

British Nuclear Weapons

Strengthening Power and Influence in the World

The Cold War and the inevitable Soviet invasion of Western Europe pressed the United Kingdom and its allies to arm themselves with nuclear technology as a deterrent to the growing threat of communism in the region. All throughout the Cold War, the United Kingdom security largely depends on its reputation, as nation capable of massive retaliation if suddenly attack. However, does possession of nuclear weapons actually increase the power and influence of the United Kingdom?

This paper will discuss the United Kingdom's role during the Cold War and find out why it is necessary to adopt the United States doctrine of Massive Retaliation. The advantage and risk of acquiring nuclear arms and the disarmament issue facing the United Kingdom after the Cold War.

In 1955, when Winston Churchill remarked, "there are a large number of targets the we and the Americans must be able to strike at once"¹, he was then referring to the American doctrine of Massive Retaliation (MR). A strategy adopted by North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in case war broke out with the Soviet Union during the Cold War. The alliance planned to use the massive American nuclear firepower to counteract the supposed Soviet's large conventional weaponry at that time. They intend to use the American nuclear arsenal as a cheap alternative to the financial and human sacrifices necessary to launch a satisfactory conventional defence. This is in fact a remedy to the abandoned Lisbon Meeting of Ministers in 1952, where

¹*this was Churchill's statement on a debate about Tactical Nuclear Weapon, Ruston Roger, 1999, A Say in the End of the World: Morals and Nuclear Weapons Policy, 1941-1987, page 122*

no member country is willing to take the financial burden of a conventional defence. Since then, the impression that the Americans will reply to anything with an all-out nuclear attack became a deterrent to communist expansion in Europe, and a way for the alliance to share basic security at lesser cost. In the following year, convinced that nuclear weapons would be the future of warfare and aiming for an actual nuclear defence of Western Europe (Baylis 1995, p.242), NATO announces the reduction of its conventional forces. Sensing the opportunity to increase their strategic advantage, the United States gradually increase the supply of tactical nuclear weapons to the United Kingdom and other allies in Europe, and by the mid 1960's the number of nuclear weapons in Europe reached to about 7,000 (Ruston 1999, p.122-123).

Although the United Kingdom is the predominant beneficiary of American war technology, their nuclear policy is purely self-preservation, as they only intend to use their nuclear firepower if attacked. However, the decision to use nuclear arms instead of conventional force is not just to counterbalance the Soviet capability, but also a matter of economics². For the United Kingdom and the rest of NATO, nuclear weapons are economical source of superior firepower (Ruston 1999, p.124). This kind of assertion is rather misleading, since nuclear weapons, in all angles, are definitely not cheap. The real deal here is not the price but reputation, since no one in his right mind will dare to attack a nation capable of annihilating an entire city in a flick of a switch (Larkin 1996, p.4). Still, even if you have the same nuclear capability, you will not provoke a counter attack unless you are sick and tired of seeing your country in the map (Lee 1993, p.10). Besides, you do not fire ballistic missiles everyday and even on a real war, you will probably need a thousand reasons before you can fire one. Threatening the enemy is the key to big savings, since no one will dare and therefore no expense.

² - *Economical in the sense that no member country of NATO wants to shoulder the extra expenses of a conventional defence. Ruston Roger, 1999, A Say in the End of the World: Morals and Nuclear Weapons Policy, 1941-1987, page 122*

The value of nuclear weapons to deter the Soviet during the Cold War supersedes its risks. However, from a humanitarian point of view, nuclear war still means death of innocent civilians, radiation, sickness, and inconceivable horror (Houldstock 2006, p.2). The United Kingdom deliberate ambiguity³ to the effects of an overwhelming nuclear attack during the Cold War is a clear manifestation of nuclear weapons indispensability (Ruston 1992, p.123). The real disadvantage of nuclear weapons is at the receiving end (Smith and Little 2005, p.65) and it is not a threat to its home state unless mismanaged or triggered by accident. Nevertheless, having a nuclear arsenal is a great responsibility as you must be ready to accept the “suicidal consequences of such strategy” (Ruston 1999, p.124).

The Cold War strategy of the United States and NATO of massive retaliation is no longer valid in the 21st century. The rationale for deploying nuclear weapons to deter a Soviet nuclear attack can no longer justify its existence. Furthermore, 87% of UK public⁴ opposed the use of nuclear force against non-nuclear state and it is against the law according to the International Court of Justice (MedAct 2006, p.3) (Sands et. al. 1999, p.272). The United Kingdom must disarm not just for the reason that nuclear weapons are already irrelevant after the Cold War, but also for most important reason that it is a risk to many innocent lives. A nuclear explosion that can kill anyone within an 800m radius and the distressing smell of burning flesh from thermal radiation is something we cannot just ignore (MedAct 2006, p.4). In addition, the Soviet is no longer a threat, and according to Lodal (2001), NATO’s conventional forces are at present far more superior to the Soviets. Furthermore, there is a diminutive probability that Russia will embark on a conventional war as all its former members and buffer zones of the Warsaw Pact,

³ – *this is from the fact that UK still incorporates the threat of immediate nuclear response throughout the 1950’s even when the United States already abandon the idea and looking for a more humane alternative solution*

⁴ - *Referring to the result of the September 2005 Greenpeace/MORI poll*

Poland, Hungary, and Czech Republic are already with NATO. The Russians cannot possibly alter these facts, even if the political system changes, communist or nationalist. More significantly, even the Soviets delay the destruction of their remaining short-range nuclear weapons; they no longer have any useful strategic advantage (80).

The United Kingdom should realize that it is now widely accepted that nuclear weapons are no longer relevant to the present day conflicts. In addition, the actuality that nuclear powers such as U.S. and Russia during the Cold War, failed to accomplish their objectives in Vietnam and Afghanistan respectively. Even more depressing was when Argentinean Military Generals courageously invade Falkland Islands regardless of evident British nuclear firepower. Similar to our earlier discussion, this behaviour is sufficient to prove that no one will dare to use them or provoke such destructive encounter. In addition, nuclear weapons were never use in Iraq or Afghanistan, and up to now, the Indians and Pakistanis (both with nuclear capability) are still ferociously fighting each other in Kashmir conventionally. Lastly, just a year ago, Israel's superior firepower and nuclear arsenal did not defeat or deter the Hezbollah of Lebanon (Johnson et. al. 2006, p.11)

Today, threats are no longer about to the Soviet Union. Proliferation of nuclear weapons and other deadly weapons of mass destruction can be anywhere. States with fundamentalist ideology who hates the west; regional conflict by two nuclear powered states; armed groups with access to fissionable materials; dictatorial regimes who is mad enough to use nuclear power as a means to rule; the danger of pre-emptive strikes by a nuclear-powered states against a suspected but innocent state, and more. The possibility is immeasurable and therefore it is important to check all the regions particularly those with ideology and religious conflict with democracy.

The present situation suggests that disarmament should be done gradually in a manner dictated by the nature of the threats. In Britain, majority believed that one of the primary threats is terrorism carried out by non-state actors, which is according to Taylor, and Youngs (2006) has nothing to do with nuclear weapons. The New York and London attacks remind us that Terrorists are simply not intimidated by mere possession of nuclear weapons, and therefore you cannot use it to dissuade them (27). However, this does not mean terrorist cannot acquire or use nuclear weapons and therefore they remain a threat to security. The notion that terrorist cannot accurately locate a target using such weapon⁵ is a total non-sense because in this age where technology progresses rapidly, anything is possible (Barnaby 2003, p.123).

Since total disarmament is not sensible and the possibility of newer threats is always inevitable, reduction of long-range ballistic missiles may be a better option. However, the cost of decommissioning is too expensive. For instance, the estimated cost of decommissioning a Trident SSBN and SSN Nuclear Submarines is around £1.75 billion (CND 2007, p.3). An MOD White Paper in 2003 clearly reflects the position of the UK government. Although the UK will continue to be a part of the International effort for arms control and proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, it cannot disregard the continuing risk and belief that many countries will hold on to their nuclear capability, the UK will therefore retain its own nuclear arsenal for security (Taylor and Youngs 2006, p.56).

⁵ - this is a claim from the September 2006 briefing of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, Taylor Clair and Youngs Tim, 2006, *The Future of British Nuclear Deterrent, International Affairs and Defence and Social and General Statistics Section of House of Commons Library, page 27.*

The gradual approach for nuclear reduction is indeed a better option since it is too early to conduct a full disarmament. Slowly, based on the assessment of the threat and the levels of the nuclear firepower of other country, UK will dismantle the equivalent nuclear weapon. Similar to the Treaty on Strategic Offensive Reductions signed by Bush and Putin of the Soviet Union in 2002, limiting both strategic nuclear arsenals of 1,700 to 2,200 operationally deployed warheads. This treaty is a clear sign of the continuing reduction of nuclear firepower towards the lowest level. The Bush administration is also pursuing usable smaller weapons against more precise targets. It is a specialized nuclear warhead capable of destroying underground chemical weapons facilities in rogue states (Taylor and Youngs 2006, p.52). The UK can either follow the gradual reduction process or pursue an acquisition of smaller but more precise weapons to ensure minimal casualties.

The United Kingdom's nuclear power was an effective deterrent during the Cold War against the Soviet Union and its allies. The capability gave the UK the strength, security, and influence around the world. However, the Cold War is over and nuclear weapons possession is widely accepted as irrelevant to the modern threats. The need to disarm is necessary to ensure the safety of all nations against the danger of a nuclear war. Gradually and vigilantly, the United Kingdom can successfully work towards a safer world.

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