



British Nuclear Weapons: Culture, Change and Strategy

**University of Bristol
29 October 2015**

**ESRC Seminar Series (ES/L012944/1)
Reconnecting the Academic Community to British Defence and Security Policy**

This one-day workshop was the fifth in a series of seven ESRC-funded events on *Reconnecting the academic community to British defence and security policy: the 2015 Strategic Defence and Security Review* (ES/L001616/1). It took place on 29 October 2015 and was hosted by the Global Insecurities Centre at the University of Bristol.

Nuclear weapons have been a cornerstone of British defence, security and foreign policy since the early 1950s. However, the UK's fleet of nuclear submarines is coming to the end of its service life, and, if it is to be renewed, the manufacture of replacements must begin soon.

The UK government will make the 'main gate' decision to proceed with the manufacture of a Trident replacement – effectively committing the UK to nuclear weapons status for the foreseeable future – in 2016. At the same time, the rise of the Scottish Nationalist Party and the election of Jeremy Corbyn to the leadership of the Labour Party have introduced powerful anti-nuclear voices to mainstream British politics. In consequence, the decision on whether to retain the UK's nuclear status is perhaps more open and contested than it has been for many years. Arguments for and against Trident renewal centre around four main areas of debate: first, the strategic utility, or not, of nuclear weapons possession; second, their role in sustaining UK status and influence in the international; third, the moral dilemmas of nuclear weapons possession; and finally, the effective uses of resources during a prolonged period of government austerity.

The workshop took place under Chatham House rules. Those speakers mentioned by name in this report have given their permission to be identified.

British Interest, Identity and Nuclear Weapons

The workshop was organised into three panels addressing: British Interest, Identity and Nuclear Weapons; Old Concepts, New Threats?; and British Nuclear Policy.

Matthew Grant from the University of Essex opened the first panel with a *longue duree* view of the relationship between British national interest and nuclear capability. Grant argues that the impending Main Gate decision on the renewal of Trident is at least the sixth major decision on nuclear weapons in the UK, including the decision to develop nuclear weapons in

the first place, and the later adoption of the US-derived Trident system. The primary strategic dilemma in the current debate concerns the extent to which nuclear deterrence is still relevant in the distributed and fragmented security context of the contemporary period, in contrast to the Cold War when there was a clear adversary against which it could be premised. The strategic argument for renewal is premised on the uncertainty of this environment, particularly over a 40-50 year period. This timeframe is deliberate, and identifies a future that is sufficiently far away to be inherently uncertain, but also close enough to affect people or their children within their lifetimes. Even so, diplomatic and status arguments for renewal may be more important, particularly in relation to the UK's position as a permanent member on the UN Security Council and an important voice in non-proliferation debates. For Grant, decisions on renewal are unlikely to be made on the basis of moral arguments, but on the budgetary trade off between nuclear weapons and other areas of state spending, including health, education, and the armed forces more widely.

Jonathan Hogg from the University of Liverpool examined the relationship between constructions of British identity and the legitimacy of nuclear weapons. Decisions on British nuclear capability have in this sense formed part of the struggle to define the inherently unstable concept of Britishness. Hogg sees elite constructions of Britishness as creating a permanence and invisibility of the nuclear state, as well as resistance to radical change. The way in which these constructions are then diffused by the media reinforces the legitimacy of nuclear weapons as an artefact that collectively represents the British people, rather than a strategic or weapons capability *per se*. However, Hogg notes that these constructions have always been contested, including opposition to nuclear testing in the 1950s and the anti-nuclear campaigns of the 1980s. By showing how identities are constructed, he questions the legitimacy of nuclear identities, nuclear weapons and the arguments in the current debate that accentuate the role of the nuclear deterrence for British identity. For Hogg, nuclear identity is not only a dominant construction, but also an ideological one, the hegemony of which should not be accepted without question or challenge.

Matthew Harries, from the International Institute for Strategic Studies, argued that the UK is unique amongst the permanent five members of the UN Security Council in having had periods in which the major opposition party advocated unilateral nuclear disarmament. The UK has now begun the latest round in a series of debates over the renewal of its nuclear deterrent. A number of factors are at play, including pressures on government spending following the 2008 financial crisis; Russian military assertiveness; the debate over Scottish independence, including the fact that the UK's submarine fleet is based in Scotland; and the election of an anti-nuclear-weapons leader of the Labour Party, Jeremy Corbyn.

Old Concepts, New Threats?

Campbell Craig from Aberystwyth University began the second panel by questioning the current nuclear order, and particularly the assumption that UK disarmament can only take place in a wider multilateral context. Assessing various arguments for Trident renewal, he dismisses the claim that the UK has more influence in non-proliferation talks as a nuclear state as counterintuitive. He also argues that identity and employment-based arguments for

their retention are unpersuasive and unfounded. Instead, in the absence of immediate threats it is the inherently unstable nature of the international system and the abstract and unknowable nature of future threats that provide the main justifications for the UK deterrent. As it stands, nuclear weapons are strategically decisive and used to coerce and protect. They are easy to produce, to hide, and relatively straightforward to rebuild even once disarmament has taken place. For Craig therefore, conditioning UK disarmament on a wider global disarmament process is a red herring because the latter is both unrealistic and would lack resilience even if it occurred. Instead, UK disarmament debates should take place on their own terms and as far as possible against knowable and realistic criteria.

Paul Ingram from the British American Security Information Council (BASIC), and coordinator of The Trident Commission who published their report in 2014, examined issues of nuclear weapons utility, impact and risk in the UK case. The Commission argues that the UK is not ready to give up its nuclear capability due to specific uncertainties over Russian foreign policy, and because nuclear capability helps the UK to pull its weight within NATO. In contrast, they explicitly rejected Tony Blair's argument for nuclear weapons as a general insurance against an uncertain future, the idea that their possession reinforces Britain's status, military interventions and general global influence as well as the argument that nuclear weapons provide jobs. BASIC's stance is more explicitly anti-nuclear, with concerns over the future utility of Trident in the face of new technological counter-measures and a general lack of public (and elite) debate about the UK's nuclear capability. Where nuclear debate has taken place, this has tended to be party political in nature – particularly as a mechanism to discredit Jeremy Corbyn – rather than a broad and open debate on renewal on its own terms. There are risks that these tendencies could be intensified if the government were to hold the Main Gate vote prior to the Scottish parliamentary elections in May 2016.

Wyn Bowen from King's College London examined recent negotiations between the E3 +3 and Iran over its nuclear programme. He focused on the implications of the recently agreed Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) – to address concerns over Iran's suspected nuclear weapons aspirations – for the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and the future of non-proliferation. Since 2002-3, he argued that Iran has pursued an approach based on 'hedging' rather than an all-out pursuit of the bomb. It was argued that the JCPOA implicitly accepts Iranian hedging by allowing Iran to retain a limited uranium enrichment capacity and that Saudi Arabia may seek to pursue a similar strategy in response, particularly as the JCPOA has enabled Iran to re-engage with the international community while maintaining its latent nuclear capability. The emergence of a hedging race in the Middle East will pose a challenge to the to the NPT and international nuclear governance efforts, and it possible that hedging strategies could ultimately result in the actual development of nuclear weapons by these and other states. Bowen discussed the wider use of security assurances as a potential means to bolster the NPT regime in this context.

British Nuclear Policy

In the last panel, Nick Ritchie from the University of York identifies six domains of value for UK nuclear weapons. They have a domestic value linked to party politics and employment,

where parties want to appear 'strong on defence' and protective of British jobs; they have an ontological value by reinforcing an identity of Britain as a 'pivotal' power and key US ally; they have an institutional value whereby the nuclear-armed P5 enjoy widespread privileges in international institutions; they are seen to have a systemic value for producing international stability between major powers; they are seen to have a relational value as a deterrent in specific relationships including Russia, Iran and state-sponsored terrorist groups; and, finally, an operational value through which the UK is perceived as a 'responsible' nuclear power operating a safe and 'minimum' arsenal. For Ritchie, these values constitute a 'UK regime of truth' about nuclear weapons and nuclear disarmament efforts must concentrate on challenging these values assigned to nuclear weapons if they are to be successful. Some surface devaluation has occurred with the end of the Cold War reductions in the size and role of nuclear arsenals. However, a deeper process of devaluing will require a transformation of the political, strategic and military logics that support nuclear weapons and the practices of deterrence.

Paul Schulte from Birmingham ICCS responded by pointing to the idealist insubstantiality of 'devaluation'. He argued that like much academic discourse and NPT rhetoric, it failed to acknowledge that nuclear weapons were actually 'used every day, fundamentally shaping geopolitics, and signalling to avoid or manage crises. Key international security elites perceive contending, usefully calibratable, nuclear 'force fields' of inhibition, reassurance - or coercion. This limits the scope for changing the role of nuclear weapons, unless sufficiently influential constituencies in enough nuclear states could somehow convincingly demonstrate their permanent acceptance of the primacy and practicality of elimination or even 'devaluation'. However, there are no significant signs of this - as earlier panels had conceded. A 'Second Nuclear Age', involving widespread proliferation, hedging and nuclear blackmail, is more plausible, with growing indifference even to 'responsible nuclear stewardship' (RNS). Most obviously, an aggressively revisionist P5 member is conducting prolonged, hybrid aggression against an ex-nuclear neighbour, under intimidatory nuclear shadows, intensified by information warfare. Schulte pointed to what he perceived to be specific Russian nuclear threats, over Crimea and Eastern Ukraine, and even within NATO, against the Baltic states. Unilateral British disarmament, or 'devaluation' beyond RNS, would now increase unbalanced - and thus precarious - British and European reliance on American military capacity and commitment, discarding responsible 'moral burden sharing', undermining the credibility of joint P3 Alliance nuclear guarantees, and weakening inhibitions on further Russian adventurism.

The day's discussion was concluded by Kris Stoddart from Aberystwyth University with a number of observations of the British nuclear weapons debate. Stoddart highlighted the UK's role in NATO as the most important argument for retaining the nuclear deterrent. This, coupled with a strong British sense of tradition as a nuclear power, and government scepticism towards disarmament, means that it is likely that Trident will be replaced on a like for like basis. The only real threat to this outcome is economic, particularly if immediate replacement costs rise significantly.

Key Findings:

Taken together, the workshop papers and discussion explored in some depth current arguments for and against the retention of British nuclear weapons. The following are most likely to influence this debate and its ultimate outcome:

1. There are four main fulcra of debate around Trident renewal in the UK. The first concerns its strategic capacity to deter in the present and future security environment. The second relates to issues of British identity, status and influence in the international arena. The third concerns the moral dilemmas of nuclear weapons possession. The fourth relates to the effective use of resources during a period of government austerity.
2. In strategic terms, the debate hinges on a tension between the simultaneous complexity and uncertainty of the contemporary and likely future security environment.
3. Complexity arguably challenges the deterrence concept. The prevalence of non-state adversaries and transnational (often non-military) security threats raise difficult questions of who is to be deterred, or influenced, by nuclear weapons, and to what end.
4. Uncertainty can reinforce arguments for nuclear weapons possession. The re-emergence of state-based, perhaps nuclear-armed adversaries, cannot be ruled out, and it may be wrong to rule out a renewed significance for deterrence in the long term. This argument has been given greater weight in the wake of recent Russian military assertiveness in Ukraine and elsewhere.
5. Nuclear weapons possession is still seen by many within the establishment as a prerequisite for UK influence in the international arena, including membership of the P5 of the UN Security Council and the N5 of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), and in the UK's relations with NATO partners and the US. Nuclear weapons may also play a role in influencing the behaviour of adversarial (and allied) states in their strategic interactions with the UK. However, these claims remain fiercely disputed.
6. Conversely, there may be significant international moral and political capital for the UK in a conscious decision to abandon its nuclear weapons status. Such a decision could increase the UK's influence in the NPT and elsewhere. Wider moral questions of nuclear weapons use remain, given their capacity for devastation and the likely catastrophic risks of escalation.
7. The cost of retaining the nuclear capability has become an increasingly important factor in the debate, as government austerity policies sharpen choices about public spending in the short to medium terms, including vis-à-vis the armed forces more widely. Many argue investment in conventional military forces may be a more strategically effective than paying for Trident renewal.
8. Despite recent media attention, the nuclear weapons issue remains relatively low on the popular agenda in the UK, at least when abstracted from wider questions around Scottish independence or internal Labour party politics. The lack of debate around such an important question is concerning from a democratic perspective.

Policy Implications:

1. The current decision on Trident renewal comes at a time when the question on UK nuclear weapons possession is unusually open and contested, with implications and effects that will be generational in scope. The government should take this opportunity to encourage an open and serious public debate about the UK's nuclear status.

2. Government needs to be clearer about the trade-offs involved in any decision to renew Trident, particularly vis-à-vis cuts to UK conventional military forces. Such assurances should go beyond boilerplate discussions of deterrence and insurance policies and focus on specific questions utility and vulnerability, including lessons from the past and likely strategic futures.

3. The Trident decision relates to, and should feed into wider debates about who the UK's global role, the risks and burdens it is willing to take on in the international arena, and the levers it has at its disposal to achieve these goals. Government should make these considerations explicit in the wider discussion around Trident renewal.

4. Multilateral nuclear disarmament is unlikely in the foreseeable future. The debate about nuclear disarmament in the UK should therefore take place in this context and on its own terms, rather than as an action dependent on global denuclearisation.

Contact the Researchers:

Professor Andrew Dorman, King's College London
amdorman@btinternet.com

Professor David Dunn, University of Birmingham
d.h.dunn@bham.ac.uk

Professor Timothy Edmunds, University of Bristol
tim.edmunds@bristol.ac.uk

Oscar Berglund
Timothy Edmunds
14 December 2015