

The US nuclear guarantee, and possible future threats

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Introduction

This short paper is in response to questions posed by the Executive Director of BASIC (Paul Ingram) as supporting evidence the the Trident Commission of 2010/2013. The views represented are my own.

1. Possible future credible threats (capability and intention) to UK and allies that would not sufficiently involve the US, and would not be deterrable by other means

It is stating the blindingly obvious that the future is difficult if not impossible to predict. What we can be sure of is that over the next 40+ years the security environment will surprise us with shocks and the unexpected. It is that certainty that make the tabling specific future war scenarios a dangerous game as the reaction is often: “that could never happen !” and it probably never will. But we have to recognise that it might: indeed if we had postulated in 1996 that Islamic terrorists would fly into the twin towers in New York city within the next five years, we should probably have been ridiculed ! It happened. A more helpful approach is to conduct a higher level analysis: whilst the UK continues to adopt a high profile of full engagement in global affairs (endorsed in the recent SDSR), the following represent potential future threats to UK security over the next half century:

= **Nuclear proliferation.** Despite reductions since the Cold War, large nuclear arsenals remain and are likely to do so for the foreseeable future. Furthermore measures to control the proliferation of nuclear know how and materials have failed to prevent an expanding number of nations pursuing nuclear ambitions. Whilst a world without nuclear weapons remains a laudable goal, evidence today suggests that the number of nations possessing a nuclear capability will rise by mid-century heralding a corresponding increase in the risk of a nuclear dimension to regional and global conflicts.

= **Global warming** will generate tensions and potential conflict between nation states as competition for natural energy resources – oil, gas, water etc. – becomes more acute. Some of those states will possess nuclear weapons.

= **Changes in major power relationships:** there will be significant shifts in major power relationships between now and mid-century introducing new tensions. Whilst the US is likely to remain a major superpower, it remains questionable whether she will continue to engage globally as she has done in the past. Competition from China and an unpredictable Russia – both of whom have on-going major nuclear weapon modernisation programmes – and emerging powers such as Iran, India and Brazil have the potential to herald new areas of tension and conflict which could generate specific threats to the UK.

= **Nuclear Terrorism:** The enduring threat of nuclear terrorism will remain

A combination of any or all of the above could generate a conflict scenario with a nuclear dimension. It is a truth that these threats are common to the US, UK and NATO allies however it is when one or a number of them conflate into a major crisis that we have to recognise that the politics of the time might cause the UK to be alone or at least in coalition with others than the US.

As an example, consider the following hypothetical scenario set “sometime” in the future:

- The UK has given up its nuclear capability; however the number of other countries possessing nuclear weapons has multiplied.
- The US is self-sufficient in energy and is engaged in a major conflict in the Pacific.
- A hostile Middle Eastern country or countries possessing nuclear weapons closes the straight of Hormuz, stopping oil supplies reaching a still thirsty UK/Europe.
- Hostilities break out in the Gulf region involving UK forces trying to guarantee free passage of oil.
- The conflict escalates such that a nuclear dimension is threatened by the aggressor nation or nations to test resolve. Hostile countries calculate that the US has not been engaged to date and is too preoccupied with events in the Pacific. Aggressive action can continue unabated in the safe knowledge that UK cannot match their ultimate nuclear capability. The UK will therefore eventually have to capitulate to nuclear blackmail.

Conclusion: Such an extremely dangerous stage in the conflict would not be reached if deterrence played its part, i.e. if the adversary knew that nuclear retaliation from the UK was a certainty.

What is critical here is that we address such scenarios through the eyes of the potential aggressor rather than our own. For the example above, it may be that the UK has complete confidence in US support; however if the aggressor perceives that there is a potential weakness in the relationship (and that support will NOT be forthcoming) then he/she may consider that it is worth the risk to exploit it.

2. Probability that a US nuclear guarantee can be relied upon into the foreseeable future

In short the probability is very high but not 100%, particularly in the long timeframe to 2050 and beyond.

In the short to medium term it is very hard to envisage a global conflict, leading to a nuclear confrontation, where the US would not be “shoulder to shoulder” with its NATO allies. However ‘times they are a changing’ and the scope of the current UK programme invites us to look further ahead, to 2050 and beyond. There things become more difficult to predict with any confidence. What is a certainty is that major power relationships will be subject to profound change, driven by the emergence of economic superpowers such as China, India and Brazil on to the global stage. Already these “new” global players are having an impact on US foreign policy. In his annual address to Congress in 2012, President Obama suggested that the primary area of US opportunity and security concerns were in the Asia/Pacific sphere and that US presence and attention would be enhanced in that region. As recently as 22 November 2012 the new US Chief of Naval Operations (Admiral Greenart) spoke publicly of a major reassignment of US maritime forces from the European sphere to the Asia/Pacific.

Whilst US commitment to the defence of Europe remains a fundamental in US foreign policy, there is a risk in the longer term that this might change. The WW11 and Cold War generations are passing on and future US administrations might adopt a different view over their commitment to European security. In these difficult economic times, the US role as primary sponsor of NATO, including the basing of large numbers of troops and equipment on the European mainland, will come under severe scrutiny. An objective view might be that the European security is no longer the priority it once was. Indeed such a view would be re-enforced by:

- The failure of the majority of NATO countries to live up to their commitments on defence spending loading the US with an even greater share of the logistics burden.

- NATO allies can no longer be relied upon for support of operations outside the European theatre (Iraq)

The overall conclusion might therefore be that there is no real reason why NATO should expect the US to carry the major burden for European security forever and that perhaps the current level of engagement should be reduced. Such thoughts are currently just that and US commitment to NATO remains strong today. However over the 40 year timeframe we are exploring, things can change (especially if the economic climate deteriorates further and European countries continue to fail to allocate the appropriate priority to their defence spending) and such thinking might be translated into policy. There is a risk therefore - albeit small - that in the future Europe may have to manage major conflict without immediate US military assistance. There is a further risk that those conflicts will have a nuclear dimension for which the UK will need to sustain sufficient nuclear capability to deter if it is not to be forced into capitulation to nuclear coercion and blackmail.

3. The ethics of giving up a UK deterrent and relying upon the US to shoulder the burden (as well as the impact upon the Alliance, etc)

Rather than describe the US/UK relationship as “special” it is perhaps more apposite to recognise its unique features, a prime example of which is the long, deep and enduring nuclear alliance between the two countries. Since the end of the Second World War the US and UK have exchanged nuclear knowledge, capability data and operational experience to the mutual benefit of both countries. In 1962, under the Nassau agreement, the US agreed to sell the Polaris system to the UK under the principle that UK nuclear weapons would be assigned to NATO. There was no “national” capability as such; that came later and only after lengthy discussion with the US (who were initially sceptical). Historically, therefore, the primary purpose of the UK nuclear deterrent is in the NATO context where it was perceived as an adjunct to the (much greater) US capability providing a second decision centre for nuclear release, based in the European sphere, thereby enhancing deterrence and bringing benefit to both UK and NATO security.

In terms of cost and capability the UK has benefited enormously from US research and capability development. For the US, there is merit in having a friend with whom they can engage openly, at all levels, in the knowledge that the information exchanges are secure and mutually beneficial. These principles and benefits have underpinned the US/UK nuclear relationship for over 50 years and remain true today. In declaring their joint nuclear capabilities to NATO, both nations underpin the doctrine of “extended deterrence” providing added security for NATO allies. With this background, it is clear therefore that, were the UK to give up its own independent capability, the consequences would be draconian representing a major change in the status quo and a crisis for NATO already struggling to define its role in the post-Cold War security environment. Some or all of the following would result:

- damage to US\UK relations. The breaking of the nuclear alliance will have consequential penalties particularly in the areas of intelligence and military co-operation;
- NATO resolve and the effectiveness of NATO’s nuclear strategy would be seriously undermined by the perceived failure of the European pillar to accept its historic finite share of the nuclear burden;
- the effectiveness of the extended deterrence doctrine would be severely damaged causing concern amongst allies;
- a US review of its military commitment to NATO and European security would be provoked.

As memories of the Second World War and the Cold War fade, the case for major US commitment to Europe both in terms of cost and manpower is weakened. Coupled with frustration in the US administration at the European failure to live under its commitment to allocate 2% of GDP to defence. In short: If the Europeans cannot commit themselves to their own security, why should the US do it for them? In extremis, this could be the final straw that causes the US to de-clutch from Europe and to the disintegration of NATO.

In conclusion, the UK has a moral obligation to the US, its friends and allies in NATO as well as to its own people to continue its historic role as the primary European “burden sharer” of NATO’s nuclear deterrent capability if we are to maintain the Atlantic alliance and NATO as the primary pillars of our national and collective security.

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