

Response to the Trident Commission Report

*Dr Nick Ritchie
University of York
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The Commission's recommendations

1. The report makes a useful contribution to UK debate on the future of Trident and international debate on nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament. It sets out a number of progressive recommendations that go beyond the nuclear conservatism that typifies formal government reports. These include:
 - Introduce discussion of a multilateral no-first use agreement into NWS dialogue in the 'P5 process' in order to reinforce a multilateral no-first use international norm.¹
 - Further reduce nuclear holdings by revisiting the 'Moscow criterion'.
 - Publish a technical assessment of life extension options in advance of the 2016 Main Gate decision.²
 - Undertake a detailed study of further 'steps down the nuclear ladder' in preparation for multilateral nuclear disarmament negotiations, including:
 - Studies 'into the conditions that would facilitate a safe move to threshold status and its associated technologies'.³
 - Possible steps under current political conditions, i.e. 'Are there less rosy possibilities that could enable us to move further down the disarmament ladder without compromising our security?'⁴
 - Further transparency and verification modalities and treaty-based commitments to control and reduce stocks of fissile material and their means of production.⁵
 - Extensive and open consultation with the US on the implications for US-UK relations of further UK nuclear force reductions and disarmament.
 - Further restrict declaratory policy on use of nuclear weapons in response to a CBW attack and adopt a 'sole purpose' policy.⁶
 - Consider voluntarily taking part in transparency and inspection measures associated with the New START process, whilst not becoming a formal party to the Treaty.⁷
 - Further debate on the relationship between a like-for-like replacement of the current Trident system and the UK's capacity to act as a 'strong contributor to the momentum towards the global reduction of nuclear weapon holdings' in support of the credibility of the NPT.⁸
2. **I urge the Commissioners to explore in further detail how these recommendations could be carried forward.**

Nuclear path dependency and national identity

3. The recommendations above are positive. Nevertheless, the report is disappointing in the extent to which its analysis and conclusions appear predicated upon prior assumptions on what is politically acceptable. In doing so it has missed an important opportunity to surface the underlying assumptions supporting different viewpoints in the name of open and challenging debate.
4. The conclusion that Britain should retain a nuclear arsenal is underpinned by a subtext of path dependency that is only hinted at in the Commission's report. **The Commission report could and should have been much more explicit about its collective subjective political judgement about what it deems possible and not possible in UK nuclear weapons policy.**
5. The path dependency subtext suggests that the UK is locked into a set of political and security structures and historical narratives about who we are and how we should act that *require* us to retain nuclear weapons well into the second half of this century through replacement of the Trident system, despite the considerable financial and opportunity costs. This is symptomatic of a deeper culture that invests considerable value in nuclear weapons. It is one in which we picture ourselves as a reluctant and benign possessor of nuclear weapons and so deeply dependent upon US patronage that we struggle to imagine getting on in the world without a nuclear capability.⁹
6. The Commission justifies retention of a nuclear arsenal based on the possibility of a nuclear threat from Russia ('re-emergence of a nuclear threat from a state, and with a significant nuclear arsenal and overwhelming conventional capabilities and with an aggressive posture'), Iran or similar ('an existing or emerging nuclear-armed state that attains global reach and enters into direct strategic competition with the UK'), or from a state capable of massive destruction with biological weapons or new technologies.¹⁰
7. It is essential to ask why the UK might face such threats that ostensibly warrant a nuclear retaliatory capability when many other nuclear-capable states do not reach this conclusion. Part of the answer, and a significant part at that, lies in a national identity conception that frames the UK as a 'pivotal power', to use Tony Blair's phrase. This narrative claims that the combination of Britain's history, power, influence and values mean it has a special responsibility to uphold international peace and security and maintain the current international order as a permanent member of the UN Security Council, a leading power in NATO, and the United States' primary military ally. It is routinely translated into an obligation to defend an expansive iteration of 'enlightened self-interest' through expeditionary warfare in support of an interventionist foreign policy.¹¹ It is through such actions that we might encounter a nuclear or otherwise overwhelming military threat for which a nuclear response could provide existential salvation. It would be incredible to argue that an international shrinking violet version of the UK could encounter the threats identified by the Commission given the passivity of our immediate geography (the majority of inter-state wars are based on disputed contiguous territory). A comprehensive understanding of the justificatory threats set out

by the Commission must engage with the circumstances in which the UK could conceivably find itself embroiled in a military conflict with existential consequences. In doing so it becomes clear that the retention of nuclear weapons is intimately connected to collective ideas about who we are and how we should act in global politics, even if in the moment of intervention we may not explicitly acknowledge the role of our nuclear arsenal in providing 'the necessary assurance that no aggressor can escalate a crisis beyond UK control', in the words of Tony Blair.¹²

8. The Commission rejects this argument by conflating identity with status and insisting that there are 'no strong arguments for nuclear weapon possession arising out of questions of global status'.¹³ The Commission acknowledges that articulation of an explicit and formal connection between nuclear weapons and status 'could encourage proliferation by others'.¹⁴ That is surely correct but it does not undermine the explanatory importance of national identity conceptions, even if it is impolitic to say so publicly (a normative claim that a connection must not be acknowledged does not undermine the veracity of the connection). Nor does it prevent members of the policy elite from supporting that claim (most recently, for example, on 14 July 2014 when then-defence secretary Phillip Hammond agreed with Priti Patel MP that 'that any surrender of our deterrent would not only leave us vulnerable but weaken our position as a permanent member of the UN Security Council'.)¹⁵

Nuclear contingency

9. The Commission report could and should have been far more explicit about the contingency of successful nuclear deterrence.

10. Necessity in the face of uncertainty has been the central theme of the debate on the future of Trident since 2006 when the Labour government published its White Paper on *The Future of the United Kingdom's Nuclear Deterrent*. This was echoed by the Commission. The reason is that the Commission's threat-based argument in favour of the status quo is entirely future-based. The Commission accepts that the UK does not face an existential military threat to the survival of the state and hasn't done so for about a quarter of a century since the end of the Cold War (a third of the time the UK has been nuclear-armed). It also accepts that nuclear deterrent threats only have potential relevance to a very narrow set of contingencies.¹⁶ But it insists that in the absence of a crystal ball we cannot rule out the emergence or re-emergence of a strategic nuclear threat so we had better keep nuclear weapons just in case.

11. In doing so the Commission has missed an opportunity for a more open discussion of the 'realities' and contingency of practicing nuclear deterrence. The 'reality' is a very thin strategic case for retaining nuclear weapons that reflects this fundamental contingency. Specifically:

- The Commission argues that a UK nuclear deterrent threat is needed because it *could* be decisive in future nuclear crises.

- The Commission acknowledges that nuclear deterrence *might not* operate as planned in a crisis. It is right to do so because there is *no guarantee* it will work under the intense conditions of escalating conflict
- The Commission *does not* acknowledge that the historical track record of nuclear deterrent threats is mixed at best: nuclear coercion, or ‘blackmail’, has rarely worked in practice. There are no convincing examples of nuclear compellence.

12. The Commission’s specific argument is that we need nuclear weapons because at some point in the future another nuclear-armed country, perhaps Russia, *might* seriously threaten the UK or its allies with a *nuclear or massive conventional attack* that could threaten to bomb this country or its allies past the point of recovery. In such a scenario an independent UK threat to retaliate with strategic nuclear weapons *might* cause the belligerent to think twice.

13. Despite the changed security environment since the end of the Cold War, despite the fact that we haven’t faced such a threat for a quarter of a century, despite the myriad of security risks and threats we have a good idea we *will* face for a which the blunt threat of massive nuclear violence is irrelevant, despite the enormous financial and opportunity cost, despite the fact that it will mean playing no small part in sustaining a global system that heaps value on nuclear weapons as an *essential* provider of security, despite the clear dangers manifest in reproducing such a system over time, we think it is absolutely necessary to continue with nuclear business-as-usual because the residual chance that the UK could face a nuclear-armed aggressor cannot be set at zero. This is the Commission’s case.

Deterrence and proliferation

14. The Commission report could and should have been far more explicit about the inescapable tensions between insisting on the necessity of nuclear weapons for the UK whilst denying them to others.

15. The Commission’s conclusion and supporting arguments is riven with an inescapable tension between two political-psychological effects that nuclear weapons can exert: deterrence and ‘proliferance’.¹⁷ Proliferance describes the dynamic whereby proliferation begets proliferation when nuclear weapons are framed as the appropriate solution to radical state insecurity. The Commission was not expected to resolve this tension, but it could and should have brought it to the fore in the interests of public debate.

16. The tension is evident in the Commission’s future-based argument for retaining and replacing Trident. This argument provides a permanent justification for the possession of nuclear weapons because it transcends any particular threat posed by a specific enemy. The case for retaining nuclear weapons for the foreseeable future becomes a function of the international system: the world is as it is and that is justification enough. The Commission does not explicitly advocate indefinite possession of nuclear weapons (indeed it argues the case for efforts towards global zero), but this is the inevitable destination of the argument’s logic. It is a position that inevitably undermines the NPT, an

institution whose health and legitimacy the Commission presents as a vital national security interest.¹⁸ In doing so, in acknowledging the central importance of a credible NPT regime, the Commission finds itself struggling to square a circle. This is an inescapable tension.

17. As experienced practitioners, the Commissioners will be used to handling inescapable tensions, and presumably believe that it is possible, through careful management and patient diplomacy, to manage such tensions for the foreseeable future drawing on past experience. Nevertheless, it is far from clear that the current global nuclear order is in anyway sustainable. The Commission acknowledges that the UK has an important role to play in transforming the nuclear order into a more stable and sustainable form that minimise the long-term risks of massive nuclear violence, and it should be commended for this. However, the Commission underplays the direct contribution the UK makes to maintaining an unsustainable system through its renewal of the Trident system and legitimisation of nuclear deterrence as an *essential* practice.
18. The appropriation of the strategic logic of nuclear deterrence for ourselves and the other four states recognised as nuclear weapon States under the NPT and a recognition that legitimising this logic inevitably legitimates its appropriation by *any* state that feels sufficiently threatened irrespective of their legal classification as a non-nuclear weapon State under the NPT (a treaty a NNWS can leave at three months' notice if it decides extraordinary events have jeopardised its supreme interests) or a state that has not signed the NPT.
19. The Commission rehearses familiar arguments for our continued possession of nuclear weapons as objective, prudent statecraft. Closer inspection reveals the proliferation logic at work in these arguments and a sense that these arguments are being marshalled to fit the current paradigm of the essential necessity of continued nuclear ownership. For example, arguments that the UK should retain nuclear weapons because it cannot rely on a US security guarantee in perpetuity *and* because they constitute a vital 'second centre of decision-making' within the Alliance can be appropriated by any number of US allies, not least Japan, South Korea, Australia, Germany, or Turkey. This argument is a proliferator's logic that legitimises the existence and potential development of nuclear weapons by those that currently do not possess them, yet the Commission cannot acknowledge that.

Nuclear stability

20. **The Commission report could and should have been far more explicit about the conditional role of nuclear weapons in inducing stability between adversarial states and asked critical questions about the sustainability of the current global nuclear order.**
21. The Commission is undecided or confused about the relationship between nuclear weapons and stable relations between states. The Commission's argument for the 'necessity' of nuclear weapons rests on the purported stabilising role of latent or explicit nuclear deterrent threats in peacetime and in a crisis, in contemporary strategic

relationships. The Commission insists that the possession of nuclear weapons by the major powers (assuming here that the UK is one of them) remains an essential component of stability until a time when strategic relations have improved. Without nuclear weapons 'the great powers will once again be drawn into major global conflict', argues the Commission.¹⁹ Nuclear weapons are the finger in the dyke, the ultimate constraint on military adventurism and therefore *essential* to the prevention of industrialised warfare between the major powers.

22. Yet the stabilising function nuclear weapons is conditional and not absolute, as is often implied. The Commission acknowledges that nuclear weapons can be *destabilising* when deterrence doesn't work as envisaged, notably in South Asia.²⁰ In fact, the Commission argues that if only every nuclear-armed state would think and act as we do then nuclear stability will reign: 'Other nuclear-armed states outside the NPT... need to be brought urgently into stable deterrence ways of thinking'.²¹ But other nuclear-armed states beyond the Western three are unlikely to be socialised into a common Western deterrence culture. They developed and now deploy nuclear weapons in different contexts guided by different strategic cultures. **The degree of nuclear weapons-induced stability that is sought is illusory and constitutes a different form of nuclear utopianism:** namely the belief that a stable nuclear order can be maintained indefinitely by a handful of states that claim unique security benefits from nuclear weapons whilst denying those benefits to others, and that if proliferation does continue then a world of 'radical nuclear multipolarity' can be safely managed by inculcating others into our notions of responsible nuclear sovereignty.²²

Alternative nuclear postures

23. The Commission rejects alternative nuclear postures to significantly reduce the salience of nuclear weapons in national security policies and practices. This is based on a definition of 'credible' nuclear deterrence that is framed as objective, when in fact what is 'credible' is based on subjective, contextual political assessment.

24. In its discussion of deterrence credibility, the Commission report suggests that nuclear deterrence can flip from 'stable' to 'unstable' if we deviate from current operational practices based on continuous at-sea deterrence (CASD).²³ It implies that nuclear deterrence is a fine art, a delicate equation in which small changes in practice and numbers can tip the balance from success to failure. This is representative of Cold War techno-strategic narratives that obscure the realities of the massive and inhumane violence that would accompany any conceivable use of nuclear weapons. Nuclear weapons are the bluntest of instruments. Their use *per se* is *the* decision. The whys and wherefores matter far less. (During the Cold War the absence of empirical data on nuclear deterrence and nuclear war-fighting led to a 'scientisation' of nuclear strategy based on an illusion of precision and exactness and a belief in the ability to develop rational and controllable strategies for the use of nuclear weapons.)²⁴

25. The Commission develops a set of criteria for a 'credible' and therefore effective nuclear deterrent threat. Like the 2013 Trident Alternatives Review and 2006 White Paper on the Future of the United Kingdom's Nuclear Deterrent before it, there is a powerful sense that the criteria have evolved to fit the capabilities offered by the Trident system made available by the US in the early 1980s as the Cold War resurged. Credibility criteria are presented to fit the system we have to justify it on ostensibly objective, *a priori* grounds that mask the political subjectivity of defining what is credible and what is not.²⁵
26. In doing so the Commission rejects alternative nuclear postures that significantly reduce the salience of nuclear weapons in national security policies and practices. I looked at options in 2009 in a report on *Stepping Down the Nuclear Ladder* and some of this has been considered by the Liberal Democrats and the Trident Alternatives Review. This research outlined a range of nuclear postures that move from permanent deployment of nuclear weapons, to non-permanent deployments (ending CASD), to a form of recessed deterrence where warheads and missiles are stored separately with reconstitution in weeks or months, disassembled warheads and subs used for other missions with reconstitution based on months or years, to Jonathan Schell's 'weaponless' deterrence with no nuclear weapons or components but a residual military nuclear industrial base that could, over time, regenerate a basic deliverable nuclear capability. But developing and implementing a nuclear posture that deviates from current practice means rethinking current ideas of minimum nuclear deterrence associated with the Trident system and deeply embedded in our nuclear culture.
27. One of the reasons why a possible smaller bespoke nuclear arsenal is rejected is because it will set a bad precedent for other nuclear aspirants (with little evidence to back up this claim).²⁶ Yet it then goes on to state the UK nuclear policy decisions have little or no impact on the decisions of other nuclear-armed or arming states 'which are largely determined by regional circumstances on which Britain has scant influence'.²⁷ The report cannot have it both ways.

Central problem

28. The central problem that the Commission's final report failed to tackle is that a 'safe' and 'stable' nuclear-armed world is not sustainable. A world of states that are *de facto* permanently nuclear-armed and growing in number is unlikely to end well. So what should the UK do? How should it act as a 'responsible' state that is committed to 'the development of international regimes that strengthen stability, security and peace, and to prioritising human security and the responsibility to protect'?²⁸ What should we make of the tensions between being a 'responsible' nuclear-armed state *and* fully versed in the collective existential consequences of a nuclear conflict and fully cognisant of the abiding dangers of a proliferating world? The report gives us a disappointing answer of nuclear business-as-usual.
29. **We have an opportunity to surface, dissect and present different viewpoints on these very difficult and long-term questions cognisant of what today's politics will take and what it might be *required* to take in the future.** I would invite the

Commission to play an active role in stimulating and facilitating further open debate, one that involves well-argued viewpoints with assumptions fully acknowledged and developed, and where we do not claim have irrefutable answers to the challenging questions involved.

30. In sum, this paper is a response to the Commission's report. I did not expect the Commission to recommend relinquishing nuclear weapons now, or in the near future. But I did hope that the Commission would open up debate by bringing the inherent contradictions at the heart of Britain's retention of a nuclear arsenal to the fore, to shine a light on some of the assumptions upon which our nuclear policies and practices are based and to interrogate their validity. **I urge the Commission to promote debate in this vein by further developing and communicating its thinking as a Commission or as individual Commissioners drawing on the three years of work behind the final report.**

¹ Trident Commission Concluding Report, found here:

http://www.basicint.org/sites/default/files/trident_commission_finalreport.pdf. p. 30.

² P. 33.

³ P. 41.

⁴ P. 39.

⁵ P. 39.

⁶ Pp. 29-30.

⁷ P. 40.

⁸ P. 41.

⁹ P. 16.

¹⁰ P. 5.

¹¹ MoD, *Delivering Security in a Changing World*, pp. 7, 11; Tony Blair, 'Our Nation's Future - Defence', speech aboard HMS Albion, Portsmouth, January 12, 2007.

¹² Tony Blair, Foreword in *The Future of the United Kingdom's Nuclear Deterrent* (London: HMSO, 2006), p. 5.

¹³ P. 15.

¹⁴ P. 14.

¹⁵ House of Commons, *Official Report*, 14 July 2014, Column 573.

¹⁶ P. 13: 'Nuclear deterrent is only relevant to strategic threats that emanate directly from a state with significant military capabilities and unpredictable intent that is capable of being deterred from, and then desisting from, carrying out that threat against the UK'. Russia remains the central focus.

¹⁷ Jonathan Schell, 'The Folly of Arms Control', *Foreign Affairs*, 79: 5, 2000, p. 32.

¹⁸ P. 38.

¹⁹ P. 15.

²⁰ P. 12.

²¹ P.15

²² Ken Booth, 'Debating the Future of Trident: Who are the Real Realists?' in K. Booth and F. Barnaby (eds.) *The Future of Britain's Nuclear Weapons: Experts Reframe the Debate* (Oxford: Oxford Research Group, 2006).

²³ P. 25.

²⁴ Anthony Burke, 'Nuclear Reason: At the Limits of Strategy', *International Relations*, 23: 4, 2009.

²⁵ Pp. 24-25.

²⁶ P. 27.

²⁷ p. 38.

²⁸ P. 15.