Demonstration, Manufacture, In-service and Disposal. These factors lead to the timetable below.¹⁷

Year	Activity
2007	'Concept' phase start. The decision endorsed by parliament in March 2007 to begin the process of commissioning new submarines to carry the Trident missile into the 2050s authorised the first phase of CADMID only.
2009	'Assessment' phase start. The decision to move to the next phase – often referred to as the 'initial gate' decision – is due to be taken in September 2009. At this point the MOD would place a full design contract for a new submarine.
2010-15	'Demonstration' phase start. Two crucial decisions would be taken in the next parliament (2010-2015). The first would be the 'main gate' decision – which would begin the 'Demonstration' and 'Manufacture' phases. It is at this point that the submarine design is finalised, contracts to build the new boats are tendered, billions are committed and the process becomes politically difficult to reverse. The decision must be made no later than 2014, with approval for the procurement of long-lead items for the new submarine by 2011. The second decision would be on whether to refurbish or replace the current UK Trident warhead. The government says the current warhead was designed to last into the mid-2020s and it is currently exploring life-extension options but has made no decision on whether a new warhead will be required.
2016	'Manufacture' phase start. A contract to build the new submarines would be expected. A decision would be required on whether to build a fourth new submarine or whether current British nuclear doctrine could be operationalised with three.
2022	First submarine would be delivered to the MOD and begin two years of sea trials.
2024	'In-service' phase start. First submarine would enter service.
2020s/ early 2030s	Britain's new submarines would carry the current US Trident missile. The US plans to phase this missile out of service by 2042, long before Britain's planned new submarines will retire. A decision can therefore be expected in the 2020s or early 2030s on whether to purchase a successor missile. The US Navy recently initiated studies for a new missile to replace Trident. The government has sought assurances from the USA that any new missile will be compatible with the new British submarines, but this is not guaranteed.
2050s	'Disposal' phase start. Submarines would begin to be decommissioned.

References

1. Ministry of Defence (MOD) and Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) (2006). *The Future of the United Kingdom's Nuclear Deterrent*. Cm 6994. London, HMSO.
2. Freedman L (2004). *Deterrence*. Cambridge, Polity Press.
3. Quinlan M (1993). *The Future of Nuclear Weapons: Policy for Western Possessors*. *International Affairs*, 69: 3, pp.487, 496.
4. McCwire M (1994). *Is there a Future for Nuclear Weapons?* *International Affairs*, 70: 2, p.228.
5. Stocker J (2007). *The United Kingdom and Nuclear Deterrence*. Adelphi Paper 386. London, Routledge for IISS. p.43.
6. DFI International (2001). *Non-Nuclear Strategic Deterrence of State and Non-State Adversaries*. Washington DC, Defense Threat Reduction Agency. p.15.

7. Freedman L (1989). *The Evolution of Nuclear Strategy*. Basingstoke, Macmillan Press; Kenyon I, Simpson J (Eds.) (2006). *Deterrence and the New Global Security Environment*. London, Routledge.
8. Booth K (1979). *Strategy and Ethnocentrism*. London, Croom Helm.
9. Jervis R (1976). *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*. Princeton, Princeton University Press.
10. Mueller J (1988). *The Essential Irrelevance of Nuclear Weapons*. *International Security*, 13: 2, p.66.
11. Howard M (1964). *Military Power and International Order*. *International Affairs*, 40: 3, pp.402-403.
12. MOD and FCO (2006). *Op cit* – see note 1. pp.5, 18-19.
13. McCwire (1994). *Op cit* – see note 4. p.214.

14. Booth K (1989). *Alternative Defence*. In: Booth K, Baylis J (Eds.) *Britain, NATO and nuclear weapons*. New York, St. Martin's Press. p.200.
15. Snyder C (2008). *Contemporary Security and Strategy*. In: Snyder C (Ed.) *Contemporary Security and Strategy*. 2nd edition. Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan. pp.1-13.
16. Prime Minister's Strategy Unit (2007). *Policy Review: Summary of Background Papers (January)*. London. pp.30, 41, 67; MOD (2007). *Global Strategic Trends: 2007-2036*. 3rd ed. Development, Concepts and Doctrine Centre. Shrivenham. p.v.
17. National Audit Office (2008). *Ministry of Defence: The United Kingdom's Future Nuclear Deterrent Capability*. November. HC 1115, Session 2007-2008. London: HMSO.