Recommended Citation

Britain's third nuclear weaponpossessor was published on October 7, 1992. Doctrine and policy have fluctuated during the years, reflecting doctrinal shifts in the United States and NATO following developments in the strategic environment, and changes in British defense and foreign policy. Britain's nuclear strategy is therefore not static, but in general the strategic context has remained quite consistent. Moreover, over the years the government has sought to ensure that a decision to deploy nuclear weapons is made only if the political and military pressure to do so is overwhelming. Indeed, the nuclear weaponkeeping is seen to be a matter of last resort, and the most recent Strategic Defence Review (SDR) found that the United States would not put it in the position to have to make a decision. Public opponents of NMD and, significantly, the Secretary of State for Defence, Robin Cook, have both warned of the possibility of a repetition of what one FCO minister described as the “nightmare” scenario of a nuclear war between Britain and the United States, which would be “the most catastrophic event Britain has ever had to face.”

The British response is to hedge its bets and hope that the United States sees sense before it is too late. It was clear from the Secretary of State’s response to the Foreign Affairs Committee’s question regarding Fylingdales that the government is hoping the United States will not take such a step. 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 states: Brazil, Egypt, Ireland, Mexico, 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 it clear that nuclear deterrence as a matter of last resort is not only right, but for NATO. When the new Agenda Coalition first put forward their agenda, NATO had no say in the SDR, which was published in the United Kingdom just 2 years later. The SDR, it seems, is to be read as the UK response to the new Agenda.

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