

It is time to rethink nuclear deterrence and disarmament

Commander Robert Forsyth RN (ret'd)

'Nuclear annihilation is just one miscalculation away' UN Secretary General addressing the opening session of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty Review Conference 1 August 2022

"If we fire then deterrence has failed": so have spoken all RN SSBN submariners since HMS *Resolution's* first patrol in 1968. In our heads we could not conceive we ever would; it was believed that no rationally thinking government would risk a nuclear attack inviting a recriminatory response, not just to themselves, but escalating uncontrollably to the rest of the world. The UK Government confidently asserted that no "rogue" State would dare risk the same. This has been the baseline assumption that the US and UK have consistently used to justify retaining nuclear weapons (NW) whilst seeking (unsuccessfully), through the Nuclear Non Proliferation Treaty (NPT), to prevent other States from acquiring them.

An overwhelming majority of the rest of the world has rejected this position. Opposition to NW has been widespread, vocal and continuous at all levels of society and political influence. 70% of UK citizens approached in a [Survation survey](#) supported a worldwide ban on NW and 59% supported the UK signing the 2017 Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) knowing that this would require immediate and unilateral action by the UK. On another level, 56 former prime ministers, presidents, foreign and defence ministers from 20 NATO countries plus Japan and South Korea, released [an open letter in 2020](#) calling on current leaders to join the TPNW. The signatories included two former NATO Secretary Generals as well as a former UN Secretary-General. [The TPNW](#) entered into force in 2021. Of the 86 States who signed it, 61 so far are parties to it. The rest will assuredly follow. Significantly, Sweden's recent application to join NATO has been accompanied by a [statement](#) that NW should not be stationed on its territory. This accords with the governing Social Democratic Party pledging in November 2021 to contribute to the "development and clarification" of the TPNW, stating unequivocally that "the goal is that Sweden will join" the treaty. The recently elected Government in Australia also has committed to [sign and ratify it](#). 75% of the Australian public support this action. These are but a cross section of the enormous groundswell in favour of abolishing NW.

Those who still need to be convinced should read two recent articles:

- Daniel Immerwahr, Professor of History at Northwestern University, USA, in his article ['Forgetting the apocalypse'](#) posits that "the horrors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki made the whole world afraid of the atomic bomb – even those who might launch one. Today that fear has mostly passed out of living memory, and with it we may have lost a crucial safeguard".
- Ward Wilson, former Senior Fellow and Director of the "Rethinking Nuclear Weapons" project at the British American Security Information Council argues in his article ['Too dangerous to live with'](#) that there is "...no realistic case for the lurking risk of nuclear armageddon... [i]f nuclear weapons are the 'ultimate' weapon, guarantor of our very lives, then even the tiniest step toward elimination will be fraught with difficulties. But if nuclear weapons are blundering, clumsy, overly-large, mostly unusable weapons that carry with them mortal danger, then it will not be hard to ban them."

Yet the NW States continue to reject any suggestion that their policies may not be achieving a world safe from the devastation that a failure of nuclear deterrence would bring. Indeed, they have brought strong pressure to bear on any State contemplating signing the TPNW, and have characterised individuals and organisations opposed to the use of NW as either naive, misinformed or supporting the enemy in their attempt to stifle open and rational debate. I know just how egregiously personal such characterisation can be. Recently, Matthew Harries of RUSI cogently criticised the UK Government in [Prospect magazine](#) over its excessive secrecy and resistance to open debate, asking: “Do we really know how to manage deterrence in this landscape?”

Harries was referring to the new nuclear landscape thrust upon us by President Putin. Dr Fiona Hill is another knowledgeable specialist on European and Russian security affairs, who has advised both No. 10 and the White House. In a recent [Radio 4 “Today”](#) programme interview she succinctly and perceptively summed up the political and military earthquakes that occurred when Russia invaded Ukraine with these three observations:

“So it is very clear we are not going after Putin because he has nuclear weapons”;

“He [Putin] is telling everyone you need a nuclear weapon so the whole idea of non-proliferation is out of the window”;

“We are in a whole new territory we have not been in even in the Cold War”.

The nuclear deterrence boot is undoubtedly now on Putin’s foot rather than NATO’s. Furthermore, all too evidently, his is a military one, not the political one the Government has always claimed the UK Trident submarine force to be. The stark fact is that Putin is not playing by the Cold War rule book. He is using his nuclear arsenal to threaten NATO whose conventional deterrence capability is too weak to risk taking on Russia in direct warfare; a situation that several retired senior officers have been so concerned about as to write and speak publicly on the issue. Vice Admiral Sir Jeremy Blackham, General Sir Richard Barrons, and Air Chief Marshal Sir Michael Graydon have all highlighted the weakness of the UK’s contribution to NATO forces. Adm. Blackham addressed the issue in his Foreword to my book [Why Trident?](#) The fact that NATO seems to have been deterred from taking direct action in Ukraine for fear of breaching the threshold and causing a nuclear WWII rather proves their point.

The obduracy of nuclear-armed States continuing to justify retention of NW, President Reagan not accepting President Gorbachev’s offer of joint Soviet/US disarmament in 1986, and NATO not pursuing multilateral disarmament in the 1990s now haunts the West. Had the voices of reason been given more serious consideration we might be in a better place today. For too long have political/military strategies been directed at the last – Cold – war. As Fiona Hill pointed out, the nuclear deterrence game changed instantly beyond recognition on 24 February 2022. On that day the logic and effective bilateral agreement about Mutual Assured Destruction observed by both sides in the Cold War was completely torn up by President Putin thus rendering it invalid.

The question now faced by humankind is: are we prepared to accept that proliferation means that NW will inevitably be used - whether by accident or design - at some time in the future? If not, then worldwide NW disarmament is the only rational way forward. In 2017 former US Defense Secretary William Perry explained why he had become [a vocal advocate for disarmament](#): “...What we're talking about is no less than the end of civilization... I would like [my children and grandchildren] to have a chance at a future, a future in which they can live in peace and not be faced with the specter of nuclear war, and we can translate that to other people's children and grandchildren as well.” This was when a more aggressive Russia, and a brash and unpredictable President Trump raised the possibility, Perry said, “...of a nuclear catastrophe [which] is probably greater than it has ever been,

greater than any time in the Cold War.” Three years later he expanded even further on his reasons in an article for the [Bulletin of Atomic Scientists](#). If a man who had responsibility for the US nuclear arsenal could change his mind in the light of a changed world then there is no shame in other decision-makers doing likewise.

Once the Russia-Ukraine war ends, knowing that world is pre-inclined and now all too further aware of the dangers, the US, UK and France urgently need to take positive steps towards establishing a strategy for multilateral nuclear disarmament. Initial verifiable reductions and removal of US NW from European territories would kick-start the process and demonstrate commitment to the serious negotiations required to complete the process. In conjunction, all three States should verifiably stand down their strategic nuclear forces. The framework for these negotiations should not be the failed NPT under which no nuclear disarmament has been effected since it was signed in 1968. Instead, parties to it should engage with the TPNW process adapting it as necessary to accommodate individual States’ particular circumstances, but with the clear and unambiguous intention of banning NW.

Inevitably, not all States will immediately follow suit. It will therefore be necessary to formulate strategies to persuade, or if necessary coerce, compliance. These could involve:

- Maintaining the current severe sanctions imposed on Russia unless and until it agrees to nuclear disarmament. Similar sanctions can be threatened/implemented on other recalcitrant States. For example, the influence that the US has over Israel is considerable and could be matched with political and financial pressure plus security reassurances to Iran and other Islamic States.
- Strengthening conventional forces, including non-nuclear strategic weapons capable of inhibiting the launch of any NW that any non-compliant States retain. For example, the Conventional Prompt Global Strike warhead that the US has developed would credibly enable the US and other similarly equipped States to face up to Russia and other rogue states. Thousands of these tungsten rod, meteor-like warheads, carried by all existing submarine and land based ballistic missiles instead of nuclear ones, arriving at supersonic speed with pinpoint precision would, a 2021 [Congressional report](#) states, “...allow the United States to strike targets anywhere on Earth in as little as an hour.”
- Providing financial assistance/compensation to those States abandoning NW in favour of strengthened conventional armament. This could be funded to some degree by savings from cancelling the enormous costs of sustaining nuclear weapon capabilities. Although the UK only finally paid off the [National Debt](#) incurred to compensate slave owners for their losses in 2015, it was considered a price well worth paying. Is the abolition of NW any less important?

In summary, a complete shift of mindset is needed to consign nuclear deterrence doctrine to the Cold War history books. The only way to avoid a future nuclear war is to have no nuclear weapons. The chance to achieve this was missed in 1986 and again in the 1990s, so let us not fail to seize the moment to do so once this present war is over and Russia seeks re-admission back into an international world; a world which contains enough intellect, energy and assets to achieve total disarmament if it so determines.

On the Government website [‘The UK’s nuclear deterrent: What you need to know’](#) it states: “The UK remains committed to the ultimate goal of a world without nuclear weapons”. I urge UK decision makers to follow the lead of elder statesmen such as William Perry and recognise that now is the

time to rethink nuclear weapon and disarmament policies. UK should seize the opportunity the end of the Russia-Ukraine war will bring to emulate the responsible and widely admired leadership Great Britain exhibited in 1833 over the abolition of slavery, and move from just “remaining committed” to “making it so”. It would be pushing at an open door.

©robertforsyth(2022)