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Preserving the character of the nation: British military attitudes to nuclear weapons

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Introduction

What are the views of the British military on nuclear weapons today? How can we answer this question given both the different actors and institutions and the level of secrecy surrounding this issue? Moreover, why should those supportive of non-proliferation and disarmament, or anyone else- especially given the political nature of these weapons- care what the military thinks? As a study published by the Nuclear Education Trust (NET) and Nuclear Information Service (NIS) this week entitled [*British Military Attitudes to Nuclear Weapons and Disarmament*](#) states 'The armed forces have a unique relationship with and experience of the country's nuclear arsenal. They are responsible for deploying the UK's nuclear weapons, ensuring their security, and for delivering many aspects of the country's security strategy.'¹ The study highlighted that whilst many believe the UK should remain a nuclear power, significant concerns exist about the costs and risks of the UK's Trident nuclear weapons system amongst the military community, raising doubts about its future. For example, the funding crisis facing the Ministry of Defence has meant that nuclear weapons spending is increasingly questioned when conventional equipment is needed and many have lost their jobs.

This article aims to complement the NET / NIS

¹ Wilson, Henrietta (2015), UK Military Attitudes to Nuclear Weapons and Disarmament (London: NET / NIS), p.9

study by considering these issues within the current domestic and international political context, particularly the impact of deep public spending cuts and the crisis in Ukraine. This is done in order to better understand the pressures the British armed forces are currently under and the effect this has on the nuclear weapons debate, particularly given the concerns raised by former and serving military personnel regarding the government's approach to defence and the strategy underpinning it in recent years. For example, the determination of the government to build four new nuclear-armed submarines in order to maintain continuous-at-sea-deterrence (CASD), whereby a submarine is perpetually on deterrent patrol, 'threatens to be at the expense of further reduction in conventional forces' according to Professor Malcolm Chalmers². This situation has produced an apparent contradiction in the UK's security strategy given that, as we shall see, prominent political and military figures have argued that the UK needs strong conventional military capabilities in order for the threat to use nuclear weapons- as in deterrence- to remain credible.

Overall, this article therefore seeks to address this contradiction by proposing that, in addition to the compelling moral and legal arguments for nuclear disarmament, given prevailing economic and political dynamics, the UK is finding it increasingly difficult to meet the ambition of being a leading

² Chalmers, Malcolm (2010), Like for like renewal of Trident will come at expense of conventional forces, www.rusi.org, 28th July

power with a strong military capable of global power projection. Yet rather than planning for a transition to a security strategy and identity compatible with its available resources and the real threats to security facing the nation's citizens—such as climate change, hunger and poverty—planners prefer to maintain familiar policies which minimise institutional risk³. This is principally because, as Nick Ritchie points out, 'military organisations and large bureaucracies are characteristically cautious, pragmatic and resistant to what may be perceived as radical change'⁴. For Chalmers, in the case of decisions on Trident this has meant that decisions are 'driven as much by institutional and political momentum as by strategic necessity'⁵.

Trident and 'in fighting over the war budget'

Perhaps the best way to begin considering military views on the UK's nuclear arsenal is to focus on the publicly available opinions of the top brass, serving and retired, from the different services. As well as having the biggest say in these matters they are also responsible for the strategic direction of the armed forces and have been quite vocal on nuclear issues in recent years given the ongoing acrimony over the size of the defence budget and what equipment the military needs. Moreover, given the hierarchical nature of the military, whilst those of lower rank may have expertise regarding the safety, security and other technical considerations, it is reasonable to say that their influence and insights on the political debate will not greatly differ from that of the general public.

Of the three services, it is often assumed that the navy's leadership value Trident highly and it may appear quite obvious why this should be so.

³ Such a transition, from a 'conflict management or containment approach to one of proactive conflict prevention' has been recently explored by Richard Reeve (2015) in *Cutting the Cloth: Ambition, Austerity and the Case for Rethinking UK Military Spending* (London: Oxford Research Group)

⁴ Ritchie, Nick (2006), *Replacing Trident: Who Will Make the Decisions and How?* (London: Oxford Research Group), p.4

⁵ Chalmers, Malcolm (2010), Like for like renewal of Trident will come at expense of conventional forces, www.rusi.org, 28th July

Firstly, nuclear weapons have always brought money, bureaucratic power and prestige to the institutions wielding them. In the early 1980s, when the Soviet threat was supposedly at its peak, historian and peace activist E.P. Thompson described the 'savage in-fighting over the war budget' that took place between service chiefs of the army, navy and air force concerning which platform the UK should adopt for its nuclear arsenal⁶. Back then the navy wanted the Trident system as it meant submarines whilst the army and air force wanted nuclear-tipped cruise missiles. British governments have studied this question several times (most recently with the 2013 Trident Alternatives Review) and always decided, according to their criteria, that a submarine-based system is more credible and reliable, mainly because ballistic missiles are seen as being more effective than cruise, whilst the question of which platform is cheaper is disputed⁷. Yet the navy leadership's position on Trident today may not be as clear-cut as one might assume. This is because, as former Armed Services Minister Nick Harvey has pointed out, the 'competing costs facing defence in 2020' means that the 'surface part of the navy', will, alongside the army and air force, want to engage in an 'open debate as to whether replacing Trident with another full scale programme of nuclear weapons is an absolute must'⁸.

One of the main points of contention here is that whilst the navy's surface fleet is being 'entirely rejuvenated' to include new, technologically advanced, destroyers, frigates and aircraft carriers, the size of the fleet has been cut back. Former First Sea Lord Alan West has therefore argued that the surface fleet is too small for the navy to fulfill all the tasks assigned to it⁹. As for the other services, the fact that different nuclear weapon systems continue to be discussed means

⁶ Thompson, E.P. (1981), *Britain and the Bomb* (London: New Statesman), p.10

⁷ Wyatt, Caroline (2010), Is there a cheap alternative? www.bbc.co.uk, 23rd April

⁸ Wright, Oliver and Sengupta, Kim (2012), Top military chiefs go cold on nuclear deterrent, www.independent.co.uk, 26th September

⁹ Powell, Michael (2012), Royal Navy needs two more destroyers now says Admiral, <http://www.portsmouth.co.uk>; Brooke-Holland, Louisa (2013), The Royal Navy's surface fleet: in brief, <http://researchbriefings.parliament.uk>

that an option remains for the air force (platforms that could be operated by the army are not considered sufficiently credible) to once more be given a nuclear mission, meaning its chiefs retain some interest in the UK remaining a nuclear power.¹⁰

Trident as a political weapon

As former Prime Minister Tony Blair stated in his 2007 memoir, whilst Trident is hugely expensive, its utility in the post-Cold War world is 'less in terms of deterrence, and non-existent in terms of military use'. Blair admitted that what matters more to the military are 'helicopters, airlift and anti-terror equipment' yet giving up Trident would be 'too big a downgrading of our status as a nation'.¹¹ What was being acknowledged here is that the UK's nuclear weapons are, and always have been, political weapons, a fact acknowledged in the 1980s by Field Marshal Lord Michael Carver, who saw 'no military logic' in the decision to acquire Trident¹². Top political elites have wielded these weapons to ensure Britain's position as a leading world power capable of influencing the US, albeit as its loyal deputy, whilst remaining on a par with France and a notch above Germany and Japan. Britain's nuclear status- and all the extreme expense and secrecy that goes with it- was easier to justify during the Cold War when the fear of annihilation bound the population together and the Soviet Union could be blamed in official propaganda as the primary cause of global instability. The nuclear mission was thus much clearer back then. Now things are more complicated. According to the last National Security Strategy the UK does not currently face a military threat from a major state, there is strong scepticism within the public concerning overseas military intervention after the catastrophic human

¹⁰ The RAF operated nuclear weapons from the early 1950s to 1998. In *Retiring Trident*, a recent report published by CentreForum, Toby Fenwick proposed that the UK use 'air-dropped' nuclear weapons with F-35 Joint Strike Fighters rather than submarines. There is also the question of which navy and air force capabilities will be needed to support the UK's proposed new nuclear-armed submarines.

¹¹ Nuclear Information Service (2010) Blair on Trident: 'There was a case either way' www.nuclearinfo.org, 3rd September

¹² Carver, Michael (1982), *A Policy for Peace* (London: Faber and Faber), p.112; van der Vat, Dan (2001), Field Marshal Lord Carver, www.theguardian.com

and material costs of the Afghan and Iraq wars, and, since 2010, the government has imposed huge cuts on public spending.¹³

Whilst the Ministry of Defence (MoD) got off lightly compared to other departments in the 2010 Comprehensive Spending Review, further cuts came in 2013/14 and 2014/15¹⁴. The MoD is now facing cuts of as much as 35% by 2018-19 in real terms compared to its 2010-11 level¹⁵. Moreover, the Treasury has stated that if the MoD wants a successor nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarine (SSBN) fleet, the money for it will have to come from the defence budget, as it did for the original Vanguard-class project.¹⁶ If four new SSBNs are built, current spending projections show that nuclear weapons will then eat up about a third of the MoD's overall annual equipment budget for about fifteen years.¹⁷ Whilst the navy would get their subs and two new aircraft carriers the army is set to be the significant loser with further cuts to manpower on the horizon.¹⁸

In early 2010, General Sir Richard Dannatt- then serving as defence adviser to David Cameron, having just recently left his post as Chief of the General Staff- came out with a public statement regarding the future of the British armed forces, as part of what John Redwood MP described as 'the intense public lobbying by all three services' before the Strategic Defence and Security Review

¹³ BBC (2010), Defence review: Cameron unveils armed forces cuts, www.bbc.co.uk, 19th October; HM Government (2010), *A Strong Britain in an Age of Uncertainty: The National Security Strategy*, p.14

¹⁴ Chalmers, Malcolm (2013), *The Squeeze Continues - UK Defence Spending and the 2013 Budget*, www.rusi.org, 25th March

¹⁵ Corlett, Adam & Whittaker, Matthew (2014), *In the balance: Public finances in the next parliament* (London: Resolution), p.24

¹⁶ BBC (2010), Trident costs must come from MoD budget, Osborne says, www.bbc.co.uk, 30th July

¹⁷ Chalmers, Malcolm (2013), *Mid-Term Blues? Defence and the 2013 Spending Review* (London: RUSI); Rifkind, Malcolm et al (2014), *The Trident Commission- Concluding Report*, (London: BASIC), p.18

¹⁸ Dominiczak, Peter (2014), Britain will have a second aircraft carrier, www.telegraph.co.uk, 5th September; Norton-Taylor, Richard (2014), Ministry of Defence in line of fire for further cuts, www.theguardian.com, 5th September

(SDSR)¹⁹. Dannatt stated that the UK should retain its nuclear weapons ‘for the next few years... but maybe not forever’, arguing that continuing with Trident ‘might not be right in five or ten years’ time.²⁰ At the same time, the Liberal Democrats were calling for a delay to the ‘main gate’ decision on whether to build a new generation of SSBNs, a position they successfully argued within government in the first few months.²¹ Trident was subsequently excluded from the SDSR with David Cameron announcing that the main gate decision would be delayed for two years and be taken in the following parliament in 2016.²²

General David Richards (former Chief of the General Staff), has also argued that land forces (i.e. the army) should be given priority over the navy and air force in future defence budgets, and that hi-tech, high cost military equipment is much less relevant for fighting today’s protracted low-intensity wars.²³ Moreover, Richards said he believed that the government should be focusing on providing adequate resources for the then current operations in Afghanistan rather than on ‘future projected possibilities’. This was an apparent reference to Trident, which its supporters have for several years justified by arguing that the future is uncertain and an aggressive state (e.g. Russia) may one day again threaten the UK. Last November, in a Newsnight

¹⁹ Bloxham, Andy and Kirkup, James (2010), Defence cuts: Dannatt backs Liam Fox saying cuts could undermine Britain’s status in world, www.telegraph.co.uk, 29th September

²⁰ Kirkup, James (2010), General Sir Richard Dannatt: British nuclear deterrent is “not forever”

www.telegraph.co.uk, 20th January

²¹ Newman, Cathy (2010), CutsCheck: the cost of delaying Trident, www.blogs.channel4.com, 8th November

²² According to the Financial Times, construction of the new submarines was delayed ‘to take minimal initial running costs out of the current spending review’, see: Blitz, James and Barker, Alex (2010), Defence row hots up as decisions on cuts loom, www.ft.com, 18th September; Watt, Nicholas (2010), David Cameron to delay Trident replacement, www.theguardian.com, 19th October

²³ Richards, David (2009), Twenty-first Century Armed Forces – Agile, Useable, Relevant (London: Chatham House); The Scotsman (2010), Army chief insists Afghanistan must come before Trident, www.scotsman.com, 9th June

interview, Richards also made the point that even if Trident was scrapped, he wasn’t confident that the money saved would be ploughed back into conventional forces.²⁴ He went on to state that ‘you wouldn’t get any retired or serving chiefs of defence saying that (Trident replacement) wasn’t necessary’. Clearly then, Trident- being in the most sensitive political territory- is something that influential members of the armed forces refuse to directly question, even whilst they may privately hold strong opinions on the subject.²⁵

Dannatt and Richard’s earlier remarks were echoed by current Chief of the Defence Staff General Nick Houghton in 2013, who warned that Britain was in danger of being left with ‘hollowed-out’ armed forces which had ‘exquisite equipment’ but not enough people to use it.²⁶ Moreover, his comment that the UK will ‘have to better prioritise its money towards things which are most relevant to the security demands and capability needs of the future’ was seen by experienced defence journalist Richard Norton-Taylor as a ‘thinly-veiled reference to Trident’. Norton-Taylor also pointed out that,

‘Many defence officials and independent analysts describe the carriers as a “political” project which make little sense in military terms. They say the same about the plan to replace the Trident nuclear missile fleet - something no chief of defence staff could question in public.’

Last April a group of public figures, including defence and security policy chiefs and commentators wrote a letter to *The Times*, addressed to the incoming Prime Minister, arguing the case for the UK to retain its nuclear arsenal²⁷. The letter warned that it would be ‘irresponsible

²⁴ BBC Newsnight (2014), General Richards and Britain’s aircraft carrier shortage (sic), www.youtube.com, watch from 11:20mins

²⁵ More formally, see the Queen’s Regulations forbidding military personnel from getting involved in politics: <http://labourfriendsoftheforces.org.uk/queens-regulations/queens-regulations-regular-units/>

²⁶ Norton-Taylor, Richard (2013), British defence chief fires volley of warning shots www.theguardian.com, 19th December

²⁷ Signatories to the letter included General David Richards, two other previous heads of the armed forces and three ex-Royal Navy chiefs.

folly to abandon Britain's own independent deterrent' which exists 'not as a military weapon but a political one whose very purpose is for it never to be used in anger'. Given the obvious in fighting over the future of the UK's armed forces such public statements appear to be an attempt to give the impression of harmony where there is discord. For example, in 2009 Field Marshal Lord Bramall and Generals Lord Ramsbotham and Sir Hugh Beach themselves wrote a letter to *The Times* which called on the government to scrap Trident, denouncing it as 'virtually irrelevant except in the context of domestic politics'²⁸.

Who is the enemy and how do we fight them?

As journalists from the Financial Times wrote in describing the 'battle' over the UK's defence budget in 2010,

'Underlying the resources turf war is a fundamentally divided view of the future character of conflict. The Royal Navy and the RAF back high-tech platforms – aircraft carriers and fast jets – that project power and give politicians more diplomatic choices. By contrast, the army believes Britain needs far more flexible forces in the 21st century for complex conflicts such as in Afghanistan.'²⁹

Reflecting on the decisions that were made in 2010, Vice Admiral Jeremy Blackham wrote in 2013 that:

'Conventional force levels are again at risk and so therefore is the credibility both of the nuclear deterrent and of deterrence more generally ... To be credible, the nuclear deterrent must be underpinned by strong conventional deterrence ... If you remember nothing else from this article, remember this: When bad things don't happen, it is because they have been deterred. Nuclear deterrence is simply the most extreme example of this deterrence spectrum ... In Britain today 'defence policy' appears to be merely to have a

nuclear deterrent and then buy whatever else can be afforded, with no informed consideration of how the whole strategy fits together.'³⁰

Blackham is arguing here that an overdependence upon nuclear weapons leaves a wide credibility gap concerning military responses to any threats short of the destruction of the British state, and that this gap renders nuclear deterrence itself untenable.³¹ How does this square with Blair's argument that Trident's utility is 'non-existent in terms of military use'?

Blackham and Blair are viewing Trident through two different, though connected, lenses. One is more material and military, where use means actual detonation, and one is more ideational and political where using nuclear weapons means harnessing their social and psychological power to influence others and set agendas. With regards to the latter, on a geopolitical level this includes implicit or explicit threats of detonation directed towards another state's leadership.³² With regard to domestic politics, Tony Blair saw Trident as a useful issue for disciplining the Labour party, moving it away from the left and the unilateral nuclear disarmament policies of the 1980s towards Margaret Thatcher's brand of militarism and nationalism. At the same time, given that it was Labour under Clement Attlee which decided in secret that Britain should have the bomb to retain a vestige of great power status and that both Conservative and Labour leaders chose to keep the nuclear faith once in office, Blair could be said to be returning his party to the bipartisan consensus on this issue.

²⁸ BBC (2009), Generals in 'scrap Trident' call, www.bbc.co.uk, 16th January

²⁹ Blitz, James and Barker, Alex (2010), Defence row heats up as decisions on cuts loom, www.ft.com 18th September

³⁰ Blackham, Jeremy (2013), Deterrence is not just about nuclear weapons- Time for serious strategic thought, www.uknda.org, August

³¹ Notably and without naming him, Blackham contradicts Richard's argument that the main threat to the UK's interests is from non-state actors e.g. terrorists, including ISIS and cyber-attacks and that the UK needs to be able to help stabilize failing states. Richards also argued in the Newsnight interview that the UK's armed forces are still substantial so that we're a long way from being 'Belgium with nukes'.

³² One point to bear in mind is that, unlike other weapons, the UK's nuclear weapons are under direct political control. Whilst nuclear threats have been issued by previous defence and foreign secretaries, detonation can only be authorised by the Prime Minister, the military don't have a say- formally at least- regarding their use.

Yet even though Blackham and Blair have different experiences and understandings of what the use of nuclear weapons means based on their different institutional positions, Blackham's argument does have an important bearing on the political utility of Trident in terms of the question of credibility- meaning is the UK actually willing to detonate the weapons it has? Many of those who want to see the UK continue to be an interventionist, global power- standing four-square behind the US- would argue that if the UK is perceived as being unable or unwilling to use military force, up to and including detonating a nuclear weapon, then others won't be deterred and will do as they please. This position justifies continued high spending on conventional defence to both support Trident and make it credible from a strategic point of view. Rory Stewart, Chair of the Defence Select Committee, illustrated this point prior to the 2015 election when he argued that if the UK does not spend 2% of its GDP on the military then the 'character of the nation' will be affected and that British nuclear weapons will be akin to 'a gold inkstand on the Table- a golden pinnacle on top of a cathedral, when the foundations and the structure of that cathedral are lacking and the faith of the nation has been lost'.³³

Similarly, whilst some in the military might not want Trident and prefer other weapons, if they're going to be stuck with it they want to see political leaders provide a coherent strategic vision that explains how conventional and nuclear weapons fit together in meeting the UK's 'ambitions' for global reach, and then to fund it properly. But as Max Hastings has argued, the 2010 defence review wasn't about strategy, it was a 'dogfight' about 'politics and money' and there's little chance the 2015/6 review will be any different³⁴.

Public opinion and the military

David Cameron clearly blamed his predecessor Tony Blair for Parliamentary moves that curtailed his authority and prevented him taking military action against Syria in 2013, stating that 'the well of public opinion has been well and truly poisoned

³³ Stewart, Rory (2015), Trident Renewal, www.rorystewart.co.uk, 22nd January

³⁴ Hastings, Max (2010), Trident skewers Britain's post-imperial refit, www.ft.com, 22nd September

by the Iraq episode'.³⁵ Despite remaining one of the nation's most respected institutions, the unpopularity of the Afghanistan and Iraq wars has harmed the armed forces as they depend upon public support for morale, to secure resources (financial and human) and to actually fight and win conflicts³⁶. For example, a 2010 research project by academics Rob Johns and Graeme Davies found that 35% of the British public either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement 'The use of military force only makes problems worse', whilst 42% were neutral and 25% disagreed or strongly disagreed³⁷. One result of the British public's ambivalence to military action may be that the government has been able to cut military spending with minimal political impact. Furthermore such spending (particularly on nuclear weapons) is one area which does not have high political salience for the public, for example when they come to vote, though when they become aware of the costs and risks of these weapons their opposition to them increases.³⁸

Trident has thus become almost an invisible issue since the end of the Cold War, a situation that pro-nuclear sections of the military and political elite certainly encourage and benefit from. Whilst some in the British establishment may not want or feel ambivalent towards nuclear weapons they would therefore rather deal with the pros and cons of the bomb behind closed doors. There is a tension here though- on the one hand decision-making elites want to avoid a public debate on the subject at all costs because once it is out in the open it becomes visible and they can't control the issue as easily. Consider, for example, the trouble caused by the Scottish public asserting their democratic wish that Trident be removed from their country as an unwanted symbol of Westminster rule. On the other hand, some supporters of Trident are happy to have a debate, believing that the public support their viewpoint and that this support can only grow the more the

³⁵ BBC (2013), Tony Blair: Iraq War made UK 'hesitant' over Syria intervention, www.bbc.co.uk, 6th September

³⁶ Jolley, Rachael ed. (2013), State of the Nation- where is bittersweet Britain heading?, (London: British Future), p.26

³⁷ Johns, Rob and Davies, Graeme (2011), Public opinion and military action, <http://fpc.org.uk>

³⁸ Ritchie Nick & Ingram, Paul (2013), Trident in UK politics and public opinion (London: BASIC)

issue is discussed³⁹. The key issue here is how the debate is framed and what information is available for public discussion. Historically decisions on nuclear weapons have been taken by very small groups of top bureaucratic and political officials, leading to a lack of transparency and accountability over the costs and risks of the bomb. In addition parliament has very little influence over nuclear weapons decision-making, which, as with the main gate decision regarding whether to build a new class of nuclear-armed submarines, is often presented as being about arcane technical decisions, which only insiders and experts can really understand⁴⁰.

The purposeful alienation of the electorate from these issues means that at a time of austerity, the pro-nuclear / NATO lobby need to 'reach out to the public' and make the case for military spending and the UK as a global power, according to Rory Stewart MP. In this sense, the ongoing crisis in Ukraine has provided an opportunity for the defence lobby to unite around maintaining high budgets, with NATO's target of 2% of GDP spending on defence a key symbolic rallying point. Current statements in the media and parliament by those supportive of the UK maintaining a strong military have thus pushed the 'Russia threat' theme, with a view to it being given a prominent place in the forthcoming National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence Review. Establishing the narrative that an aggressive Russia requires a robust response from the West is one way by which the continuation of significant spending on defence and nuclear weapons can be justified⁴¹. The degree to which both former and serving senior military figures interfered in the democratic process, drawing attention to defence cuts, got to the point where David Cameron had to defend his austerity programme. The prime minister claimed in February that critics may have

³⁹ Lewis, Julian (2009), 'Soldiers Against the Bomb?', www.julianlewis.net

⁴⁰ Ritchie, Nick (2006), *Replacing Trident: Who Will Make the Decisions and How?* (London: Oxford Research Group), p.17

⁴¹ See, for example: Walker, Peter (2015), 'Russian expansionism may pose existential threat, says Nato general', www.theguardian.com, 20th February; Defence Select Committee (2014), *Defence Committee - Third Report, Towards the next Defence and Security Review: Part Two-NATO*, www.publications.parliament.uk, 22nd July; Stewart, Rory (2015), 'Ukraine proves defence cut would be 'big mistake'', www.rorystewart.co.uk, 25th February

vested interests and that decreases in military spending would not diminish Britain's international influence⁴². Yet the Prime Minister also faces pressure from the US to maintain high levels of military spending, including from President Barack Obama and former defence secretary Robert Gates- the latter warning that current cuts will mean that the UK 'won't have full spectrum capabilities and the ability to be a full partner as they have been in the past'⁴³.

Conclusion

The UK's nuclear arsenal is a political weapon which remains highly valued by those decision-making elites that believe Britain is still one of the world's leading nations. Maintaining this identity and status, alongside the US and in NATO, has historically been intertwined with a strong military capable of projecting power globally. Key to these capabilities is the question of credibility- if the UK is to remain a nuclear power its threats to use its nuclear arsenal must seem credible. This in turn requires the UK to maintain sufficient conventional strength to ensure a proportionate ladder of escalation ending in the possibility of nuclear detonation, the circumstances of which are always kept ambiguous.

Yet given the continually rising costs of hi-tech military equipment, the cuts to defence spending as part of austerity and a lack of public support, it is becoming increasingly unrealistic for the UK to maintain its global pretensions. This is not least because the cost of building a new generation of nuclear-armed submarines threatens to jeopardise the UK's conventional military strength, capabilities which are themselves foundational to nuclear deterrence. The only way for the government to fund all the contingencies this entails would be to raise more money through taxation or divert funds from other departments- both of which would incur significant and very likely unacceptable political costs. Rather than

⁴² Norton-Taylor, Richard (2015), 'David Cameron gags Top Brass', www.theguardian.com, 23rd February; Mason, Rowena (2015), 'David Cameron: critics of defence cuts 'have their own book to talk'', www.theguardian.com, 10th March

⁴³ BBC (2015), 'Obama urges Cameron to keep 2% defence spending target', www.bbc.co.uk, 7th June; BBC (2014), 'Military cuts mean 'no US partnership'', Robert Gates warns Britain', www.bbc.co.uk, 16th January

dealing with the economic and political reality of the situation head on to craft a long-term security strategy without nuclear weapons, hawks within the British establishment instead prefer to revert to Cold War rhetoric, amplifying the threat from Putin's Russia to justify the need for high military spending. As we saw in the Cold War, demonising Russia in this way benefits militarists in Moscow who are desperate to maintain their own power and ensure the survival of the current regime by whipping up nationalist feelings amongst the Russian people. Only by breaking out of this vicious circle- we need NATO and nuclear weapons to face down the Russian threat / we need the Russian threat to justify NATO and nuclear weapons- will the UK be able to act as a respectable and responsible nation capable of dealing with this century's many economic, environmental, social and political challenges.

Nevertheless, what supporters of Trident within the military and political elite really fear is not the power of Moscow, or even Washington, but what the UK becoming a former nuclear weapon state would mean in terms of their institutional power and prestige given that they see a decision to scrap Trident as irreversible. For example, as General Richards has pointed out, if the UK disarmed, because Trident is a political weapon the savings wouldn't necessarily go to conventional forces. Moreover, depending on how disarmament was conducted, some costs would be incurred, especially if the existing infrastructure supporting nuclear weapons was to be dismantled irreversibly, transparently and verifiably as required by the UK's obligations under the nuclear non-proliferation treaty.

Thus, even though some within the armed forces may not like nuclear weapons they have appreciated that it raises the UK's overall economic and political commitment to the military, which compensates for the fact that Trident had no military relevance to the conflicts they fought and that they envisage fighting in future. So whilst some former senior military figures may break ranks and support nuclear disarmament, for many, the UK losing its nuclear status would risk losing the military 'character' of the nation and is therefore to be avoided for as long as possible. The problem now is that the very costs of remaining a nuclear power may further erode the armed forces to the point where the UK's nuclear arsenal becomes but a hollow political ornament.

Tim Street is a PhD candidate at the University of Warwick. His research focuses on the political obstacles to and opportunities for nuclear disarmament in and between the nuclear weapon states.

BASIC has published this report in order to complement the recent study conducted by the Nuclear Information Service and to further the disarmament debate in the United Kingdom, but the views expressed in this article reflect those of the author and not necessarily those of BASIC.



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