

## Force for good?

### *How to respond to the new nuclear deterrence and disarmament crisis*

*Commander Robert Green RN (Ret'd)*



*A former operator of British nuclear weapons warns against increasing nuclear risks and charts an alternative, non-nuclear course for the UK.*

My book *Security without Nuclear Deterrence*, a new edition of which Spokesman published last year in the UK, explains my gradual rejection of pro-nuclear deterrence indoctrination as a former operator of British nuclear weapons. In it I chronicle how the US politico-military-industrial complex, drawing the wrong lessons from Hiroshima and Nagasaki and in denial about the horrors it had unleashed on humanity, seized upon the bogus mantra of nuclear deterrence to play upon people's fears and justify sustaining the unaccountable, highly profitable scientific and military monster spawned by the Manhattan Project.

Since then the principal guardians of nuclear deterrence – the western group comprising the US, UK and France – have struggled to provide intellectual coherence as endless adjustments to the theory and doctrine were made to accommodate the latest expansion of the nuclear arms race it had unleashed. Uncritical repetition by posturing political leaders, careerist experts and mainstream media of simplistic soundbites gave it the aura of a state religion, to the point where it echoed the fable of the emperor with no clothes.

Nuclear deterrence is based upon a crazy premise: that nuclear war can be made less probable by making it more probable. Worse, it is bedevilled by two insurmountable contradictions:

1. A rational leader cannot make a credible nuclear threat against an adversary capable of an invulnerable retaliatory 'second strike'.
2. Yet a second strike would be no more than posthumous revenge.

Moreover, unlike conventional war, following nuclear war – amid millions of dead and untreatable survivors, radioactive poisoning and apocalyptic destruction – the smoke alone from firestorms over cities in a nuclear war in South Asia would blot out the sun around the entire northern hemisphere, causing massive crop failure and global famine.

Recently, the groundless claim that nuclear weapons prevent war between nuclear-armed states was yet again challenged in the latest clashes between India and Pakistan, whereupon anxious nuclear powers led by the US and China had to intervene to restrain them. India and Pakistan naively followed their former colonial master's insistence that nuclear deterrence held the key to guaranteed security and acceptance as a great power. Instead, blind faith in nuclear deterrence has emboldened both sides to launch provocative military actions over disputed Kashmir: thus, nuclear weapons have increased the risk of war between them.

### **Challenging the nuclear order**

An article by British expert Dr Nick Ritchie, *A hegemonic nuclear order: Understanding the Ban Treaty and the power politics of nuclear weapons*, examines how the US-led nuclear order has evolved around nuclear deterrence.

The 2017 Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) represents a significant challenge to the P5's oligarchic power to establish norms biased towards non- and counter-proliferation, co-opt dissenters and institutions, and sustain mainstream acceptance of nuclear deterrence dogma.

This nuclear cartel recognises that reframing the discourse from an arms control and non-proliferation mindset to a 'humanitarian disarmament' standpoint threatens their status quo. Hence the ferocity of their response led by the western group, bitterly protesting at how irresponsibly naive the 122 member States who had adopted the TPNW had been in destabilising international security, when US-Russian relations were deteriorating, and North Korea had demonstrated further strides in its nuclear capability. This bluster tried to deflect attention from US President Trump's far more destabilising determination to renege on the Iran Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, expand US ballistic missile defence, and even question the value to the US of NATO.

The Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons represents a new, determined diplomacy of resistance, fuelled by frustration over the nuclear cartel modernising their arsenals. The nuclear order is constrained by US ability to maintain subservience through bargaining between the dominant and dominated, employing strategies of inhibition applied to friends and foes alike, including aid, conventional arms sales, alliances and extended

nuclear deterrence.

The post-Cold War period witnessed a shift from non- to counter-proliferation, preventing the acquisition of nuclear weapons by threatening attack against regional 'rogue' states, including first use with new low-yield nuclear warheads. In so doing, nuclear deterrence doctrine had been effectively inverted from professed prevention of war to pre-emptive war backed by ballistic missile defence, thereby exposing its practical irrelevance, not least in countering terrorism after 9/11.

Ritchie discusses how the western group have led development of benign conceptions of 'responsible' nuclear sovereignty and norms of behaviour, forming a respectable façade for what is essentially a fetishisation of nuclear weapons, imbuing them with extraordinary symbolic power. This subject was first tackled in 2009 by Anne Harrington de Santana in *Nuclear Weapons as the Currency of Power: Deconstructing the Fetishism of Force*. In support, institutions have been established to monitor and control nuclear weapon and energy programmes, such as the International Atomic Energy Agency, the 48-member Nuclear Suppliers Group, and the Zangger Committee with 39 member States. These institutions are not neutral, but politicised fora that fix systems of bias, privilege and inequality.

Other important US-dominated institutions include NATO and its Nuclear Planning Group, and the bilateral Asia-Pacific nuclear alliances. Then there is the institution of US-Russia nuclear arms limitation, developed to organise and constrain Cold War nuclear arms competition, manage the risk of nuclear violence in crises, and displace disarmament as the more logical, equitable and effective alternative path.

Closely linked to bilateral attempts at arms control is the US-Russia consensus to persist with over 1,500 strategic nuclear warheads on each side at minutes' notice to launch before confirmation of a nuclear strike, almost thirty years after the Cold War ended.

In a commendable effort to challenge this notoriously unreliable and irresponsible posture, a seminar held in Switzerland in 2009 co-sponsored by the East West Institute and the Swiss and New Zealand governments brought together US and Russian experts to explore ways to de-alert their forces. However, in their report, *Reframing Nuclear De-Alert: Decreasing the operational readiness of US and Russian nuclear arsenals*, the co-sponsors explained that no progress was achieved because both US and Russian sides blocked any change to current arrangements. This demonstrated the pernicious influence of nuclear deterrence doctrine and the associated nuclear order.

Underpinning this entire construct has been a deliberate socialisation of

ideas to mould a pro-nuclear consensus, and sideline or suppress other ways of thinking about security, justice, and nuclear order through indoctrination, self-censorship, and exclusion of those 'out of touch with the real world' who do not accept nuclearism.

This regime of acceptable knowledge, or 'institutional truth', has brought us to the current perversely unsustainable situation, especially with the US erosion of arms control agreements. Western nuclear weapons are seen as inherently legitimate and good for international peace and security; but those in the hands of authoritarian states or those beyond the West's sphere of influence are illegitimate and undermine a western interpretation of international order.

### **The nuclear deterrence and disarmament crisis**

However, in addition to all nuclear-armed states modernising their arsenals, in February last year, the new US Nuclear Posture Review signalled the start of the most serious nuclear deterrence and disarmament crisis for 30 years.

In May 2018, Trump trashed the Iran Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action; then early this year the US released a Ballistic Missile Defence Review, and then withdrew from the Intermediate Nuclear Forces Treaty.

The 2018 US Nuclear Posture Review revives enthusiasm for 'usable' low-yield nuclear warheads to shore up nuclear deterrence credibility. It includes a new, low-yield Trident nuclear warhead; a new nuclear-armed cruise missile; and a more accurate, guided version of the B61 freefall nuclear bomb with lower variable yield between 0.3-50 kilotons (the Hiroshima bomb was 16 kilotons), and a fusing system more capable of withstanding the shock of penetrating hardened and deeply buried targets. This will replace 150 older model B61 bombs deployed in Belgium, Netherlands, Germany, Italy and Turkey.

The US Missile Defence Review, published in January 2019, commits the US to expanding ground and space-based systems. These violate the fundamental principles of Mutual Assured Destruction – but there seems to be a lack of awareness, let alone alarm, about this in mainstream western commentaries.

One new, particularly dangerous development is the push to deploy conventionally armed ballistic missiles in US submarines, possibly including Trident, for pre-emptive 'Prompt Global Strike' against a threat which otherwise would require a nuclear response. An obvious risk would be that, even if the conventional warhead is launched in a different ballistic missile from Trident, Russia would presume it was a nuclear strike.

### **A global nuclear tinderbox**

The announcement on 2 February of US withdrawal from the 1987 Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces Treaty, followed the next day by Russia's withdrawal, means that the world – especially Europe – is faced with a far more dangerous rerun of the 1979 NATO decision to deploy nuclear-armed Cruise missiles and Pershing ballistic missiles in Europe to counter Soviet SS-20 intermediate range ballistic missiles.

This time the US leadership is unlikely to listen to European concerns, which are heightened by a more ambiguous US/NATO nuclear posture; probable collapse of US-Russian arms control initiatives, and even greater consequent public alarm and resistance. This could severely strain NATO cohesion, and trigger a major rethink of its nuclear deterrence doctrine.

In predictable response, specifically to Trump's withdrawal from the INF Treaty, President Vladimir Putin claimed in his state of the nation address on 20 February 2019 that, in addition to new weapon systems soon to become operational, Russian submarines stationed off the east and west US coasts are now capable of launching Zircon hypersonic stealthy cruise missiles invulnerable to ballistic missile defence with a range of up to 1,000 km.

The inevitable consequence of US hubristic abuse of its hegemonic nuclear order, and the Russian response, is to increase the risk of nuclear weapon use through miscalculation, mistake or malfunction.

Moreover, there is general acceptance that once the first nuclear detonation occurs, escalation to all-out nuclear war would rapidly and uncontrollably follow. Facilitating all this has been a fallacious and disingenuous lumping together of nuclear with chemical and biological weapons of mass destruction by some policy-makers, when the reality is that nuclear weapons are orders of magnitude worse.

Britain is the best-placed nuclear weapon state to lead the world out of the new nuclear deterrence and disarmament crisis. The UK nuclear arsenal is the smallest of the P5, deployed in only one system, at several days' notice to fire; a £70 billion Defence Budget deficit, driven by planned Trident renewal related to dependence on the US, would grow with Brexit; and the £50 billion opportunity cost of Trident renewal could be redirected to providing a more balanced, useful Royal Navy contribution to graduated conventional deterrence.

Meanwhile, Opposition Leader Jeremy Corbyn has experienced no loss of public support on pledging that, if he became Prime Minister, he would refuse to authorise nuclear weapon use, and would sign the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons. In addition, there is a solid anti-nuclear

majority in Scotland, where British nuclear weapons are based, linked to support for independence. Finally, a network of legal, academic and political experts and former RN operators of nuclear weapons are working in support of a determined, experienced group of campaigners opposing the UK Government's unlawful and irresponsible nuclear posture.

If the UK were to reject nuclear deterrence, the British and international anti-nuclear movements, and an overwhelming majority of world opinion, would erupt in support. As initiator, organiser and energiser of a process that would start to shift western attitudes from the current adversarial national security paradigm to one embracing co-operative security, the UK would gain a global role in which it would be welcomed as truly a 'force for good'.

The first anti-nuclear breakout by one of the P5 would be sensational and would transform the nuclear disarmament debate overnight. In NATO, Britain would wield unprecedented influence in leading the drive for a non-nuclear strategy – which must happen if NATO is to sustain its cohesion. It would create new openings for shifting the mindset in the US and France, and give pause to India and Pakistan, as well as others seeking nuclear weapons. Moreover, it would open the way for a major reassessment by Russia and China of their nuclear strategies, for all nuclear forces to be de-alerted, and for multilateral negotiations to start on a Nuclear Weapons Convention.

### **Britain should lead France away from nuclear deterrence**

Some political and military diehards argue that it is critical for Britain to retain nuclear weapons because 'France must never be allowed to be the sole European nuclear power'. My response is that the security threats confronting British and fellow Europeans in the twenty-first century demand that both the UK and France move on at last from the Napoleonic Wars and loss of Empires.

As the first medium-sized power to acquire nuclear weapons, Britain has the opportunity to set France a wiser and more responsible example. Central to this are the opportunity costs for both countries' defence policies. Above all, the ridiculous notion that France's greatness depends on possession of nuclear weapons should be exposed as demeaning to French citizens and culture. The reality is that threatening nuclear weapon use risks the annihilation of both French and British culture within devastated and poisoned homelands.

### **A new British challenge to ‘pressing the nuclear button’**

Since the 1990s, when UK nuclear weapons were de-targeted and placed at relaxed notice to fire, a decision to re-target, let alone use, UK Trident would initiate the most extreme use of British military force, with unprecedented political and legal implications.

A 2016 report by Sir John Chilcot on lessons to be learned from the disastrous 2003 US-UK invasion of Iraq recommended that Parliament should be more involved in a decision to go to war. A Parliamentary Inquiry by the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Select Committee is currently probing how best to implement this. A former distinguished British Polaris submarine Commander, Robert Forsyth, has made recommending establishment of an advisory committee, independent of Government, to scrutinise the political and legal justifications for a re-targeting or firing order from the Prime Minister [see *Spokesman 141*].

Commander Forsyth’s concern is that the currently deployed UK Trident-armed submarine Commanding Officer, who is acutely aware that what he is there to do is to actually ‘press the nuclear button’ on behalf of the Prime Minister, would be placed in legal jeopardy by current British nuclear policy. Nuremberg Principle IV states:

‘The fact that a person acted pursuant to order of his government or superior does not relieve him from responsibility under international law, provided a moral choice was in fact possible for him.’

Interestingly, Admiral Lord Alan West, testifying to the Inquiry as First Sea Lord during the invasion of Iraq, endorsed Cdr Forsyth’s concern. And of course, the reality is that there is no scenario where a 100 kiloton UK Trident warhead could ever be used lawfully.

A most timely article, *The Finger on the Button — The Authority to Use Nuclear Weapons in Nuclear-Armed States*, was published in February by the James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies, Monterey. Prompted by concerns over US President Trump’s nuclear threats to North Korea’s President Kim Jong-un, the authors Jeffrey Lewis and Bruno Tertrais compare who is authorised to initiate nuclear weapon use and the related procedures in each of the nine known nuclear-armed States.

However, re-targeting is not mentioned, and there is little discussion of accountability, especially the need to justify use and scrutinise legality. Yet at least one US Trident submarine Commanding Officer has indicated that, in the event of a peacetime order to launch, he would insist on



confirmation and a justification. Also, there is no mention of recent public statements by current and ex-Chiefs of US Strategic Command challenging an illegal firing order.

Meanwhile, when I last met Bruno Tertrais, a veteran commentator and former adviser to the French Ministry of Defence, I asked him what impact British breakout from nuclear deterrence would have in France. He replied: 'It would make the French think objectively about nuclear weapons for the first time'.

To conclude, in my view the most ground breaking achievement of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons is to have provoked the US-led nuclear cartel to drop any attempt to conceal its irresponsible, dishonest manipulation of nuclear deterrence theory and doctrine, with associated dangers to global security. This is why, in my recent TEDx talk on the insanity of nuclear deterrence, I risked telling it like it is:

'Nuclear deterrence is no more than a repulsive, unlawful protection racket used as a counterfeit currency of power. It is hugely profitable to the corporate arms industry. The power elites of the nuclear-armed states are in denial that their game of nuclear chicken really does risk the survival of us all. But the tide of history is at last turning towards justice. It is time for all of us to step up and end the threat to humanity and the planet from this irresponsible hoax holding us all hostage.'

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FOREWORD BY  
VICE ADMIRAL SIR JEREMY BLACKHAM KCB MA

*'This is a most important contribution to the debate on a subject which is crucial to the survival of the human race, and it needs to be read with a degree of humility and an open mind – qualities not always apparent among our decision makers and their advisers.'*

Vice Admiral Sir Jeremy Blackham KCB

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