

# **UK Nuclear Deterrence Policy**

## **and**

### **The Trident Nuclear Weapon System**

**By Commander Robert Forsyth, Royal Navy (Ret'd)**

#### **Part 1 - The Concept of Nuclear Deterrence**

*This first part of a series of three articles summarises why I undertook to research a concept I once took for granted and the results of that research; Part 2 reviews current UK nuclear weapon policy; Part 3 examines international and military law on the threat or use of nuclear weapons, the UK Government's position, and how it affects Trident submarine Commanding Officers.*

#### **My experience**

In 1962, months into being appointed to my first submarine, *HMS Auriga*, we sailed on war patrol in response to the Cuban missile crisis US-led naval blockade tasked with detecting Soviet submarines south of the Iceland-Faroes gap. I therefore was a Cold War warrior from the start, fully convinced of the Soviet threat and the need to counter it. Following command of *HMS Alliance* (1970-72), I was appointed Executive Officer of the Starboard Crew of the *Polaris* nuclear-armed ballistic missile submarine (SSBN) *HMS Repulse*. Before our first patrol, my Commanding Officer (CO) and I discussed the procedures for receipt of an order to fire and whether we were both fully committed to obeying it. As his second in command I was the other half of the two-man launch authorisation team, so we needed to be clear with each other. He told me that we would only be ordered to fire if the Soviets fired nuclear missiles at the UK or our NATO allies first. We agreed that, under those circumstances, we would retaliate; but the chances of being called upon to do so were small, because both East and West recognised that what would ensue would be 'Mutually Assured Destruction' (MAD). Nonetheless, our response might have limited further nuclear exchanges.

At that time international law was silent on the specific use of nuclear weapons, but the Geneva Conventions implied their use would be unlawful because their massive and indiscriminate effects would inevitably kill millions of civilians. However, we did not know what our targets were, because targeting was by means of coded tapes; but we did know that military installations were located in or near heavily populated cities. We wryly called this deliberate policy the 'Aunt in Minsk syndrome' - that if we knew we had an aunt there, we might refrain from firing. We also agreed that if a simple check of the BBC News showed no sign of the UK being under attack and programmes were transmitting as usual, then we would not fire but pause and, against all the rules, 'phone home' to question the firing order.

I carried out four patrols in *HMS Repulse*, before being appointed Commanding Officer ('Teacher') of the submarine CO's Qualifying Course (dubbed for good reasons the 'Perisher') followed by command of *HMS Sceptre*, a new build SSN. Some desk time followed in the Ministry of Defence (MoD) (Operational Requirements), whereupon I took voluntary retirement in 1981, and subsequently spent some 25 years in a career in industry, experiencing a somewhat wider perspective on the world.

### **My growing concern**

In 2015, in final retirement I began to take a serious interest in the declining state of the Navy. Over the next few years, I carried out an in-depth examination of the rationale for, and cost of, the UK *Trident* programme. This led me into researching the history of UK nuclear weapon policy and evolution of international humanitarian law. My experience of command and my time as 'Teacher', coupled with a view of the world now de-coupled from accepted naval thinking, led to a growing awareness that today's *Trident* SSBN COs, in very different circumstances to my day, have a much greater problem in how they respond to an order to fire.

A new *Polaris* warhead, code-named *Chevaline*, was introduced into service as I was leaving the Navy. The justification for this very secret and costly programme was that, to sustain the credibility of the UK's nuclear deterrence policy, the RN *Polaris* force needed the capability to take out military command and control installations in Moscow<sup>1</sup>, which were protected by increasingly capable anti-ballistic missile systems. Prior to that, US and UK *Polaris* had mainly been targeted at cities and therefore at millions of 'Aunts in Minsk'.

I observed the completed replacement of *Polaris* by *Trident* in 1996 with interest; but I wondered what would happen to this over-capable, hugely expensive programme as the Soviet threat receded with the end of the Cold War. US, UK and Russian nuclear arsenals were reduced; deployed strategic systems mutually de-targeted; and in 1998 the new Labour Government unilaterally relaxed the alert state of *Trident* to several days.<sup>2</sup> I presumed that it would be stood down from Continuous At Sea Deterrence (CASD) but remain operationally available as insurance. I also thought our deterrent policy remained one of second strike, because of repeated Government assurances that the UK would only use *Trident* as a weapon of 'last resort.' The commitment to disarmament contained in Article VI of the 1968 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT)<sup>3</sup> seemed to be no longer utopian.

Of greater concern to many ex-service people was the steady decline in our conventional forces as successive UK Governments took the opportunity to cut the Defence budget. This alarming trend accelerated under the fiscal austerity policies adopted following the 2008 worldwide financial crisis. The Fleet's capabilities have now been reduced to the point where the essential escalating stepping-stones of conventional deterrence before a threshold of nuclear use is reached have been dangerously removed, such that the UK's nuclear deterrence posture is no longer credible.

In 2016, during the debate in Parliament to replace the four *Vanguard* class submarines with the *Dreadnought* class and a new nuclear warhead programme, I began to question the fast escalating costs - both financial and in terms of operational strain on the RN - of maintaining CASD against a future unknown threat. Delays in the *Dreadnought* programme now entailed running on the obsolete *Vanguard* class for 6-8 years longer than the *Resolution* class. I wondered whether these costs were justified in light of the severe reduction in the UK's conventional ability to defend against the very real, emerging new and diverse threats. The worsening relations between NATO and Russia threatening re-expansion back into former Soviet satellite States are of a far less extreme order to the Soviet threat of world domination, but will require credible conventional forces to deter any such ambitions.

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<sup>1</sup> Generally referred to as 'The Moscow Criterion'.

<sup>2</sup> [UK Strategic Defence Review 1998. para 68.](#)

<sup>3</sup> [Nuclear Weapon Non-Proliferation Treaty \(NPT\) 1968](#)

The arguments put forward owed less to how best to defend the realm, and more to the fact that giving up *Trident* would denude the UK of a prestigious international role. It became apparent to me that all studies prior to the decision to proceed with *Trident* replacement presumed the continuing need for a UK so-called ‘deterrent’. Any discussion seemed more about how best to deliver this, rather than an objective examination of whether the UK actually needed nuclear deterrence in the first place.

The 2016 debate particularly struck me as an exercise in self-righteous rhetoric, noticeably short on facts, in which *Trident* supporters competed to be patriots and sought to brand any dissenters as traitors – a word clearly heard used by Prime Minister (PM) Theresa May on the live TV broadcast, but curiously missing from the Hansard transcript.<sup>4</sup> The tone was very much “Never mind the question – the answer is *Trident*”. Furthermore, the PM’s flat “Yes” to the question “Is she personally prepared to authorise a nuclear strike that could kill 100,000 innocent men, women and children?” alarmed me. Just why was the PM – and to be fair, her predecessors – so totally wedded to *Trident* beyond any reasonable discussion? This was also generally accepted by the media and public. They seemed unaware that, come the need to resist a serious threat, it will now be little more than a single step to reach the nuclear option in order to offset a lack of sufficient conventional military force.

Twenty-five years in industry gave me a healthy instinct always to look behind Government statements. Time had also eroded the habit of conformity that military service inevitably induces. To help my research, I conducted a lengthy but ultimately frustrating correspondence with the MoD Nuclear Policy Department.<sup>5</sup> The responses carefully avoided answering my questions, which were directed at finding out how SSBN COs reconciled current international and military law on the use of nuclear weapons with their responsibility to observe them. MoD’s unattributed replies - which gave the uneasy impression of having come from the Ministry of Truth in George Orwell’s *1984* - repeatedly made unsupported assertions of legal compliance (which I discuss in Part 3). This strengthened my resolve to probe deeper.

### **Does nuclear deterrence work?**

Forty-odd years on from accepting without question that nuclear deterrence worked, I re-addressed the concept. After considerable research it became clear that there is no proof ‘beyond reasonable doubt’ that nuclear weapons deter the use of nuclear weapons by others or have prevented any of the major wars that have occurred since 1945.

Sir Michael Quinlan, the arch proponent of the UK’s nuclear deterrence policy, admitted he was only providing “intellectual clothing for a gut decision” by successive UK Governments.<sup>6</sup> Following the Soviet collapse he added ruefully he had “perhaps been stuck in adversary patterns of thinking”. Former PM Tony Blair in his autobiography also confessed to ambivalence: “...[T]he utility in a post-Cold War world is less in terms of deterrence and non-existent in terms of military use... I opted to renew it [*Trident*]. But the contrary decision would not have been stupid.”<sup>7</sup> In 2015 George Shultz, US Secretary of State 1982-89, wrote that he

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<sup>4</sup> [Parliamentary Debate UK’s Nuclear Deterrent, 18 July 2016, Hansard.](#)

<sup>5</sup> [Correspondence between Cdr Forsyth and MoD Nuclear Policy Department](#)

<sup>6</sup> Hennessy, Peter, *Cabinets and the Bomb* (Oxford University Press, 2007). The initial decision to acquire nuclear weapons was influenced by Labour Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin in 1946 declaring to Attlee’s Cabinet that “we’ve got to have a bloody Union Jack on it” (p.8); and a subsequent fear of France being the sole European nuclear power sustains this.

<sup>7</sup> Blair, Tony, *A Journey: My Political Life* (Random House, 2010).

now believed nuclear weapons “...were, and are, the gravest threat to humanity’s survival. Their effect in preventing wars has been overrated.”<sup>8</sup>

Even when the US held a nuclear monopoly it did not stop Stalin interfering in Berlin, or North Korea invading the South supported by China; likewise Ho Chi Minh in Vietnam; Egypt attacking nuclear-armed Israel in 1973; Argentina invading the Falklands in 1982 (threatened use of *Polaris* was not credible); Iraq attacking Kuwait in 1990; and repeated dangerous confrontations between India and Pakistan after they both acquired nuclear weapons in 1998. The latter’s ‘1999 Kargil war’ upended nuclear deterrence theory, when Pakistan felt emboldened to send military forces into disputed territory because it mistakenly believed its nuclear capability would deter India, when instead it provoked rapid escalation which was only ended after intervention by US President Clinton.

The 1962 Cuban missile crisis is often cited as an example where nuclear deterrence worked. But did it? Soviet President Khrushchev was not deterred from deploying nuclear-tipped missiles in the first place, to protect Cuba from US invasion. This was also to counter US Jupiter missiles deployed to Turkey and in US submarines patrolling off the Pacific coast of the USSR.<sup>9</sup> We now know that he withdrew the Cuba missiles because he became increasingly fearful of his own forces being provoked by US threats into accidentally or irresponsibly using them, and because of US President Kennedy’s unpublicised face-saving offer to withdraw the US missiles from Turkey. Khrushchev’s fear was justified when Soviet Navy Second Captain Arkhipov refused to authorise the CO of his ‘F’ class submarine to launch one of its three 15 kiloton nuclear-tipped torpedoes at a blockading US escort dropping explosive charges to “encourage” him to surface. This first came to light at a former decision-makers’ conference hosted by President Castro in Cuba in 2002.<sup>10</sup>

The other reality is that the use of nuclear weapons by miscalculation, mistake or malfunction, is much the most likely way that a nuclear exchange could be instigated. In 1983 Yuri Andropov, Soviet General Secretary, recognised this when he said: “Nuclear war could occur not through evil intent but could happen through miscalculation”.<sup>11</sup> A Chatham House report *Too Close for Comfort*<sup>12</sup> supports this, identifying at least 13 separate occasions when the world came extremely close to this happening. An example in 2018 involved a false initiation of a nuclear warning alarm in Hawaii at a time when North Korea was threatening a missile attack against US territory.<sup>13</sup> Sir Rodric Braithwaite, UK Ambassador to the Soviet Union in 1991-92, eloquently summed up the paradox of nuclear deterrence: “...[Y]ou intend to terrify your enemy into behaving properly; but you risk frightening him into doing something silly.”<sup>14</sup>

All of this is discussed in considerable depth by many authoritative sources, from which I found four authors of particular value:

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<sup>8</sup> [Shultz, George P. & Goodby, James E. Ed., \*The War That Must Never Be Fought: Dilemmas of Nuclear Deterrence\* \(Hoover Institution Press, 2015\).](#)

<sup>9</sup> [Wikipedia, \*USS Growler\*](#)

<sup>10</sup> [Wikipedia, \*Vasily Arkhipov \(Vice Admiral\)\*](#).

<sup>11</sup> [Yuri Andropov & Averill Harriman in conversation. \*The 1983 War Scare: “The Last Paroxysm” of the Cold War Part 1\*](#)

<sup>12</sup> [Lewis, Patricia, Williams, Heather, Pelopidas, Benoit and Aghlani, Sasan, \*Too Close for Comfort: Cases of Near Nuclear Use and Options for Policy\* \(Chatham House Report, The Royal Institute of International Affairs, April 2014\).](#)

<sup>13</sup> [FAQs related to the Ballistic Missile False Alert 13 January 2018](#)

<sup>14</sup> Braithwaite, Rodric, *Armageddon & Paranoia: The Nuclear Confrontation* (Profile Books, 2017) p.355.

**Sir Michael Quinlan:** *Thinking about Nuclear Weapons: Principles, Problems, Prospects* (Oxford University Press, 2009). He was the Permanent Under-Secretary of State at the MoD 1988-92 and a leading advocate for nuclear deterrence and proponent of UK nuclear weapon policy.

**Sir Rodric Braithwaite:** *Armageddon and Paranoia: The Nuclear Confrontation* (Profile Books, 2017) It was illuminating to read in his book that “...There is no evidence that the Russians ever hoped to incorporate Western Europe by military means”.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, he reported that “...the British Prime Minister told the Russian President in January 1992 that the British nuclear deterrent consisted of four ballistic missile submarines of which only one was on patrol at any given moment. Boris Yeltsin at first seemed surprised but recovered his composure and indicated generously that he didn’t think he needed to worry too much about such a small force”.<sup>16</sup>

**Mr Daniel Ellsberg:** *The Doomsday Machine: Confessions of a Nuclear War Planner* (Bloomsbury USA, 2017). He worked as a strategic analyst at the RAND Corporation in the 1950s and 60s concentrating on US nuclear strategy. His account of US policy and (lack of) command and control of nuclear weapons makes for very uncomfortable reading and reaches forward to similar concerns in the US Forces today (to be discussed in Part 3).

**Cdr Robert Green RN (Ret’d):** *Security without Nuclear Deterrence* (Spokesman Books, 2018). The substantial Foreword to this very well researched book is by Vice Admiral Sir Jeremy Blackham and should be required reading by politicians. He articulates very clearly his concerns about the loss of a graduated UK conventional deterrence capability and concludes that “...it is not possible to separate nuclear doctrine, force structure and strength from conventional force structure and strength, across an increasingly wide range of non-nuclear war making capabilities”.<sup>17</sup> This will be discussed in more depth in Part 2.

## Summary

After several years’ study, discussion and thought, I now fall firmly into the nuclear deterrence doubters’ bracket. However, I accept that others, just as sincerely, do not – though they recognise the dangers of nuclear capability ownership and fully support multilateral nuclear disarmament. Interestingly, China seems to fall into this category (more on this in Part 2). Those who most concern me avowedly believe in nuclear deterrence, not for the principle but because they believe possession confers indispensable political power. These include the Governments of the five self-appointed ‘responsible’ recognised nuclear weapon States (generally known as the P5): the US, Russia, China, France and the UK – the latter desperately trying to keep up with the US upon which it depends for its nuclear capability, and refusing to contemplate France as the sole European nuclear power. Of the remaining nuclear-armed States, Israel struggles to maintain ambiguity; conversely, India and Pakistan flaunt their capability. This leaves North Korea, which uniquely uses its development of nuclear weapons not so much to deter attacks on itself as to trade them for international recognition, by

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<sup>15</sup> Braithwaite, Rodric, *Armageddon & Paranoia: The Nuclear Confrontation* (Profile Books, 2017) p.355.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, p.186.

<sup>17</sup> Robert Green: *Security without Nuclear Deterrence*. Foreword. p.19

exploiting the power of ownership rather than relying on nuclear deterrence for strategic defence.

A combination of false intelligence, lobbying by the military and their equipment suppliers, and political power play has encouraged a nuclear arms race in order to justify the continuance of nuclear deterrence – a vicious circle of self-confirmation. A “gut decision” is leading to expenditure on a weapon system which the UK has not had occasion to target for 24 years and, by admittance, may not ever do so, let alone use it. Moreover, it is denying its military the usable weapon systems which are badly needed to deter existing threats. As Vice Admiral Blackham reiterates in his Foreword to Green’s book, “...the cardinal point is that the nuclear deterrent is not, and cannot be, a substitute for conventional capabilities. The credibility of flexible response depends upon deferring any decision to use nuclear weapons until the very existence of the nation is at stake. This requirement means that the conventional forces must be of sufficient capability to deal with any lesser threat; and that one’s potential enemy must believe this to be so.”<sup>18</sup>

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### **Biography**

Robert Forsyth: born 1939, joined the Royal Navy 1957, served in submarines 1961-81, commanding conventional and nuclear submarines, including *Polaris*; he also commanded the Submarine Commanding Officer’s Qualifying Course (Perisher), which provided a unique insight into the responsibilities of military commanders. After retirement he worked in industry at a senior level from 1981-1999.



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<sup>18</sup> Robert Green: *Security without Nuclear Deterrence*. Foreword. p.19.