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by Rebecca Johnson

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Introduction

Britain became the third nuclear weapon possessor on October 3, 1952. Doctrine and policy have fluctuated during the years, reflecting doctrinal shifts in the United States and NATO following from developments in the strategic environment, and changes in British governments following elections. In general, the Conservative Party is much more keen on retaining nuclear weapons than the Labour Party, but in government both tend to be cautious and pragmatic. On coming to power in 1997, the Labour government undertook a Strategic Defence Review (SDR), the report of which was published in July 1998. The SDR confirmed the withdrawal and dismantlement of Britain's remaining tactical bombs, announced a ceiling on warhead numbers of 48 per Trident submarine, up to a maximum of 200, and states that following these reductions the British nuclear arsenal was deemed to be "the minimum necessary to provide for our security for the foreseeable future". Noting that Britain's arsenal is "very much smaller than those of the major nuclear powers", the SDR said that "further reductions [in the largest arsenals] would be needed before further British reductions could become feasible". (1) Such a position is not dissimilar to that of China, amounting in effect to: We don't have to do anything ourselves, but wait for the big guys to come down to our level.

But though the official statements continue to emphasise Britain's reliance on nuclear weapons, there is for the first time a recognition of the necessity to begin preparing for nuclear disarmament. At the 2000 NPT Review Conference, Britain put in two working papers. One, entitled 'Systematic and progressive efforts to reduce nuclear weapons globally: a food for thought paper' looked at nuclear arms control, related security issues and underlying political issues. (2) The second, on 'Nuclear verification' was essentially the executive summary report published by Britain's Atomic Weapons Laboratory, the Aldermaston Atomic Weapons Establishment (AWE). In initiating the report, Britain's Defense Secretary, George Robertson - now Secretary-General of NATO - said that "The Government wishes to see a safer world in which there is no place for nuclear weapons". Instead of just repeating that we would wait for the big nuclear arsenals to come down, Robertson put forward the new official (post- SDR) position that "when we are satisfied with progress towards the goal of the global elimination of nuclear weapons we will ensure that our nuclear weapons are included in multi-lateral negotiations on balanced reductions". What came next was even more interesting: "But even if such negotiations are not imminent, we have started to think about their likely implications for us". (3) The AWE report was the first practical step. Just as Aldermaston scientists were assigned more than 20 years ago to study verification for a comprehensive nuclear test ban treaty (CTBT), even as the British government argued in the United Nations and elsewhere that a CTBT was impractical and premature, undertaking this verification report now is an indication that British policymakers are beginning to foresee a future without nuclear weapons.

Nevertheless, British military and government officials view such a future as still some way off. For the rest of this paper I shall look at governmental, parliamentary and civil society attitudes to nuclear disarmament and US national missile defense plans.

Britain's nuclear forces

Britain's nuclear weapons are assigned to NATO for use in defending the Alliance "except where the UK government may decide that supreme national interests are at stake". British Trident submarines are coordinated with Trident submarines from the US Atlantic Fleet. Britain bought 58 D-5 missiles from the United States for deployment aboard Trident, but does not, according to the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists own them. The missiles are "borrowed" from a pool of submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs) kept by the United States at King's Bay, Georgia and may be rotated between US and British Trident fleets. British nuclear targeting is coordinated with the United States through NATO's Nuclear Planning Group and the Supreme Allied Commander for Europe (SACEUR), who maintains the Alliance's nuclear plans (and who is always an American officer). The missiles are equipped with the US Satellite Navigation system and use US intelligence data in determining targeting. Britain's Official Secrets Act precludes direct information on targeting, but the US Doctrines for Joint and Joint Theater Nuclear Operations can be assumed to contain the guidelines that apply to British nuclear forces as well. (4) In the context of the SDR, the Ministry of Defense announced that only one out of its four Trident submarines would be out on patrol and that the nuclear forces would be on a lower state of readiness than during the cold war, with a 'reduced day-to-day alert state' and normally at 'several days notice to fire'. Economic rationalization and the end of the cold war enabled the MoD to decide to institute fewer patrols and a reduced level of alert, but they were careful to distinguish these operational decisions from the kinds of de-alerting advocated by Bruce Blair, Frank von Hippel et al. The SDR also rejected proposals from British NGOs for de-weaponizing Trident by separating the warheads from the missiles. Relying on arguments about surprise attack and potential misunderstandings, the MoD pledges in the SDR to "ensure that we can restore a higher state of alert should this become necessary at any time". (5)

Furthermore, stating that the "credibility of deterrence also depends on retaining an option for a limited strike that would not automatically lead to a full-scale nuclear exchange", the SDR proposed a "sub-strategic role" for Trident. (6) There has been a great deal of confusion and a certain amount of scepticism about what Trident's sub-strategic role might look like in practice. The Secretary of State for Defense for the previous Conservative Government, Malcolm Rifkind, referred to a "warning shot" or "shot across the bows". (7) More recently, British officials have described a sub-strategic strike as "the limited and highly selective use of nuclear weapons in a manner that fell demonstrably short of a strategic strike, but with a sufficient level of violence to convince an aggressor who had already miscalculated our resolve and attacked us that he should halt his aggression and withdraw or face the prospect of a devastating strategic strike". (8) For Trident's strategic role, AWE Aldermaston has designed warheads understood to resemble the W-76 warheads used by the United States for the same purpose. The normal yield is 100 kt, although this may be varied. For a sub-strategic role there has been speculation that some of the 100 kt MIRVed warheads would be replaced with single 1 kt or 5 kt warheads, or that commanders could choose to detonate only the unboosted primary, resulting in an explosion with a yield of just a few kilotonnes. There are three core problems with the concept of a warning shot to deter further aggression:

i) It cannot be used against non-nuclear parties to the NPT without violating Britain's security assurances, most recently enshrined in UNSC 984 (1995 ii) where to conduct a warning shot so that civilians are not endangered iii) how, in the uncertain context of a hotting-up conflict, Britain would ensure that the adversary interpreted such a nuclear shot from Trident as a warning rather than a nuclear attack.

Since pre-emption is not an option, the only way to be sure that sub-strategic nuclear use would cause nuclear retaliation and possibly all-out nuclear war: British planners tend to duck the questions rather than address the dilemma, leaving the impression that they hope the bridge will never have to be faced, never mind crossed.

Nuclear Disarmament Commitments

The SDR was published just a month after the declaration on the Need for a New Nuclear Disarmament Agenda by the foreign ministers of eight non-nuclear nations: Brazil, Egypt, Ireland, Mexico, New Zealand, Slovenia, South Africa and Sweden. Despite expressions of support for a safer world in which there is no place for nuclear weapons, the SDR made clear that it regarded nuclear deterrence as a "longer term insurance" not only for Britain, but for NATO. When the New Agenda Coalition first put forward its resolution to the UN First Committee and General Assembly in 1998, British diplomats opposed it and joined the United States and France in heavy arm twisting to prevent any other NATO governments voting in favour. In fact 12 out of the 16 then members of NATO, together with Japan, abstained on the resolution. Their 'defection' was regarded as a partial defeat by the NATO nuclear powers. Partly as a result of civil society pressure and work to raise parliamentary awareness of nuclear issues over the next year, in 1999 Britain was more conciliatory towards the New Agenda resolution. The UK voted against, but did not try to put such heavy pressure on its allies, leaving the arm twisting to France and the United States.

At the 2000 NPT Review Conference, Britain sought to play a constructive, bridge-building role between the nuclear weapon states and the New Agenda Coalition, and was eager to support both the N-5 statement and multilateral agreements on nuclear disarmament steps as part of the final document. Britain was the first to accept the 'forward-looking' nuclear disarmament 'plan of action' and to help persuade some of the more reluctant weapon states to go along with a constructive, pragmatic approach. Since then, British officials have been keen to emphasise their support for the NPT final document and to advertise how they have done or are doing towards fulfilment of the NPT's obligations. Britain and France were the first of the N-5 to ratify the CTBT and the test ban treaty remains a very high priority. Britain has ceased production of fissile materials for weapons purposes and declared a moratorium, together with France, Russia and the United States. Getting negotiations on a cut-off treaty or fissban underway is now Britain's major priority for multilateral negotiations at the Conference on Disarmament (CD). If the CD remains deadlocked, it is possible that Britain may join those looking for alternative fora or mechanisms to undertake fissban negotiations.

Giving evidence to the Foreign Affairs Committee recently, the Foreign Office declared that Britain's nuclear holdings were now "considerably lower than those of any other nuclear weapon state". (9) Foreign Secretary, Robin Cook MP, also claimed that the government had made progress on "all four" specific steps identified by the Foreign Office as applying directly to the weapon states: "We halved the number of planned warheads and are now operating at reduced level of warheads" "We are now the most transparent and most open of all the nuclear weapon states about the declared number of nuclear warheads..." "We do not have any non-strategic weapons now..." "We have made it clear that we have reduced the state of alert of our submarines and we are much more transparent about what state of alert is than anybody else..."

Having declared Britain to be in conformity with the obligations outlined in the 2000 NPT review document, Cook concludes "Further progress must depend on progress by other nuclear weapon states. We remain ready to consider further steps we can take but it is difficult to see, having done as much as we have in the past three years, what more we can do long term objectively." (10) The Foreign Affairs Committee did not take this on face value however. The report also quoted academic experts questioning whether, apart from the lip service given to the goal of a nuclear weapon free world, there was any evidence of long term objectives or ideas for taking the process of 'minimum deterrence' to the next stage. The Committee therefore recommended that the UK government should "think creatively about how to proceed towards minimum deterrence for all nuclear weapon states and not focus its attention solely on existing arms control agreements and negotiations". (11)

Public opinion

Successful opinion polls have shown around 80 percent public support for global nuclear disarmament, with over 50 percent in favour of Britain getting rid of our nuclear arsenals even if other weapon states do not. However, these may be the responses to direct polling, but such apparent support does not translate easily into political action. After the highly charged and polarised political debates of the 1980s, nuclear weapons are not of high salience and no longer feature significantly in public or political discourse. For example, in the Foreign and Defense Policy debates that followed the Queen's Speech in November 1999 (which sets out the government's legislative programme for the coming year), neither the Foreign nor Defense Secretaries mentioned arms control or disarmament, and nuclear issues were treated almost as a joke in questions. In January 2000, one day before launching the first All Party Parliamentary Group on Global Security and Non-Proliferation, Malcolm Savidge MP was successful in getting an adjournment debate on weapons of mass destruction. In this, Savidge argued that Britain must "leave behind old slogans, old positions and old arguments" and, echoing the New Agenda resolution, said there was a place for bilateral, plurilateral and multilateral negotiations. (12) Through the All Party Group, Savidge has been successful in raising the profile of nuclear issues in parliament, contributing to increased media interest in nuclear weapons and arms control (13) and, it appears, the more constructive approach shown since 1999.

Public pressure from civil society has also increased in the past two years. Although the broad-based pressure group the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) still exists, the headlines and most of the effective pressure arise from the actions of a growing grassroots movement called Trident Cough which since the 1999 General Council of Justice (JCJ) ruling on the use or threat of use of nuclear weapons pledged that if the government does not take responsibility for disarmament in conformity with international law and Britain's treaty obligations, the people themselves will take nonviolent direct action to disable and if possible disarm Trident. In November 1999, three women were acquitted by the Scottish courts of damaging equipment and computers associated with the deployment of the Trident nuclear submarines at Loch Goll. The Sheriff, Margaret Gimmblett, directed the jury to acquit the women because they had acted according to their understanding that Trident was illegal and that they "were justified in thinking that" the threat or use of Trident could be construed as a threat... and as such is an infringement of common international law". (14) This case caused an uproar in Scotland, hitting the front pages for several days and causing furious public and media debates about the role played by Scotland as providing the home-port for Britain's nuclear weapons, when defense decisions were made in England. Unable to let this judgement stand without grave future problems, the UK government is presently appealing against the verdict on the basis that the law was misinterpreted.

In a similar case less than a month ago, on September 19 and 20, a jury in England refused to convict two more Trident Ploughshares women of criminal damage to one of the actual Trident submarines, to which they had sworn. The women had admitted to painting peace messages on the nuclear submarine and damaging its communications equipment but had argued a defense of lawful necessity, seeking to show both that the deployment of Trident breached international law and that Trident posed an imminent threat. At the same time, a group of local residents near Aldermaston (the Nuclear Awareness Group) have taken the atomic weapons establishment to court for a judicial review, claiming that its toxic and radioactive discharges, some of which are flushed straight out into the River Thames, breach European and British regulations. That case is continuing and may have to go up to the European Court for adjudication.

British attitudes to NMD

In general, the British attitude to US plans for national missile defense can be summed up in one word - sceptical. One after another, articles and interviews have questioned and criticised the concept of unilateral assured safety - and 'gun-gung China' as the UN General Assembly in December 1999, assuring everyone that it expressed its concerns to the United States privately. This appears to have been true, and was acknowledged by senior US officials. (15)

Despite its scepticism, the British government found itself in a dilemma over NMD. Among the many military facilities operated by the US military in Britain are two in Yorkshire, Fylingdales and Menwith Hill, which the United States plans to upgrade. Fylingdales, like Thule in Greenland, has early warning radars which do not have sufficiently good target tracking capabilities for interceptor missiles in space. For phase one of its NMD programme, the United States wants to upgrade the computer software (and possibly the hardware) to improve the reliability of the nuclear weapon states about the declared number of nuclear warheads. These upgrades are explicitly to enable the radars to perform as necessary for NMD. As long as the ABM Treaty remains intact in its current form, upgrading Fylingdales in this way would violate the treaty as surely as pouring concrete at Shemya. If phase two were to go ahead, the United States would construct a new and highly visible X-band radar facility, probably at one of these two bases. The situation is murkier with regard to Menwith Hill, another listening station, where ground relay stations for space based infra-red satellites (SBIRS) are planned. Although it is possible that the upgrades at Menwith are also intended to support NMD, they may be associated to other monitoring purposes and so would not violate the ABM Treaty in the explicit way that would be the case if the radars at Fylingdales were upgraded.

Concerns about NMD dominated the recent Foreign Affairs Committee report. Both the report and parliamentary questions over the past year have revealed a high level of concern that the United States has exaggerated the threats and "over emphasises the capability component of the threat equation". The Committee also suggested that if a future US President came to believe that there was an imminent risk of WMD attack against America, the President would authorise the pre-emptive destruction of the offending state's missile sites regardless of whether NMD was deployed or not. (16)

Nonetheless, the UK government acknowledges that there is a threat from missile proliferation that needs to be countered. Two approaches are being considered. The Defense Evaluation and Research Agency (DERA) has undertaken a three-year Technology Readiness and Risk Assessment Programme on behalf of the government to monitor developments in ballistic missiles and the technology to counter them. Secondly, since the NPT review conference there has been a growing interest among some foreign policy officials to explore ways of controlling missile production and proliferation more effectively. The Conservative Party takes the position that the British government should be working closely with the United States and taking a lead in NATO "to create or negotiate a NATO ballistic missile defence programme or". Though unwilling to rule out a British or NATO ballistic missile defense (BMD) system completely, Labour's Foreign Secretary, Robin Cook, was unenthusiastic. (17)

As a consequence of information which I provided to the Foreign Affairs Committee during evidence given in April, they asked the government for clarification of whether upgrading Fylingdales would breach the ABM Treaty. In response, a joint MoD-FCO Memorandum argued that no breach of the ABM Treaty was envisaged: either the US and Russia would have agreed to modify the treaty to permit phase one NMD deployment; or the United States would have formally given notice of withdrawal from the treaty. When asked whether the government would allow the United States to upgrade Fylingdales, Cook dodged, saying "until we know both the nature of the question and also the circumstances in which we are being asked that question, it would be premature for us to debate what the response might be, particularly since at the moment there is no commitment by the United States to ask the question". (18)

The Foreign Affairs Committee concluded that regardless of the desirability or feasibility of NMD, a decision to refuse a US President "committed to implementing NMD as essential to the security of the USA would have profound consequences for UK/US relations". The Committee commended the government for its commitment to dialogue with the United States and others and its attempts to prevent US fears putting at risk progress in nuclear disarmament. (19) Its conclusion was rather more forceful:

"We recommend that the government articulate the very strong concerns that have been expressed about NMD within the UK. We are not convinced that the US plans to deploy NMD represent an appropriate response to the proliferation problems faced by the international community. We recommend that the Government encourage the USA to seek other ways of reducing the threats it perceives." (20)

Conclusion

Britain's position on nuclear weapons, disarmament and NMD is still conditioned by the perceived relationship with the United States, but the UK approach is subject to internal questioning, with a growing pressure to reduce reliance on nuclear possession. The US pursuit of NMD has carried two uncomfortable messages for Britain: firstly, that the US has lost confidence in nuclear deterrence and now seeks defense against threats which nuclear weapons were supposed to deter; and secondly, that NMD is symptomatic of a new American unilateralism (also shown in the Senate rejection of the CTBT) - that the views of its allies and risks to the existing international, collective security architecture are of diminishing relevance vis-a-vis domestic considerations of US defense and safety.

The British response is to hedge its bets and hope that the United States sense before it is too late. It was clear from the Foreign Secretary's response to the Foreign Affairs Committee's question regarding Fylingdales that the government is hoping the United States will not put it in the position to have to make a decision. Public opponents of NMD and, significantly, government officials have both warned of the possibility of a repetition of what one FCO minister described as the 'nightmare' scenario of a Greenham Common-style protest if Britain tries to let the United States go ahead with upgrading British bases for NMD. (21) By evoking Greenham, where the USAF deployment of cruise nuclear missiles became severely hampered for most of the 1980s by daily blockades and demonstrations, the government could be attempting to signal the United States that plans to use UK bases for NMD may have domestic implications that the British government would not necessarily be able to control.

With regard to nuclear disarmament, Britain should also be characterised as hedging bets, while retaining nuclear weapons "for the foreseeable future", the government instructs the primary nuclear weapon research facility to study verification approaches and technologies for any future global nuclear weapons arms control treaty. The brief is to research verification for arms control and reduction - carefully not, at this point, elimination. (22) Nevertheless, although resources for such a study are a tiny fraction of Aldermaston's budget for nuclear warhead design and production, involvement of the AWE in verification research is widely welcomed. Each of the weapon states needs to set up a similar project, to prepare the expertise and technical understandings necessary for implementing the nuclear disarmament steps agreed at the 2000 NPT Conference. Britain has taken the lead in publicly and openly declaring itself the smallest nuclear weapon state and in undertaking and advocating unprecedented levels of transparency.

There is a growing acceptance in British defense and security circles that nuclear weapons have a reduced, perhaps even counterproductive role militarily. In many ways the political implications of de-nuclearising face Britain with a larger dilemma. Unless France is also willing to renounce its nuclear weapons - which does not appear likely in the near future - Britain fears that leaving France the sole possessor of nuclear weapons in Europe will destabilise the core balance and relationship between Britain, Germany and France, to the detriment of Britain's interests (and, arguably, those of Europe as a whole). Second, Britain fears that it could lose what remaining leverage is left of the 'special relationship' with the United States, at a time when European and NATO defense and security are challenged by increasing American unilateralism.

Since the 2000 NPT review conference was adopted, it is likely that Britain will try to continue to play a constructive, bridging role between the non-nuclear weapon states, especially the New Agenda Coalition, and the weapon states. Britain will be seen to diverge more openly - perhaps even distance itself - from harder line French and American positions, while keeping up pressure on Russia and China to address tactical nuclear weapons and transparency respectively, and on India and Pakistan to prevent any further nuclearisation in South Asia. (Britain tends to leave Israel to the United States.) The fissile material cut-off treaty or fissban will continue to be Britain's priority for multilateral negotiations, but it is willing to see the NPT plan of action (13 steps) also discussed at the CD. There will be no dramatic change in British nuclear policy in the near future, but a gradual erosion of reliance on nuclear weapons for deterrence or international position and a more overt seeking of alternative means to ensure security and a continued seat at the top table.

(1) The Strategic Defense Review, The Stationery Office, Cm 3999, July 1998, p 19.

(2) Systematic and progressive efforts to reduce nuclear weapons globally: a food for thought paper, submitted by the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, May 4, 2000, NPT/Conf.2000/23.

(3) AWE Aldermaston, Confidence, Security & Verification, AWE, 2000, letter from Garry George, accompanying publication, June 1, 2000.

(4) Doctrine for Joint Nuclear Operations, Joint Pub 3-12, December 18, 1995 and Doctrine for Joint Theater Nuclear Operations, Joint Pub 3-12.1, February 9, 1996.

(5) The Strategic Defense Review, op. cit. p 19.

(6) The Strategic Defense Review, op. cit. p 18.

(7) Malcolm Rifkind, 'A Defense Strategy: A Continuing Role for Nuclear Weapons?' Speech to the Centre for Defense Studies, London, November 16, 1993.

(8) Quoted in The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, September/October 2000, p 71.

(9) Foreign Affairs Committee, Eighth Report, Weapons of Mass Destruction, The House of Commons, The Stationery Office, London, July 25, 2000, p xxviii.

(10) Ibid.

(11) Ibid. p xxix.

(12) Nicola Butler, British Parliamentary Update, Disarmament Diplomacy 43, January/February 2000, p 27.

(13) As acknowledged in the Foreign Affairs Committee report, p vi.

(14) Angie Zelter, Putting Nuclear Weapons on Trial, Disarmament Diplomacy 42, December 1999, p 3.

(15) 'Britain swayed US over missile deal', Patrick Wintour, The Guardian, July 27, 2000.

(16) Foreign Affairs Committee, op. cit. p xvi.

(17) Nicola Butler, UK Parliament Update, Disarmament Diplomacy 48, July 2000, p 20.

(18) Foreign Affairs Committee, op. cit. p xviii.

(19) Ibid. The report quotes the UK Prime Minister, Tony Blair, speaking after the G-8 Summit in Okinawa, July 24, 2000: "We are trying to ensure that the fear that the United States has - perfectly and legitimately and justifiably - is taken account of in a way that does not put at risk the substantial progress that has been made on nuclear disarmament over the past few years."

(20) Ibid. p xix.

(21) 'US plan puts Blair on Spot, warns MPs', Richard Norton-Taylor, The Guardian, August 2, 2000.

(22) AWE Aldermaston, Confidence, Security & Verification, AWE, Crown Copyright, 2000.

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