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British Nuclear Strategy at the Threshold of the 21st Century

by

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INTRODUCTION

The beginning of the 21st Century saw profound changes in international relations particularly in terms of international order as well as traditional balances of power. The processes of globalization with all their challenges manifested in the latest global financial downturn together with a global war on terror add up to an amalgam of a number of salient factors shaping today's international security. New variables make us think how these changes affect the foreign policies of major powers in international relations, such as Great Britain, which traditionally has been amongst the more important players contributing to international order and stability.¹

Security is the first and foremost among a number of human needs. At the state level, this basic need turns into interests eagerly perused by every state, regardless of time, geographical location or cultural context. It is the aim of this article to analyse a number of factors influencing British security strategy at the beginning of the 21st Century, with special regard to the future of the UK nuclear deterrent.

THE NEW TWENTY YEARS' CRISIS

Referring to the idea of “The New Twenty Years’ Crisis”, introduced by Ken Booth in his work titled, *‘Theory of World Security’*,² it is evident that nuclear weapons remain a major challenge to international security and have the potential to play a decisive role in the arrangements for the future global, as well as national, security. Booth’s *The Great Reckoning* will also have to be addressed in respect of the question of the future of nuclear weapons. That is to say, no matter how many people would rather forget about the destructiveness of nuclear weapons, they continue to carry a relevant, if negative threat to international security.

As Avery Goldstein argues, “national deterrents would remain attractive even if there is a shift to multi-polarity, not only because of the existence of nuclear weapons aggravates doubts about the usefulness of alliances in general, but also because nuclear weapons would be especially helpful for dealing with the greater strategic complexity of a multi-polar system in particular”.³ Instead of considerable “Cold War bipolar stability”, states are now confronted with “strategic ambiguity”, where nuclear weapons in the hands of democratic states give the international community some sort of comfort, regardless of the sources of potential threats. They also provide states with cheaper and easier possibilities of addressing major threats, regardless of their origin. In their hands, nuclear weapons remain the means of “last resort”.⁴

The relevance of nuclear weapons is even more evident if those states that are considering acquiring them, or plan to acquire the technology to produce their own nuclear “devices” are also taken into account. Whether the critics of nuclear deterrence like it or not, this category of weapon remains - and is most likely to continue to be - very relevant to a large

number of states, especially to those states that already possess them, to those who want to possess them and to those who are allied with either of these groups.⁵ In this respect, national nuclear strategies pursue a number of goals. Nuclear weapons are supposed to act not only as a deterrent against those who would like to use nuclear weapons, but also against other forms of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD), principally chemical and biological weapons.

Even though the new US Barack Obama Administration claims that it is committed to setting “a goal of a world without nuclear weapons, and pursuing it”, at the same time it maintains the hitherto official US stance that it, “will always maintain a strong deterrent as long as nuclear weapons exist”.⁶ The 2006 US National Security Strategy with regard to WMD reads as follows: “Safe, credible, and reliable nuclear forces continue to play a critical role. We are strengthening deterrence by developing a New Triad composed of offensive strike systems (both nuclear and improved conventional capabilities); active and passive defenses, including missile defenses; and a responsive infrastructure, all bound together by enhanced command and control, planning, and intelligence systems. These capabilities will better deter some of the new threats we face, while also bolstering our security commitments to allies”.⁷

The latest British Defence White Paper, aptly titled, “The Future of the United Kingdom’s Nuclear Deterrent?”, puts the issue straight forwardly by asking, “why should we retain our nuclear deterrent?”. It answers this question equally bluntly, “the threat has now changed – but the global context does not justify complete UK nuclear disarmament. Ballistic missile technology has also continued to proliferate and most industrialized countries have the capability to develop chemical and biological weapons”.⁸ These two examples clearly

demonstrate how the governments of the USA and UK remain committed to the idea that nuclear deterrent could also be treated as sort of a *panacea* to all insecurities and uncertainties of the future international security environment. This kind of thinking could be really summed up as, “we do not know what is coming, but cannot imagine a better insurance policy than relying on what has worked so far”. The uncertainty of the today’s world, as exemplified in *The New Twenty Years’ Crisis*, makes it even more significant for the hitherto democratic nuclear powers to retain and modernize their nuclear deterrent strategies. As Sir Lawrence Freedman argues, “There can be no purely nuclear strategies, but there remains a continuing need for strategies that take nuclear weapons into account”.⁹

A NEW EPISODE OF THE OLD DEBATE

On 5 November 2008, The British National Audit Office (NAO) published a report on the future of British nuclear deterrent capability. The document notes, “there is a challenging timetable to meet if continuous at sea deterrence is to be maintained. The critical path for provision of a future deterrent capability is the delivery of the nuclear-powered submarine platform in time to meet an in-service date of 2024”.¹⁰

The NAO Report also notes, “the key developments have to be in place by September 2009 - including establishing exactly how long the Vanguard submarines’ lives could be extended and “robust” estimates of costs of the new system over its lifetime”. According to experts, Britain’s nuclear deterrence system (based on four elements: a fleet of four Vanguard-class submarines; access to a pool of Trident D5 missiles, shared with the USA; a stockpile of nuclear warheads; and a support infrastructure) will lose its deterrence characteristics by the

2020s due to technical reasons. This means that the UK government needs to commit to the upgrading of Britain's nuclear deterrence system in the near future, otherwise it will no longer continue to be an important player in international relations, purely in terms of military power. There is not much time left and the future of Britain's nuclear deterrent appears highly uncertain.

In 2006, The British Labour Government, then lead by Prime Minister Tony Blair, accepted the plans for upgrading the British nuclear deterrent at a cost of between £15bn and £20bn devoted to the development and construction of a new generation of submarines for the Trident missiles.¹¹ The whole program represents a major item of expenditure, which, in the face of the country's serious financial downturn, may be under threat of cancellation. On 16 January 2009, three highly respected and influential retired military Commanders, Field Marshal Lord Bramall, General Lord Ramsbotham and General Sir Hugh Beach, published a much quoted letter in the *Times*: its title said it all. The "UK does not need a nuclear deterrent".¹² They claimed that, "even major-player status in the international military scene is more likely to find expression through effective, strategically mobile conventional forces, capable of taking out pinpoint targets, than through the possession of unusable nuclear weapons. [...] This force (nuclear deterrent) cannot be seen as independent of the United States in any meaningful sense. It relies on the USA for the provision and regular servicing of the D5 missiles. While this country (United Kingdom) has, in theory, freedom of action over giving the order to fire, it is unthinkable that, because of the catastrophic consequences for guilty and innocent alike, these weapons would ever be launched, or seriously threatened, without the backing and support of the USA. [...] Should this country ever become subject to some sort of nuclear blackmail - from a terrorist group for example - it must be asked in what way, and against whom, our nuclear weapons could

be used, or even threatened, to deter or punish. Nuclear weapons have shown themselves to be completely useless as a deterrent to the threats and scale of violence we currently, or are likely to, face — particularly international terrorism”.¹³

Needless to say, this caused an immediate reaction from the then Secretary of State for Defence, Mr. John Hutton, who firmly replied that, “the nuclear deterrent will not be funded at the expense of the conventional capabilities required by our armed forces”.¹⁴ He added that he, “would not choose between protecting Britain against nuclear threats, or terrorism, or global warming”.

Just as history has a propensity to repeat itself, this same debate has been going on in the UK for some time. The late 1980s saw one of its episodes with the adherents of the so-called “new thinking” about nuclear weapons.¹⁵ With the Cold War coming to an end, the future seemed to many much brighter than it subsequently turned out to be at the outset of the 21st Century. To the well-known set of arguments on both sides – namely the supporters and the opponents of nuclear weapons - has been added the uncertainty of what the future holds in a world dominated by international terrorism. Hence the assertion of Mr. Hutton that, “we must protect the country from all threats. [...] It is the duty of the government to protect the country in an uncertain world. [...] ‘But we should not let our guard down against a future nuclear threat in such an uncertain world’”.¹⁶

THE UNCERTAINTY OF THE WORLD TODAY AND THE RELEVAMNCE OF NUCLEAR WEAPONS

The persistence with which British governments, regardless of their political roots, have adhered to a policy of nuclear deterrence can be explained on the basis of two major assumptions: firstly, during the Cold War, Great Britain was the only European partner to the Americans, whose weapons were pooled thereby contributing to the so-called US-British “special relationship”. Most British politicians believed that nuclear weapons served a valuable purpose in cementing that relationship during the forty-year period of global confrontation between the West and the Soviet Union from 1949 until 1989. Questioning the relevance of nuclear deterrent and Anglo-American collaboration was, therefore, tantamount almost to blasphemy. Nuclear weapons have been axiomatic to British security strategy, which meant that doing without them was unthinkable. As John Hutton asserted, “Our nuclear deterrent has helped to ensure our security and that of our allies for 50 years”.¹⁷

Secondly, possession of a nuclear deterrent marks the status of a country in international relations. In the case of UK, it is especially important to note the significance of this argument. Even though Downing Street will be reluctant to admit it openly, the UK nuclear deterrent is one of the few remaining elements of a regional power status that the UK is able to use to leverage its position in international relations. It is, arguably, the only element left that it can invoke that enables the UK to “punch above its weight”.

Analysis of the British defence white papers, especially those published after 1989, reveals a repeated *mantra* that Mr. Hutton asserted again on the 20 December 2008, “the UK would only consider using nuclear weapons in self-defense, including the defense of its NATO allies, and even then it would use them in extreme circumstances. [...] However, the government

believes it should take the decisions necessary to ensure our national security and, in the current security environment, that includes retention of a minimum nuclear deterrent”.¹⁸ “Extreme circumstances” and “minimum deterrent” are the key rhetorical elements in the verbal statements by UK senior political and military figures. In fact, these words, repeated by many on different occasions, have already become more or less established in British public discourse and have continued to have a life of their own. Even so, many academics as well as politicians question their relevance with regard to contemporary security issues in international relations.

According to the British government, the nuclear deterrent can be used in four general situations, namely:

- deterrence against aggression towards British/NATO vital interests or nuclear coercion/blackmail by major powers with large nuclear arsenals;
- deterrence against nuclear coercion or blackmail with other WMD by regional ‘rogue’ states;
- deterrence against state-sponsored acts of nuclear terrorism; and,
- as a general residual deterrent function to preserve peace and stability in an uncertain world.¹⁹

Nick Ritchie, in his article “Deterrence dogma? Challenging the Relevance of British nuclear weapons”, claims that the British nuclear deterrent cannot be used as a relevant tool for any of the purposes above.²⁰ According to him, “no major direct nuclear threat currently exists, and none has done so for at least a decade, according to the government”.²¹ Secondly, “nuclear use in the Middle East, North-East Asia or other regional conflict zones would be an

unprecedented disaster with massive humanitarian, political, environmental and economic costs, and deeply counterproductive to western political values and objectives”. Thirdly, “the prospect of deterring even state-sponsored terrorist groups that receive substantial support from a host country, and the credibility and utility of the threat, are questionable”. Finally, nuclear weapons “have no relevance to transnational and sub-national security threats, and they provide no solution to the vulnerabilities Britain and the West will face arising from the types of conflict and security challenges that will result from these diverse, interdependent sources of insecurity”.²²

The possession of nuclear weapons is considered a serious threat to international security, a condition also acknowledged by Mr. Hutton. As he noted, “we remain fully committed to the goal of a safer world in which there is no place for any nuclear weapons and continue to work hard internationally to achieve that goal”. This remains irrevocably part of the security dilemma, because one cannot seriously expect states, such as the United Kingdom or the USA, to disarm unilaterally when so many others, such as North Korea, Iran or Syria, already have, or would themselves like to acquire, nuclear weapons.²³

There is a further consideration that has to be taken into account in today’s world. What kind of advantage does nuclear deterrent give to a country in times of cyber wars? Technological development has always been at the very core of the Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA).²⁴ Recent examples from Iraq, or the 2007 Russian attack on Estonia’s official websites, are salutary examples of how important to national and international security the so-called Information Technology (IT) sector has become. With today’s system of internal communications based on IT technology, the national defense systems of every state and alliance

become ever more vulnerable and less secure. In such circumstances, it is no longer in the realms of science fiction to imagine that a nuclear power like the UK could somehow either lose control over its nuclear arsenals or become a victim of cyber attacks from outside with a relatively minimal input of logistics and finance.²⁵

NUCLEAR COERCION BY MAJOR POWERS WITH LARGE NUCLEAR ARSENALS

The end of the Cold War brought widespread uncertainty, shared by most states, about the future of international security. The former Soviet Union and its partners collapsed, leaving the West and NATO faced with an uncertain future over what was left of the *Imperium Sovieticum*. Three of the newly independent republics - Ukraine, Belarus and Kazakhstan - soon agreed to destroy, or return, all strategic nuclear warheads to the Russia Federation and to adhere “in the shortest possible time” to the 1968 Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty. In the first half of the 90s, the Russians were quite successful in blackmailing the West over nuclear deterrence on account of their own internal weaknesses. For that particular reason, many politicians, supported by prominent experts, adhered to the idea of treating the Russians with kid gloves with regards to its stance on democratic values, so long promoted by liberal democracies. The bottom line was the need for internal stability in Russia.

It is hard not to recognize that the West’s former adversary could not change overnight. Today, relations between Russia and major Western powers are still marked by a mixture of cooperation and direct confrontation. In the light of latest developments in the field of energy security, future relations between the West and Russia are difficult to predict. Though relations are currently generally friendly, it does not mean that Russian foreign policy towards what they

refer to as the “near abroad”, Central and Eastern Europe or Central Asia, will not be a source of future conflict. The US anti-ballistic missile shield project has revealed that the Russians have not fully shed their Cold War mentality and still think exclusively in terms of balance of power rather than multilateral cooperation on a truly international basis.²⁶ It has to be remembered also that the first Russian President and now Prime Minister, Vladimir Putin, explicitly plays on nationalistic cords when he talks about the future of Russia as a major power in international relations. In 2005, he went as far as to state that, “the collapse of the Soviet Union was the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century.”²⁷

As long as the Western states remain major powers (nuclear weapons being one of the most obvious correlates of their great power status) Russia will have to take them and their stance into consideration.²⁸ In this case, the nuclear deterrent serves as an *authenticating* argument in the short term, but could prove to be a useful tool should, for some unforeseeable reason, relations between Russia and the West deteriorated. “The overall long-term trend in relations with both (Russia and China) countries has been very positive since the end of the Cold War, current tensions with Russia notwithstanding”,²⁹ - but this does not mean that they will stay so forever.

As far as People’s Republic of China (PRC) is concerned, there is an impression that China is a rising military power without clearly knowing the direction of, or purpose for, that increase. On the one hand, Chinese party leaders acknowledge the leverage that nuclear weapons give their state; on the other hand, they seem to be quite unclear as to their purpose.

The extent to which a state “feels secure” is defined by its relative strengths and weaknesses. The claim that either Russia or China may fear a long-term containment strategy clearly clashes with the latest developments in the field of economic cooperation, the more so since the 2008-2009 global financial downturn. Cooperation in economic and financial fields does not mean that traditional calculations of the balance of power (also from a military perspective) is an obsolete concept with no relevance to contemporary international relations. As long as there is power, there will be the need to balance it.³⁰

THE PROBLEM OF “ROGUE STATES”

Even though the UK government does not often refer to “rogue states”,³¹ in principle they agree with the Americans that the term refers to any Third World state that either possesses weapons of mass destruction and/or sponsors international terrorism, or both. In addition, a “rogue state” is a foreign government that, in the view of the USA, does not abide by international norms of civilized behavior.³² This definition currently encompasses such states as North Korea, Iran, Syria, and Libya. According to what is generally known about “rogue states”, they are determined to develop or acquire destructive weapons, including potentially nuclear devices or weapons. It is assumed that their aims include, *inter alia*, countering a potential attack from the USA and justifying their leaders’ legitimacy among their populations.³³ “Rogue states” are not usually rational actors in international relations in the conventional sense of the word. Their internal domestic problems likely affect their foreign policies and make them both unstable and unpredictable.

One may question the possibility of the UK ever using nuclear weapons against any “rogue state”, since it would be irrational to carry out such an attack or sponsor any military action that entailed the use of any weapon of mass destruction (WMD).³⁴ On the one hand, the obvious lack of proportionality automatically excludes such an option, not to mention the 1996 advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice on the “Legality of the threat or use of nuclear weapons”, one to which the UK subscribes.³⁵ On the other hand, advisory opinions of the International Court of Justice are not binding from the legal point of view, since they only express an opinion.³⁶ Even if they constitute an element of “soft law”, it is still irrelevant to the matter under discussion, since the UK is least likely to threaten openly any other international actor with nuclear weapons. It simply does not have to. The sole fact of the *possession* of nuclear weapons speaks for itself, making the threat implicit rather than explicit. As Craig Snyder argued, it (deterrence) relies on the fact that nuclear warheads symbolize a potential to destroy the world as we know it, regardless of planning. In this sense, deterrence can be seen as being a relatively easy option, almost automatic, as long as a state has some deliverable nuclear warheads. The issue here is that no matter how impressive a strategy might be, would any aggressor risk even a small chance of its own destruction?³⁷

The problem lies elsewhere. The question of legality of the use of threat of, or the actual use of, nuclear weapons becomes irrelevant in the event of attack. This article, however, deals with a deterrence policy that addresses the question of how to prevent other actors from deciding to use WMD against UK. By addressing threats to international security, the UK, along with other Western powers, signals its willingness to escalate its actions, should an attack take place

and intensify, rather than specifically using nuclear weapons in the field.³⁸ In this case, the emphasis would shift to the *political* value of the nuclear deterrent, instead of its *military* one.

Here again, the problem of the effectiveness of the nuclear deterrent against “rogue states” lies in their irrationality for international actors. One might rightly fear that in the face of “extinction”, “rogue state” leaders might be tempted to escalate their actions and, when fighting for a “lost cause”, resort to the use of WMD. The fact that this has never happened does not mean that it could not or cannot. This again undermines the general deterrence posture of contemporary British nuclear weapons, rendering it an easy target for criticism, as long as the basic difference between general and immediate deterrence is not recognized. “In contrast to immediate deterrence, the promised retaliation is usually not directly connected to a challenge”.³⁹

Those, fighting for a “lost cause” usually want to maximize their goals or at least minimize their costs - a common characteristic of human behavior. Even if they think irrationally and are prepared to sacrifice their own and their countrymen’s lives, they still have to realize that ultimately antagonizing the US or the UK could, or even would, bring retaliation upon them, an act that would also ultimately annihilate their cause as well. In which event, they would achieve nothing. As contemporary history shows, none of them would be so utterly irrational as to use WMDs against Western powers. The argument that this is exactly why a nuclear deterrent is dispensable is therefore fallacious.

Conversely, it has to be noted that in contemporary international relations, nuclear weapons themselves do not work on a simple balance of power logic as long as they are not

backed by credible conventional forces.⁴⁰ This argument is well acknowledged by British politicians and generals.⁴¹ Conventional forces make possible the threat of destruction of a régime via legitimate, “usable” means, while offering the chance that the opponent loses the will to continue the conflict and does not escalate.⁴² The best threat would be not only to use conventional forces but also to stop short of the ultimate punishment of the adversary régime.⁴³ Both conventional and strategic forces therefore, are important means in the conduct of foreign policy and authenticate each other, as well as provide the basis of the political and military strategies of the actors.

Those who claim that the existence of nuclear weapons is a threat to international security are correct due largely to the nature of security, which to a large extent is subjective and greatly depends on states’ perception. For this reason, it is conceivable that at least some of the states that do not yet possess nuclear warheads may try hard to acquire them, thereby adding to the issue of the proliferation of WMD. In this respect, non-proliferation strategies - or régimes - are likely to continue to prove ineffective. Fundamentally, ‘non-proliferation’ is a diplomatic approach that attempts to prevent states from acquiring strategic nuclear weapons technology by promising them rewards and/or threatening them with sanctions. The post Cold War alternative to a non-proliferation strategy – counter-proliferation – also makes it evident that the proliferation of WMDs is inevitable. “Hence, a winning counter-proliferation arms control strategy should aim only at either a complete elimination of proliferation activity or the dismantlement of proliferated systems by all means, including the use of force”.⁴⁴ This use of force is all the more credible when it is backed by something stronger, such as nuclear weapons, even if they are not to be

used on the battlefield at least until the last moment when any possible danger from “rogue states” cannot be safely eliminated.

THE CONSTANT THREAT OF NUCLEAR TERRORISM

Like it or not, the world is a dangerous place, where the black market is a major driving force behind many types of human activity. This, unfortunately, does not exclude the nuclear field. According to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) 2008 Report on “Illicit Nuclear Trafficking”, there is a possibility that the seized radioactive material was only a sample of larger quantities either available for illegal purchase or at risk of being stolen.⁴⁵ The Report provides some significant data: “As of 31 December 2007, the IAEA’s Illicit Tracking Data Base (ITDB) contained 1,340 confirmed incidents reported by the participating states and a few non-participating states. Of these 1,340 incidents: 303 involved unauthorized possession and related criminal activity; 390 involved the theft or loss of nuclear or other radioactive materials; and 570 involved other unauthorized activities”. If the number of “incidents reported to the ITDB involved “theft or loss” or “other unauthorized activities” are compared over the years 1993-2007, an alarming, ascending tendency can be found.⁴⁶

This is not the worst news for the international community. When the case of Dr. Abdul Qadeer Khan, considered to be the father of Pakistan’s nuclear weapon, is taken into consideration the situation is even worse. It was Dr Khan who admitted that he had transferred sensitive nuclear technology to Libya, Iran, and North Korea. The US and IAEA are still tracking the network set up by Dr Khan, which includes a large number of countries and individuals. The task seems precarious, given that the Pakistan authorities still do not want to cooperate fully in

that matter. The country's economy is afloat only due to International Monetary Fund (IMF) loans, whilst Islamist militants threaten the security of the country.⁴⁷ No great imagination is needed to tell what threats are likely to emerge should Pakistan fail as a state.⁴⁸

British security decision-makers makers acknowledge this risk. The 2006 Defense White Paper of addresses the issue: "There is a risk that some countries might in future seek to sponsor nuclear terrorism from their soil We can only deter such threats in future through the continued possession of nuclear weapons. Conventional capabilities cannot have the same deterrent effect".⁴⁹ Nuclear weapons, however, cannot directly deter non-state actors, such as terrorist organizations or those states that decide to sponsor nuclear terrorism. In the view of this author it would be naive to suppose that any government would seriously consider using nuclear weapons in such circumstances. It would be mostly unsuccessful for the obvious difficulty of defining and locating the enemy, not to mention the asymmetry of the power capacity, potential damage and international outcry caused by possible massive loss of civilian lives. Nevertheless, the case of Israel clearly shows that a deterrence strategy works as long as it is psychologically credible.

The existence of nuclear stockpiles remains a threat to international security, but in today's world, unilateral disarmament by democratic states such as Great Britain, would only deteriorate the situation further. Such an action would strengthen "rogue states", relatively speaking, as well as give encouragement to terrorist organizations that would, no doubt, interpret it as the weakening of the West. US intelligence agencies already believe that the detonation of a "dirty bomb" – the use of radioactive materials - is almost inevitable in a major city within the

next five years.⁵⁰ The UK government agrees that such an attack is highly likely and could happen without warning at any time.⁵¹ The psychological credibility of conventional weapons demands some sort of *ultima ratio* argument. For people who do not understand anything else than sheer power, a nuclear deterrent remains the best tool that is most likely to make them think twice before finally deciding to attack any country or nation.

A GENERAL RESIDUAL DETERRENT FUNCTION TO PRESERVE PEACE AND STABILITY IN AN UNCERTAIN WORLD

As Nick Ritchie claims, arguments for the retention of nuclear weapons to be used in situations of extreme uncertainty rest on three problematic assumptions: first, the idea that nuclear weapons constitute a form of insurance; second, that general nuclear proliferation constitutes an immediate threat to the UK; and, third, that nuclear weapons are an essential tool for dealing with potential strategic threats to British “vital national interests” in a complex and uncertain world.⁵²

As far as the first assumption is concerned, it is claimed that, “What nuclear weapons provide is only some assurance of revenge, not insurance against attack, and the two should not be conflated”. Even if we accept the logic supported by the example of Argentina’s invasion of the Falklands/Malvinas, it still does not really reveal much about the nature of nuclear deterrent *per se*.⁵³ As such, any deterrence, including the nuclear one, is based on rationality. General Andre Beaufre defined the object of deterrence as to, “prevent an enemy power taking the decision to use armed force; put in more general terms this means compelling him, when faced with a given situation, to act or react in the light of existence of a set of dispositions which

constitute an effective threat. The result which it is desired to achieve is therefore a psychological one and it is sought by means of threat”.⁵⁴

There are basically two kinds of deterrence – general deterrence and immediate deterrence.⁵⁵ Both rely on a military power that has to exceed that of a potential enemy. A rational opponent, when outweighed in military power, will not engage in open conflict or war because potential reprisals. In fact, deterrence is based on psychological perception and credibility of “revenge”. It’s the notion of “‘revenge’ that makes rational leaders refrain from attack. Given that states are assumed to be rational in the pursuit of their foreign policies, the possibility of revenge turns into a form of insurance against attack. It is precisely the credibility of revenge that lies behind deterrence as a form of ‘insurance’. Even North Korea, despite latest developments in its nuclear program and the abandonment of the Six-party Talks, is still rational enough not to attack any other state or threaten to use its nuclear weapons.⁵⁶ In these circumstances, what should be taken into consideration is the question how to deter those actors that are not rational. One example would in that case be the 9/11 attack on the USA by an international terrorist organization against USA.⁵⁷

The second assumption addresses the argument that “there is no automatic connection between British nuclear weapons and the nuclear weapons or potential nuclear capabilities of other countries”. The so-called “general nuclear proliferation” presents an automatic threat to the UK but does also to the whole international community. If the argument, raised by many opponents of nuclear weapons, is that their sole existence makes the world a dangerous place,

then logically in the interest of the UK, as well as other nuclear and non-nuclear states, to eliminate the slightest possibility of WMD proliferation.⁵⁸

It is even more in the interests of non-nuclear, which express no desire to acquire such weapons, that those nuclear armed, democratic and stable states such as the USA, UK or France, retain their nuclear deterrent capabilities in the interests of a *common* international security.⁵⁹ As Lawrence Freedman puts it: “A credible threat of WMD from “rogue states” or terrorists might persuade the USA to intervene in some parts of the world, and for this reason it has maintained a full deterrent threat, even including nuclear use, to persuade potential enemies not even to think about such move. Thus far it has succeeded, although the occasions when this might have been tested have been few”.⁶⁰

The most problematic argument to defend would be the third assumption, according to which British nuclear weapons would provide a general deterrent against threats to its “vital interests”. However, there is the counter-argument that: “they (i.e. nuclear weapons) have no relevance to transnational and sub-national security threats, and they provide no solution to the vulnerabilities Britain and the West will face arising from the types of conflict and security challenges that will result from diverse, interdependent sources of insecurity”.

It is therefore necessary to take a closer look at the notion of what is meant by UK’s “vital interests”. Used by many as an all-embracing cliché, the term “vital interests” has lost its clear focus and seems more meaningless than meaningful. Drawing on the realists’ approach, we cannot disagree with the basic correlates of this term (i.e. national security – survival -

development). When talking about “security”, it is also necessary to bear in mind that it is not an absolute and that it is subject to a matter of perception. In a complex and uncertain future international environment, states will feel as secure as their perception allows. If any regard - and most do - transnational and sub-national security threats to the “vital interests” serious enough with regards to their ‘vital interests’, they will revert to any means at their disposal, including nuclear weapons.

According to Patrick Morgan, the logic of general deterrence “is to ensure that thinking about an attack never goes very far, so crises do not erupt and militarized disputes do not appear and grow. It is also used to avoid being coerced by threats...”.⁶¹ As security itself is, to a large extent, a neglected concept, the issue becomes one of questioning the meaning of security itself. In the internal and international affairs of states, most threats are indeed perceived as threats to national security strategies. It can be safely assumed, therefore, that it is in the “vital interests” of every state, including the UK, to work towards and develop a secure environment in which a threat of an attack never develops very far. Indeed, this is also in the “vital interests” of the international community as a whole and which can be guaranteed only by credible and effective means.

No one claims that a nuclear deterrent will, in these circumstances, be the best means to tackle the problem, for example, of organized crime. Organized crime usually comes hand in hand with weak or ineffective governments and is a potential source of many conflicts. In this context, nuclear weapons do not have any direct relevance to transnational and sub-national security threats. However, in the hands of stable democracies they provide international

community with a sense of comfort, resting on the *ultima ratio* arguments. They provide a sense of psychological confidence if a threat of attack were to go too far or if a crisis should erupt and escalate into open military conflict. In this event, a general deterrent based on nuclear weapons authenticates military and political power, and therefore plays a very important role in the preservation of UK's "vital interests" as well as international community.

CONCLUSION

This article supports the idea of the UK Britain continuing to retain its nuclear deterrent and rejects the arguments put forward by Nick Ritchie in his article, titled: *Deterrence dogma? Challenging the relevance of British nuclear weapons*. It has been the aim the author to emphasize the relevance of the British government's claim that nuclear deterrent threats are still relevant in the four broad areas to which it addresses: deterrence against aggression towards British/NATO vital interests or nuclear coercion/blackmail by major powers with large nuclear arsenals; deterrence against nuclear coercion or blackmail with other WMD by regional "rogue" states; deterrence against state-sponsored acts of nuclear terrorism; and as a general residual deterrent function to preserve peace and stability in an uncertain world.

Current developments seem to confirm arguments put forward in this article. On Sunday, 5 April 2009, North Korea launched its rocket, claimed to be carrying a satellite. However, not one country confirmed the arrival of the new satellite in space. The incident demonstrated two major problems: first, the Communist authorities in North Korea have generally disregarded the concerns of the international community, UN Security Council and its resolutions, as well as

pressure from the major nuclear powers such as the USA, China and the UK. The North Koreans have done so because they are aware that the major players would not stand together.

Hence, there is the second problem: Russia and China again refrained from issuing any tough and clear statement condemning the North Koreans. President Obama's hopes for a world free of nuclear weapons indeed remain just a dream. For as long as North Korea and Iran continue with their nuclear programmes, the USA, he said, "...will maintain a "safe, secure and effective" arsenal'.⁶² As long as one country adopts this strategy, there is little incentive for others not to do likewise. This, then, ultimately puts the US-Russian talks on reductions of nuclear weapons somewhat at odds. Further reductions might, on the one hand, encourage former rivals to pursue the goal of nuclear parity with the superpowers, whilst on the other, simply further undermine international security and prove counter productive.

British nuclear weapons are still important and very much relevant in all the four areas discussed above. First of all, they play a role of a significant tool of political leverage as they continue to serve as an authentication of British military capabilities. In that regard, they still function much the same way they did during the 'Cold War'. WMDs were, after all, a guarantee of their non-use, which does not mean that they were not useful. Secondly, it also authenticates the UK among its allies. Even though generally democracies do not wage wars with one another, they still have to face the challenges posed by non-democracies. In doing so, they need to support each other with the use of '*ultima ratio*' arguments in order to safeguard international peace and stability. The British nuclear deterrent should, therefore, be perceived as a general deterrent with a positive influence on international community and international security, overall.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ We mean here modern period of international relations, which is commonly referred to as to have started at the beginning of 17th Century with the Westphalia Peace.
- ² Booth, K. *Theory of World Security*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007, pp. 1.
- ³ Goldstein, A. *Deterrence and security in the 21st Century. China, Britain, France and the Enduring Legacy of the Nuclear Revolution*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000, pp. 222 - 223.
- ⁴ Even if we assume that the Canberra Commission was right in its claim that the nuclear weapons are needed only because other states possess them, it is paradoxically why nuclear states continue to possess this kind of weapons. It may look like a dead-end, one-way street from where there is no turning back. A 'vicious circle' of once adopted nuclear deterrence strategies means that the sole possession of nuclear weapons will make it unlikely for countries to get rid of them, which seems to have been proved by the latest developments in the field.
- ⁵ Scouras, J. "Post-Cold War Nuclear Scenarios: Implications for a New Strategic Calculus" in Cimbala, S. J. (Ed.). *Deterrence and Nuclear Proliferation in the Twenty-First Century*. Westport: Praeger, 2001, pp.58 - 59.
- ⁶ The White House, Washington. *The Agenda, Foreign Policy*. Retrieved April, 15, 2009 from http://www.whitehouse.gov/agenda/foreign_policy/
- ⁷ The White House. *The National Security Strategy of United States*. Washington, 2006, p. 22.
- ⁸ Ministry of Defence, *The Future of the United Kingdom's Nuclear Deterrent*. Cm 6994. London, Her Majesty's Stationery Office. 2006, p. 6.
- ⁹ Freedman, L. *The Evolution of Nuclear Strategy*. Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003 pp.464.
- ¹⁰ National Audit Office, *Ministry of Defence, The United Kingdom's Future Nuclear Deterrent Capability*. London: The Stationery Office 5 November 2008. Retrieved 16 April, 2009 from http://www.nao.org.uk/publications/0708/nuclear_deterrent_capability.aspx
- ¹¹ Prime Minister's Official Spokesman. 4. December 2006. *Morning press briefing from 4 December 2006*. Retrieved 16 April 2009 from <http://www.number10.gov.uk/Page10533>. It was also indicated that the submarine numbers might be cut from four to three, while the number of nuclear warheads would be cut by 20 per cent.
- ¹² Field Marshal Lord Bramall, General Lord Ramsbotham, General Sir Hugh Beach. 16 January 2008. "UK does not need a nuclear deterrent". *Times online*. Retrieved 16 April, 16, 2009 from <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/comment/letters/article5525682.ece>
- ¹³ *Ibid*
- ¹⁴ Hutton defends decision for £20bn Trident project. *North-West Evening Mail*. 20 January 2008. Retrieved 16 April 2009 from <http://www.nwemail.co.uk/news/barrow/1.501197>
- ¹⁵ Freedman, L. "Whither nuclear strategy? The End of the Road". In: Booth, K. (Ed.). *New Thinking about Strategy and International Security*, London: Harper Collins Academic, 1991, p. 75.
- ¹⁶ Hutton defends decision for £20bn Trident project. *North-West Evening Mail*. 20 January 2008. Retrieved 17 April 2009 from <http://www.nwemail.co.uk/news/barrow/1.501197>
- ¹⁷ *Ibid*.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid*.
- ¹⁹ MOD and FCO, 'The future of the United Kingdom's nuclear deterrent', pp. 5, 18, 19.
- ²⁰ Ritchie, N. Deterrence dogma? Challenging the Relevance of British nuclear weapons. *International Affairs*, Vol. 85:No. 1, 2009 pp. 81-98.
- ²¹ *Ibid*.
- ²² *Ibid*
- ²³ Even if by any chance, major military powers would decide to get rid of their nuclear arsenals once and for all, that would paradoxically pose even greater threat for international security, not only because the nature does not tolerate the state of void, but also because of the potential risk of this equipment leaking out of national control out there where there are so many willing to pay huge amounts of money to acquire it.
- ²⁴ RMA – Revolution in Military Affairs. See: Sloan, E. (2008). *Military Transformation and Modern Warfare*. Westport: Praeger. Latham, A. (2008). *The Transformation of War*. In: Snyder, C., A. (Ed.). *Contemporary Security and Strategy*, (2nd ed.). Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 118-135.

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- ²⁵ American administration seems to acknowledge such risks by establishing the office of Cyber Security Coordinator on 30 May 2009.
- ²⁶ Over the weekend of March 21 - 22, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov criticized the EU's Eastern Partnership, using such typical language and describing the pact as an attempt by the EU to spread its 'sphere of influence'. Retrieved 24 March, 2009 from: <http://www.euractiv.com/en/energy/putin-warns-eu-ukraine-pipeline-deal/article-180577?Ref=RSS>
- ²⁷ Retrieved 2 April, 2009 from: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/4481455.stm>
- ²⁸ "Both political and moral imperatives suggest that strategic nuclear weapons can deter only other strategic nuclear weapons". See at: Clarke, M. "Does my bomb look big in this? Britain's nuclear choices after Trident", *International Affairs* Vol. 80: No. 1, 2004, p. 57.
- ²⁹ Ritchie, N. Deterrence dogma? ...*op.cit.*
- ³⁰ From this perspective we should analyze latest ambiguous Chinese response to North Korean rocket launch on April 5. In fact China holds a significant leverage over the country, covering 80% to 90% of the regime need for fuel as well as supplying food and humanitarian assistance. See more at: International Crisis Group. "China and North Korea: Comrades forever?" *Asia Report* No. 12. Seoul/Brussels.2006.
- ³¹ In official documents terms: "Fragile States" and "Failed States" are used rather than "Rogue States". HMG, *The National Security Strategy of the United Kingdom. Security in an interdependent world*. Cm 7291. London: The Stationery Office, 2008, pp. 14.
- ³² About the origins of the term 'rogue state' see more at: Minnerop, P. "Rogue States – State Sponsors of Terrorism?" *German Law Journal* Vol. 3 2002 Retrieved 28 April, 2009 from <http://www.germanlawjournal.com/print.php?id=188>
- ³³ More on Rogue states: O'Reilly, K. P. "Perceiving Rogue States: The Use of the "Rogue State" Concept by US Foreign Policy Elites". *Foreign Policy Analysis* Vol. 3 No. 4 2007, pp. 295- 315.
- ³⁴ According to *The Sun*, Defence Secretary Des Browne, during his hearing in front of Defence Committee on 1 July 2007, said "Britain would blast a state-backed terror campaign with Trident nukes". *The Sun*, 7 February 2007. Retrieved 29 April 2009 from <http://www.strategypage.com/militaryforums/567-6379.aspx>
- ³⁵ Legality of the threat or use of nuclear weapons, advisory opinion at the request of the UN General Assembly', *ICJ Reports* The Hague: International Court of Justice, 8 July 1996, paras. 95 -97.
- ³⁶ This specific case is particularly controversial which is why five judges submitted their declarations individually; three of them submitted separate opinions and six of them submitted dissenting opinions.
- ³⁷ Snyder, C. A. (Ed.) *Contemporary Security and Strategy*. Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008, pp.145 - 146.
- ³⁸ The National Security Strategy of the United Kingdom. Security in an interdependent world. Cm 7291. *op. cit.* p. 31.
- ³⁹ Morgan, P. M. *Deterrence. A Conceptual Analysis*. Beverly Hills: Sage Publications.1983, p. 272-273.
- ⁴⁰ May and Speed: 1994, *op. cit.*
- ⁴¹ Hutton, J. *The role of the Armed Forces in protecting national security*. A speech to the Institute for Public Policy Research. Retrieved 29 April, 2009 from <http://www.mod.uk/DefenceInternet/DefenceNews/DefencePolicyAndBusiness/HuttonTheRoleOfTheArmedForcesInProtectingNationalSecurity.htm>
- ⁴² Morgan: Deterrence: A Conceptual Analysis, *op. cit.*
- ⁴³ Morgan, P. M. Deterrence. Now *op. cit.*
- ⁴⁴ Which is exactly what the authors of The National Security Strategy of the United Kingdom Security in an interdependent world mean by: dissuasion, detecting, denying and defending. See: The National Security Strategy *op. cit.*, pp. 29-31. Also: Perry, W. J. (1998). "US Counter-proliferation Efforts: Prevent, deter, defend" in. Schneider, R. B., Dowdy, W. L. (Eds.). *Pulling Back from the Nuclear Brink. Reducing and Countering Nuclear Threats*. London: Frank Cass, 1998, p. 275.
- ⁴⁵ International Illicit Trafficking Database (ITDB) IAEA information system on illicit trafficking and other unauthorized activities involving nuclear and radioactive materials Fact Sheet for 1993-2007. Retrieved 25 April 2009 from http://www.iaea.org/NewsCenter/Features/RadSources/PDF/fact_figures2007.pdf

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- ⁴⁶ Even though it largely depends on the reporting practice of certain states or non criminal activities, it still shows that there are vast quantities of nuclear materials out there not directly controlled by the governments, potentially available for non-state actors like terrorist organizations.
- ⁴⁷ It is difficult to estimate how much the nuclear market may be worth, but the sole nuclear weapons parts sold to Libya were allegedly worth \$100 million.
- ⁴⁸ Large supplies of nuclear materials would be more than prone to ‘theft or sabotage of nuclear items for demonstration or blackmail’. See: Frost, R. M. *Nuclear Terrorism after 9/11*. Adelphi Paper 378. International Institute for Strategic Studies. London: Routledge, 2005, p. 11.
- ⁴⁹ The Stationery Office *The Future of the United Kingdom’s Nuclear Deterrent*. Cm 6994. London, HMSO, 2006, p. 6.
- ⁵⁰ See more: “Terrorist CBRN: Materials and Effects”. Retrieved, 29 April 2009 from https://www.cia.gov/library/reports/general-reports-1/terrorist_cbrn/terrorist_CBRN.htm
- ⁵¹ *The Stationery Office (2009). Pursue Prevent Protect Prepare The United Kingdom’s Strategy for Countering International Terrorism*. Cm 7547. London, 2009, p. 28. See also: Smith, J. *Our shared values – a shared responsibility A speech by the Home Secretary*. 2009. Retrieved 29 April 2009 from <http://homeoffice.gov.uk/Speeches/sp-hs-terrorism-keynote-jan-08>
- ⁵² Ritchie, N. Deterrence dogma? *op. cit.*
- ⁵³ The fact that the UK did not use or even threaten to use its nuclear arsenals in the course of events of 1982 proves the fallacy of arguments presented. There was no ‘revenge’ and certainly no nuclear one. That is to say that every means of combat has its level of use and drawing on the principle of proportion of means it would be utterly irresponsible of British government to consider using its nuclear warheads in that particular case.
- ⁵⁴ Beaufre, A. *Deterrence and Strategy*. London: Faber and Faber, 1965, p. 24.
- ⁵⁵ Morgan, P. M. Deterrence. A Conceptual Analysis ... *op. cit.*, pp. 25 - 7.
- ⁵⁶ On the 25 of May North Korea conducted its second nuclear test, this time more powerful than the previous one in October 2006.
- ⁵⁷ On the problem of rationality and irrationality of actors with regards to nuclear deterrent see: Morgan, P. M. *Deterrence Now*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2003.
- ⁵⁸ This is the direction that the world is generally heading for, as far as PSI (Proliferation Security Initiative) is concerned. However, proposed by US in 2003, the PSI is still somewhat lame as long as nuclear powers such as PRC, India or Pakistan do not follow it, let alone Iran or North Korea. See: <http://www.state.gov/t/isn/c27732.htm>
- ⁵⁹ Drawing on that logic, many countries agree on “special status” of the above nuclear powers assuming their exceptional responsibility for international peace and stability.
- ⁶⁰ Freedman, L. *Deterrence*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004, p. 120.
- ⁶¹ Morgan, P. M. *Deterrence Now...op. cit.*, p. 80.
- ⁶² Many obstacles to Obama nuclear dream. Retrieved 29 April 2009 from <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/7984149.stm#graphic>