

Time to abandon the 'Moscow criterion'

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By Sir Menzies Campbell MP

Like many a military euphemism the expression “Moscow Criterion” conceals lethal intention. It has been the United Kingdom’s policy that the independent British nuclear deterrent should be able to defeat ballistic missile defences around Moscow. If the United Kingdom decided alone to take the apocalyptic decision to use its nuclear weapons it wants to be able to target large centres of population like Moscow. Hiroshima and Nagasaki would be dwarfed by such events. The rationale for this policy is that our independent deterrent has to be so capable as to cover the possibility that if the United States decided for any reason not to use its nuclear capability to defend Europe the continent and the United Kingdom in particular could defend itself.

The analysis is chilling to say the least but its current relevance is undermined by; first, the end of the Cold War and second, by the adoption by the United Kingdom of the nuclear doctrine of last resort and minimum deterrence.

Nuclear weapons have no intrinsic merit. Their significance is in deterrence. If you ever have to use them it can only be because their primary purpose has been defeated. But nuclear policy ought always to be assessed in its political context. It is unthinkable today that Britain would contemplate the destruction of the heavily populated capital of Russia, or any other city for that matter.

The history of the last twenty five years tells us that “independent” (a word to be used in preference because of the connotation of “unilateral”) decisions can make an effective and lasting contribution to disarmament without any prejudice to national security. In the last twenty five years or so Britain has abandoned nuclear depth charges, nuclear artillery, free fall nuclear bombs and reduced the number of warheads deployed in the current fleet of Trident submarines. These “independent” decisions did not diminish the security of the United Kingdom but rather they enhanced it since they significantly reduced the possibility of nuclear exchanges on the continent of Europe. The threats to our security in that period have been asymmetric and our nuclear weapons have been no defence.

The lesson to be drawn from that history is that when the political context provides safe opportunities to reduce the salience of nuclear weapons we should take these if necessary by “independent” decisions.

As we approach the NATO Chicago Summit what should be Britain's position in relation to the Moscow Criterion. What utility does it have if we know it is inconsistent with the stated policy of minimum deterrence?

A decision to announce publicly that we renounce the Moscow Criterion could be made without any prejudice to our security. It would make a significant contribution to the multilateral disarmament so eloquently promoted by President Obama in his Prague speech. It would be entirely consistent with the multilateral political initiatives being taken on both sides of the Atlantic by politicians and officials, like Henry Kissinger and George Schultz, and Des Browne and Malcolm Rifkind, who had responsibility for nuclear policy during and after the Cold War.

Could it provide fresh impetus for discussion between NATO's nuclear powers and Russia? There is no guarantee that it would do so, but we don't know until we try. And we can try without any risk to ourselves.

There are those who argue for a world free of nuclear weapons. It is a noble objective but in truth one that is unlikely ever to be achieved. But if elimination is not possible reduction is surely no less desirable. Nor is 'unilateralism' as understood in the nuclear debate an answer. Who believes that the nuclear ambitions of Iran would be abandoned or that Israel would feel sufficiently confident to acknowledge its nuclear capacity if the UK were to announce at the forthcoming NATO Summit that it would decommission the existing Trident system and abandon any policy of replacement of a nuclear capability of any kind? But we could reduce the salience of nuclear weapons without any prejudice to our security. We can do so by announcing a military decision entirely consistent with international circumstances.

But a decision to abandon the Moscow Criterion could not be taken in a vacuum. It would inevitably have an impact on the current debate about a Trident replacement. In that discussion it is not enough to plan as if the cold war never ended and mutually assured destruction or a variant of it is still necessary. Taking the decision to abandon would underline the question whether a like for like replacement of Trident is necessary, or whether minimum deterrence can be provided in some other way. We should take the decision and debate the consequences.