

# **British Approaches to Nuclear Disarmament and National Missile Defense**

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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 46 per Trident submarine, up to a maximum of nuclear weapons for the near future, and stated that "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".<sup>(1)</sup> 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.<sup>(2)</sup> The second, on "Nuclear verification" was essentially an executive summary report on British views on nuclear verification, the Aldermaston Atomic Weapons Establishment (AWE). In initiating the report, Britain's Defence 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".<sup>(3)</sup> 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 defence plans.

## Britain's nuclear forces

Britain's nuclear weapons are assigned to NATO on 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.<sup>(4)</sup> In the context of the SDR, the Ministry of Defense announced that only one out of its four Trident submarines would be 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".<sup>(5)</sup> 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.<sup>(6)</sup> 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 Defence for the previous Conservative Government, Malcolm Rifkind, referred to a "warning shot" or "shot across the bows".<sup>(7)</sup> 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".<sup>(8)</sup> For Trident's strategic role, AWE Aldermaston had designed warheads understood to resemble the W-76 warheads used on the United States' long-range cruise missile. 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 unbolted primary, resulting in an explosion with a yield of just a few kilotons. 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 iii) 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.

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## Nuclear Disarmament Commitments

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