

Nothing sacrosanct

*Vice Admiral Sir
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Vice Admiral Blackham served as Deputy Commander-in-Chief, Fleet and, in retirement, was Editor of The Naval Review. This is his Foreword to Commander Robert Forsyth's book, Why Trident? (Spokesman Books, 2020)

The British submarine-borne nuclear deterrent was first deployed in 1969, at the height of the Cold War, and has been an unchallengeable cornerstone of British defence and security ever since. But in that time much has changed. Many more countries now possess, or have the means to possess, nuclear weapons; international relationships are different and more complex; critical threats emanate from non-state actors. British international influence has declined, not least because of her reduced conventional military power and the growth of new forms of warfare, perhaps less amenable to nuclear dissuasion. However, the conventional forces that Britain has chosen to retain are now sufficiently reduced to lower very significantly the nuclear threshold, the point at which a decision to use nuclear weapons or rather to seek an accommodation is reached. Some people, of whom I am one, believe that a lower nuclear threshold greatly undermines the credibility of our nuclear deterrent because an adversary with far greater conventional and nuclear capability may not believe we would use it, or may conclude that he can win a conventional war before he has exhausted his conventional options or before we have found ourselves at a level of threat which could justify unleashing mutual nuclear destruction. Deterrence would have failed before nuclear forces came into play. One might even argue that we have deterred ourselves rather than the enemy.

Deterrence is an intellectually challenging subject and one in which no nation can afford to act without careful

consideration of the interests of its allies and even those of its potential rivals. In the interconnected world in which we live, and the many natural and technological challenges, as well as the more conventional military threats we face, it is impossible to over-emphasise the value of being able to deter at any level of warfare, to prevent us reaching the nuclear threshold. Against this background, the United Kingdom has declared its intention to carry out a fundamental defence and security review, with the aim of reshaping its defence and security posture to meet the new challenges and those of the next generation. This is crucially important in an increasingly dangerous world.

Such a review must be a ‘clean sheet’ review; nothing should be sacrosanct. It must produce a policy which is coherent ‘end-to-end’ and equipped with the best and most effective tools we are prepared to afford. It is therefore very timely to review the nuclear element of our deterrent posture, in the light of the moral, legal, economic, political, environmental and practical issues involved. We can no longer simply assume that it is in all circumstances essential, irrespective of its impact on our overall security. Few people have examined more rigorously the critical questions surrounding the nuclear element of this ‘continuum of deterrence’ than Rob Forsyth. I am very glad that his work in this field has been collected into this book. All those involved in this field should read and carefully reflect on what he has to say.

