[This article is adapted from a paper, commissioned by the Geneva Centre for Security Policy, which appeared as Chapter 2 of its report *Security in a World without Nuclear Weapons: Visions and Challenges*, published in January 2014]

Trident Replacement and a New World Role for Britain

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The British Trident replacement debate, with the final 'main gate' decision postponed until 2016 because of its political sensitivity, is overshadowed by fundamental questions surrounding the UK's defence priorities amidst an ongoing economic crisis.[1] Currently, political leadership of the five recognized nuclear weapon states, the US, Russia, China, France and UK, and permanent members of the United Nations (UN) Security Council (known as the P5) accepts nuclear weapons as the pre-eminent currency of power.[2] Underpinning this is a hitherto largely unquestioned consensus that nuclear deterrence has prevented major war among members of the P5 and their allies, and provides an indispensable "insurance policy" as the ultimate guarantor of national security in an unpredictable world. This dogma, with its contradictions and fallacies, is now under serious challenge, and coincides with a new, determined initiative to apply a humanitarian approach to nuclear disarmament, which is gaining momentum. These developments will inevitably impact upon the UK 'main gate' decision, with huge implications for the future shape, image and ethos of the Royal Navy.

Nuclear deterrence challenged

Acceptance of the "insurance policy" claim is based on the presumption that nuclear deterrence works. However, the historical record shows that nuclear deterrence undermines security, provokes proliferation, creates instability, fosters hostility and mistrust, and flouts the system of international law on which relations among states depend.[3] Even "small", so-called "tactical" nuclear weapons are far too indiscriminately destructive to be militarily usable. Furthermore, operating them exposes military professionals - in the UK case, specifically those Royal Navy personnel controlling and operating Trident - to potential accusations of committing war crimes under the Nuremberg Principles.

If deterrence with conventional weapons fails and war breaks out, the damage is confined to the belligerents. This would not be the case with a failure of nuclear deterrence, as was reiterated conclusively at a recent conference on the humanitarian impact of nuclear weapons in Mexico, attended by 146 governments.[4] For example, drawing on the latest climate change computer models, analysis of a regional war between India and Pakistan in which 100 Hiroshima-size nuclear weapons were detonated over cities in these two countries shows that the temperature drop from smoke from the resultant firestorms alone would cause global famine.[5]

For these and other reasons, nuclear deterrence amounts to an irresponsible doctrine devised by the P5 to sustain the vested interests of their politico-military-industrial establishments. Increasingly, these arguments are being accepted and voiced by non-nuclear weapon states.

Paradigm shift

The growing impetus for a paradigm shift away from reliance on nuclear deterrence, begun at a previous conference in Oslo in March 2013, involves a reframing of the discourse from an arms control and non-proliferation mindset to a "humanitarian disarmament" standpoint. As in Oslo, the P5 plus Israel and North Korea did not send delegations to Mexico. For Oslo, the P5 issued a joint statement explaining that they had boycotted the conference because it "will divert discussion away from practical steps to create conditions for further nuclear weapons reductions" under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) review process.

The Norwegian government's initiative was presented as complementary to the NPT agenda. The Oslo conference enabled 127 government delegations – including all 25 non-nuclear NATO member states plus close US allies Australia, Japan and South Korea – to forge a fresh consensus around the unacceptable consequences of nuclear deterrence failure in terms of its economic, health and climatic effects. This attendance by two-thirds of the UN membership, which increased to 146 states in Mexico, reflects these governments' growing frustration over the dysfunctional Conference on Disarmament and increasingly sterile NPT processes, where the P5 and others can block any substantive progress by using the need for consensus.

With strongly supportive contributions from the International Committee of the Red Cross, UN agencies and other leading humanitarian institutions, plus a re-energized campaign by civil society, enough political will was generated by the Mexico conference for the Austrian government to offer to host a follow-up conference in late 2014 to "deepen the momentum, anchor these conclusions and take them forward." This refers to the drive among non-nuclear weapon states for a treaty – similar to existing nuclear weapon-free zone treaties – that would outlaw most aspects of nuclear weapons, as a way of persuading the P5 to take seriously their obligation to get rid of their nuclear arsenals and engage in negotiations on a Nuclear Weapons Convention (NWC). The last time the P5 were challenged so strongly was in July 1996, when the International Court of Justice (ICJ) issued its advisory opinion that the threat or use of nuclear weapons would generally be unlawful; but because the advisory opinion was not binding, the P5 evaded its implications.[6] The UK will find it increasingly difficult to ignore these developments.

A win-win opportunity from not replacing UK Trident

In 1952, the UK became the world's third nuclear weapon state, driven by the need to preserve its waning great-power status. Currently a debate is under way about replacing the four Trident-equipped submarines with whatever system the US is prepared to provide to the UK. Amid severe defence budget cuts, the British Army and Royal Air Force see Trident replacement as a financially vulnerable irrelevance at a time when the security focus is on the so-called "war on

terror". The main security threats in the 21st century include climate change, poverty, resource depletion and financial crises as well as terrorism. Nuclear deterrence prevents rather than assists the global cooperation required to solve them.

US officials have suggested that the UK government consider abandoning replacement, because "either they can be a nuclear power and nothing else, or a real military partner".[7] Trident replacement is an important issue in the referendum on Scottish independence in September 2014, because UK Trident submarines can only be based in Scotland. With public opinion divided and a significant anti-nuclear citizen movement, the final 'main gate' decision on Trident replacement has been delayed until 2016, after the next General Election due by May 2015.

The first anti-nuclear "break-out" by one of the P5 would be sensational, and a powerful catalyst for shifting the paradigm. With the smallest nuclear arsenal deployed in just one system, the UK is the best P5 candidate to seize this unexpected new world role, which would overwhelmingly be welcomed by the international community. In NATO, the UK would wield unprecedented influence – with wide support from non-nuclear-armed members – in leading the drive for a non-nuclear strategy, which must happen if NATO is to maintain its cohesion. It would encourage the French to rethink their more hard-line stance, and trigger a serious debate in the US. It would cause heart-searching in the former British colonies of India and Pakistan, and would open the way for a major reassessment by Russia and China. The Royal Navy, released from a militarily useless, politically controversial and implicitly unlawful role, could refocus on what it does best: conventional deterrence, protection of maritime trade, and defence diplomacy.

Among analogous precedents for such a process, the campaign to abolish slavery is illuminating. When it began in Britain in 1785, three of the leading slaving nations were the US, UK and France, whose governments today are the leading guardians of nuclear deterrence. They were outmanoeuvred by a network of committed campaigners who for the first time brought together humanitarian outrage and the law. They mobilized public and political support for their campaign to replace slavery with more humane, lawful and effective ways to create wealth. The analogy, and its associated paradigm shift, are instructive for replacing nuclear deterrence with more humane, lawful and safer security strategies.

Conclusion

To conclude, nuclear weapons are militarily counterproductive, and nuclear deterrence is an irresponsible, disingenuous doctrine that is implicitly unlawful and not credible. Whether the "humanitarian disarmament" approach, launched in Oslo in 2013 and recently reinforced in Mexico, gains enough traction remains to be seen. Nonetheless, the P5 should not underestimate this evidence of the depth of frustration with the dysfunctional non-proliferation regime of a large majority of non-nuclear weapon states, and their consequent determination to seize the initiative by forging ahead with a treaty banning nuclear weapons as a stepping stone towards

obliging the P5 to negotiate a Nuclear Weapons Convention. This, together with stigmatizing nuclear weapons and deterrence as a dangerous and divisive obstacle to tackling humanity's current security problems, offers the most promising strategy to accelerate the paradigm shift needed to rid the world of nuclear weapons. The current British Trident replacement debate presents an intriguing opportunity for the UK to take a leading role in this process.

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