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Britain's Independent Deterrent

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'I know not what course others may take; but as for me, give me liberty, or give me death'!

Patrick Henry

Introduction

The decision of the British Labour Government to make the atomic bomb sparked off a controversy which may yet have many years to run. The atomic bomb and its successor, the hydrogen bomb, have, in conjunction with their means of delivery, formed the nuclear deterrent around which British defence policy has been built. This deterrent policy has always been fairly generally accepted, but from the start there have been those who, for varying reasons, were opposed to our possessing a nuclear deterrent. Some were pacifists who wished us to renounce arms entirely; others, while not pacifists, considered that the appalling destructiveness of nuclear weapons placed them in a category quite distinct from the so-called conventional weapons, and therefore urged that Britain should have nothing to do with them. These 'nuclear abolitionists', though growing in number, remain a small minority compared with those who accept that nuclear weapons, horrible as they are, form the ultimate safeguard of the Western World.

The American atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945 gave the world a convincing demonstration of the new destructive forces that had been unleashed. Although we can never be certain, many people believe that the USSR was deterred from launching a full-scale attack on the West during the years immediately after 1945 only by the knowledge that the USA possessed atomic bombs and the means to deliver them. Since then the USSR has herself developed nuclear weapons, and both the USA and USSR have been deterred from attacking each other by the knowledge that the other could retaliate with devastating power. The British decision to enter the nuclear arms race was based primarily on the assumption that the possession of nuclear weapons was one of the criteria of a great power. What was more natural than that Britain, whose bombers had played a vital part in winning the war and whose military prestige stood high, should wish to continue in the van of military techniques? Not all were convinced, however, that our decision was wise. Apart from those who objected to nuclear weapons on principle, there were many who saw little point in duplicating the American effort at great cost to ourselves. They realised the value of the nuclear deterrent for the Western World, but believed that as long as the USA possessed the deterrent and remained our ally, we could safely leave that part of the Western defences in her hands; our smaller resources could be more usefully devoted to the conventional forces needed for small-scale wars.

The critics of our independent deterrent failed to carry the day; as a result we now have a substantial forces of V-bombers, capable of delivering hydrogen bombs to a large number of targets in the USSR. Military science, however, never stands still, and while our V-bombers should remain an effective means of delivery for at least another five years – maybe up to ten – they will eventually need replacement. Until recently British policy was staked on the development of Blue Streak; with its abandonment we now face the apparent necessity of

buying an essential part of our means of delivery from the USA. It is therefore being widely asked whether there is any point in retaining our costly nuclear deterrent any longer, and the object of this article is to examine the case for Britain's independent nuclear deterrent to see whether it is, as so often claimed, vital to our defences.

Britain's Position in the World

In the 1956 Statement on Defence it was said that 'our forces must make a contribution to the Allied deterrent commensurate with our standing as a world power'. This theme that Britain is still a world power, or a first-rate power, has underlain nearly all our military thinking since 1945, and it was certainly one of the main assumptions on which the decision to make nuclear weapons was based. Is it, however, realistic to consider ourselves a great power, with or without nuclear weapons? A great power is surely one which cannot merely exert great influence on world events but can successfully defend its own vital interests without outside assistance. During the nineteenth century we were by that definition a great power, but although we can still influence world events to some extent we can no longer, even with our nuclear weapons, defend all our vital interests unaided. Dr Kissinger has truly pointed out that none of America's allies could conduct a war against smaller powers without either American protection or Russian acquiescence. The over-riding factor in the military situation today is the balance of power between the USA and the USSR. Our population and resources are in no way comparable with theirs, and whether or not we have a nuclear deterrent cannot affect this balance. It is therefore irrelevant to argue in favour of retaining the deterrent on the grounds that it alone prevents us from being relegated to the ranks of the second or third rate powers; whether we like it or not, we no longer have that major influence on world events that would entitle us to the status of a first rate power.

Britain's Position in the Western Alliance

It is often contended that our possession of nuclear weapons would give us more influence in the general direction of allied strategy in wartime and in the determination of peace terms. Such talk seems a little unrealistic when we contemplate the likely effects on this country of a nuclear holocaust. We come on to rather firmer ground, however, with the suggestions that our nuclear power gives us greater influence over allied policy in peacetime than we should otherwise possess. While military power – in nuclear or any other form – is by no means the sole criterion of a nation's influence within an alliance, there can be little doubt that the possessor of strong military forces is listened to with greater respect than he who restricts his forces to the barest minimum and whose determination to support the alliance may consequently be suspect. That our statesmen have in recent years played a leading role in the counsels of the West is largely because they have not been forced to go naked into the conference chamber. Our allies see our independent deterrent as the measure of our resolve to undergo the most appalling physical horrors rather than submit to Communist domination.

We often hear it said that we are making an important – even essential – contribution to the overall Western deterrent, and our ego is flattered when we hear that General Power, the

Commander of the United States Strategic Air Command, regards the V-force as an essential part of the Western deterrent, with an important place in the joint operational plans. 'With Britain's closer proximity to Russia', he said, 'we rely on the V-bombers to provide an important part of the first wave of the allied retaliatory force'. It would be strange if the V-force, being available, were not included in the joint plans, and we could hardly expect General Power to deny its value. Yet are we to believe the SAC is too weak to pose on its own an insupportable threat to the USSR and that the V-force would make the difference between success and failure if it came to the point where nuclear weapons had to be used? In the 1955 Statement of Defence we note that 'the primary deterrent is the atomic bomb and the ability of the highly organised and trained United States strategic air power to use it', and this theme is continued in the subsequent Defence White Papers. Dr Kissinger considers that the USA finds bases in Britain more useful than the British strategic air forces, and Air Vice-Marshal Kingston-McCloughry reinforces this by saying that the USA expects the Commonwealth to provide base facilities for her deterrent strategic air forces, but does not press us to provide any substantial force. 'Whatever strategic air forces we provide', he goes on, 'arise out of our own national considerations'.

It is therefore hard to justify, from a purely military point of view, our contribution to the Western nuclear deterrent. If perfect harmony existed and could be guaranteed to continue between the members of the alliance we should indeed do better to leave the nuclear weapons entirely to the USA. Unfortunately such harmony is never likely to be achieved, and within an alliance whose members have many conflicting interests our nuclear power largely determines our degree of influence.

Independent National Defence

As we turn to the purely national considerations behind our deterrent policy, we must first ask ourselves, 'Under what circumstances would we ever be ready to use our nuclear weapons'? The concept of mutual deterrence is based on the fact that neither side can defend itself effectively against nuclear attacks; neither side will therefore risk attacking the other because it knows it will receive a nuclear attack in return. This country, being small and relatively close to Russian bases, is particularly vulnerable to Russian attack. Very few hydrogen bombs would be required to deal a devastating blow, and when the Minister of Defence stated in 1957 that the Government had decided not to try to protect the whole country but only the bomber bases, he was admitting that there were no means of protecting us. If we used our nuclear weapons against Russia our country would almost certainly suffer irretrievable damage. One of the arguments often used to support our independent deterrent is that we have overseas interests which are vital to us but not to the USA, and since we cannot expect the USA to commit her nuclear weapons to the defence of such interests, we ourselves must be able to deter attacks on them. Can we, however, honestly regard our deterrent as credible in such circumstances? If a deterrent is to deter, the opponent must be convinced that the physical threat will be used in certain given circumstances, and it is reasonable to assume that Russia would believe us willing to face the consequences of using nuclear weapons only if our

homeland were directly threatened. We are therefore driven to conclude that our independent deterrent stands a reasonable chance of deterring only an attack on our homeland or on our immediate neighbours in Western Europe, which are so close to us that our fate must be linked inextricably with theirs.

We have so far assumed that Britain has the power to deliver nuclear weapons to the USSR and therefore pose a threat to her. It is possible to define precisely the extent of this threat, but our strategic bombers could certainly destroy sufficient Russian cities to inflict very serious damage on the USSR as a whole, although we could probably not strike her a mortal blow. Our deterrent power is aptly illustrated in the simile coined by Mr R T Paget MP, who suggested that the country possessing the hydrogen bomb has the power of the bee as represented by its sting – if the bee uses it, it dies; yet we all handle bees much more carefully than if they had no stings. The threat we pose should therefore make the USSR reluctant to attack us, but it has a further advantage: the damage Britain could inflict would place Russia in an unfavourable position relative to the US which remained undamaged, so if Russia decided to attack this country and thus provoke us into striking back she would almost certainly feel impelled to attack the USA at the same time. In any case her radar defences could hardly be expected to distinguish between British and American aircraft or missiles; in any nuclear exchange she would have to assume that both Britain and America were involved. As long as we have an independent deterrent, therefore, we can virtually guarantee that the American deterrent is also staked on any issue between the USSR and ourselves that we regard as vital.

It may, however, be asked whether there is any need for this form of guarantee that America will associate herself with us in a nuclear war. Surely if the Western Alliance means anything, it means that an attack on one member will be regarded as an attack on all. Furthermore, the presence of American armed forces – and particularly of Strategic Air Command bases – in Britain and Western Europe must automatically involve the USA in any European war, so the American deterrent is as effective in Europe as it is in America. This line of argument is a compelling one, but it does presuppose a continuing identity of interest between the USA and ourselves. In 1959 Mr Shinwell pointed out that, although generally we were on good terms with the USA, 'some day there may be some mischief at work, some misunderstanding may arise, some point of disagreement may occur, and we might find ourselves isolated'. Mr Sandys said in 1957 that 'so long as large American forces remain in Europe, and American bombers are based in Britain, it might conceivably be thought safe to leave to the United States the sole responsibility for providing the nuclear deterrent. But when they have developed the 5,000 miles inter-continental ballistic rocket, can we really be sure that every American administration will go on looking at things in quite the same way'?

One of the lessons the USA learnt from the Second World War was that she could no longer isolate herself from the affairs of the Old World – with the development of long-range strategic air power the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans ceased to be the insuperable military barriers behind which America had so far sheltered. To be secure she must be able to contain any nation in the

Old World which might threaten her, and she could do this only by closely associating herself with her friends in Eurasia. Her strategic air forces could pose an effective deterrent threat to the USSR only if they could operate from bases within striking distance of the Russian centres of population. Now, however, it is becoming possible for the USA to pose a deterrent threat to the USSR either from her own soil or from the ocean; with the ICBM and the submarine-launched missile she may be able to dispense with her overseas bases. General Gavin suggests, in *War and Peace in the Space Age*, that the conservative school of military thinking in the USA wants to do just this. A reversion to isolationism – albeit in a new form – will soon therefore be theoretically possible.

How likely is it that the USA will in fact retreat into her shell, relying entirely on long-range missiles to deter any attack on her? We know to our cost how extreme was the isolationism practised by the USA before the Second World War, and we hardly need reminding that she refused to enter either world war until provoked by overt acts of hostility against her. The temptation to divorce herself once again from the quarrels and rivalries of the Old World may again become strong when it is no longer essential for her to be militarily involved in them. We must bear in mind that the USA would suffer appalling devastation were she ever to use her nuclear weapons against Russia, and in this connection a quotation from Mr Bernard Brodie, writing in *World Politics*, is apposite: 'When the United States thinks of deterrence as something to be practised concerning territories away from the USA, whether or not her population is reasonably protected becomes all-important. If it is not, the United States leaders may be reluctant to come to the defence of allies if they are threatened or attacked – despite present treaty commitments'. What it comes down to is: 'Would the United States Government and the American citizens risk the destruction of their cities on behalf of Europe?' – to use Mr Gaitskell's words. At present, with bases in Europe, they would have little choice, but once the chance of opting out of Europe was offered them, they might well decide to extricate themselves from a position in which their survival was automatically linked with the fate of Europe. They could certainly use the threat of withdrawal as a means of forcing unwelcome policies on the nations of Western Europe. Admittedly an American withdrawal from Europe remains unlikely but it is less unlikely now than it seemed some years ago when the ICBM was thought to be in the distant future. It is not pleasant to have to cast doubts on the reliability of the Anglo-American alliance, but no alliance in the world has ever been subjected to the strains that would be imposed by the threat of nuclear destruction, and while we might hope that the USA would be willing to undergo such destruction on our behalf, we have no right to expect it of her. Our independent deterrent is the guarantee that should America withdraw from Europe – and she might – we should not be left defenceless.

In discussing the national considerations we must mention one further argument that has often been used to defend our independent deterrent. Air Vice-Marshal Kingston-McCloughry pointed out that the USA and her potential were less vulnerable to Russian attack than the United Kingdom; it was particularly important for us that the Soviet bomber bases should be among the first targets attacked. 'Unless Britain makes this contribution', he wrote, 'she could

not be sure that the exact targets of cardinal importance to her would be given the necessary priority in the first few hours of total war'. As Dr Kissinger commented, such an argument is a sad reflection on the Western alliance. Much more important, however, is that it misses the whole point of our deterrent strategy. Our deterrent – or any deterrent, for that matter – has failed once the physical threat has to be used; we hope that by threatening to cause severe damage to the USSR we can deter any attack on ourselves, but if Russia did decide to attack us despite this, nothing we could do in the way of attacking particular targets could avert catastrophe.

The Division of our Limited Resources

So far we have thought entirely in terms of deterring a major Russian attack on this country. We cannot, however, ignore the many other military threats we have to meet – threats which, although much more limited in nature, are far more likely to materialize. Since we are unlikely ever to be willing to use our nuclear weapons except in defence of our homeland and its immediate approaches, our deterrent is useless as far as meeting these other threats is concerned. Many of the critics of our independent deterrent have suggested that in trying to equip ourselves with the forces for both total and limited wars we have so divided our resources that we have effective forces for neither. As a result our politicians are not being given the room for manoeuvre they need. Lord Montgomery was unhappy about the present state of affairs when he said to the RUSI in 1958: 'If the deterrent is regarded as an independent national thing … we cannot also afford proper conventional forces'. He was not, however, prepared to go the whole way and advocate leaving the deterrent entirely to the USA in order to concentrate on conventional forces. Some would have us do this, contending that the military forces within the Western alliance should complement rather than duplicate each other. They suggest that the USA would prefer to see us making a first-rate conventional contribution to the alliance, and point out that there would be nothing invidious about sheltering under the American wing; we should merely be doing what the Americans themselves did during the nineteenth century, when they relied in effect upon the British fleet for their protection. However, we do well to remember, as Mr Watkinson reminded us in this year's defence debate, that our independent deterrent costs only about 10 per cent of our total defence budget. Certainly this amount of money, if devoted instead to conventional armaments, would increase the power of our limited war forces, but as Mr Sandys put it in 1959, the increase in conventional strength would be negligible compared with our loss of military power and influence. If the national considerations in favour of the independent deterrent are valid, we have no choice but to accept the cost of that deterrent and the consequent limitation of our conventional forces to those we can pay for from the balance of our defence budget.

A Dangerous Example

There is one other result of our possessing an independent deterrent that we must take into account. The arguments we have used in its favour are equally compelling to other nations. France has already joined the 'nuclear club', and Mr Grimond, who has frequently pointed out

that our policy encourages other nations also to make nuclear weapons, estimates that at least eleven other countries are capable of doing so. A Labour MP, Mr Usborne, while accepting that once one nation possessed nuclear weapons it was better that a second should have them as well, argued strongly in the 1955 defence debate that the world would be much safer if no further nations possessed them. 'We should try to prevent the proliferation of these hideous weapons under sovereign national control', he urged. We can but agree that the fewer the nations possessing nuclear weapons the better; the risks of nuclear war occurring by accident, by miscalculation, or even by design will grow as nuclear weapons spread – and particularly as they spread into the hands of the less responsible members of the international community. How likely is it, however, that our abandonment of nuclear weapons would prevent any further spread? It might prove successful in Europe, although this is less likely now that France possesses atomic weapons. We cannot conceive of it being successful as regards China, and such folk as Colonel Nasser and General Kassem would probably be only too delighted to get their hands on some nuclear weapons. To relinquish our deterrent would certainly be a striking moral gesture and would be so acclaimed in many parts of the world: like so many moral gestures, it is highly doubtful whether it would serve the cause of peace.

Can Our Deterrent Remain Independent?

Before concluding, we must deal briefly with the contention that our deterrent cannot be truly independent if we have to buy an essential part of its means of delivery from another nation. Since, it is argued, the main object of preserving our own deterrent is to prevent ourselves being completely at the mercy of American policy, it becomes pointless if we depend on America to provide it. Let us remember, however, that Sky Bolt is a joint project, on which British as well as American scientists are engaged; in the unlikely event of a change in American policy causing our exclusion from the project we should therefore be capable of continuing it on our own, although at greater cost. In any case, as had already been pointed out, our possession of nuclear weapons and some sort of means of delivery – provided it is not completely obsolete – ensures in effect that the American deterrent is also staked on any issue that we consider vital. There is therefore no reason why, as long as we can deliver strategic nuclear weapons, our deterrent should be regarded as anything other than independent.

Conclusion

The case for our nuclear deterrent does not rest on outworn conceptions of our status as a great power, nor can we honestly contend that our nuclear striking power is an indispensable part of the overall Western deterrent. What our independent deterrent does is to give us a degree of political influence within the Western alliance immeasurably greater than we should have if we abandoned it. Even more important, we must always reckon with the possibility of an American withdrawal from Europe, a withdrawal that would indeed be made more likely if we gave up our nuclear striking power. Our independent deterrent is therefore the keystone of our national defence, and it would be the height of folly to abandon it. Admittedly it is expensive and whatever means of delivery we decide upon to succeed our V-bombers will be even more costly, but the price we must pay is the price of our liberty.