

Australia and the Bomb

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Thinking the unthinkable about Australia deploying submarine-based nuclear weapons, an experienced Royal Navy Commander offers some timely reflections. Commander Forsyth served in the Royal Navy from 1957 to 1981. He commanded conventional and nuclear powered attack submarines, was Executive Officer of a Polaris missile equipped submarine, and led the Submarine Commanding Officers' Qualifying Course.

As a former Royal Navy submarine Commanding Officer who also served as second in command of a *Polaris* submarine, I have read with interest that Professor Hugh White's book *How to defend Australia* includes the suggestion that Australia should revisit possessing its own nuclear weapons because it can no longer rely on the USA's 'nuclear umbrella'. I have spent some time post-service researching the justification for the UK decision to acquire, and now sustain, a submarine launched nuclear-armed ballistic missile system, and the negative effect that this has had on our armed services and the Royal Navy in particular. Australian politicians and military strategic thinkers might care to consider some of my conclusions that apply equally to any State thinking of possessing a 'nuclear deterrent' for the first time.

One first has to ask the question: does nuclear deterrence work? Counter to Cold War ideology, and with the benefit of hindsight, it is now quite clear that nuclear weapons have never deterred any aggression against a nuclear-armed state or a state such as Australia under a US extended nuclear deterrence. Some would argue that the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis was such a time. However, Khrushchev did not back down for fear of being attacked but because he realised, only just in time, that the biggest danger came not from the USA but from losing control of his own or Cuban nuclear-armed forces who might start a nuclear war the USSR did not want. It is also significant that US nuclear weapons were irrelevant in the Vietnam War in which Australia was deeply involved with its largest military commitment since

World War Two.

Furthermore, and more recently, the risk of nuclear war through miscalculation, mistake or malfunction has, if anything, increased. The much respected Royal Institute of International Affairs, Chatham House, in its 2014 report *Too Close for Comfort* documents some 13 separate occasions when the world has come extremely close to this happening. A subsequent example in 2018 involved a false initiation of a nuclear warning alarm in Hawaii at a time when North Korea was threatening a missile attack against US territory. Former UK Ambassador to Moscow in the 1990s Sir Rodric Braithwaite's book *Armageddon and Paranoia: The Nuclear Confrontation* and Daniel Ellsberg's 2017 book *The Doomsday Machine: Confessions of a Nuclear War Planner* provide compelling evidence of the dangers inherent in possessing nuclear weapons.

Despite this, and without any apparent current or probable future existential threat – Trident missiles have been at 'several days' notice to fire' since 1994 – the UK has decided to continue with its 'independent nuclear deterrent' into the 2050s at a cost of what will likely be well over £150 billion. However, for all this enormous expenditure, UK Trident is not independent. In reality the USA – which leases its missiles to the UK from a common US pool, and whose technical design and support for every part of the weapon system to target and launch them is critical – can frustrate the UK from using Trident if it disapproved. Nor would it be averse to the use of military force to do so. A precedent for this was set in 1956 when the US opposed the Anglo-French Suez campaign. The UK Force Commander at the time, General Sir Charles Keightley, said "It was the (military) action of the US which really defeated us attaining our object". So, unlike France, the UK has opted for nuclear dependence on the US.

Only a force of four nuclear-armed ballistic missile equipped nuclear-powered submarines (SSBNs) would be sufficient to maintain one continuously on patrol. In addition, to maintain its independence from the USA, Australia would need to design and manufacture its own missiles, war heads, specialised satellite navigation, targeting and communications systems and acquire nuclear submarine design, build, operation and maintenance skills. As the UK has learned, there would be a heavy political as well as financial cost for all this; and the Royal Australian Navy would have to develop a major new skills base in operating these highly technical systems. Then there is the need for a nuclear-powered attack submarine (SSN) plus at least one surface ship and maritime patrol aircraft to protect the deployed SSBN. Experience shows that at least six SSNs are required to have one always available for this task. Despite the

cost saving by heavy reliance on US equipment, support and expertise, keeping one UK SSBN continuously at sea and undetected places huge and growing strains on a now very depleted and imbalanced Royal Navy.

In fact, the cost of maintaining a UK 'deterrent' has led to the hollowing out of the UK's conventional armed forces to the point where we cannot deter, let alone respond effectively to, aggression against the homeland. For example, the RN fighting fleet has been reduced to six destroyers and 13 frigates: alarmingly, the same numbers of ships sunk or damaged respectively during the 1982 Falklands War. There are new frigates on order, but they barely sustain the number of these key workhorses in the Navy's core role of protecting maritime trade and graduated conventional deterrence. Already the RN is struggling to have enough units to escort one of the two super-carriers *HMS Queen Elizabeth* and *Prince of Wales*. How deeply ironic it is that, as we may be about to exit the European Union, we are having to call on their navies to help protect UK oil tankers in the Gulf because we can no longer do this on our own. Admiral Lord Nelson famously wrote "Were I to die at this moment 'want of frigates' would be found stamped on my heart". There are quite a few latter day Royal Navy Admirals expressing similar sentiments.

I would therefore urge Australia, who would be embarking on an independent nuclear deterrent with no nuclear propulsion or missile experience to build on, to take a long hard look at the effect that maintaining our four *Trident* submarines has had on the defence of the UK homeland. Simply put, it has denied our armed services, especially the Royal Navy, the equipment and personnel they need to meet the wide variety of today's actual threats. Our costly 'nuclear deterrent' has degraded our conventional deterrence capability such that a 'last resort' weapon system would too quickly become the only option left, with associated loss of credibility.