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Giving up is hard to do

By Robert Merkel
Posted Thursday, 18 January 2007

While the Cold War is long over, its remnants still permeate the world’s militaries. In Britain’s case, its four Vanguard-class submarines each take their turns patrolling, carrying their 16 American-supplied Trident D5 missiles, with a total of 48 warheads.

They, and their predecessors, the Resolution-class, have lapped the North Atlantic for 38 years. With a range of 12,000 kilometres, the combination of the Vanguard and Trident have given Britain the ability to rain down annihilation, within half an hour, on any location in Europe, Asia, Africa, or the Americas - Australia and New Zealand are pretty much the only places the Trident couldn’t reach directly from the Vanguard’s regular stomping ground.

While the Vanguards continue to circulate, returning to base only when their crews take a break, eventually their nuclear reactors will run out of fuel (yep, that’s right, they’re fuelled for their planned lifespan), their hulls will no longer be able to take the strain of deep water, and their various electronic doodads will break down so regularly that even Dr Who’s sonic screwdriver won’t be able to keep the ships running.

Vanguard itself will be first to hit the scrapheap, in 2020 or so, and the other three will follow within a few years. And while a new batch of nuclear warheads could be whipped up in a few months at the Atomic Weapons Establishment at Aldermaston, designing and building a new set of submarines will take a while. So a decision about what to do with Britain’s nuclear deterrent needs, at least according to the British government, is to be taken pretty soon.

Once upon a time, Blair himself, along with much of his cabinet, was a member of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament. And that was when the Russians were the “Evil Empire” with 10,000 warheads on hair-trigger alert, a fair fraction of which were pointed at the UK.

Surely now, in a world where that threat has receded, and the major threat to British lives comes not from identifiable states but by terrorists, who are impossible to target by means of nuclear weapons, the time has come for Britain to pension off its nuclear submarines.

Blair’s final legacy could be a shining example to the world - the first of the five NPT-declared nuclear weapons states to decide that its security is better served by renouncing nuclear weapons than continuing the largely pointless possession of them.

But that’s not going to happen. Tony Blair, and, importantly, Gordon Brown, have committed to beginning the process of designing the Vanguard submarine’s replacement. And while there are plenty in their own party unhappy about it, it’s going to happen, as the Tories strongly support it, and, indeed, their only question is whether the deterrent is large and scary enough. Only the leadership of the Lib Dems is quibbling, and, even then, their main quibble is whether the decision really needs to be taken now.

So why has Blair decided his swansong is to be the retention of a British nuclear deterrent? The arguments for the deterrent, and specifically building a new generation of submarines, is presented in this Defence White Paper:

Ballistic missile technology has also continued to proliferate and most industrialised countries have the capability to develop chemical and biological weapons. It is not possible accurately to predict the global security environment over the next 20 to 50 years. On our current analysis, we cannot rule out the risk either that a major direct nuclear threat to the UK’s vital interests will re-emerge or that new states will emerge that possess a more limited nuclear capability, but one that could pose a grave threat to our vital interests. Equally there is a risk that some countries might in future seek to sponsor nuclear terrorism from their soil. We must not allow such states to threaten our national security, or to deter us and the international community from taking the action required to maintain regional and global security.
And while the headline cost of replacing the Vanguard-class sounds stupendous at possibly £20 billion over 30 years, it works out to roughly 3 per cent of the British defence budget over that time - less, probably, given economic growth.

So, for a country the size of Britain, maintaining a nuclear deterrent is actually a pretty minor cost, even allowing for an inevitable budget blowout. And, through its 30 years of existence, continues to render Britain, and its western European allies, invulnerable to conventional attack, no matter what other nations do.

So, even ignoring the foreign policy take-us-seriously benefits of retaining a nuclear deterrent, you can argue that keeping missile subs is cheap insurance against, say, the Russians descending into an aggressive authoritarian nationalism as they currently threaten to do.

But if even the United Kingdom - led by a nominally left-wing government filled with people who cut their teeth on opposing nuclear weapons - in the most benign “conventional” security environment Britain has arguably ever faced, can’t face the prospect of giving up its nuclear capability, what hope of persuading any of the other nuclear powers? And what hope of persuading other countries that a nuclear deterrent isn’t a good idea when they remain such an effective (and comparatively cheap) deterrent against conventional military aggression?

First published on Larvatus Prodeo on December 12, 2006. It is republished as part of “Best Blogs of 2006” a feature in collaboration with Club Troppo, and edited by Ken Parish, Nicholas Gruen et al.

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