

The future of Trident

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What price nuclear blackmail?

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Britain has possessed nuclear weapons for half a century and plans to keep them for another half century. One argument for this decision that cannot be dismissed out-of-hand is that if other states retain nuclear weapons, this would prevent the UK from acting as a 'force for good'.

Giving up nuclear weapons, it is argued, would expose the country to blackmail or aggression from remaining nuclear weapons states. But this argument rests on the fallacy that the non-nuclear weapons states (NNWS) have to kowtow to nuclear weapons states (NWS). The huge majority of NNWS, which voluntarily accepted non-nuclear status, seem to suffer no disadvantage. It can be argued that Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and NATO members are able to shelter under the US nuclear umbrella. However, this umbrella is fragile – its use would put the US itself at risk of nuclear attack.

NWS have not derived benefit from their possession of nuclear weapons. For example, the US suffered defeat by North Vietnam; the British and French over Suez; the French in Algeria; and Israel in its wars in Lebanon.

Further, the possession of nuclear weapons has had no deterrent effect. The UK has not derived any direct security benefit from possessing nuclear weapons – take the example of the Argentinian attempt to annex the Falkland Islands in 1982. If there has been no benefit so far, what about the next 50 years?

Who knuckles under the threat of nuclear weapons?

If the UK renounced nuclear weapons would it be obliged to knuckle under to threats? A number of examples show that NNWS did go ahead with attacks even in the face of a nuclear weapons threat. The Berlin blockade (1948) went ahead despite the fact that the USSR had no effective nuclear weapons.

The Chinese were not deterred from invading North Korea when they did not have nuclear weapons even though the US had threatened a nuclear attack. Equally Egypt was not deterred in the Six-Day war; and Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait despite US nukes. Such a threat may have constrained Iraqi use of chemical or biological weapons, but they still fired missiles at Israel. To say that a NNWS had 'no choice' when it faces attempts by NWS to coerce it is simply wrong.

Are nuclear weapons an insurance policy?

The idea of nuclear weapons as an insurance policy could be reasonable if it was not too expensive – say one quarter of one per cent of GDP – but in no other aspect of military strategy would this ‘just in case’ argument be used. In fact, the cost of the UK’s nuclear weapons (including AWE) in 2008 was said to be ‘around 5-6 per cent’ of the defence budget, and this percentage will increase with the current defence cuts.

The current annual operating and maintenance cost of Trident is estimated at £2.24bn.¹ Even with some cuts and possible savings created by collaboration with the French, the Trident Replacement Programme will still cost no less than £20bn from 2016 to 2032. This together with current running costs would work out at around £3.5bn a year.

Cancellation and decommissioning would not be cost-free – estimates suggest the cost would be round £7bn – but this still frees up some £30bn to meet other expenditure forgone – either on other defence needs or for transport, hospitals, universities or deficit reduction.

In my opinion, Trident is a white elephant, and not worth its keep.

¹ According to Ian Davis, former Director of BASIC