

Introduction

I am a former Royal Naval officer who served in submarines from 1961 to 1981. I commanded both diesel and nuclear powered submarines and was Commanding Officer of the Commanding Officer's Qualifying Course (aka Perisher). I was appointed 2nd in command (Executive Officer) – on two occasions in command – of the Polaris missile equipped submarine HMS Repulse (Starboard crew) between 1972 and 1974. Repulse (S) completed one missile test firing and 4 patrols.

During this time both myself and my two commanding officers were under the clear impression that the purpose of the nuclear deterrent was to threaten a 2nd strike in retaliation for a 1st strike by the Soviet Union. Come the end of the Cold War (c.1994) I fully expected Continuous At Sea Deterrent (CASD) patrols to stop and the now Trident missile submarine force (Vanguard class) to be stood down. When proposals to proceed with the replacement Dreadnought class emerged I took a close interest in the cost and justification. In the process I became aware that, when we had been on patrol in the 1970s, the UK policy for launch had, contrary to my (and many others) understanding, included the possibility of a 1st strike being ordered. As I had only served in the Polaris force on the understanding - checked and confirmed with my second CO; the first is now deceased - that we would not be so ordered, I undertook a deep study into the whole subject of nuclear deterrence and concluded (a) that the present policy of 'deliberate ambiguity' by a self professed 'responsible' nuclear weapon state is untenable in the light of both international law and moral leadership and (b) that the UK Trident system is no more truly independent than in Polaris days.

In the light of my experience as a former Polaris submariner and my subsequent research, I submit the following comments on the UK nuclear deterrent in answer to Question 2.

UK deterrence is not credible

For nuclear deterrence to be credible as a last resort all other means must have been exhausted. Thus 'all other means' must also be credible. The growing imbalance between nuclear and conventional forces can be attributed to the ever increasing cost of our Trident nuclear force – larger than any one of the three armed forces conventional budgets – which has now reached a point at which it is recognisably detracting from our conventional forces and has therefore arguably made UK deterrence, in the broadest sense, 'incredible'. The effect of inflation and growth on what appears to be a virtual blank cheque for Trident will inflict further significant damage on every aspect of UK's conventional defence capability; a capability which is increasingly likely to be involved in action with consequential damage and loss of forces already well below critical mass for a hot war and severely stretched to support a war by proxy in Ukraine.

It is often argued by those defending Trident that, if it were to be abandoned, the money allocated to defence would be commensurately reduced, quoting a Treasury statement of 1982. But if the Government were to make a clear but different defence strategy, it would be for the Government as a whole (not the Treasury) to decide on the level of resources to be allocated to this new strategy. To suggest

otherwise is to give Treasury officials power of veto over the Cabinet which is clearly unconstitutional. Furthermore, the House of Commons briefing paper No.7353 of 16 July 2016 states quite unequivocally (pages 6, 20, 21 & 53) that Trident is part and parcel of the MoD core equipment budget. As such the Chief of Defence Staff and the individuals heads of the three armed services are quite entitled to propose changes to defence priorities.

As the US is quite capable of fulfilling NATO's 2nd strike nuclear capability on its own there is a strong case for UK to redirect its massive expenditure on Trident into restoring its conventional forces. The Dreadnought project could then be cost effectively redirected into follow-on SSN and/or SSGN roles. Critics might argue that we should not be dependent on the US lest it reverts to an isolationist (from Europe) policy. If this is so then NATO should be much more fearful of not being able to field adequate conventional forces in the absence of the US which is currently providing Ukraine with roughly the same financial and humanitarian support as all other nations combined!

Adopt Policy of No First Use

Outwith any moral or legal consideration, I question why any nuclear state, whatever the provocation, would/should deliberately resort to First Use thereby provoking in return an exchange that would annihilate both sides' civil populations and render their opposing territories totally uninhabitable for decades, if not centuries, to come? It is of note that while NATO's possession of nuclear weapons does not exclude their First Use, this does not seem to have daunted President Putin in his rhetoric; such that there is a real fear he may launch a nuclear strike. Indeed, it would seem that it is NATO that has been self-inhibited from direct conventional force action for fear that it will provoke Putin into a nuclear response. As it is unimaginable that NATO would carry out a first nuclear strike there is nothing to lose and everything to gain by it adopting a policy of No First Use.

No such thing as 'Limited' nuclear war

Governments have sought to normalise tactical nuclear weapons by language referring to 'low yield' or 'dial-able' war heads. Public perception of them as weapons of mass destruction has thereby been reduced. This subliminally encourages acceptance of them as useable within a concept of a 'limited' nuclear war in which the use of one or two will not lead to the 'armageddon' that the Cold War threatened. However, there is no such thing as a limited nuclear war. It is a brave and foolish person who thinks that this would be limited. In very short order there would be an exchange which would bring on a nuclear winter that would cause a step change in global warming of unimaginable consequences never mind the extensive and lingering deaths by radiation dispersal. The concept of low yield war heads were introduced at about the time that battlefield war heads were withdrawn. It is not difficult to deduce that the two are related and lack of Government probity.

Lack of Civil Defence

Today when the Bulletin of Atomic Scientist's Doomsday Clock is closer to midnight than ever, it is ironic that there are no apparent efforts to provide civil defence protection or advice for the public at large as was the case in the 1980s. Does the

Government think there is no danger of a nuclear war – in which case why do they argue the need for deterrence? – or does it think there is no defence against the effects of one and the public must shift as best it can?

Need for more aggressive nuclear disarmament policies

The message arising from Ukraine, in which all-out nuclear war (whether by accident or design) continues to be a real and significant threat despite NATO's vast nuclear armoury, is that a much more aggressive approach needs to be taken towards total nuclear disarmament lest the opinion of the Rest of the World (ROW) that the nuclear weapon powers have no will or ambition to get rid of them is proved to be correct. No significant movement under Article VI of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty has taken place since atmospheric nuclear testing was banned. No wonder the ROW has caused the UN Treaty for the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons to become international law.

I conclude by referencing this article published by The Bulletin of Atomic Scientists:

<https://thebulletin.org/2023/04/the-british-government-doesnt-want-to-talk-about-its-nuclear-weapons-the-british-public-does/#post-heading>

It would seem the British public also thinks the time has come for the UK Government to listen, be more open and rethink the whole matter of nuclear weapons.

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