

Scarcely reconcilable

*How terminology
skews the nuclear
weapons debate*

Rob van Riet

In July 2016, I wrote an article entitled ‘How terminology skewed the Trident debate’, which reflected on the UK Parliament’s debate and vote on renewing the four submarines that carry the Trident missiles fitted with Britain’s nuclear warheads (a programme collectively known as “Trident”). Today, almost five years later, the motivations that prompted me to write that article have resurfaced. This time it’s in response to the government’s significant changes to the UK’s nuclear posture, which increases the country’s nuclear warhead stockpile cap and expands the policy stipulating under which circumstances the UK could use or threaten use of nuclear weapons. There is plenty to say about how worrying these developments are, and fortunately some of my colleagues have written excellent pieces on this, but I wanted to highlight something that often goes unnoticed: the way in which terminology skews the debate on these weapons. Having followed the debate in Parliament on these controversial changes to the UK’s nuclear weapons policy, as well as its coverage in the media, it’s evident that the central theme put forward in the article below, which has been revised to fit the current context, is as relevant now as it was then.

Introduction

George Orwell famously wrote in his novel *1984* that, “if thought corrupts language, language can also corrupt thought.” Indeed, the words we use can shape ours and others’ thinking. We are all bound by the language we use and so we best make sure that the words we use accurately convey

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our intentions and thoughts and are as reflective of reality as possible.

In March 2021, the UK published its *Integrated Review* of security, defence, development and foreign policy, entitled *Global Britain in a Competitive Age*. The *Integrated Review* serves as an expression of the Johnson government's aspiration to become "Global Britain" after Brexit, and to that end makes much of how the UK will boost international trade and deploy a wide range of soft power tools over the next decade. On the issue of nuclear weapons, the review brings worrying changes to the UK's nuclear posture. It re-affirms the role of UK nuclear weapons to address chemical and biological weapon threats as well as nuclear threats, affirms new policy broadening the role of nuclear weapons to include the possible threat or use of nuclear weapons to address emerging technologies such as cyber attacks, and increases the cap on the number of nuclear weapons in the UK arsenal from the 180 planned by the mid 2020s to 260. This forty per cent increase marks the end of three decades of gradual disarmament by the UK since the end of the Cold War.

There is something very disquieting about reading a document that on the one hand boasts that the "BBC is the most trusted broadcaster worldwide", that the English football league "broadcasts to 188 countries worldwide", that "(o)ne in eight music albums sold around the world is by a UK artist" and that "(e)xhibitions from [British] museums and galleries reach over 500m people every year"—all heralded as key manifestations of British soft power—and then a few pages later coolly and matter-of-factly introduces these consequential changes to British nuclear weapons policy. And all of that packaged as signalling a decade of "British Leadership" and engagement in global affairs. This is particularly cynical as the vast majority of the world's peoples and nations are desperately looking to the UK and the other eight nuclear-armed states to finally remove what former US President John F. Kennedy called "the nuclear sword of Damocles" hanging over our shared future.

Even though there was some coverage of, and commentary on, this dramatic policy shift on British airwaves and television screens and in its newspapers (printed and online), it quickly got lost in the daily barrage of COVID-19 reporting. While there was some excellent analysis and scrutiny of the review – noting how it reverses 30 years of gradual disarmament; querying whether nuclear weapons meet the UK's security needs in the 21st Century or whether they, in fact, contribute to its insecurity; lamenting the lack of reasoning and explanation given by the government for this dramatic shift in posture; highlighting the exorbitant spending on nuclear weapons at a time when economic recovery in the

wake of the COVID-19 pandemic should put human needs and livelihoods front and centre; and underlining how it could spell trouble for the UK justifying this move at the upcoming Review Conference of the 1968 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, where it is supposed to demonstrate the progress it is making in implementing the core treaty obligation of disarming its nuclear arsenal—what once more became clear is that some of the terms used to talk about nuclear weapons skew the debate.

Talking about nuclear weapons in the established fora and publications is done in a specific jargon – one marked by acronyms, numbers, politicised terms that have accumulated meaning over the seventy-seven years since the advent of the nuclear age, and sanitised terminology from the domain of defence and security.

Yet for all the weighing and careful selection of terms in the debate on nuclear weapons, there are quite a few that on the surface might seem quite accurate, yet upon deeper scrutiny are revealed to be misleading. The widespread usage and dissemination of these terms has been an effective tactic for those invested in preventing or slowing down progress on nuclear disarmament. Some of these terms need to be challenged or exposed, while others need to be recaptured to represent their true meaning or rethought to better reflect today's reality. Let's look at several such terms and consider how they skew the nuclear weapons debate – both in the UK and more generally.

de·ter·rent ► noun

“The UK’s nuclear deterrent: what you need to know”
Guide on UK Government website, last updated March 2021

“What is Trident? Britain’s nuclear deterrent explained”
Article in *The Telegraph* newspaper, March 2017

One of the most misleading terms used in the debate on nuclear weapons is “deterrent” to describe a nuclear weapons capability or system. The term comes from the belief that nuclear weapons deter against aggression or a nuclear attack through the promise of retaliation – a security doctrine known as “nuclear deterrence”.

Although the primary geopolitical circumstances for its existence have ceased with the end of the Cold War (when nuclear deterrence took on its most cynical and nihilistic form as “Mutually Assured Destruction”), the doctrine continues to permeate strategic thought in the nuclear-armed

states and allied states covered by “extended nuclear deterrence”. For many in the defence and security elites in these states the doctrine is sacrosanct.

Incessant use of these terms in previous decades has meant that few people nowadays question the appropriateness of using “deterrent” as a synonym for any given nuclear weapons system. For example, in the UK, usage of “deterrent” to refer to the Trident nuclear weapons programme in media reporting and discussions on its operation and replacement generally goes unchallenged. During the recent parliamentary debate on the *Integrated Review*, the government’s claim that it needs to “maintain a credible deterrent” was met by the opposition’s agreement that “Labour’s commitment to the renewal of our deterrent is non-negotiable.” Interestingly, and revealing of how successful the defence and security elites have been in making policy-makers, analysts, as well as the general public at large, adopt such language, even commentators with reservations about the Trident programme, or opposed to it, often use the term.

The problem is that the term “deterrent” is infused with meaning. The designation of a nuclear weapons system as a “deterrent” is invariably accompanied by the implication that it indeed does what the term suggests – that it deters. By using such terms, we tacitly acquiesce to this belief and invest considerable purpose and meaning into these inanimate instruments.

Yet, we cannot prove deterrence works. The fact that there has not been a nuclear war or a major war between the nuclear-armed states does not prove that deterrence works.

The contrary argument – that nuclear brinkmanship has a considerable probability of triggering conflicts, possibly of the nuclear kind – is equally difficult to prove. However, there is considerable evidence within historical occasions where nuclear deterrence did not prevent war, as well as occasions where nuclear war was only narrowly avoided. There is further credible analysis that the deterrence doctrine has lost most, if not all, of the relevance it may once have had in today’s multipolar world and changing security landscape.

As such, the use of “deterrent” to describe a nuclear weapons system is a sly way to shape people’s thinking on the utility, legality and acceptability of such a system. Just consider the difference in the following two ways to ask about the British Trident programme: (1) Should the UK give up its nuclear deterrent?; (2) Should the UK give up its thermonuclear bombs? The use of “deterrent” makes the former practically a leading question, while the latter is factually more correct. Answers will undoubtedly vary.

Anyone who has ever had the sobering and harrowing experience of coming face to face with the effects of nuclear weapons knows them for what they are: instruments of terror and mass destruction. We should remind whomever attempts to get away with shrouding them in terms such as “deterrent” or “strategic stability” of the catastrophic consequences their use would cause and the kaleidoscope of risks inherent to their existence.

se·cu·ri·ty ► noun

“World events demonstrate that in an unpredictable era our country needs the ultimate security guarantee.”

David Cameron, Former Prime Minister of the United Kingdom,
April 2013

“It is the ultimate guarantee, the ultimate insurance policy against the worst threat from hostile states.”

Dominic Raab, UK Foreign Secretary, March 2021

The primary reason given for retention of nuclear weapons is that they are regarded as a vital part of a nation or alliance’s security. Ben Wallace, the UK Defence Secretary, assured the House of Commons during the debate in Parliament on the *Integrated Review* that the country’s “nuclear deterrent [serves as] as our guarantor for security from aggressive states.”

What defenders of nuclear weapons often fail to realise is that their country is of course not alone in caring about its security and the more they tout the indispensable role of nuclear weapons as the ultimate security guarantor, the more they are in the business of convincing other countries to acquire or develop these weapons. This is particularly contradictory as the nuclear-weapon states will use any opportunity to stress the critical importance of preventing other countries from developing nuclear capabilities to maintain global peace and security. No nation or group of nations can have a monopoly on “security”.

Luckily, the vast majority of states recognise that their security is better served by renouncing nuclear weapons. Indeed, through national and regional nuclear weapon-free policies, the entire southern hemisphere, as well as parts north of the equator, have sought security without nuclear weapons. By doing so, they have bolstered the security not just of their own countries and regions, but of the rest of the world as well.

So, whose security are nuclear weapons supposed to serve? They don’t

serve planetary security; they don't serve human security; they are useless against public health insecurity and pandemics, as strikingly illustrated by the COVID-19 pandemic currently wreaking havoc across the globe. Instead, they are used by a few to advance narrowly devised national security interests. But even that is a false security. Recent research into the ever-growing list of cases of near nuclear use has revealed the hydra-headed risk inherent in nuclear operations.

The truth is that because the effects of use of nuclear weapons cannot be controlled within space or time and their employment in operations and deterrence policies are vulnerable to errors, their wielding by a few comes at the price of insecurity for the rest. This is a blatant form of inequality and injustice.

Through fear-mongering and misinformation, nuclear weapon advocates (advocates for their country maintaining its nuclear arsenal) have permeated our collective thinking with the dangerous notion that these weapons have kept us safe and that their disarmament will bring with it insecurity and risks. It is certainly true that a world free of nuclear weapons will not be today's world minus the nearly 13,500 nuclear warheads still in the arsenals of the nuclear-armed states. Serious and sustained thought, attention and cooperation will need to be given to identifying the common security models and mechanisms that can fill the deterrence-shaped hole in national, regional and international security infrastructures that global nuclear disarmament will leave. However, it is imperative that we work to advance this goal in good faith and through the lens of, and with the intention of, de-coupling narrow concepts of security from these weapons. We should examine how nuclear disarmament can most effectively benefit our shared security, rather than cling onto dangerous, divisive and outdated perceptions of security.

Coincidentally, the debate on the *Integrated Review* coincided with the grim milestone of the UK marking one year since the first COVID-19 lockdown (another reason why much of the reporting on the nuclear weapons policy changes was snuffed out in media coverage). It's been a year in which a microscopic parasite 10,000 times smaller than a grain of salt has laid waste to life as we knew it, with consequences unfolding along every important parameter of human health, dignity and security: from unprecedented economic downturns and skyrocketing levels of unemployment to overwhelmed and crippled healthcare services and the largest disruption of education in history. Surely such a year should prompt reflection on the inability of nuclear weapons to address the real security needs and threats of the 21st Century, rather than be marked by a doubling-down on them.

Ultimately, greater security, not insecurity, for all lies in prohibiting and eliminating nuclear weapons. The security challenges coming from interconnected threats such as climate change, environmental degradation, demographic changes, resource scarcity and pandemic disease cannot be met by nuclear weapons. If anything, the adversarial deterrence policies in place are a great obstacle to achieving the unprecedented cooperation needed to address this host of transnational threats. It is thus imperative that we recapture the meaning of security—or rethink what security means in the interconnected global community of the 21st Century which is grappling with these transnational threats and crises.

pos·ses·sion ► noun

“The only value in our two nations possessing nuclear weapons is to make sure they will never be used.”

Ronald Reagan, Former President of the United States

One often hears about countries that “possess” nuclear weapons. Similarly, “nuclear possessors” is a widely used term to refer to those countries with nuclear arsenals. Merriam-Webster defines “possession” as “the condition of having or owning something”, which would undoubtedly apply to the nuclear-armed states. But the term falls woefully short of accurately describing the nuclear enterprise.

The reality is that these weapons are being used every second, of every minute, of every hour, of every day.

Merriam-Webster defines “use” as “the act or practice of employing something”. With regard to nuclear weapons, “use” is generally understood as the actual detonation of a nuclear warhead. But their threatened use is part and parcel of the policies of the nuclear-armed states and nuclear alliances.

This “threat to use” underpins the deterrence doctrine. Indeed, nuclear deterrence relies on a perceived willingness to use these weapons, without which the credibility of the doctrine would implode. Nuclear weapons are thus best understood as continually “employed” by possessor states to project threat and power.

An analogy with firearms is enlightening in this respect. Falling short of actually pulling the trigger (thereby using a gun in the strictest sense of the word), pointing a gun at someone to secure a certain decision or type of behaviour or to advance your own interests should surely also be regarded as use of said gun.

The reality is that the nuclear weapons in the arsenals of the nuclear-armed states are not like a gun locked away in a cabinet at home or even holstered on the person. They are not residing in inert stockpiles. Rather, they are at all times employed in dynamic military policies and exercises, and are used to intimidate and coerce. They thus more resemble the drawn gun pointed at someone, or at least the showing of a locked and loaded gun on your person. As I write this, thousands of nuclear weapons are aimed at cities, with some of them on “hair-trigger alert”, ready to be fired at a moment’s notice. It has kept the world on the brink of nuclear annihilation for over half a century. It is a “security system” predicated on the constant readiness and preparations to wage all-out nuclear war, which is riddled with risks, including unauthorised launch, mistaken launch on warning, accidental detonation and inadvertent escalation.

In the case of the United Kingdom, the practice for over 50 years has been for one nuclear-armed submarine to be on patrol at all times, so as to ensure that the UK could retaliate against an attack, a policy known as “Continuous at Sea Deterrence”.

Talking about countries that “possess” nuclear weapons runs the risk of depicting a static situation that is under control. It lulls people into a false sense of security. It is our responsibility to remind people that “possession” actually entails a dynamic enterprise that breeds an existential form of insecurity for all, including their possessors.

stra·te·gic ► adjective / tac·ti·cal ► adjective

“It is my view that there is no sensible military use for nuclear weapons, whether “strategic” weapons, “tactical” weapons, “theatre” weapons, weapons at sea or weapons in space...”
Admiral Noel Gayler, United States Navy (ret.)

There are a wide variety of types of nuclear weapons – e.g. fission weapons (a.k.a. atomic bombs), fusion weapons, thermonuclear weapons (a.k.a. hydrogen bombs), bombs that use plutonium for fissile material and ones that use highly enriched uranium.

In terms of military usage, nuclear weapons are generally divided between “strategic” and “tactical” weapons – the former are high-yield weapons designed to produce enormous blast damage and kill civilian populations in cities, while the latter are low-yield nuclear weapons designed to be used in battlefield against military formations. Strategic nuclear weapons make up the bulk of the arsenals of the nuclear armed

states, while US “tactical” nuclear weapons are still stationed in five NATO countries (The Netherlands, Belgium, Germany, Italy and Turkey), countering the deployment of “tactical” nuclear weapons by Russia alongside its border.

Although distinguishing between different types of nuclear weapons can be a useful exercise in setting out steps and strategies for disarmament, there is also a danger in labelling nuclear weapons this way.

It is tremendously cynical to call weapons that are part of a strategic plan involving their use on heavily populated areas and cities, “strategic”. Of course, the broader strategy in question is the high-risk deterrence strategy that is predicated on a willingness to wage all-out nuclear war.

The same goes for “tactical” nuclear weapons. The tactic in question is one where these weapons would be used in a wartime scenario on the battlefield. Military planners generally agree that even if they had any tactical value to begin with – no matter how morally indefensible and illegal it may have been – they no longer have it.

Granted, for the purpose of clarity, it is at times useful to distinguish between these two (and other) categories of nuclear weapons. However, we should only do so when necessary. By copying terms such as “strategic” and “tactical” we run the risk of obscuring the truth about these weapons of terror and their usage in doctrines.

Conclusion

There is no greater tactic of exclusion and obfuscation than bombarding (for lack of a better term) someone with technical terms. For too long, those in the establishments committed to brandishing nuclear weapons have successfully employed this tactic. It has further allowed them to sanitise a discussion that should be had primarily on humanitarian grounds.

Once again, George Orwell said it best when he wrote in his 1946 seminal work *Politics and the English Language*, that “[p]olitical language is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind.”

Let’s call a spade a spade. Instead of using adjectives, such as “strategic”, “tactical” and “low/high-yield”, to distinguish between types of nuclear weapons, we should emphasise that they are *all* weapons of mass destruction, the use of which would, in the words of the International Court of Justice, be “scarcely reconcilable” with international humanitarian law and that there rests a legal obligation on the nuclear armed states to pursue good faith negotiations leading to disarmament.

Instead of describing the systems and policies that rely on nuclear weapons in terms of “deterrent” and “strategic stability”, we should expose the risks they are rife with and underline the catastrophic consequences any use would have.

Instead of letting a few monopolise and corrupt the concept of “security” in narrowly devised goals that come at the detriment to the security of the rest, we should recapture the meaning of security as one that recognises that human and planetary security are better served through the elimination of nuclear weapons.

Ultimately, words don’t even begin to capture the horror of nuclear weapons. Anyone shown what these instruments of terror do – the destruction, the death, the burns, the birth deformities, the tumours – should be lost for words.

The author would like to thank Commander Robert Forsyth RN (Ret’d) for his helpful comments and suggestions. He would also like to thank Noam Chomsky and Paul Meyer for taking the time to read a previous draft of the article.

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