

Does the United Kingdom require a Strategic Deterrent Capability Post-2030,

or is there a better strategy?

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Britain's strategic deterrent capability is due to be decommissioned in approximately 2030, and the requirement for a replacement system needs to be considered. Demonstrating that Britain's strategic deterrent offers few positive effects in today's international environment, this paper considers the merits of a defence-based security strategy exploiting missile defence systems. Analysis is conducted utilizing contemporary and historical evidence combined with the theory of 'strategic drift', highlighting the influence of post-Cold War mentalities and underlying British culture. This paper contends that a deterrent-based replacement would not afford Britain the level of strategic security, status and technological advantages that a defence-based strategy would.

*'What ought we to do? Which way shall we turn to save our lives and the future of the world? I find it poignant to look at youth in all its activity and ardour and wonder what would lie before them if God wearied of mankind.'*¹
(Winston Churchill)

The United Kingdom (UK) has remained committed to nuclear weapons as a source of security and influence ever since its first atomic test in 1952. This test highlighted that Britain was prepared to go to astonishing lengths in its quest for what was perceived to be both a highly influential military weapon and a substantial enhancement to national status.² The current UK strategic deterrent was designed with a political and strategic utility very different from that extant

today or anticipated tomorrow.³ The geopolitical situation has changed dramatically since the Cold War, and the UK's nuclear capability now exists in an international system that has undergone considerable political, technological and moral changes.⁴ Although no major arguments are being advanced in favour of altering Britain's current nuclear posture, will the UK require a strategic deterrent capability when the existing system comes to the end of its service life in approximately 2030?

The aim of this paper is to provide an effects-based analysis of the British strategic deterrent, using open source material, to provide evidence as to the UK's long-term requirements for strategic national security. It will also aspire to offer a solution that could fulfil these requirements. In this context, the term 'effects' will be used to describe the military and political results, or consequences, experienced by the UK as a direct result of the ownership of a nuclear arsenal. The paper will contend that a strategic deterrent strategy will not provide the UK with the optimum level of security required to meet the challenges and threats envisaged in 2030. It will go on to contend that a transformational shift in national security strategy will be needed if Britain hopes to meet the demands of the future international environment. In conducting this evaluation the paper will firstly outline the UK's current strategic deterrent system before defining what effects this weapon system affords Britain today; this will be achieved by assessing both contemporary and historical evidence regarding security and status benefits. The second part of the paper will then analyse the UK's future strategic security requirements and strategies, utilizing the strategic management concept of 'Strategic Drift', before offering a possible solution to meet Britain's security needs in the 21st Century. The paper will highlight the requirement for the UK to re-evaluate its security priorities without allowing Cold War era mentalities and strategic culture, pertaining to reliance upon deterrence, to overshadow its decision making process. For the purpose of clarity, this paper will focus on the UK's nuclear deterrent, to provide a dispassionate view of any benefits that are, or could be, derived from it as a weapon system. No attempt will be made to analyse the

relevance, ethics or utility of nuclear weapons as a whole. Furthermore, the paper will limit its scope to future national security systems; arguments regarding early disposal of the current strategic deterrent system will not be addressed.

Effects afforded by UK nuclear weapons in today's international environment

To enable an accurate assessment of the effects that Britain's nuclear deterrent provides, an outline of the current weapon system must be established for use as a baseline. Presently, the UK strategic and sub-strategic nuclear deterrents comprise just one weapon system. This consists of a four-boat Vanguard-class ballistic missile submarine force, with each boat carrying 16 United States (US) built Trident II D5 missiles. Each of these missiles carries three independently targeted warheads, developed and produced autonomously by the UK. This system is generally regarded to be modern and highly sophisticated. The combination of the UK's geographic position and a submarine-based launch vehicle provides the UK with an efficient and, debatably, invulnerable nuclear deterrent force.⁵ Allowing for maintenance schedules and time to transit to patrol areas, four boats afford the UK the ability to have one boat on patrol at all times.

This capability is underpinned by a strategy of 'minimum deterrence', which constitutes current British nuclear strategy. This strategy encapsulates the belief that Britain's nuclear arsenal is the minimum required to deter an opponent, by having the capability to inflict a degree of destruction that would outweigh any potential benefits he could hope to make from his aggression.⁶ Britain's nuclear arsenal and offensive capability are at the lowest levels they have ever been. All other British nuclear weapons have been withdrawn from service and the UK's estimated number of warheads only represents approximately one per cent of the total number in the world. Moreover, Britain has made considerable reductions to the country's weapons alert status since 1994. The UK no longer has its warheads targeted at specific locations in Russia and the notice-to-fire times have increased significantly.⁷ But will a policy of minimum deterrence remain relevant to the UK as the 21st century unfolds?

A fundamental prerequisite in determining any future UK strategic deterrent requirement is an assessment of the effects the current nuclear capability offers the UK in today's dynamic international environment. The complex and interwoven elements that combine to define what nuclear weapons provide for the UK in the 21st century are difficult to assess clearly as they are

subject to considerable conjecture and subjectivity. Nevertheless, what is of enduring relevance is the perception that nuclear weapons provide the UK a degree of national security, and status on the world stage. To determine how these factors contribute to the overall effect that nuclear weapons afford Britain, these elements will be analysed against the post-Cold War international system.

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UK Vanguard class is the only submarine that carries Trident missiles in the UK Navy
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National security effects and UK nuclear weapons

Most political leaders believe that the maintenance of national security is their primary duty to those that they represent, and Britain is no exception. In today's international security environment, characterised predominantly by uncertainty, the new threats faced by the UK will require a far broader approach to security. Julian Lindley-

French believes that 'uncertainty is almost certain to continue progressively, revolutionizing the assumptions that drive security policy'.⁸ Security has been defined in many different contexts ranging from territorial, cultural and religious to economic. This is encapsulated by Barry Buzan's definition of security as 'the pursuit of freedom from threat and the ability of states and societies to maintain their independent identity and their

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Britain's nuclear deterrent — a Vanguard class ballistic missile submarine, stern view
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functional integrity against the forces of change that they see as hostile'.⁹ It is this definition that will be used when considering the concept of Britain's strategic security.

Within the writings of most advocates of maintaining a UK strategic nuclear deterrent, four main security elements can be distilled that underpin what they believe the future roles of nuclear weapons will be. These potential roles can be summarized as undertaking the following functions: deterring other states who have, or are developing, nuclear arsenals; bolster conventional war prevention; deterring the possession, or use, of chemical and biological weapons; and to provide a 'low-key' element of insurance in support of general world order.¹⁰ To examine what security effects nuclear weapons provide for the UK, these roles will be analysed to ascertain their relevance in the post-Cold War international environment.

The first of these nuclear roles, that of deterring other states who have or are developing nuclear arsenals, is difficult to argue for the UK. The issue of deterrence has always been highly subjective, fundamentally requiring the group that the deterrence is aimed at to evaluate the effectiveness of the strategy.¹¹ The required influence or effect can only be achieved with the cooperation of the intended deteree. By virtue of there being human beings within the decision making loop 'whether or not a nuclear arsenal deters is a matter for decision by the recipients of would-be deterrent menaces, not by the owners of the putative deterrent'.¹² British nuclear policy today no longer has specific threats against which it is targeted. 'The forces intended to generate nuclear deterrence for Britain today are for the notice of whomever they may concern.'¹³ Having no specified target for its deterrent, and hence no established deterrent relationship, would suggest that Britain's deterrent strategy is fatally flawed. Colin Gray believes that deterrence can never be considered to be reliable, as it is intrinsically difficult to deter those who are 'truly desperate, those who are over-confident and that are fatalistically resigned to submit to 'History's Command' or the will of Allah'.¹⁴ This analysis is somewhat general in nature. To get a detailed reflection of how effective Britain's

nuclear weapons are at deterring other states who have or are developing nuclear arsenals, examination must be conducted of the UK's nuclear relationship with each potential threat that is perceived to fall within the 'whomever they concern' category.

Of the eight states known to possess nuclear weapons it is unlikely, due to Britain's alliances, history, cultural and economic ties, that the UK's nuclear weapons are meant to deter either France or the US. This position is unlikely to change in the foreseeable future.¹⁵ This only leaves Russia, China, India, Pakistan, Israel and emerging nuclear states such as North Korea or Iran.¹⁶

The demise of the Soviet Union has modified the way that the UK perceives the threat from Russia. Despite the possession of a huge nuclear arsenal, it is no longer considered to threaten an invasion of Europe, and has also become intrinsically linked to the West through a number of political organizations including the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe and the NATO/Russian Founding Act on Mutual Relations, Cooperation and Security.¹⁷ Moreover, the substantial reforms that the country has undergone over a relatively short period has left the Russian military in crisis and disarray, with any plans to restructure its conventional forces severely hampered by a lack of political reform, a parochial opposition to restructuring, inadequate education standards within the officer corps and widespread deterioration of military facilities.¹⁸ Christopher Donnelley observes that the implications of this decline require the West, "having long thought of Russia as a problem because of its strength, to deal with a Russia that becomes a problem because of its weakness".¹⁹ As such, the only real threat to Western interests currently posed by post-Cold War Russia emanates from the uncertainty of the political situation, not from a premeditated aggressive political doctrine. It is possible that further disintegration of the Russian Ministry of Defence could undermine the power balance in Eurasia or, in extremity, foster the conditions conducive to civil war.²⁰ Either scenario has the potential to seriously harm UK economic and diplomatic interests throughout the world and

would threaten European stability. In this way, Russia poses only an indirect, unintended threat to British national security and, consequently, deterrence by means of the threat generated by the UK's nuclear arsenal is ineffective. Conversely, even if Russia were to return to a hostile mode, and utilize nuclear weapons to threaten or blackmail, it is difficult to believe that the UK's minimal nuclear arsenal could be the influence that would promote world order; only the nuclear strength of America would, realistically, be able to achieve this.²¹

The relationships between India-Pakistan, Israel-Arabs and China-US/Russia represent a significant threat to global security. Given the mainly bilateral, and geopolitically determined, nature of these relationships they present no direct threat to the UK's national security. Moreover, considering that the UK has no specified nuclear relationship with these states, it is unlikely that Britain's relatively small nuclear arsenal imposes any restraining influence upon the sporadic bouts of brinkmanship between the parties.

This only leaves the deterrent effectiveness of the UK's nuclear arsenal towards emerging nuclear states for consideration. Many states such as Argentina and South Africa have abandoned their quest for nuclear status following substantial diplomatic pressure from the international community. States such as North Korea and Iran are believed to be actively pursuing nuclear weapons. These so called 'rogue states', which are known to have facilitated anti-western terrorist groups, are also developing ballistic missiles which could be utilized to target the UK with weapons of mass destruction (WMD). This is likely to become a substantial threat to UK national security. With no established deterrent relationship, and vastly differing perceptions of tolerable attrition and rational behaviour, the UK's nuclear arsenal could hope to offer little reassurance against these increasing threats. Malcolm Rifkind expanded upon this fact in 1993. It is difficult to be confident that an intended deterrent would work in the way intended, in the absence of an established deterrent relationship. Would the threat be understood in the deterrent way in which it was intended; and might it have some unpredictable and perhaps counter-

productive consequence?²²

Deterrence theorists often describe a further limiting factor to the UK's deterrent strategy as self-deterrence. This phenomenon can best be explained by the notion that retaliatory threats can lack credibility if they are deemed to be disproportionate in nature or give rise to fear of escalation, leading to all out nuclear exchange. As Donald Whitmore observes, the 'threat of nuclear retaliation can have a hollow ring if it is believed [that] actual retaliation would be self-deterred by fears for national survival'.²³ Some strategic planners have contemplated the use of very low-yield nuclear weapons to overcome this self-deterrence feature of Britain's existing nuclear weapons. This is generally viewed with much scepticism outside of the US. In opposing this notion, Malcolm Rifkind stated that 'the implications of a new war-fighting role for nuclear weapons would be seriously damaging to our approach to maintaining stability in the European context, quite apart from the impact it would have on our efforts to encourage non-proliferation'.²⁴ It can be seen, therefore, that the practical value of Britain's nuclear arsenal in deterring nuclear attack from an established, or emerging, nuclear aggressor is highly questionable.

The second role envisaged for the UK's nuclear weapons is to prevent conventional war. Michael Quinlan believes that the reality of war has changed radically due to the influence of nuclear weapons, leading to the recognition that the concept of winners and losers between the major nuclear powers is inconceivable. Therefore, the idea of total war as a trial of military strength to gain advantage over an adversary is completely irrational between states that possess nuclear arsenals.²⁵ Effectively, this argument maintains that 'a trial of strength between effectively infinite forces is nonsensical';²⁶ the notion that total warfare has become *ruductio ad absurdum*. This argument is difficult to assess objectively, due to the very nature of the deterrent concept, as describe earlier. To ascertain whether the UK's nuclear weapons protect Britain from the risk of all-out conventional war, it is necessary to assess how well deterrence worked in this way in the past, and then ascertain

whether changes in the international environment will alter this deterrence factor in the future. Examples within this arena will be derived by evaluating Cold War interactions and then, by way of balance, analysis of the India-Pakistan dispute and the effectiveness of British nuclear weapons at averting conventional war.

During the Cold War the historical evidence concerning the effectiveness of nuclear deterrence in preventing a major East-West conflict is far from clear. It is 'not even certain that the Leadership of the Soviet Union had any real intention of attacking Western Europe in the first place'.²⁷ Most Western suspicions originate from a speech made by Stalin, on the eve of elections to the Supreme Soviet in 1946, when he claimed that capitalism made war inevitable; to Stalin's audience this was merely repeating familiar communist rhetoric. The West perceived it as an overt threat. George Kennan's subsequent assessment of Soviet intentions, now known as 'The Long Telegram', amplified the fears initiated by Stalin's speech and enhanced US apprehension towards the Soviet Union for several decades.²⁸ If there was a *real* threat of a European invasion, the resolve that the US and Western European countries showed in order to defeat the Soviet Union blockade of Berlin in 1948-1949 would have played a major part in demonstrating the determination of the West to resist any form of aggression. This, combined with the commitment of the US to base large numbers of its troops in Germany, and the strong political cohesion of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), is more likely to have been the influential factors that deterred Soviet invasion attempts.²⁹

Further examples — beyond the Cold War — of how nuclear relationships have deterred conventional warfare include the Indian-Pakistan dispute over Kashmir. On the surface, this case does seem to be an example of how the ownership of nuclear arsenals has prevented conventional war. Although India and Pakistan have fought three wars since they won independence from Britain in August 1947, since they were declared as being nuclear weapon states in 1998, full-scale conventional war over Kashmir has not occurred.³⁰ Prevention of a full-scale war between

the adversaries in 1999, following the build up of tensions in the region, was probably due more to diplomatic and economic pressure exerted from the world community than any deterrent effect afforded by their nuclear arsenals. Other historical examples provide evidence as to the ineffectiveness of Britain's own nuclear arsenal in deterring conventional wars since 1945. The UK's nuclear capability failed to prevent the Suez crisis in 1956, did not deter the Argentinean invasion of the Falkland Islands in 1982, nor did it prevent Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait in 1990. These examples demonstrate that nuclear weapons do not play a significant role in deterring conventional war. A more compelling theory is that world opinion, expressed through diplomacy and underpinned by economic leverage, is the major contributor in reducing the incidents of confrontation today.³¹ This conclusion is supported by several theories regarding the utility of force in the modern world.

Edward Luttwak suggests that modern society is too sensitive to loss of life and that competitive trade is gradually taking the place of warfare.³² Similarly, Francis Fukuyama believes that the gradual spread of democracy will replace the cruel world with consumerism and liberal culture, preventing the majority of conventional war between developed states.³³ Michael Doyle observes that, within the liberal states of the world, 'conventions of mutual respect have formed a cooperative foundation for relations among liberal democracies of a remarkably effective kind'.³⁴ This theory does not suggest that the 'political realism' school of thought, that advocates that 'war is an inevitable outcome of human insecurity and the desperate quest for the power it generates',³⁵ is no longer valid. Instead, it highlights that the 'political bond of liberal rights and interests have proven a remarkably firm foundation for mutual non-aggression'.³⁶ There is little evidence that categorically supports the claim that Britain's strategic nuclear deterrent can play a role in preventing all-out conventional war for the UK today or in the future.

The third role that the UK's nuclear forces are said to fulfil is that of deterring the possession or use

of biological and chemical weapons by states. The deterrence provided by the UK's nuclear arsenal is argued to protect the UK as well as providing a nuclear umbrella over British forces fighting 'wars of choice' around the world. This role of retaliating with nuclear weapons for an attack by biological and chemical weapons was first envisaged as a way of preventing the Soviets from mounting a surprise attack against NATO during the Cold War. Today a similar argument is made, advocating that nuclear weapons deter the use of chemical and biological weapons by rogue states.³⁷ It would certainly be reassuring to believe that the UK's nuclear weapons did offer a degree of protection in this way; however, there are several reasons why these arguments are not valid. Firstly, in 1995, Britain (along with the US, China, Russia and France) reiterated the Carter Administration's pledge against nuclear strikes against non-nuclear countries who were party to the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT).³⁸ Although, there are some loopholes within this pledge, the possession or use of chemical or biological weapons against the UK does not nullify this undertaking. This then rather limits the deterrent value that the UK's nuclear weapons have in countering a chemical or biological attack by a rogue state to only a handful of countries around in the world. Moreover, the very nature of these weapons, especially in the case of biological agents, makes verification of their origins extremely difficult to confirm with the degree of certainty required to justify nuclear retribution.³⁹ This was only too evident during the uncertainties surrounding Iraq's alleged possession of chemical weapons during the prelude to hostilities in 2003. As such, the UK's nuclear arsenal would seem to offer little in the way of deterrence, or security, from the threat of chemical or biological attack by rogue states.

In addition to a direct attack against the UK, it is feasible that a chemical or biological attack could occur against British forces whilst engaged in expeditionary operations; the so-called 'wars of choice' around the world. The UK's nuclear weapons are often cited as a means of deterring adversaries from the use of chemical and biological weapons whilst British troops are engaged in such operations. Given the UK Government's



A Trident ballistic missiles takes to the skies
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The International Court of Justice gave an advisory opinion on 8 July 1996, stating that the only time the threat or use of nuclear weapons may be considered lawful is 'in extreme circumstances of self-defence, in which the very survival of a State would be at stake'

commitment to the Carter Administration's pledge, this would only be feasible if the 'war of choice' was against one of the few states not party to the NPT. Moreover, it is difficult to imagine that the UK, considering public and international opinion, would choose to engage a state in conflict (acting as a 'force for good') and then resort to killing large numbers of the civilian population if the ruling faction resorted to the use of chemical or biological weapons. The international community would probably view this action to be as morally reprehensible as the introduction of chemical or biological weapons in the first place.⁴⁰ Some commentators argue that Saddam Hussein was deterred from the use of chemical weapons, during the American led invasion of Iraq in 2003, due to the threat of nuclear retaliation from the allied forces. There are two more likely factors that explain his apparent restraint: either Iraq lacked the capability to launch such an attack or Hussein considered the protection by the Allies against chemical weapons to be vastly greater than that of his own forces, risking greater impact on his own troops from the introduction of such weapons.

The final role cited for the retention of the UK's nuclear weapons is that they 'serve as a low-key element of insurance, not directed against specific adversaries, in support of world order'.⁴¹ Although, on the face of it, this argument sounds reasonable, it is difficult to see how successful the threat of UK nuclear weapons would be in defusing tension around the world or in reducing the threat posed by international terrorism. Considering the role of reducing world tensions, if two states went to war it is highly unlikely that Britain's nuclear weapons could be employed legally to bring tensions to a peaceful conclusion.⁴² The International Court of Justice gave an advisory opinion on 8 July 1996, stating that the only time the threat or use of nuclear weapons *may* be considered lawful is 'in an extreme circumstance of self-defence, in which the very survival of a State would be at stake'.⁴³ Considering this, it is difficult to envisage the UK receiving international support, or a United Nations (UN) resolution, endorsing the threat of nuclear intervention, even if it was to promote world order, as such an act would clearly be outside the bounds of international law. This role is

further complicated as the UK's submarine based deterrent has inherent difficulties in deploying overtly to facilitate the British Government's resolution. Moreover, 'the majority of future conflicts are likely to be internal ones, where the use of nuclear weapons is almost literally inconceivable'.⁴⁴ This rationale is even more apparent in the case of deterring international terrorism.

There is now intense national and international attention paid to the risks posed by terrorism, both conventional and that utilizing WMD.⁴⁵ The possibility that a terrorist group may acquire the materials and knowledge to build nuclear, chemical or biological weapons, construct a dirty bomb or attack a commercial/military nuclear facility — in order to trigger a nuclear meltdown — is of particular concern. There is little evidence to suggest that the UK's nuclear weapons help to suppress the ever-increasing threat posed by international terrorism. The attacks against the US on 11 September 2001 demonstrate the inability of even America's nuclear strength to deter terrorist attacks.⁴⁶ This was highlighted by the Under-Secretary of State for Arms Control and International Security Affairs, John Bolton when he said: 'these horrible events demonstrated the validity of our concern, that there [are] people in the world who [don't] adhere to classic notions of deterrence and whose value systems and respect for human life [don't] match Western standards'.⁴⁷ As a growing number of international terrorist groups are not anchored to states or geographical regions, it is eminently difficult to find a justifiable target that could be engaged in retaliation and thus form the basis for a deterrence relationship. Some commentators have suggested that low-yield nuclear weapons could re-introduce this deterrence factor, especially if utilized in sparsely populated areas like the Afghanistan desert.⁴⁸ It is hard to see how nuclear weapons could achieve any practical effect in combating an internationally dispersed terrorist network such as Al-Qaeda. As such, the UK's nuclear arsenal would seem to offer little in the way of deterrence effect against global terrorist groups.

The arguments throughout this section demonstrate that the UK's nuclear arsenal now

contributes little in the way of security and this is a position that is unlikely to alter markedly in the foreseeable future. Within the current international framework the UK's strategic nuclear deterrent affords Britain little, if any, benefits in combating or deterring the threats posed by established or emerging nuclear arsenals or WMD; neither does it offer security against the instability to British interests caused by conventional warfare worldwide or the ever increasing threat from terrorism. In terms of creating a credible force structure and effective security, the UK's nuclear arsenal is an 'investment of very dubious value'.⁴⁹

Political effects provided by UK nuclear weapons

In addition to the security benefits that the UK's nuclear arsenal is perceived to maintain, some commentators believe these weapons to be of value in preserving Britain's status, maintaining a role for the UK on the world stage despite the decline of the British Empire. Hugh Beach and Nadine Gurr wrote on the subject of British nuclear disarmament that 'by far the most powerful and insidious political reaction would derive from considerations not of security, but of status'.⁵⁰ Given Britain's overt commitment to the NPT, it is unlikely that a UK Government would ever openly admit that one reason for its retention of a nuclear arsenal was to maintain influence and status in the international system. This would be somewhat hypocritical given that Article VI of the NPT enshrines the principle that all states should work towards complete nuclear disarmament.⁵¹ To examine whether this ambiguous purpose for the UK's nuclear capability remains valid and defensible, analysis must address two distinct areas: the perceived, as well as the actual, benefits for Britain's position and role in the world. To do so requires an evaluation of Britain's nuclear history, to identify the political motives that have shaped current nuclear strategy, whilst also determining the ways in which Britain's nuclear posture has actually benefited UK interests on the world stage.

From the advent of the nuclear revolution in military affairs it is evident that the British Government never seriously considered a scenario in which it would not develop a military nuclear

capability. 'Successive British Governments simply assumed that modern great powers, among which they counted Britain, must be nuclear powers'.⁵² Authors such as Margaret Gowing characterise the UK's decision to develop and maintain a nuclear force, not as a carefully thought out process but as a reaction, underpinned by perceptions of global power.⁵³ Andrew Pierre takes this argument further, judging that Britain's major objective for developing nuclear weapons was to secure political influence over the US, whilst adjusting its gradual decline in responsibilities on the world stage.⁵⁴ More recent works by Ian Clarke and Nicholas Wheeler, based upon access to newly released archive material from the late 1980s, suggest that strategic calculations did play a role in British nuclear policy, although they do not deny the importance of political influence and prestige.⁵⁵ But why was Britain so attracted to nuclear weapons to provide its security following the Second World War and do these reasons have any enduring relevance when considering the UK's nuclear deterrent today?

Most commentators agree that the original incentive for UK atomic weapon development originated during the Second World War from the belief that Nazi Germany was working on its own atomic device. This was highlighted in a report compiled by the MAUD Committee that was first to recognise the potentially decisive influence that an atomic weapon could have in warfare.⁵⁶ Post-war development of an independent UK nuclear capability was overshadowed by concerns that the US could return to a policy of isolationism. That possibility, combined with the fact that America had terminated the lend-lease and atomic collaboration agreements, heightened Britain's feelings of vulnerability within the world environment.⁵⁷ The UK was, to a degree, compelled to implement a national counter to the perceived threat posed by the Soviet Union.⁵⁸

As such, deterring the threat from the Soviet Union became the overtly pronounced purpose of the UK's nuclear development programme. There is much evidence to support the claim that a more significant factor was the desire to maintain political influence and status benefits that

Britain's nuclear collaboration relationship with the US was re-instigated following the UK's successful atomic test and the 'special relationship' that proved to be most beneficial to the UK throughout the period of the Cold War



An early nuclear test by Britain off the coast of Australia

were perceived to accompany atomic capability.⁵⁹ Churchill argued that the UK had to possess the most up-to-date nuclear weapons to maintain influence as a 'great' world power.⁶⁰ According to Patrick Garrity, nuclear weapons also provided a method of distinguishing between second-tier states that possess them, and third-tier non-nuclear states.⁶¹ Robert O'Neill takes this sentiment further, believing that 'nuclear-weapon states have more clout in the international system just because they have nuclear weapons'.⁶² This then, is the basis for the perceived status that nuclear weapons bestow upon a nation. Whilst British policymakers generally believed that it was nuclear possession that determined and maintained major power status in international politics, there is much evidence to refute this theory. McGeorge Bundy argues that the decay of Britain's diplomatic and political power, especially within Africa and the Middle East, was not slowed by the possession of nuclear weapons. He also observes that, since the UK achieved nuclear status, these weapons have provided Britain with no additional political influence within international decision-making organizations.⁶³ This is most apparent when considering that Britain's acquisition of nuclear weapons did not achieve a status in line with that of the super-powers, nor did it break down bipolarity during the Cold War. Even with nuclear weapons, the UK was unable to develop a security strategy that was fully independent and had to accept that it must 'adapt within the bipolar competition that existed between the US and the Soviet Union'.⁶⁴ Although Britain's nuclear capability had a significant part to play within NATO's overall deterrent against the Soviet Union, it can be argued that the UK's political influence within NATO was primarily due to Britain's economic and political attributes. The same is true of Britain's status within the UN. Some commentators promote the argument that the UK's permanent status within the UN Security Council was due to, and has been maintained by, its possession of a nuclear arsenal. The UK's position within the UN was secured much earlier than their nuclear acquisition and it is unlikely that this seat would have been lost if the UK had chosen not to acquire nuclear weapons.⁶⁵ Today it is inconceivable that the UN would

promote the rationale that permanent status on the Security Council was dependent upon the possession of nuclear weapons. If the international community saw this to be the case, the UN would be considered to be actively encouraging and rewarding proliferation. It is more realistic that the UK's political, diplomatic and economic influence, through its policy of being a force for good within the world has sustained its position within the UN. It is evident that the possession of nuclear weapons is not the reason for Britain retaining its influential position within the UN. The UN Charter states that any amendments to the constitution of the Security Council must have the concurrence of all the permanent members, and Britain is unlikely to vote itself off the Council.⁶⁶ Notwithstanding the issue of perceived and actual status, three additional political reasons are cited to explain Britain's decision to develop and maintain a nuclear capability.

Firstly, one of the fundamental political motivations for developing the UK nuclear force was the recognition of its importance in influencing American policy and in later years, the need for influence within Europe.⁶⁷ "British security was recognised as being dependent upon the stability of the Soviet-American nuclear balance, and it was believed in Whitehall that Britain's most valuable contribution lay in the influence it could bring to bear in Washington".⁶⁸ There is strong evidence to suggest that this stance achieved some of the desired results; Britain's nuclear collaboration relationship with the US was re-instigated following the UK's successful atomic test and the 'special relationship' that proved to be most beneficial to the UK throughout the period of the Cold War.⁶⁹

Although the desire to influence American policy has been evident throughout most of Britain's nuclear history, it is difficult to substantiate claims that Britain's nuclear capability affords it the same degree of influence in today's international environment. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the UK's distinctive role within the Soviet-American nuclear balance has gone. This, combined with the increased reliance that Britain has upon American technology to maintain its

nuclear force and the comparatively small size of the UK's nuclear arsenal, reduces substantially any influence that Britain's nuclear weapons have on American policy. Ironically, recent influence over America has been accomplished most effectively through the UK's conventional forces, in the form of support to the 'War on Terrorism' in both Afghanistan and Iraq. This overt support, given despite much worldwide and domestic disapproval, highlights the UK Government's conviction that Britain remains reliant upon America for enhanced security in the new international environment. This is not surprising: since 1959, Britain's defence posture has been built upon UK/US interdependence.⁷⁰ Today that interdependence is more aligned towards diplomatic support, the provision of conventional forces and intelligence cooperation. The UK's 1998 Strategic Defence Review acknowledged that Britain would be unlikely to conduct any substantial operation without being part of an alliance of some kind; most likely led by the US.⁷¹ As such, a key UK security requirement for the future will be the continuing need to influence American policy. The nuclear relationship that Britain maintains with America no longer achieves this aspiration. The demise of the Cold War, combined with Britain's reliance on Trident as the sole delivery vehicle for its nuclear weapon has established a UK/US nuclear relationship that is now more characterised by American independence and UK dependence.

The second politically induced reason for the development of UK nuclear weapons was economic in nature. Towards the end of the 1950s Britain was facing substantial economic difficulties and had to establish a means of reducing its conventional forces substantially whilst maintaining a credible defence organization. In Richard Crossman's view the nuclear weapon was developed 'as a substitute for the fighting soldier'.⁷² The process of substituting nuclear weapons for conventional capabilities began when Britain was unable to meet rearmament goals during the Korean War, and became most apparent in the 1957 White Paper.⁷³ This reform made drastic cuts to conventional force strengths and placed a greater dependence upon nuclear weapons. As

Britain's colonial responsibilities diminished, this was believed to be a cheaper way of providing the force required to deter a Russian invasion of Western Europe without the need for vast numbers of uniformed personnel. Therefore, Britain's Cold War defence against a Soviet invasion of Europe was predicated upon a mixture of conventional forces supplemented by a nuclear arsenal.

Nuclear weapons certainly allowed the British Government to maintain public confidence in national security whilst projecting a plausible rationale to substantially reduce the size of its standing forces; security at an affordable price. Although there is no evidence to suggest that this reason was the major factor in the decision to acquire nuclear weapons, it was certainly a consideration. The notion of nuclear weapons providing the UK with cheaper and more affordable security is not credible in today's international environment. The need to maintain large numbers of standing conventional forces capable of defeating or deterring an invasion of the kind envisaged during the Cold War has substantially diminished. Consequently, the UK's nuclear weapons no longer fulfil the role of substituting for a shortfall in conventional forces. Moreover, the UK's armed forces are currently in the process of reconfiguring in an attempt to become a smaller, more flexible and highly mobile expeditionary organization. These forces will be configured to conduct operations to defuse potential international problems before they reach UK shores. These 'wars of choice', conducted beyond the European theatre, where national survival is not at stake, would make the threat or use of nuclear weapons unacceptable to world opinion, as outlined earlier. Therefore, it is evident that nuclear weapons cannot be seen as a substitute for conventional forces in this new role, and the role that conventional forces played during the Cold War has now all but disappeared.

The final political reason cited for Britain's decision to develop and maintain nuclear weapons is that of remaining at the forefront of science and technology. The UK suffered greatly in this area: in a forlorn attempt to maintain a lead role

Britain's security in the coming years is likely to focus less on maintaining high-level nuclear relationships and more on meeting challenges such as the threat of ballistic missile strikes instigated by rogue states; particularly since these could carry a variety of chemical and biological warheads



An Iranian Scud missile and launcher

in scientific and technological fields, Britain attempted to compete with the US and Soviet Union, and suffered a heavy financial burden as a result. The demise of the UK's Blue Streak ballistic missile programme, was a defining event that clearly verified that the aspiration to remain at the forefront of technology and science was not financially possible for the UK.⁷⁴ Although retaining an ambition to be in the vanguard of science and technology, despite a continued reduction in economic strength following the end of the Second World War, the continued development of nuclear weapons would seem to be of little benefit to the UK in this respect today. Given that nuclear technology has extremely limited applications beyond the national weapons arena, and that Britain already has a well-established civilian nuclear industry, further development within this field would seem to offer the UK few advantages. By virtue of the economic resources that are required to procure and maintain nuclear weapons, they may limit British research work aimed at exploiting technologies applicable to the revolution of military affairs.

It is evident that the development and maintenance of the UK's nuclear capability has been influenced as much by political, economic and scientific considerations as it has been by strategic security analysis.⁷⁵ It is clear that the UK's nuclear arsenal has been maintained since its introduction for reasons of perceived status as well as for security, but the degree of influence in each arena has varied in relation to the prevailing geopolitical environment. The extent to which the UK's status and influence have been enhanced by nuclear weapons is disputable, as any assessment of this kind is highly subjective in nature. It is evident that in today's post-Cold War international environment, the military instruments that held supreme during the previous era are of less significance to a nation's status today. The changing nature of international power implies that nuclear weapons are decreasing in value as a way of influencing the international environment. As international relations become more focused on economic and technological competition, most commentators believe that military intervention will be focused primarily on regional ethnic

conflicts that have little, if any, scope for the use of nuclear weapons.⁷⁶

Future UK strategic security: requirements, strategies and ballistic missile defence

The UK is now facing a substantial challenge. Within the present and projected post-Cold War international system, Britain must quickly determine its national strategic security requirements and decide upon the most suitable policies and weapon systems to fulfil them. This new international system is less well defined than the bipolarity that it replaces, and offers increased challenges for those who endeavour to manage it. Commentators such as Robert Paterson believe that, although the precise nature of the new system is not yet clear, what is evident is the certainty that it will be more dynamic than what went before and will, by necessity, incorporate complex interdependent relationships between states.⁷⁷ As such, the UK will doubtless maintain its high degree of interdependence and influence within alliances such as the European Union and NATO. As analysed earlier, the ability to have some form of influence over the US, as the world's only superpower, will remain a vital component of Britain's national security strategy. The benefits of this will be most apparent in the areas of information exchange regarding terrorist threats and technology advancements as well as in enhancing Britain's status on the world stage. Of relevance for the UK at a national level is Nye's argument suggesting that 'the sources of power are never static and continue to change in today's world'.⁷⁸ The significance of this for Britain is identified by Paul's notion that 'nuclear weapons are instruments for conducting high-level conflicts without resorting to actual war, and therefore, their utility as a power resource changes when the dimensions of conflict change'.⁷⁹ Consequently, Britain's security in the coming years is likely to focus less on maintaining high-level nuclear relationships and more on meeting challenges such as the threat of ballistic missiles strikes instigated by rogue states, particularly since these could carry a variety of chemical and biological warheads. The UK's security strategy will also have to cope with the threat from terrorism, especially from groups with access to WMD.⁸⁰ The solution to

these security requirements cannot simply focus upon a choice of weapon system. The scope of the analysis should not be limited to whether or not the UK requires replacement nuclear weapons after Trident; the whole UK strategy for national security must be evaluated and procurement decisions tailored to the results.

The danger that threatens to undermine sound analysis within the procurement process is the misguided perceptions of the policies and current benefits that envelop nuclear weapon issues in the UK. The secrecy and confusion, characteristic of successive British governments' nuclear strategy as it has evolved over the decades, is the main culprit in this regard.⁸¹ It is undeniable that nuclear weapons revolutionized warfare and fulfilled a vital role during the Cold War. Such mentalities and strategies cannot be relied upon now that the Cold War is over.

UK security strategies

Since the advent of the nuclear age, UK strategic security policy has evolved incrementally to meet gradual changes in the international system, albeit based on an overarching 'deterrence' policy. Gerry Johnson's view that most strategies have a tendency to take on a degree of momentum reflects this. His theory, known as 'strategic drift', was devised to help analyse strategic management in business. It can be harnessed to provide useful analysis of Britain's security strategies. Johnson argues that, once an organization has adopted a particular strategy, it tends to mature incrementally utilizing the initial strategy as a baseline, resisting any major change in direction.⁸² Scot Robertson identifies this within the military, observing that military strategy has roots that span many decades.⁸³ As most global change happens gradually, incremental change appears to be a highly effective way of adapting in a measured and considered way. It is evident that British nuclear policy has developed in line with this thesis, adapting to developments within the geopolitical environment with small changes in policy. The policy of 'mutually assured destruction' evolved into one of 'flexible response' in 1968, when the changing international environment required a strategy

that had 'multiple options' available should a crisis arise. The concept of 'minimum deterrence', that underpins Britain's current nuclear strategy, subsequently replaced 'flexible response'. The strategic drift theory recognizes that a system of incremental change has inherent pitfalls. These become apparent if the environmental change is so great that no amount of incremental change is able to adapt fast enough to meet the new challenges presented. 'If such incremental strategic change lags behind environmental change then the organization will get out of line with its environment'.⁸⁴ If this occurs the only way that the organization can meet and adapt to the dynamics of the new environment is by instituting a fundamental strategic change. It is apparent that this has happened within British strategic security strategies. It has been shown that the strategy of deterrence, by threat of retaliation, is no longer appropriate in the prevailing international environment. The demise of the Soviet Union ought to have made it easier to develop the step-change in strategy required to replace deterrence. Yet legacy weapon arsenals, and the intellectual mind-set of the Cold War era, persist in obstructing change. As a result, the UK currently has a nuclear strategy that is unable to meet the challenges that have developed since the end of the Cold War; transformational change now needs to be planned to create strategy to meet Britain's security requirements. Realistically, this cannot be achieved until Trident reaches the end of its service life and new, tailor-made equipment can be procured.

To determine this strategy requirement, lessons can be drawn from the debates over the UK's national security policies in the 1930s. This period of history contains striking parallels to the security situation confronting contemporary British policy makers seeking to address the threat posed by rogue states armed with ballistic missiles. Scot Robertson commented that the fear instigated by the advent of the bomber aircraft, enhanced by the belief that Britain was vulnerable, 'had a profound impact on the British people'.⁸⁵ There is evidence of such sentiments growing today: the UK Parliament passed new terrorism legislation on 11 March 2005, constraining civil liberties in order to achieve a

greater level of perceived security. If the current threat of terrorist attacks incites such a response, a ballistic missile attack by a rogue state against the UK could evoke similar national fears as those experienced during the 1930s. As such the political debates of the 1930s, regarding the relative merits of defence, deterrence and international diplomatic regulations, are extremely pertinent today.⁸⁶

The fear of attack prevalent during the 1930s was based on the assumption that there was no way of preventing a bomber from reaching its target, giving it the ability to strike against any civilian population with no means of defending against it — similar to the threat posed by a ballistic missile today. In the 1930s, the initial UK response to this threat was an attempt to abolish the bomber and outlaw bombing by international agreement. This has uncomfortable parallels with the NPT, utilized today to attempt to reduce and contain the spread of WMD capabilities. As early as 1936 it was apparent in the UK that, once invented, the bomber could not simply be disinvented.⁸⁷ As such, a strategy of deterrence was developed, based upon Lord Trenchard's own theories of strategic bombing. This deterrence, by threat of retaliation, was widely believed to be the only feasible way of countering the bomber threat. Tami Biddle believes that the Royal Air Force may have been biased towards the concept of strategic bombing and may have pressed this strategy with a view to enhancing the merits of an independent air force. She maintains that 'Britain made a mistake in fixating an exaggerated faith on the offensive, and elevating it — to an extensive degree — over the power of the defence'.⁸⁸ Notwithstanding this, it is evident that strategic bombing has had a major influence on British security strategies, evolving into the UK nuclear deterrence policy that pertains today. As such, it would seem to be deep rooted within the British security psyche.

Hans and Michael Rühle distil three lessons from the 1930s that are pertinent to future UK security strategies. The first is that diplomacy and international treaties will not always guarantee security when dealing with dictators or radical terrorist groups. Chamberlain's failure to sustain

peace forced him to admit that military weakness also equated to diplomatic fragility. The second lesson is the notion that the evolutionary nature of science will guarantee that a counter for even seemingly insurmountable security threats will be found, given sufficient time. The fact that radar and sophisticated fighter aircraft eventually countered the threat posed by the bomber is just such an example.⁸⁹ There are comparisons in this regard with current nuclear policy debates. The culture that evolved during the Cold War and persists today, maintains that no ballistic missile defence system will ever be able to defeat the evolutionary sophistication of ballistic missile systems. There are signs that anti-missile technology is now showing signs of being able to achieve success against today's threats. Colin Gray believes it is an error to argue that 'defence does not work in the nuclear era'.⁹⁰ He highlights the fact that in the second nuclear age, defence systems will only be required to defeat the less sophisticated missile threats presented by rogue states and not the multiple warhead defence scenarios envisaged in the 1970s and 1980s.⁹¹ With the end of the Cold War 'both the strategic theoretical and the military-technical-tactical referents for this subject have been transformed'.⁹² This leads on to Hans and Michael Rühle's third lesson from the security debates of the 1930s: that of the relative merits of offensive and defensive security strategies. The 1930s show that, although there will be periods of history where offensive strategies represent the only method available for national security, this does not establish that offence is a permanently superior security approach to defence.⁹³ Theorists such as Clausewitz and Sun Tzu both saw defence as the stronger form of war, with Sun Tzu observing 'invincibility lies in the defence'.⁹⁴ Today, more than 24 countries are developing nuclear, biological and chemical capabilities, as well as the means of delivering them via missiles.⁹⁵ This makes the need for an effective defence to replace the UK's questionable deterrence strategy increasingly urgent. It is contended that the most effective such defensive system would be a Ballistic Missile Defence system.

A ballistic missile defence system and the UK
Many countries, from the US to Taiwan, have already been prompted to develop or buy tactical

Israel, whose defence spending in 1999 was less than a quarter of that of the UK, made the first successful test interception of a ballistic missile using their anti-ballistic missile 'Arrow Weapon System' on 29 July 2004



Israel's anti-ballistic missile 'Arrow Weapon System'

or ballistic missile defence systems to provide a defensive element to their national security policies.⁹⁶ Israel, whose defence spending in 1999 was less than a quarter of that of the UK,⁹⁷ made the first successful test interception of a ballistic missile using their anti-ballistic missile 'Arrow Weapon System' on 29 July 2004.⁹⁸ India is also making progress in the field of missile defence, generating a capability through a combination of off-the-shelf purchases and the development of an indigenous system.⁹⁹ Both Israel and India, by virtue of their countries' geopolitical situations, and mindful of the proliferation of tactical ballistic missiles in the Middle East and Asia, have already accepted the need for greater reliance on a defensive element to their security strategies. Whether these moves towards a greater emphasis upon missile defence have been motivated by their proximity to a greater number of potential threats, or by the fact that their security planners are free from the burden of Cold War legacies, is not evident. What is apparent is that the UK has only a limited period of time before the technology required to produce long-range missile systems is freely available around the world. At this time the UK will no longer be shielded by its relatively secure geographic location. Britain will then be as vulnerable to missile attack as Israel or India is today.

A defensive security strategy, centred on a UK ballistic missile defence system, would also fulfil other key security requirements determined earlier. The US is heavily committed to missile defence, investing much time and money into developing the technology. If Britain were to establish a leading role within America's development project it would allow continued British influence over the



The radar station at RAF Fylingdales (RAF Fylingdales)

US's defence policies and strengthen the 'special relationship' between the UK and America. This would also establish a leading role for Britain within the European Union and NATO in the arena of missile defence, increasing the interdependence and enhancing the influence it has within these alliances. These measures would maintain or even enhance the UK's national security, but would also help to maintain its status within the international system and help to keep Britain at the forefront of technological development. Britain has already taken the first steps towards this goal. On 5 February 2003, the then Secretary of State for Defence, Geoff Hoon, announced that the British Government had accepted the US request to upgrade the early warning radar located at Royal Air Force Fylingdales, in North Yorkshire, for use in ballistic missile defence.¹⁰⁰

Conclusion

This paper has highlighted the way in which

On 5 February 2003, the Secretary of State for Defence, Geoff Hoon, announced that the British Government had accepted the US request to upgrade the early warning radar located at RAF Fylingdales, in North Yorkshire, for use in ballistic missile defence

political and military deliberations regarding the UK's nuclear arsenal have tended to progress under their own technical momentum. This evolutionary process has been underpinned over the decades by the strategic imperatives of the Cold War, political decline coincident with Britain's withdrawal from its colonies and a deeply embedded culture of deterrence-based policies emanating from the strategic bombing theories established in the 1930s. As such, nuclear weapons have played a central role in the formulation and development of defence policies within the UK since 1945 and, even today, exert an influence that is disproportionate to their utility for Britain. The dramatic changes initiated by the end of the Cold War have dictated that Britain's basis for security, power and influence is now markedly different. The UK Government is now faced with formulating a national security strategy to counter the contemporary threats and challenges that have emerged within the new international order. It is increasingly evident that nuclear weapons offer the UK little in addressing these new challenges. Nuclear deterrence, a strategy that evolved to meet specific challenges exclusive to the Cold War era, looks increasingly inappropriate for the types of military conflict and threats that Britain is likely to face in the future. Today many states are actively developing WMD and the means to deliver them over substantial ranges. It is unlikely that all of these diverse state actors will permanently act rationally, which is a fundamental requirement of all deterrence-based security strategies. As such, the ever-increasing threat posed by ballistic missiles is likely to be of particular concern to the UK in the future, comparable to the threat that the bomber posed to Britain in the 1930s. In those days many put their faith into diplomacy, arms control and, eventually, deterrence to protect the UK from attack. These measures failed to prevent mass attacks against the civilian population. In this context, would it not be reassuring to know, in an international system that is no longer characterised by the stability of a bipolar environment, that Britain could defend against the emerging menace of the new century?

This paper concludes that a strategic deterrent

capability, to replace Trident in 2030, will be of little utility to the UK. Following the end of the Cold War, there is evidence to support the need for a fundamental change in British strategic security strategies to align the UK with the international environment in which it now resides. This change process needs to be transformational in nature; radically different from the incremental security changes that Britain has experienced throughout most of the 20th century. The UK needs to revert from the predominantly deterrence-based strategies that have dominated UK defence policies since the 1930s, to a defensive strategy designed to counter the increasing threat that Britain faces from ballistic missiles. Currently the most practicable means of implementing a defensive capability would be via a missile defence system. This would provide Britain with a strategic security strategy that had the utility to not only address the envisaged future threats to the UK, but also to maintain a substantial degree of influence within both America and Europe. It is not envisaged that this step will be an easy one for Britain to take; it will require a substantial change in British military culture. The consequences of inaction for the UK are severe. If the change process is not transformational the UK will find itself unable to meet the challenges of the post-Cold War international system in the second quarter of the 21st century. Britain must look forward towards the future when making decisions regarding strategic security, dispelling Cold War mentalities that presently threaten to undermine the UK's future security. Those who build the present in the image of the past will miss out altogether on the challenges of the future.¹⁰¹

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