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How would Britain fare as a non-nuclear weapon state?

By Hugh Beach

In the opinion of successive British Governments Britain without nuclear weapons would be badly placed. They say that if Britain were to divest itself of this weapon system and became a non-nuclear weapon state, then a state that did possess nuclear weapons and with hostile intent might ‘pose a grave threat to our vital interests’. If this happened the British would have no option but to submit. Conventional capabilities would not suffice. Only possession of their own nuclear weapon can give them the ability to confront ‘blackmail and acts of aggression against their vital interests by nuclear-armed opponents’.ⁱ This argument carries a degree of conviction, if only because common-sense suggests that states without nuclear weapons are more likely to be attacked than those who have them. The aim of this paper is to show that this is far from being the whole story.

There is no denying that threats of using military force are often used. In the year 2008, for example, there was a warning from Russia that the accord between the USA and the Czech Republic to station a radar component of America’s antiballistic missile shield south of Prague ‘could lead to a military response’.ⁱⁱ Putin had said that Russia could target this site (and a proposed antiballistic missile site in Poland) with missiles and deploy missiles in Kaliningrad. A Russian newspaper had quoted a senior Russian air force official as saying that Russian bombers capable of carrying nuclear weapons could be deployed to Cuba.ⁱⁱⁱ Defying Russia, the Czech government then signed an accord with the United States to accept the radars. Oil deliveries from Russia to the Czech Republic were promptly reduced by 40%, ostensibly because of technical reasons. The shortfall was offset by deliveries from Germany and in other respects economic and trade ties between Russia and the Czech Republic continued to flourish. According to one security expert the Czech government was adopting a ‘pragmatic attitude’.^{iv} This episode is an example of precisely the question addressed in this paper, of how a non-nuclear weapon state can cope pragmatically, when threatened by a state that has these weapons and is prepared to brandish them.

As the British government points out: ‘We judge that no state currently has both the intent and the capability to pose a direct nuclear threat to the United Kingdom or its vital interests’^v. But we are considering a period stretching up to the middle of this century. By that time the population of the world may have risen to 9 billion and the population of Russia halved; global temperature may have risen by two degrees Celsius and the energy

consumption of the world shifted away from fossil fuels. America may no longer be a world power of the first rank and in any case the focus of American interest may have shifted decisively towards the Pacific Rim. The number of nuclear weapons states may have doubled or halved. In such a shifted scene the government is clearly right in saying that: ‘we cannot rule out the risk that such a (direct nuclear) threat will re-emerge over future decades’^{vi}. This is precisely the argument made by the British Government in defence of Trident replacement as summarized in the first paragraph of this paper. What is to be said against it?

The first and obvious point is that of the 190 states party to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) all but five have committed themselves to non-nuclear weapon status permanently. If this makes them all potential victims of nuclear blackmail, they do not seem to be unduly concerned about it. Many of them have the economic, industrial and scientific capacity to become nuclear weapon states if they wished, but have chosen not to. There is a handful of cases where countries have reneged on their commitment: South Africa and Libya both repented and made good. North Korea has formally withdrawn and the status of Iran is highly controversial. But the fact remains that a huge majority of states has voluntarily accepted non-nuclear weapon status and seems to suffer no disadvantage from this fact: specifically from the risk of being blackmailed by one of the eight countries that have these weapons. It could be said that the main reason why these countries are content is because they shelter under the American nuclear umbrella. This would certainly apply to the 25 non-nuclear members of NATO, also to Japan and South Korea. But if that is good enough for them, why not for the UK, supposedly the Americans’ ‘best friend’ and most valued ally.^{vii}

Nor has anyone claimed a direct benefit to Britain from her possession of nuclear weapons. Specifically, it cannot be shown that Britain has been able to take any action against another country that she could not otherwise have undertaken, nor prevented action by any other country that she could not otherwise have prevented, by virtue of her nuclear arsenal. British nuclear weapons did not deter Argentina from attempting to annex the Falkland Islands in 1982, nor help her to recover them, despite the belief that a Polaris submarine was patrolling the South Atlantic.^{viii} And nuclear weapons have given no protection against attacks by Irish Republican or Islamic terrorists. The most that has ever been claimed is that Britain, as a nuclear weapon state, has been influential in promoting arms control measures such as the NPT and the various nuclear test ban treaties. It is said that Britain may have been able to dissuade America from contemplating the use of nuclear weapons, if not in Viet Nam then possibly in the Gulf War of 1991. It is a strange argument for possessing

nuclear weapons that their main use is to help persuade one's allies not to use theirs, and other countries to forgo them.

If the possession of nuclear weapons for the past fifty years has not done Britain any demonstrable good, what does this tell us about the next fifty years? In answering this we need first to consider Britain's position vis-à-vis the United States. The crucial question is to what extent Britain can rely in future on the support of America in facing down any future nuclear threat. The possibility of having to confront a recidivist Russia is hinted at by the reference to re-emergence of 'a major direct nuclear threat to the UK's vital interests' and certainly it cannot be discounted. But if the American nuclear guarantee is regarded as fully watertight, why is there any need for an independent British system?

So far as the security of the British homeland is concerned this appears to fall squarely within the North Atlantic Treaty. Article 5 stops short of specifying any particular response from any party, even in the context of an actual attack, let alone a threat. So this provision was buttressed during the Cold War by the creation of a massive military structure, with American nuclear weapons in situ, explicitly to cope with any possible assault across the Iron Curtain. This structure remains intact, albeit in rudimentary form. It can surely be held to imply that the US provides member states of NATO with cover against nuclear blackmail in any European context, and it has undoubtedly been understood in this way by all the non-nuclear European members - not least those who have recently joined from Central and Eastern Europe.

But Britain also operates as an ally of America outside Europe and not necessarily in a NATO context. Here also there is an explicit policy of relying upon American protection. The British Defence White Paper 'Delivering Security in a Changing World' (2003/4) explained: 'The most demanding expeditionary operations, involving intervention against state adversaries, can only plausibly be conducted if US forces are engaged, either leading a coalition or in NATO.'^{ix} 'The full spectrum of capabilities is not required (by Britain) for large scale operations, as the most demanding operations could only conceivably be undertaken alongside the US, either as a NATO operation or a US led coalition, where we have choices as to what to contribute'.^x Reference to 'the most demanding operations' must surely imply that, where a nuclear threat is concerned, America would be in the lead and would provide the necessary cover.

Given this very close tie-up between Britain and America, what geo-political niche can be discerned in which Britain could be exposed to nuclear

blackmail without being able to count on American cover? This, of course, is an ancient question and no such scenario has ever been described, clearly for good reason. Yet if such a contingency has been held in the past to be of enough weight to justify the costs of a separate British system, one could argue that the same should apply to the next half century. To this we now turn.

The issue needs to be discussed at two levels. If the US were to determine that co-operation on British Trident was no longer promoting American defence and security, or was posing an unreasonable risk to it, then all technical assistance could be withdrawn. Denied help in maintaining, testing and upgrading the missiles, the fire control system and key components of the warhead, and with no re-supply of life restricted items for the latter (tritium injection system and neutron generator) the whole system would become unworkable and probably unsafe within a matter of a year or so. The UK has had no capacity to design and build a missile of strategic range since the demise of the liquid fuelled Blue Streak in 1960. To re-create such a capacity would take decades and the expense would be astronomical. Shopping around for another foreign supplier (Russia, China, North Korea, or even France) would be very unattractive, and there would still be the difficulty of re-fitting the submarines and providing warheads to match the new missiles.^{xi} Therefore, if Britain were to threaten to use Trident in circumstances of which the US actively disapproved it would be to sign the death warrant for British Trident.

There is also the question of actually firing a missile in circumstances where the Americans were actively opposed. The submarine could no doubt be sailed to an area where the sea-bed had been accurately surveyed by the British. The order to fire could be conveyed and authenticated without the submarine either raising an antenna or using an American satellite. The missile would then presumably work, although the accuracy might be impaired if gravitational and weather information, normally supplied by the Americans, was not available. The unsettling possibility has been raised that the software for fire control or in the warhead fusing system might have been secretly doctored so as to require independent US authorization to fire. But it is far from clear how any such instruction could be transmitted to the submarine at the time and this supposition hardly deserves serious consideration. The reasonable conclusion is that if the British Prime Minister, getting the bit between his or her teeth and deciding that 'supreme national interests were at stake', were to order Trident to fire then it would do so. Short of attacking the submarine^{xii}, or the Prime Minister, there is nothing the Americans could do to stop it.

But how likely is it that a Prime Minister, regardless of the nuclear taboo, and no doubt the hostile reaction of popular opinion world-wide, were to threaten nuclear retaliation against any country in defiance of the United States? The last time that Britain took military action in the teeth of opposition from America was at Suez in November 1956. America checkmated this action within days by means of financial, economic and political pressure.^{xiii} This situation is hardly worth contemplating seriously.

It remains to consider the situation where America, while not actively opposing British action, is unwilling to put its own nuclear weapons on the line. While difficult to visualize, such a case is certainly not impossible. Deeply engrained in the folk memory of the British is the failure of the USA to provide military help in 1940-41, when it looked as though the UK might go down, until the Americans' hands were forced by the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour.^{xiv} Lacking any direct historic precedent, it may be helpful to consider some past occasions when a non-nuclear-weapon state, acting on its own, has confronted a threat from a nuclear-armed adversary.

In July 1950, at the very beginning of the Korean War, President Truman ordered 10 nuclear configured B-29s to the Pacific, and warned China that the US would take 'whatever steps are necessary' to stop Chinese intervention, saying that the use of nuclear weapons 'had been under active consideration.' The Chinese at that time were many years short of acquiring nuclear weapons of their own. By late November the Americans had made substantial incursions into North Korea. The Chinese then struck along the Chongchon River, completely overran several South Korean divisions and attacked the flank of the remaining UN forces. The ensuing defeat of the U.S. Eighth Army resulted in the longest retreat of any American military unit in history. The U.S. forces in northeast Korea, who had advanced with great speed only a few months earlier, were forced to retreat with even greater speed and form a defensive perimeter around the port city of Hungnam, where a major evacuation was carried out in late December 1950. Facing complete defeat and surrender, 193 shiploads of American men and material were evacuated from Hungnam Harbor, and were shipped to Pusan. As they left, the American forces blew up large portions of the city to deny its use to the communists, depriving many Korean civilians of shelter during the winter. This was a major defeat for the Americans, and plainly their attempt at nuclear blackmail had not dissuaded the Chinese in any way.

During the retreat the American commander, General MacArthur, repeatedly asked for permission to attack Chinese bases in Manchuria. President Truman refused on the grounds that such action would draw the Soviet Union into the war, risking nuclear war.^{xv} When MacArthur went public on this issue

he was relieved of his command (April 1951). After the front had stabilized in July 1951 the Americans continued with their nuclear threats. In 1952 President-elect Eisenhower publicly hinted that he would authorize the use of nuclear weapons against China if the Korean War armistice talks continued to stagnate. In 1954, the commander of the US Strategic Air Command General Curtis LeMay stated his support for the use of nuclear weapons if China resumed fighting in Korea. LeMay stated, "There are no suitable strategic air targets in Korea. However, I would drop a few bombs in proper places like China, Manchuria and South Eastern Russia. In those 'poker games,' such as Korea and Indo-China, we. . . have never raised the ante - we have always just called the bet. We ought to try raising sometime." Finally, in January 1955, US Admiral Radford also publicly advocated the use of nuclear weapons if China invaded South Korea. To the extent that the Chinese did not continue fighting or invade the South this could be regarded as a success for nuclear deterrence, but it is far from clear that China had any intention of doing so anyway.

Saddam Hussein was not deterred from invading Kuwait in 1990 by fear of American nuclear weapons, although he had none himself. This was due, at least in part, to the uncertain note struck by American officials in the run-up to the attack. It has often been suggested that the reason Saddam did not use his chemical weapons to stave off subsequent defeat was that he had been warned repeatedly by the Americans, Israeli and British of dire consequences if he did so. While one might question whether the United States would actually have used nuclear weapons in response to a chemical attack, Saddam Hussein obviously could not have been confident that we would not. As Bruce Blair noted, 'There's enough ambiguity in our deployments of nuclear weapons at sea and our ability to deliver nuclear weapons by air and quickly move them into the region to plant the seeds of doubt in Hussein's mind.'^{xvi} The effectiveness of the threat of chemical or nuclear retaliation was asserted by Lt. Gen. Calvin Waller, deputy commander of Desert Storm, who said that "we tried to give him (Saddam) every signal that if he used chemicals against us that we would retaliate in kind and may even do more, so I think he was hesitant to use them there."^{xvii}

But there are other factors that could explain why Iraq did not use chemical weapons on this battlefield. Front line Iraqi soldiers had inadequate protective gear that was inferior to that of Coalition forces. The desert environment was seen as not being conducive to the effective use of chemical weapons. And despite reports prior to the war of extensive Iraqi chemical weapons deployments, Coalition forces found no evidence that chemical weapons had in fact been moved into the Kuwaiti theatre. But these factors are irrelevant to the question of chemical armed missiles. These weapons would strike far away from Iraqi forces, and could pose a considerable risk in an

urban environment. And there certainly were chemical warheads available for the Iraqi missiles. The non-use of chemical-armed missiles did indeed appear to stem from deterrence of such use by the threat of 'dire consequences'. Whether the nuclear component of this was necessary or, indeed, decisive must remain a matter of speculation.

Iraq fired conventionally armed missiles at Israel in an effort to draw Israel into the war and split the Coalition. Here again Iraq limited its efforts to conventional weapons. But Iraq was in no way deterred from striking Israel, in a notably provocative way, by fear of nuclear retaliation. In this respect, once again, nuclear deterrence spectacularly failed.

A fourth example was provided by Chinese threats against Taiwan. Concern over a formal declaration of Taiwan's independence had been a major impetus for the military buildup between Taiwan and mainland China. China had been increasing the deployment of missiles aimed at Taiwan by 100 a year or more, bringing the total arsenal to more than 700 ballistic missiles capable of being fitted with nuclear warheads. Presumably their deployment was a gambit on the part of China, increasing political pressure on Taiwan to abandon any unilateral move toward formal independence. But the Chinese government never declared such deployment publicly, let alone giving any reason. And the US administration had declared, given the status quo, that it would not aid Taiwan if it were to declare independence unilaterally

The nearest that matters came to a show-down was in 1996 when China began conducting military exercises near Taiwan, and launched several ballistic missiles over the island. This was done in response to the possible re-election of then President Lee Teng-hui. The United States, under President Clinton, sent two aircraft carrier battle groups to the region, sailing them into the Taiwan Strait. China, unable to track the ships' movements and unwilling to escalate the conflict, quickly backed down. The event had little impact on the outcome of the election, since none of Lee's contestants were strong enough to defeat him, but it is widely believed that China's aggressive acts, far from intimidating the Taiwanese population, gave Lee a boost that pushed his share of votes over 50 percent. (Mercifully tensions over the Taiwan Strait have greatly diminished since then.)

None of these four incidents is unambiguous. But all can be read as examples where a non-nuclear weapon state, faced with threats by a nuclear weapon state, went ahead exactly as if such a threat did not exist. Nor is this surprising. Game theory suggests that states without nuclear weapons are likely to likely to disregard an enemy's nuclear potential and fight in two circumstances: where submission is likely to lead to the same outcome (i.e. total

defeat) and where nuclear use by the aggressor would lead to such negative consequences (viz. the ‘Nuclear Taboo’) as to be reasonably discounted. It follows that faced with the threat of nuclear blackmail, a non-nuclear-weapon state is by no means bound to submit. It could be objected that in all the instances quoted above the government under threat was authoritarian and that a democratic government (by definition more responsive to popular anxiety) might not act so robustly. But the record of the past 70 years hardly bears out this contention. ‘Appeasement’ is a dirty word in British politics. And no government could seriously advance this supposition as a basis for policy.

Could a non-nuclear Britain ever be constrained in its actions vis-à-vis a nuclear adversary by fear of nuclear blackmail? Conceivably it might be, though we have failed to unearth a single unequivocal precedent. But for Britain to knuckle under in these circumstances is far from a foregone conclusion. The most important factor in such a situation is certain to be the attitude of the United States and we have had to postulate a very narrow range of circumstances where America - while generally supportive of Britain, otherwise the whole question of British Trident is moot anyway - would not put her own nuclear arsenal into the balance. An alliance with another nuclear protector is one possible response. Another might be ballistic missile defence. Both these are highly problematic. A far more likely outcome is that Britain would come to rely on adroit diplomacy coupled with a determination to call the bluff of any would-be blackmailer. All the examples we have examined point in this direction. And as was said at the outset some 185 other nations find themselves in precisely this situation. Seen in this light the British determination to replace Trident becomes a decision based on a philosophy of British exceptionalism - of ‘just-in-case’ - posited on a most unlikely concatenation of circumstances. To provide a general insurance against the unforeseen is not accepted as valid justification in any other area of military procurement.

[3650 words]

ⁱ ‘The future of the United Kingdom’s Nuclear Deterrent’ Cm 6994. December 2006. pp. 6,7

ⁱⁱ Judy Dempsey and Dan Bilefsky, ‘US and Czechs sign pact on missile shield: Russia warns of a military response’. *International Herald Tribune*, 9 July 2008. p.3.

ⁱⁱⁱ Peter Finn, Washington Post Foreign Service, quoting an unconfirmed report in *Izvestia*, 21 July 2008.

^{iv} Judy Dempsey, ‘Keeping the oil flowing when Russia gets upset’. *International Herald Tribune*. 24 July 2008. Quoting Vladimir Handl at the Institute of International Relations in Prague

^v *The National Security Strategy of the United Kingdom*. 2008. Paragraph 3-11 p. 14

^{vi} *The National Security Strategy of the United Kingdom*. 2008. Paragraph 3-11 p. 14

^{vii} The American Roger Cohen has written in his *Globalist* column: ‘When Britain opts for the sidelines with Germany, leaving an American president to look to France and Turkey for support in holding Bashar-al-Assad accountable for breaking the world’s taboo on using chemical weapons there is little or nothing special left. Rather than standing shoulder to shoulder with its ally, Britain has turned its back’. *International Herald Tribune*, 31August/1 September 2013. His exasperation is understandable, but the Anglo-American special nuclear relationship is founded much too durably to be unhinged by differences of this kind.

^{viii} Robert Green, in his book 'Security without nuclear deterrence' Astron Media 2010, recounts a story apparently derived from President Mitterand's former psychoanalyst, Ali Magoudi. He says that Mitterand told him about a 'phone call he received from Margaret Thatcher, after a French-supplied *Exocet* missile fired by the Argentinians from a French-supplied *Super Etendard* aircraft disabled the British destroyer *Sheffield*. Thatcher allegedly threatened to carry out a nuclear strike against Argentina unless Mitterand gave her the codes for jamming the *Exocet* missiles. Mitterand had been so convinced of her seriousness that he complied. (p.36). If this is true it gives the lie to my contention that Britain has derived absolutely no benefit from its independent nuclear weapon system. I am unconvinced.

^{ix} *Defence White Paper*. December 2003, Cm 6041-1. Paragraph 3.5, p.8

^x *Future Capabilities*. July 2004. Cm 6269. Paragraph 1.2, p.2.

^{xi} A recent Government study has found that the design staff at Aldermaston are so 'optimised' for work on the existing Trident warhead that to bring into service a new warhead (e.g. for a cruise missile) would take 24 years. *Trident Alternatives Review* 16 July 2013.

See www.gov.uk/government/organisations/cabinet-office

^{xii} The Royal Navy claims that, since the British sonar is superior to the Americans, this option is also unfeasible.

^{xiii} This is not a complete explanation. The attack on Suez attracted the condemnation of other members of NATO, the Commonwealth and the General Assembly of the United Nations. But it was the run on the pound and the oil embargo orchestrated by the United States that were decisive in forcing the Anglo-French forces to declare a cease-fire and withdraw.

^{xiv} An excellent account of the strength of isolationist feeling in the US at that time is given in Olson, Lynne, *Those angry days: Roosevelt, Lindbergh and America's fight over World war II*, Random House 2013. A persistent strain of isolationism in the American body politic can never be wholly discounted. A good current example is the 'Tea Party'. Witness also President Obama's problem in carrying the Congress and the people with him on the subject of a limited strike on Syria.

^{xv} This was a long shot. The Soviet Union had by then only a small stock of tactical nuclear weapons. But in any case this would have been an instance of mutual deterrence between two nuclear weapon powers, i.e. an offshoot of the Cold War - not the question being discussed in this paper.

^{xvi} Broder, David, "US Forces Have No Nuclear Arms in Gulf States, No Plans to Use Them," Los Angeles Times, 2 October 1990, page 6.

^{xvii} Gilley, Ed, "N-Threat Deterred Saddam," Seattle Post-Intelligencer, 17 May 1991, page 1.