

Assessing the Contemporary Strategic Utility of Trident

British Nuclear Weapons in the 21st Century

Without fail, every single British government since the Cold War has espoused the strategic importance of the British nuclear deterrent, '*Trident*'. Spurred by the recent 2016 decision to renew Britain's nuclear capability, the following thesis will seek to examine how the British political establishment view the country's nuclear arsenal, and more importantly, Trident's value to the UK in its contemporary strategic environment.



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Introduction

“[...] the UK’s independent minimum credible nuclear deterrent, based on a Continuous at Sea Deterrence posture, will remain essential to the UK’s security today as it has for over 60 years, and for as long as the global security situation demands, to deter the most extreme threats to the UK’s national security and way of life and that of the UK’s allies [...]”

- Theresa May, 18th July 2016¹

Perhaps at no point since the Cold War’s end have nuclear weapons, and their role in interstate security, enjoyed such prominence in the media and the wider attention of the public. In only the most recent few years, nuclear weapons have returned to the daily news with a vengeance: the *Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action*, between Iran and the permanent UN Security Council members,* teeters on the brink of failure, renewing fears that Iran may restart its nuclear programme; despite unprecedented (*and seemingly convivial*) summits between President Donald Trump and Kim Jong-un, North Korea’s ICBM tests continue unabated; and perhaps most ominously of all, both the United States and Russia have, at the time of writing, withdrawn from the Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, ending over three decades of arms control measures between the world’s foremost nuclear adversaries.

This recent resurgence in the prominence of nuclear arms has not escaped Britain, which, despite owning the smallest stockpile of the original five nuclear powers,² has only very recently had to grapple with the issue of its *own* nuclear arsenal, and whether to preserve its possession of their

¹ United Kingdom Parliament, *UK Parliament: Hansard – House of Commons Hansard - UK’s Nuclear Deterrent*, Vol. 613, Division No. 46, (18th July, 2016), <<https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/2016-07-18/debates/7B7A196B-B37C-4787-99DC-098882B3EFA2/UKSNuclearDeterrent>>, [Accessed 22/02/2019].

* And Germany.

² Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), *SIPRI Yearbook 2018*, (Oxford University Press: 2018).

destructive power into the foreseeable future. Interestingly enough, despite polling over multiple years showing that public opinion on such weapons, their usage, and their possession, is a distinctly mixed picture,³ enthusiasm for nuclear armaments has remained remarkably high amongst the British political establishment: a 1981 parliamentary vote on whether to endorse the acquisition of the 'Trident' missile system passed with a comfortable margin of 61.⁴ The most recent vote on Britain's nuclear deterrent in 2016 - on whether to develop a new submarine fleet to continue carrying the Trident system - was passed by a landslide of 355 votes.⁵

With support for the possession of nuclear weapons firmly embedded amongst policymakers and legislators alike then, it is clear that Britain's nuclear arsenal is unlikely to disappear any time soon. Yet despite the apparent certainty of cross-party support, much less obvious is the continued appropriateness of such support in the face of Britain's changing strategic circumstances. The government's decision to acquire the current Trident system back in 1982⁶ makes some military sense in the nuclear proliferations of a Cold War context - but why the widespread support for renewing Britain's nuclear capabilities in 2016, a quarter of a century after the Cold War's end, and in a radically different international environment? More pertinently, as this investigation's research question asks: *what is the contemporary strategic utility of Britain's nuclear weapons?*

³ Statista, *Attitudes Towards Britain's Possession of Nuclear Weapons in Great Britain in 2013, by Region*, (June 2014), <<https://www.statista.com/statistics/310697/britains-nuclear-weapons-attitudes-in-great-britain/>>, [Accessed 21/02/2019];

YouGov, *Politics & Current Affairs: Public Split on Pushing the Nuclear Button*, (October 2nd, 2015), <<https://yougov.co.uk/topics/politics/articles-reports/2015/10/02/public-split-pushing-nuclear-button>>, [Accessed 21/02/2019];

Grice, A, *The Independent: Trident: Majority of Britons Back Keeping Nuclear Weapons Programme, Poll Shows*, (January 24th, 2016), <<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/trident-majority-of-britons-back-keeping-nuclear-weapons-programme-poll-shows-a6831376.html>>, [Accessed 21/09/2019].

⁴ United Kingdom Parliament, *UK Parliament: Hansard – House of Commons Hansard - Nuclear Deterrent*, Vol. 1000, Division No. 89, (3rd March, 1981), <<https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/1981-03-03/debates/262b17d2-b714-4a23-8955-29a2a4929020/NuclearDeterrent?highlight=trident#contribution-19742bf6-ec2-4233-a172-1b1f830b326c>>, [Accessed 12/02/2019].

⁵ United Kingdom Parliament, *UK Parliament: Hansard – House of Commons Hansard - UK's Nuclear Deterrent*, Vol. 613, Division No. 46, (18th July, 2016), <<https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/2016-07-18/debates/7B7A196B-B37C-4787-99DC-098882B3EFA2/UKSNuclearDeterrent>>, [Accessed 12/02/2019].

⁶ Stocker, J, 'British Nuclear Strategy', pp.64-69, p.66, in Fitzpatrick, M, et al. (eds.), *Nuclear Doctrines and Strategies: National Policies and International Security*, (Amsterdam: IOS Press, 2008).

Since the very advent of Britain's nuclear capability in the early years of the Cold War, this question as to the strategic value of nuclear weapons to Britain would be answered by way of a 'strategic triumvirate'. Although rarely referred to directly, this 'strategic triumvirate' is readily observable within decades of government documents and policy materials on the UK nuclear deterrent – a sort of conceptual model, it outlines how the possession of nuclear weapons is beneficial to the UK in three key areas: *militarily* (in the form of nuclear deterrence), *politically* (in ensuring close security and political cooperation with the superpower United States), and *systemically* (in shoring up Britain's declining international status after the Second World War).

Although it is debatable as to whether the nuclear deterrent ever really yielded the benefits to the UK as outlined in the triumvirate model, this thesis will deal directly with Britain's post-Cold War nuclear thinking – specifically, it will be hypothesised over the following chapters that despite the end of the very Cold War environment the strategic triumvirate was first articulated for, successive UK governments have continued, perhaps erroneously, to apply the triumvirate framework to debates on the worth of Britain's nuclear arsenal up to the present day. This continued usage of the strategic triumvirate in government discourse, especially its military aspects, has notably been observable in the lead up to the 2016 renewal vote in Parliament, in which government sources advanced the argument that such weapons remained militarily invaluable to British security. The debates surrounding the 2016 Parliamentary vote to renew Britain's strategic nuclear weapons should have provided the perfect opportunity to reassess the UK's strategic needs, and the role that such weapons play in achieving them – yet there is little substantive evidence of extensive consultation or investigation on these points in government materials. Although the arguments encompassed by the strategic triumvirate played a prominent role in these discussions, and no doubt exerted significant influence in the minds of Parliamentarians, there is little evidence of deeper reflection as to the accuracy of the triumvirate's application to Britain's contemporary strategic environment, and *why* nuclear weapons remain indispensable to the UK today.

Government Discourse, Context and Relevance

The central concern of this paper then is whether, a quarter-century after the Cold War's end, the strategic triumvirate model of Britain's Cold War thinking is still in play - and if so, how reasonable its application is as a justification for Britain's retention of Trident today. The parliamentary vote on whether to renew Britain's weapons in 2016 represents a watershed moment, marking the first time since the conclusion of the Cold War that the UK political establishment has had to decide on the relevance of nuclear weapons to British security. With the triumvirate advocating the nuclear

deterrent's importance and value to Britain *militarily, politically, and systemically*, this study will draw upon primary source material, largely in the form of government documents, in order to first identify these arguments, before then scrutinising the appropriateness of their application today in light of the wider strategic concerns that have been professed by the government. As has already been noted, it is hypothesised here that the triumvirate's continued application to Britain's contemporary context may be inappropriate, in that its core arguments may actually *contradict* successive governments' prioritisation of new threats and security trends that have emerged since the Cold War – trends that government materials implicitly acknowledge leave little purpose for nuclear weapons. Yet in order to address this hypothesis we must first explore the founding rationale of Britain's nuclear arsenal, and the reasoning that would come to form the basis of the strategic triumvirate that has so guided government thinking in the past.

The Cold War

As expected, the prime military consideration for Britain's nuclear force from its inception was the threat posed by the USSR, both in terms of its conventional military superiority and its own nuclear arsenal. Generally considered to be the first major strategic defence review of the Cold War era,⁷ the *Defence: Outline of Future Policy* or 'Sandys Review' is not coy in detailing who Britain's nuclear weapons were designed with in mind:

“... [although] *the Royal Air Force would, in the event of war with Russia, be able to take a substantial toll of Soviet bombers, a proportion would inevitably get through ... In present circumstances the only way to deter nuclear aggression is to possess the means of retaliating in time ...*

*Now and in the foreseeable future, the free world is almost wholly dependent for its protection upon the nuclear power of the United States. While Britain cannot by comparison make more than a modest contribution, she must possess an element of nuclear deterrent of her own.”*⁸

⁷ Taylor, C, *A Brief Guide to Previous British Defence Reviews*, (London: House of Commons Library, 19th October 2010), p.3.

⁸ (The) Minister of Defence, *Defence: Outline of Future Policy*, (London: Her Majesty's Stationary Office, 1957), p.4, [Emphasis added].

The Soviet threat would continue to feature first and foremost in the strategic milieu of British policymakers for the duration of the Cold War, including up to the adoption of the current Trident system in the 1980s, where the threat posed by Moscow features prominently in 1981's Defence White Paper (the *Nott Review*).⁹

As has already been noted, political and systemic functions also contribute to the strategic triumvirate, and these two additional key characteristics of the nuclear deterrent can be similarly observed within defence reviews and internal memorandums issued by successive government administrations. Although on the victorious side of the Second World War, Britain emerged from that conflict with its position of global pre-eminence mortally wounded – conscious of this diminished (and *diminishing*) power in the international arena, the UK would instead seek alternative means of ensuring its own security and augmenting its agency in the new, post-war world. Forming the 'political' arm of the strategic triumvirate, of chief importance would be Britain's relationship with the United States, now "so much the most powerful nation in the Western camp that our [Britain's] ability to have our way in the world depends more than anything else upon our influence upon her to act in conformity with our interests".¹⁰ This dependence on the United States was most marked in the military sphere, in which Britain, alongside much of the rest of Western Europe, relied upon the promise of American military might to defend against Soviet hostilities. Fearing that America could readopt an isolationist, "Fortress America"¹¹ attitude in relation to Europe and the Soviet Union, it was widely recognised among UK policymakers that a British nuclear capability would provide a minimal deterrent in military terms, but would also be much more likely to prevent Washington from leaving Britain "to fend for itself".¹² As acknowledged by America's own RAND thinktank, a British nuclear capability, however meagre, effectively placed "a British finger on the American nuclear trigger",¹³ thus ensuring that American military power had little choice but to concern itself with Britain and Europe's defence.

As well as providing such benefits in the military and political spheres, a British nuclear capability was also held to be beneficial to the country's wider *systemic* position – the final arm of the

⁹ (The) Secretary of State for Defence, *The United Kingdom Defence Programme: The Way Forward*, (London: Her Majesty's Stationary Office, June 1981).

¹⁰ (The) Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, *Anglo-American Relations* (Cabinet Memorandum), C.(58)77, (London: The Foreign Office, 10th April 1958), p.4.

¹¹ *ibid*, p.5.

¹² Bowie, CJ, and Platt, A, *British Nuclear Policymaking*, (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 1984), RAND/R-3085-AF, p.8.

¹³ *ibid*.

triumvirate. In order for Britain to maintain a unique position in the post-war international order, its ever dwindling military and territorial resources necessitated a deliberate strategy of 'interdependence' with the United States, and a leading role within international alliances such as NATO – a development that a British nuclear arsenal was hoped would cement. As Britain's Secretary of State would detail to the Cabinet in a then-secret memorandum, "our need for American support is a fact which we cannot ignore. It follows that our policy should certainly be to put ourselves in the position in which we can elicit from her the greatest possible support".¹⁴ Aside from the status enhancing nature of being only the third power to develop nuclear weapons then, the possession of nuclear arms, and the privileged military and political relationship with the United States that they helped foster, was thought to magnify Britain's international importance, even as its military, political, and economic influence crumbled with the loss of empire. Indeed, the way in which the unparalleled security relationship between the two countries acted as a systemic 'force multiplier' for the UK was explicitly acknowledged in British internal memorandums - "If we act alone our efforts and resources may not bring commensurate benefits. Acting with the United States we far more often get full value or even more for our efforts."¹⁵

Post-Cold War

Although references to the importance of nuclear deterrence are no doubt to be expected from Cold War defence reviews, its importance in the minds of the British political establishment scarcely seems to have been harmed by the demise of "the largest military power in Europe"¹⁶, Britain's Soviet adversary. Only openly discussing the military benefits of the nuclear deterrent, government discourse after the Cold War's end happily endorsed the suggestion that, despite the end of the Cold War era, the same underlying principles surrounding nuclear weapons and their role remained active in Britain's strategic environment.¹⁷ The best, and most high-profile examples of this narrative are surely

¹⁴ (The) Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, *Anglo-American Relations* (Cabinet Memorandum), C.(58)77, (London: The Foreign Office, 10th April 1958), p.4.

¹⁵ *ibid.*

¹⁶ (The) Secretary of State for Defence, *TheyWorkForYou: Army (Restructuring) – in the House of Commons at 3:31 pm on 23rd July 1991*, (23rd July 1991), <<https://www.theyworkforyou.com/debates/?id=1991-07-23a.1031.0>>, [Last accessed 15/04/2019].

¹⁷ (The) Secretary of State for Defence, and (The) Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, *The Future of the United Kingdom's Nuclear Deterrent* (White Paper), (London: Her Majesty's Stationary Office, 2006), p.17.

the periodic defence reviews conducted by various British administrations. The first defence review to specifically attempt tackling a post-Cold War strategic environment (1990's 'Options for Change') was intended to be the beginning of an ongoing series of assessments, examining the UK's changing defence needs and capabilities.¹⁸ Despite this, its suggestion that Britain retain its nuclear deterrent in the form of four Trident submarines¹⁹ appears to have become a cornerstone of government defence reviews ever since – certainly, each subsequent review since the Cold War's end has reaffirmed the conviction of successive governments that “an independent deterrent ensures [Britain's] vital interests will be safeguarded”²⁰ (*the 2006 review*), providing “the ultimate means to deter the most extreme threats”²¹ (2010) and “helping to guarantee our security, and that of our allies”²² (2015).

Despite each new review appearing to parrot its predecessors on the importance of the nuclear deterrent, however, further detail as to how these assertions have been reached remains scarce – there is little to no elaboration on the strategic analysis within each review itself, and the process is not usually disclosed to Parliament either.²³ When it comes to nuclear weapons in the post-Cold War era, deterrence theory, as far as the British government is concerned, remains king.

¹⁸ www.parliament.uk, *www.parliament.uk: Select Committee on Defence Eighth Report: The Historical Context - The Fall of the Soviet Union, Options for Change and Front Line First*, (10th September 1998), <<https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm199798/cmselect/cmdfence/138/13805.htm#note93>>, [Last accessed 15/04/2019].

¹⁹ *ibid.*

²⁰ (The) Secretary of State for Defence, and (The) Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, *The Future of the United Kingdom's Nuclear Deterrent* (White Paper), (London: Her Majesty's Stationary Office, 2006), p.05.

²¹ (The) Prime Minister of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, *Securing Britain in an Age of Uncertainty: The Strategic Defence and Security Review*, (London: The Stationary Office, 2010), p.37.

²² (The) Prime Minister of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, *National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review 2015: A Secure and Prosperous United Kingdom*, (London: Her Majesty's Stationary Office, 2015), p.34.

²³ www.parliament.uk, *www.parliament.uk: Select Committee on Defence Eighth Report: The Historical Context - The Fall of the Soviet Union, Options for Change and Front Line First*, (10th September 1998), <<https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm199798/cmselect/cmdfence/138/13805.htm#note93>>, [Last accessed 16/04/2019].

Old dynamics, new threats?

Despite the government's confidence that the underlying rationale of its nuclear arsenal remains sound, however, such reasoning faces significant and growing challenges from both the academic community, as well as from internal inconsistencies within government narratives themselves. Although far from the only challengers, perhaps the most significant questions are raised by nuclear revolution theory, alongside 'New War' theory as pioneered by Mary Kaldor²⁴. Nuclear revolution theory, for example, although accepting deterrence theory's fundamental premise - that the threat of mutually assured destruction has lessened the likelihood of conflict between nuclear powers - suggests that such weapons have alleviated the security dilemma between nuclear powers to such an extent that conflict between them is now highly unlikely, if not eliminated altogether²⁵. If this *is* indeed the case, then are Britain's nuclear weapons indeed indispensable, as the government's strategic defence reviews claim, by acting as a conflict mitigator? Or has the security dilemma between nuclear powers now been muted to such a degree that they can be done away with altogether?

No less problematic are the challenges to official reasoning presented by Mary Kaldor's concept of 'New War' theory. Although not a direct attack on established nuclear strategy, Kaldor's outline of an emerging era, where war and conflict are an increasingly pluralistic affair involving a range of both *state* and *non-state* actors, poses severe problems for proponents of the UK's nuclear capabilities. Specifically, Kaldor's thesis that conflict in the future will increasingly involve a broader range of participants, with an increased role for non-state actors, directly challenges the core logic of UK government discourse on nuclear weapons. Most obviously, if nuclear deterrence requires a centralised, state level actor as an adversary in order to work, then what use are nuclear weapons in an age of decentralised, transnational threats such as international terrorism? This inconsistency is itself a discordant feature of many of the post-Cold War (and especially post 9-11) government defence reviews, which although proclaiming the continued necessity of the nuclear deterrent in the modern international environment,²⁶ have simultaneously signalled a shift in the country's footing towards combatting such emerging threats.

²⁴ Kaldor, M, *New and Old Wars: Organised Violence in a Global Era*, (John Wiley & Sons, 2013).

²⁵ Walt, SM, *Foreign Policy: Rethinking the "Nuclear Revolution"*, (August 3rd 2010), <<https://foreignpolicy.com/2010/08/03/rethinking-the-nuclear-revolution/>>, [Accessed 23/01/2019].

²⁶ (The) Prime Minister of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, *Securing Britain in an Age of Uncertainty: The Strategic Defence and Security Review*, (London: The Stationary Office, 2010), p.5.

It is here that the hoped-for value and relevance of this investigation will come into its own. Government narratives on the UK's nuclear deterrent since 1991 have (as noted above) generally suffered from a lack of critical reflection, and increasingly appear beset by internal tensions between support for a nuclear deterrent, and wider strategic assessments that appear to offer little importance for nuclear weapons in the future. Although this subject *has* been the subject of scholarly investigation over the course of the past decade, the extremely recent decision in 2016 to commit to extending Britain's nuclear capabilities will provide this study with a topicality that was last achievable *thirty-eight years ago*, when the UK last made a similarly momentous decision regarding its nuclear capabilities, with the procurement of Trident. Most obviously, this thesis will be in a unique position to contribute to the existing field of research on the UK's nuclear deterrent, in that it is in a position to investigate the thinking that led up to the recent 2016 renewal – the first time since the Cold War that Britain has reassessed its need for a nuclear arsenal.

Methodology and Structure

In order to approach an answer to the overarching question of this thesis then, a number of considerations must be taken into account – the most pressing of which regards what is meant here by the term 'strategic utility', a working definition of which will be of central importance over the following chapters. Put simply, for the purpose of this thesis the term 'strategic utility' will mean the usefulness of Britain's nuclear weapons in achieving wider military, political and/or systemic objectives, especially those outlined by the government itself. This definition should therefore be sufficiently focused to assist a rigorous assessment of the strategic triumvirate, and its claims as to the strategic usefulness of Britain's nuclear arsenal, as well as allowing the necessary room to question the wider ramifications of the triumvirate's application to Britain's contemporary strategic objectives, especially in areas that government sources do not touch upon themselves.

Key to the application of this definition will of course be the source material used. Primary source material, the majority of which will be governmental in origin, will provide the bulk of that used to inform this investigation, with secondary sources (mostly from the academic, community) providing insight as to the wider theoretical and historical background. Primary government sources in particular form the core of this investigation, and those used here to determine British thinking regarding nuclear weapons include minutes, memoranda, the findings of parliamentary inquiries and committees, speeches and presentations to Parliament, as well as research reports from think tanks. Although these primary sources take a variety of forms, particular emphasis has been placed on the strategic defence reviews routinely published by British governments – although such reviews are not

exhaustive in nature (which is partly where other government material comes in), they provide reasonably comprehensive overviews as to the strategic priorities of the government that publishes them, including the means by which they hope to address such priorities. As such, although they do contain gaps that undermine their analytical value (especially in explaining how the government in question has identified such priorities – see the previous ‘Post-Cold War’ passage of this chapter), they offer a direct insight into governments’ wider military, political and systemic objectives, which this thesis will measure Trident’s strategic utility against.

Beginning with the Strategic Origins of Trident (*chapter 2*), which will outline the founding strategic objectives of Britain’s nuclear arsenal (and later Trident), this thesis will begin by establishing the origins of Trident and the core tenets of the strategic triumvirate. The thesis will then detail the use of the strategic triumvirate in later government thinking as to Trident’s role after the Cold War (*chapter 3 - Trident in the Post-Cold War Era*), before moving on to a critical discussion of Trident’s strategic utility in the past decade, specifically leading up to the 2016 renewal vote (*chapter 4 - Trident Today*). The thesis will then conclude with a discussion on the overall trends in government thinking regarding Trident (*chapter 5*), detailing how appropriate the concept of the strategic triumvirate has really been to understanding Trident’s worth today. Specifically, this fifth and final chapter will focus on evaluating the strategic utility of such weapons in Britain’s contemporary strategic environment, in the hope of answering this investigation’s core query: establishing the strategic utility of Trident, today.

The Strategic Origins of Trident

When the British Defence Secretary Michael Fallon stated (*twice*) in a January 2016 interview that the UK's nuclear deterrent had "never been needed more"²⁷, one wonders whether he was including the Cold War-era in his assessment or not. Certainly, at the time of Fallon's interview the UK was facing an international environment that would have been unrecognisable to the likes of Margaret Thatcher's government, which, elected amidst Cold War tensions and the death throes of détente²⁸, ushered in the very deterrent system ('Trident') to which Fallon was referring.

Although Fallon's somewhat brazen comments go further than the assertions made in most official sources, they reflect the continuous pattern of support that has emanated from British governments since the Cold War's end. In a world substantially different from the one in which Britain's nuclear weapons were originally created, this pro-nuclear stance has keenly proclaimed the continued strategic importance of Britain's nuclear arsenal in a post-Cold War era.

With successive governments maintaining that the dynamics of nuclear deterrence today have remained unchanged²⁹ since the development of Britain's existing weapons, and extolling their 'undiminished'³⁰ importance, we will therefore require an understanding of the origins of the UK's nuclear deterrent and Trident. Why were nuclear weapons considered necessary for the United

²⁷ Smith, S, *BBC News: Politics - Michael Fallon: Trident 'Never Been Needed More'*, (21st January 2016), <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/uk-politics-35376681/michael-fallon-trident-never-been-needed-more>>, [Last accessed 16/03/2019].

²⁸ Wallensteen, P, 'American-Soviet Détente: What Went Wrong?', *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 22, No. 1, (March 1985), pp.1-8.

²⁹ (The) Secretary of State for Defence, and (The) Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, *The Future of the United Kingdom's Nuclear Deterrent* (White Paper), (London: Her Majesty's Stationary Office, 2006), p.17.

³⁰ (The) Prime Minister of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, *GOV.UK: Oral Statement to Parliament - PM Commons Statement on Future of Trident: 18 July 2016*, (2016), <<https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pm-commons-statement-on-future-of-trident-18-july-2016>>, [Last accessed 23/03/2019].

Kingdom in the first place? And what were the circumstances that made the possession of such weapons, including Trident, so important? Answering these questions will both contextualise the founding rationale behind nuclear weapons in a UK context, as well as shedding light on the reasoning behind the acquisition of Trident specifically - which government sources claim the renewal system will inherit a direct continuity of purpose from. As such, the following chapter will begin by examining Britain's Cold War strategic environment, outlining the strategic functions that such weapons were conceived to fill; the second half will then discuss the specific strategic circumstances surrounding Trident, specifically examining *why* Trident was adopted according to the framework of the 'strategic triumvirate'.

Strategic Origins

Living in the Soviet Shadow

As a strategic nuclear deterrent, the UK's acquisition of the Trident missile system in the 1980s was inextricably informed by the prevailing strategic environment of the time. Sought as a replacement for the ailing submarine-launched Polaris system³¹, the introduction of Trident was no exception to the stark political and military calculations that then informed western security policies. With the UK already having been in possession of nuclear weapons since 1952 however, its acquisition of Trident was not simply a spontaneous response to passing, transitory circumstances – it was also heavily informed by the wider historical context of the Cold War era.

With the conclusion of the Second World War, and the disintegration of the wartime Allies into competing American and Soviet led blocs, Britain would emerge from the devastation of war firmly embedded in the 'Western' camp. Although few historical developments, if any, can be called inevitable, Britain's key position within the burgeoning Western alliance is of little surprise – not only was the United Kingdom heavily indebted in financial terms to the United States, and dependent upon American financial clout for its post-war recovery,³² but the British political establishment had (since

³¹ HM Ministry of Defence, HM Foreign & Commonwealth Office, *The History of the UK's Nuclear Weapons Programme*, (2012),

<https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/27383/Cm6994_Factsheet5.pdf>, [Last accessed 29/03/2019].

³² Reynolds, D, 'A 'Special Relationship'? America, Britain and the International Order Since the Second World War', *International Affairs (Royal Institute of International Affairs)*, Vol. 62, No. 01, (Winter 1985-1986), pp.1-20, p.8.

the early 20th century at least) been cognisant of a kinship in ideals and principles between the two nations.³³ More cynically, British diplomats were also acutely aware that Britain's own status as a great power in the post-war world order would depend upon a magnanimous relationship with Washington - as the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs opined in 1940, "*the future of our widely scattered Empire is likely to depend on the evolution of an effective and enduring collaboration between ourselves and the United States*".³⁴ With its ideological proselytization of political revolution, and its material support for anti-colonial movements around the globe, the Soviet Union (quite aside from its adversarial relationship with Washington, the de facto leader of the Western world) represented an obvious threat to British imperial interests – as such, "the British provided [the Americans] a valued network of bases, intelligence and indigenous clients which would assist in the global containment of communism".³⁵

Although the Cold War was global in reach, however, its most pressing and enduring implications for British policymakers would be much closer to home. With the emergence of what Winston Churchill christened "the Iron Curtain",³⁶ the European continent was *literally*, as well as politically, divided amongst the two superpowers – a division that would last for the duration. By 1954, two vast military alliances – the *North Atlantic Treaty Organisation* (NATO) and the *Warsaw Pact* – would subsume the majority of European nations into their respective spheres, with each on constant alert, ready for war with the other.

Strategic Rationale

With the world, and Europe, divided into two great camps then, how should such material, strategic circumstances have contributed to the British acquisition of nuclear weapons? And why the

³³ Reynolds, D, 'A 'Special Relationship'? America, Britain and the International Order Since the Second World War', *International Affairs (Royal Institute of International Affairs)*, Vol. 62, No. 01, (Winter 1985-1986), pp.1-20, p.2.

³⁴ (The) Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, *War Cabinet Memorandum: Grant of Air Facilities to the United States*, (July 18th 1940), WP (40) 276, <<http://filestore.nationalarchives.gov.uk/pdfs/large/cab-66-10.pdf>>, p.2 [p.78 of PDF], [Last accessed 31/03/2019].

³⁵ Reynolds, D, 'A 'Special Relationship'? America, Britain and the International Order Since the Second World War', *International Affairs (Royal Institute of International Affairs)*, Vol. 62, No. 01, (Winter 1985-1986), pp.01-20, p.09.

³⁶ Churchill, W, *Winston Churchill.org: The Sinews of Peace ('Iron Curtain Speech')*, (March 5th 1946), <<https://winstonchurchill.org/resources/speeches/1946-1963-elder-statesman/the-sinews-of-peace/>>, [Last accessed 31/03/2019].

successive decisions to maintain this arsenal through the procurement of new weapons, such as Trident? The best way to explain the function of Britain's nuclear arsenal in the Cold War decades, culminating with Trident, is as a kind of 'strategic triumvirate'³⁷ – one consisting of *military*, *political*, and *systemic* components.

The most obvious and best documented function, the *military* one, is the classic deterrent role that such weapons played "in the face of a much larger, hostile and nuclear-armed superpower, the Soviet Union".³⁸ In terms of conventional arms, Britain could never hope to match the military resources at Moscow's disposal, and the UK's valuable geographic position would make it a prime Soviet target in the event of an outbreak of hostilities; similarly to the Second World War, the British isles would offer an invaluable staging post for American forces streaming into any European conflict.³⁹ As the government's *Nott Report* of 1981 noted, "the crucial role this country plays in Alliance support, [is] as a key forward base in [an] emergency for land and air forces from across the Atlantic".⁴⁰ Relying only upon conventional arms alone for Britain's defence would therefore not be enough – the country's geostrategic importance might prove too tempting a target for a Soviet nuclear strike, especially if Britain had no means by which to threaten retaliation in kind. Without an independent nuclear capability, Britain would, so to speak, be the proverbial 'sitting duck'.

Although the primary military function of Britain's nuclear capabilities has always been the protection of the UK homeland, the advent of Soviet Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles (ICBMs) in 1959⁴¹ also reinforced the importance of an independent arsenal as a security guarantee for European allies and the wider NATO alliance. Prior to this point, in what was still largely a *pre-missile* era reliant upon freefall bombs, Britain had provided US strategic bombers with vital bases – bases from which they could fly "into the Soviet Union, and inflict atomic devastation. Though the Soviet Union had conventional superiority on the continent of Europe, the American bases in the United Kingdom acted

³⁷ Stocker, J, 'British Nuclear Strategy', pp.64-69, in Fitzpatrick, M, et al. (eds.), *Nuclear Doctrines and Strategies: National Policies and International Security*, (Amsterdam: IOS Press, 2008).

³⁸ *ibid*, p.64.

³⁹ Reynolds, D, 'A 'Special Relationship'? America, Britain and the International Order Since the Second World War', *International Affairs (Royal Institute of International Affairs)*, Vol. 62, No. 01, (Winter 1985-1986), pp.1-20, p.6.

⁴⁰ (The) Secretary of State for Defence, *The United Kingdom Defence Programme: The Way Forward*, (London: Her Majesty's Stationary Office, June 1981), p.5.

⁴¹ Eucom History Office, *This Week in EUCOM History: February 6-12, 1959 - February 9, 1959 -- The R-7 Semyorka Beocmes [sic] Operational*, (Feb 6th, 2012), <<https://www.eucom.mil/media-library/article/23076/this-week-in-eucom-history-february-6-12-1959>>, [Last accessed 04/04/2019].

as a powerful deterrent to any Soviet adventurism in Europe”,⁴² and to some extent provided a nuclear umbrella for the UK in lieu of its own nuclear arsenal. The emergence of the R-7 Semyorka class of ICBMs however, capable of hitting US cities, rendered the security guarantee of the American nuclear umbrella a questionable proposition. Britain and Western Europe had previously relied upon the deterrent effect proved by the US’ strategic bombers, safe in the knowledge that the continental US was out of reach of effective Soviet retaliation⁴³ – could the Americans still be relied upon to risk the destruction of Washington or New York, by striking the USSR in defence of London, or another European capital? That this was no longer the case was the sobering conclusion of British defence officials. An independent nuclear capability would therefore be needed, to provide the insurance policy that the Americans could not.

In tandem with their obvious *military*, or deterrent utility, Britain’s Cold War nuclear weapons have also served a less conspicuous – although no less crucial – political function, one that has been of great (*if largely unadmitted*) importance to successive British governments. Although militarily directed at the Soviet Union, “Britain’s modest deterrent capability could be no substitute for the US nuclear ‘umbrella’”.⁴⁴ As former British General *Hugh Beach* notes, as “the operational nuclear forces provided by the US are many times greater than the UK’s nuclear forces, what possible significant contribution could Britain make”?⁴⁵

Whilst Britain’s nuclear weapons have therefore provided a bare minimum level of deterrence against Soviet attack, their greater value has no doubt been as a tool of influence over the United States, and its much larger, more destructive arsenals (both conventional and nuclear). As a 1983 RAND report notes, “*the emergence of the United States as the preeminent world power at the close of World War II strongly fuelled British desires to acquire and maintain a nuclear capability so as to exert influence over U.S. security policy*”.⁴⁶ For British policymakers, “recent and past history had proved that the voice of any country in the military councils of an alliance was largely governed by its

⁴² Wheeler, NJ, ‘British Nuclear Weapons and Anglo-American Relations 1945-54’, *International Affairs (Royal Institute of International Affairs)*, Vol. 62, No. 01, (1985), pp.71-86, p.73.

⁴³ *ibid*, p.83.

⁴⁴ Stocker, J, ‘British Nuclear Strategy’, pp.64-69, p.65, in Fitzpatrick, M, et al. (eds.), *Nuclear Doctrines and Strategies: National Policies and International Security*, (Amsterdam: IOS Press, 2008).

⁴⁵ Beach, H, ‘Trident: White Elephant or Black Hole?’, *The RUSI Journal*, Vol. 154, No. 01, (February 2009), pp.36-43, p.38.

⁴⁶ Bowie, CJ, and Platt, A, *British Nuclear Policymaking*, (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 1984), RAND/R-3085-AF, p.76, [Italics added].

military contribution”⁴⁷ – although Britain could not hope to match, of course, American military might, its own nuclear arsenal would at least provide Britain with a modicum of independence from the Americans, and allow them a privileged say in Washington’s corridors of power;⁴⁸ Britain was only the third country, after all, to successfully develop nuclear weapons, and it swiftly catapulted the UK into an unparalleled position as a US ally.

Although any nuclear power in the Cold War demanded a certain level of international attention, a nuclear capable Britain provided the Americans with a close ally within NATO, with similarly destructive capabilities and similar interests – factors that, as Whitehall correctly calculated, made close military and political cooperation practically inevitable. Not only did such weapons prove that the UK would not be beholden to America’s atomic monopoly, they signalled that the UK pulled its weight in defence matters, and should therefore be coordinated with extensively, and have its interests accommodated.⁴⁹ To a large extent this strategy was remarkably successful - as former US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger has observed, “there was no government which we would have dealt with so openly, exchanged ideas so freely, or in effect permitted to participate in our own deliberations”.⁵⁰

Yet if, as has been discussed, one of the reasons for Britain’s acquisition and maintenance of a nuclear capability was the suspicion that US security guarantees could never be considered fully watertight, then what real point was there in the political arm of this ‘*strategic triumvirate*’? Although each of the examined aspects of the triumvirate are mutually linked, it is here that we come to the final strategic function of British nuclear weapons in the Cold War era: their compensatory, *systemic* function.

Bankrupted by the Second World War,⁵¹ and having already shed some of its most valuable imperial possessions (*most notably India in 1947*), Cold War Britain was a post-imperial power struggling to come to terms with a significantly diminished global role. In a new bipolar age of competing superpowers, and with the steady loss of its colonial territories around the globe, Britain’s

⁴⁷ Wheeler, NJ, ‘British Nuclear Weapons and Anglo-American Relations 1945-54’, *International Affairs (Royal Institute of International Affairs)*, Vol. 62, No. 01, (1985), pp.71-86, p.79.

⁴⁸ Bowie, CJ, and Platt, A, *British Nuclear Policymaking*, (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 1984), RAND/R-3085-AF, p.76.

⁴⁹ Stocker, J, ‘British Nuclear Strategy’, pp.64-69, p.65, in Fitzpatrick, M, et al. (eds.), *Nuclear Doctrines and Strategies: National Policies and International Security*, (Amsterdam: IOS Press, 2008).

⁵⁰ Kissinger, H, *Years of Upheaval*, (Boston, MA: Little, Brown & Co, 1982), p.282.

⁵¹ Howard, M, and Roger Louis, WM, *The Oxford History of the Twentieth Century*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p.194.

continued claim to global power status was increasingly tenuous. Chastened by the Suez debacle in 1956, which was itself a repudiation of Britain's post-war imperial delusions, the reality of Britain's decline could scarcely be ignored - indeed, the truth is that the country could ill afford such an active international role, and would need to drastically scale back both its expectations and interests accordingly. In a retreat that would dismantle its pretensions to empire, British forces would be withdrawn entirely from Jordan, and would be "progressively reduced" in Libya.⁵² In South-East Asia, a 1957 defence paper counselled, *Australia* and *New Zealand*, former British colonies themselves, would "assume an increasing share of responsibility for the defence of this area"⁵³ - the "responsibility for assisting ... in the maintenance of internal security" in British territories should be "increasingly assumed by colonial forces" anywhere it was possible to do so, in fact, so severe was the state of Britain's overreach.⁵⁴ This relative decline in global potency would only accelerate as the decades wore on: by 1975 the Wilson government had determined that British "commitments outside the Alliance [NATO] should be reduced as far as possible to avoid overstretching our forces".⁵⁵

Mindful of the importance that military power plays in global status then, and conscious of dwindling conventional capabilities, nuclear weapons have been widely held in British political circles to be essential to maintaining Britain's status as a 'great power', and a means of shoring up international credibility. As much as they represented a practical tool of defence, deterring any potential nuclear adversary and offsetting British deficiencies in conventional arms⁵⁶, such weapons have therefore also provided the political and military prestige necessary to demand a privileged international status, and remain in the front rank of world powers in the post-war order. The most immediate example of this function was the restoration of 'balance' to Britain's subordinate relationship with the United States, enabling Britain to carve out a position of limited independence in relation to the de facto leader of the Western world, and avoiding the ignominy of mere vassalage. Apart from ending the superpower monopoly on nuclear arms, the development of its own deterrent broke Britain's dependency on American security guarantees for its defence, and provided an alternative point of nuclear decision making, one that Washington simply could not afford to ignore.

⁵² (The) Minister of Defence, *Defence: Outline of Future Policy*, (London: Her Majesty's Stationary Office, 1957), p.6.

⁵³ *ibid*, p.7.

⁵⁴ *ibid*.

⁵⁵ (The) Secretary of State for Defence, *Draft Statement on the Defence Estimates 1975* ('The Mason Review'), (HM Ministry of Defence, 1975), Section 1, p.8.

⁵⁶ Baylis, J, and Stoddart, K, *The British Nuclear Experience: The Role of Beliefs, Culture, and Identity*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p.31.

In the words of Prime Minister Clement Attlee, who initiated Britain's post-war nuclear programme, "we couldn't allow ourselves to be wholly in their hands [...] we couldn't agree that only the Americans should have atomic energy".⁵⁷ His Foreign Secretary's assessment was even blunter: "*we've got to have this thing over here, whatever it costs [...] we've got to have a bloody Union Jack flying on top of it.*"⁵⁸ Quite despite its practical utilities then, there was a real sense that it was only right and proper for Britain to have such weapons, especially if others already did so – indeed, it would be unseemly for Great Britain, despite its reduced standing, to play second fiddle to Washington. An independent deterrent levelled the playing field, ensuring that Britain retained a favourable political and military position internationally, and would be treated on something approaching equal terms by its far more powerful ally.

Since the detonation of its first 'bomb', Britain's nuclear arsenal has also supported the country's wider ability to 'punch above its weight' internationally (a popular conception amongst UK politicians), offsetting the country's continued decline in relation to emerging powers in the international system. All of the five permanent United Nations Security Council members, for example, now possess nuclear weapons, and although Britain's membership of this key organ does not rest on nuclear capabilities alone, it is inconceivable that Britain could continue to justify membership of such an exclusive club without them, in the face of growing calls for reform. Certainly, with the ascendance of countries such as India over the past few decades, which is itself a nuclear power, and possesses a larger conventional military, landmass and economy⁵⁹, as well as a far greater population, Britain's claims to such a prominent position in international affairs would surely be untenable if the country were without nuclear capabilities. As such, aside from the interplay with Washington, Britain's nuclear arsenal has also acted as a kind of backstop over the decades, in the face of shifting global dynamics – such destructive capabilities necessarily render access to some of the highest levels of international decision making, regardless of a state's power by other metrics. Put simply, such weapons offer a minimum level of international influence, below which a country, declining or otherwise, is unlikely to conceivably slip.

⁵⁷ Baylis, J, and Stoddart, K, *The British Nuclear Experience: The Role of Beliefs, Culture, and Identity*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p.32.

⁵⁸ *ibid*, [Italics added].

⁵⁹ Centre for Economics and Business Research, *CEBR World Economic League Table 2019*, (London: CEBR, December 2018).

The Adoption of Trident

Although the above dynamics sustained Britain's development and retention of a nuclear capability throughout the Cold War years, and constituted a constant underlying presence, they do not explain the immediate environmental circumstances considered by the British government as it decided to acquire the Trident missile system in 1981 – considerations that post-Cold War administrations, as well as the 2016 government, would later happily invoke as “unchanged”.⁶⁰ How then, did this ‘triumvirate’, which represented long-term strategic trends, translate into the immediate, temporal factors that drove the Thatcher government to acquire Trident in particular? This is especially important to consider as Theresa May's government, endorsing the conclusions of earlier defence reviews,⁶¹ advocated the renewal of Britain's nuclear weapons capabilities in 2016 on the basis that the *same* strategic dynamics were at play then, as when Trident was first procured – an assertion that implies a degree of similarity between the two eras' underlying strategic conditions. In order to uncover the geopolitical challenges that likely compelled policymakers to adopt Trident in 1981, two key documents bracketing the Thatcher government's decision offer an insight into British strategic thinking at the time: the 1981 Defence White Paper (the *Nott Review*), and to a lesser extent its predecessor, the 1975 Statement on the Defence Estimates (or *Mason Review*).

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the threat posed by the Soviet Union, both nuclear and conventional, remained “at the top of the Government's priorities”⁶² at the time of Trident's acquisition. With the Soviets having invaded Afghanistan in 1979, substantially weakening the already crumbling spirit of *détente* between East and West that had begun in the early 1970s,⁶³ Soviet military power, and their

⁶⁰ (The) Secretary of State for Defence, and (The) Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, *The Future of the United Kingdom's Nuclear Deterrent* (White Paper), (London: Her Majesty's Stationary Office, 2006), p.17.

⁶¹ (The) Secretary of State for Defence, and (The) Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, *The Future of the United Kingdom's Nuclear Deterrent* (White Paper), (London: Her Majesty's Stationary Office, 2006).

⁶² (The) Secretary of State for Defence, *The United Kingdom Defence Programme: The Way Forward*, (London: Her Majesty's Stationary Office, June 1981), p.3.

⁶³ Njølstad, O, 'Chapter 7: The Collapse of Superpower Détente, 1975–1980', pp.135-155, in Leffler, MP, and Westad, OA (eds.), *The Cambridge History of the Cold War – Volume 3: Endings*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

apparent willingness to use it,⁶⁴ remained the key military concern in a period of exacerbated tensions. Even so, the strategic circumstances facing the British government at this time were difficult – 1975’s *Mason review*, conducted under the previous Callaghan government, had all but concluded that “the UK was not and could not afford to be a world military power within the Cold War”⁶⁵ international system. “Throughout the post-war period Britain’s economic performance” had “lagged behind that of her major European Allies”, with the country’s annual average growth rate “little more than half that achieved by France and the Federal Republic of Germany”.⁶⁶ Put bluntly, and reflecting a continuous post-war trend, the decline of empire meant that Britain’s economic base simply could not support the kind of military profile traditionally needed to play a leading global role – an extensive scaling back of Britain’s global military commitments was therefore envisioned, in an effort to cut back spending and obligations on resources that could be better employed elsewhere.

Although the subsequent Thatcher government would later scale back some of the budget cuts floated by the Callaghan administration in 1975, the armed forces would still, ultimately, face cutbacks in size, in an effort to ensure that the defence budget was spent to the best possible effect,⁶⁷ whilst simultaneously being “brought into line with available resources”.⁶⁸ Yet how could such reductions in military resources be squared with the Thatcher’s professed ambitions to “pull our weight in the Alliance”, “play our full part” and achieve the “restoration of Britain’s place in the world”?⁶⁹ Certainly, the rhetoric of the time suggests that the cuts to capability were not accompanied by a similar reigning in of expectations as to Britain’s international status – talk of global decline remained as unpalatable as ever.

It is here where we find that, although not openly admitted in official sources, the extension of UK nuclear capabilities with the adoption of Trident may have been a foregone conclusion, as each

⁶⁴ (The) Secretary of State for Defence, *The United Kingdom Defence Programme: The Way Forward*, (London: Her Majesty’s Stationary Office, June 1981), p.3.

⁶⁵ Taylor, C, *A Brief Guide to Previous British Defence Reviews*, (London: House of Commons Library, 19th October 2010), p.7.

⁶⁶ (The) Secretary of State for Defence, *Draft Statement on the Defence Estimates 1975* (‘The Mason Review’), (HM Ministry of Defence, 1975), Section 1, p.3.

⁶⁷ (The) Secretary of State for Defence, *The United Kingdom Defence Programme: The Way Forward*, (London: Her Majesty’s Stationary Office, June 1981), p.4.

⁶⁸ Taylor, C, *A Brief Guide to Previous British Defence Reviews*, (London: House of Commons Library, 19th October 2010), p.7.

⁶⁹ Thatcher, M, *Margaret Thatcher Foundation: 1980 Oct 10 Fr: Margaret Thatcher - Speech to Conservative Party Conference* (‘The Lady’s Not for Turning’) [‘The Reason Why’], (10th October 1980), <<https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/104431>>, [Last accessed 18/04/2019].

aspect of the aforementioned strategic triumvirate manifested itself in concerns of practical immediacy. The direct nuclear and conventional threat posed by the Soviet Union still presented a clear and present danger, and its recent adventurism in Afghanistan, along with a general decline in relations between East and West, ensured that a clear military case for a nuclear deterrent remained on the cards. Furthermore, acquiring Trident and maintaining the UK's nuclear arsenal offered the government an opportunity to make the necessary reductions in its conventional military forces, without unduly damaging Britain's ability to deter the Soviets or play a greater role in key international forums than the country's size and resources would normally allow. The benefit that nuclear weapons provided in being able to 'offset' reduced traditional forces was most obviously evident in relation to Britain's position in NATO - with "the UK's influence" reliant upon "a commensurate national conventional and nuclear contribution",⁷⁰ the scale of the Thatcher government's defence cuts would ordinarily have reduced British status within the Alliance considerably. Drastically reducing the British naval contribution, the Royal Navy alone would take 57% of expenditure cuts,⁷¹ and would also lose "approximately *one fifth* of its destroyers and frigates, *one* aircraft carrier and *two* amphibious ships, thereby further reducing the UK's expeditionary capability".⁷² These cuts, whilst simultaneously renewing Britain's nuclear capability in the form of Trident, "emphasised the UK's increasing reliance on its nuclear capability to counter the Soviet threat"⁷³, as well as to offset the diplomatic impact of its reduced conventional capabilities.

For perhaps any other country, such swinging reductions in capability and commitment would almost certainly relegate it to the periphery of Alliance decision making – yet despite emaciated conventional forces, the British deterrent still offered the ability to devastate Soviet cities in the event of conflict, a scarce capability within NATO, and its independence from the American security guarantee made it invaluable for European allies, thus shoring up British credibility within the Alliance. The adoption of Trident was, then, a pragmatic response to the intersections between the currents of the strategic triumvirate discussed earlier – as each of these currents remained very much in play, the retention of nuclear capabilities by the Thatcher government therefore seems sensible based on the prevailing strategic circumstances of the time.

⁷⁰ Dodd, T, and Oakes, M, *The Strategic Defence Review White Paper*, Research Paper 98/91 (House of Commons Library, 15th October 1998), p.14.

⁷¹ Taylor, C, *A Brief Guide to Previous British Defence Reviews*, (London: House of Commons Library, 19th October 2010), p.8.

⁷² *ibid*, [Italics added].

⁷³ *ibid*.

Trident in the Post-Cold War Era: 1991-Today

Having established the historical, strategic dynamics surrounding Trident's initial procurement in the midst of the Cold War, our attention now turns to the more recent, post-Cold War past. Whilst we have seen how historical circumstances (under the 'strategic triumvirate') made the acquisition of nuclear weapons a compelling choice for the United Kingdom operating within the Cold War international system, with such weapons serving strategic functions, what would become of Trident's role in an environment devoid of Cold War mechanics?

As has already been noted, successive post-Cold War British governments have continuously reaffirmed the strategic value that Trident provides to British security, and references to its importance as the "ultimate" guarantee (or 'insurance') can be found in virtually every defence review conducted since the Cold War's end.⁷⁴ Whilst it may well be true that the UK's nuclear arsenal remains the ultimate weapon in terms of sheer destructive power, and in the consequences of its use, it is unclear whether its privileged position is based on sound strategic rationale, however. Most obviously, since Trident first actually entered service back in 1994, the strategic roles that successive governments have accorded and valued it for, reflect a broad continuation of Britain's Cold War strategic triumvirate. Yet Trident's detractors argue that the strategic challenges that face Britain today, and which can be reasonably anticipated in the future, bear little resemblance to those that drove the Cold War procurement of such weapons.⁷⁵

⁷⁴ Dodd, T, and Oakes, M, *The Strategic Defence Review White Paper*, Research Paper 98/91 (House of Commons Library, 15th October, 1998); (The) Secretary of State for Defence, and (The) Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, *The Future of the United Kingdom's Nuclear Deterrent* (White Paper), (London: Her Majesty's Stationary Office, 2006); (The) Prime Minister of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, *Securing Britain in an Age of Uncertainty: The Strategic Defence and Security Review*, (London: The Stationary Office, 2010); (The) Prime Minister of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, *National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review 2015: A Secure and Prosperous United Kingdom*, (London: Her Majesty's Stationary Office, 2015).

⁷⁵ Ritchie, N, *Trident: What is it For? Challenging the Relevance of British Nuclear Weapons*, Bradford Disarmament Research Centre - Department of Peace Studies, (Bradford: University of Bradford, 2008).

Can the strategic logic of a weapons system designed for a previous age be carried over wholesale to the modern era, a quarter-century later? Or have such weapons instead found an alternative role, countering 'new' strategic threats that they were not originally envisioned for? Scrutinising strategic defence reviews, parliamentary debates, and other sources of government record, the following chapter will examine the evolution of the triumvirate and the nuclear deterrent's role in twenty-first century British security, as set out by policymakers in the two decades or so following the Cold War's end.

The Evolving Role of Trident?

With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Cold War's consignment to history, proponents of Britain's nuclear deterrent appeared to be left in a precarious situation – as we have seen already, the existence of such weapons in a UK context up to that point had been inextricably linked with Britain's Cold War strategic environment. With the removal of their founding *raison d'être* – the deterrence, and if necessary, *destruction*, of the Soviet Union – would such weapons now be obsolete? At the very least their role would need to be substantially reassessed, in line with Britain's place in the new international order in which it now found itself.

Despite the demise of the adversary they had originally been acquired for, the government's official stance in the wake of the Soviet collapse saw "a continuing need for nuclear submarines and to maintain a modern nuclear capability".⁷⁶ The disappearance of the Soviet threat from the UK's strategic horizons should have removed *at least* the military rationale of the 'strategic triumvirate' that governed British nuclear planning to that point, collapsing it as a concept - instead, despite altered rhetoric and new labels, the Cold War triumvirate that had hitherto exercised a guiding hand over Britain's nuclear thinking, continued to be visible in the country's post-Soviet mindset.

New Era, Old Excuses?

Following the Soviet Union's disintegration then, why have successive British governments continued to emphasise Trident's importance? And how has this emphasis represented a continuation of the strategic triumvirate that so led the UK to prize its nuclear weapons through the Cold War

⁷⁶ (The) Secretary of State for Defence, in *parliament.uk*, *Hansard: Defence (Options for Change) HC Deb 25 July 1990* vol.177 cc468-86, (25th July 1990), <<https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1990/jul/25/defence-options-for-change>>, [Last accessed 30/04/2019].

decades? The most obvious answer is that although nuclear war in and of itself no longer represented as direct a threat to British security as it once had,⁷⁷ Trident's supporters in government were able to cite areas in which the deterrent still appeared strategically beneficial, and which could be readily adopted into the pre-existing triumvirate of *military, political, and systemic* functions.

Upon the Cold War's conclusion, the most immediate of these beneficial areas was systemic in nature, relating to the kind of budgetary constraints that had been familiar to British cabinets since the end of the Second World War. These tensions, between Britain's international security commitments and its financial difficulties in meeting them, quickly began to resurface with the Warsaw Pact's demise and the cessation of East-West hostilities. Entering office in 1990, in a period of economic decline that would soon become a recession,⁷⁸ Thatcher's successor government under John Major was therefore keen to conduct a reassessment of the resources being allocated towards Britain's defence commitments – specifically with a view to reducing them, where possible. Luckily for Major, the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Britain's overriding security threat, provided the strategic breathing space needed to do so - “the end of the Cold War had heralded considerable talk about a ‘peace dividend’ at a time of economic slump. The MOD [*Ministry of Defence*] therefore found itself the prime target of the Treasury, which sought to reduce government expenditure where it could.”⁷⁹ As with 1981's Nott Review, cuts to Britain's conventional forces, this time of a larger scale, would almost inevitably follow: manpower across the armed forces would be reduced 18%,⁸⁰ the Army would be cut by a third,⁸¹ and a reduction in the size of the Royal Navy from “48 destroyers and frigates to 40” was swiftly implemented.⁸² For a cash-strapped Britain now seemingly relieved of the need for sizeable conventional forces, retaining Trident in a post-Soviet security environment would maintain

⁷⁷ Johnson, R, *www.parliament.uk: Memorandum from Dr Rebecca Johnson*, (2006), <<https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200506/cmselect/cmdfence/uc986-i/ucm0402.htm>>, [Last accessed 30/04/2019].

⁷⁸ Office for National Statistics, *Office for National Statistics: Trends in the UK Economy*, (2015), <<https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/economicoutputandproductivity/productivitymeasures/articles/trendsintheconomy/2015-02-27>>, [Last accessed 30/04/2019].

⁷⁹ Taylor, C, *A Brief Guide to Previous British Defence Reviews*, (London: House of Commons Library, 19th October 2010), p.10.

⁸⁰ *ibid*, p.9.

⁸¹ *ibid*.

⁸² *ibid*.

a fig leaf of power and credibility for a country whose regular military forces were becoming ever smaller in size, as noted by *The Guardian*.⁸³

It is likely of course that Trident by this point, not yet operational but nearing service, was simply too far progressed to seriously consider scrapping in reaction to strategic developments, even if there was a genuine appetite for this within the government and defence circles. Yet the decision to retain the incoming system, whilst simultaneously implementing sweeping cuts to conventional forces, more obviously reflected Britain's continuing reliance on nuclear weapons as a systemic counterbalance for diminished capabilities in other areas, hopefully offsetting the accompanying loss of international influence that would inevitably follow such limitations. This is especially important in a UK context, as much of Britain's post-war international influence rested on its military contributions to NATO, and the country's position within the Western alliance. Whereas conventional forces could (*at least theoretically*) be raised by any member of the Alliance, Britain's nuclear arsenal remained a rarity amongst NATO members – a quality that made Britain invaluable not only to its European allies,⁸⁴ but also the United States. Even with the looming threat of the Soviets removed from the picture, to have discarded such weapons at the same time as slashing conventional forces would undoubtedly have jeopardised the privileged position Britain enjoyed amongst its allies. In a unipolar era of unparalleled US power, and a rapid subsidence in the likelihood of great power conflict, the retention of Trident would allow Britain to continue playing an “outsized role on the global stage”,⁸⁵ and avoid fading further into international mediocrity, eclipsed in importance by emerging powers as geopolitical fault lines shifted.

Although the Soviet Union's collapse also seemed to relegate the importance of their classic deterrent role to an anachronism, the *military* utility of Britain's nuclear weapons remained very much in play post-1991, and would undergo something of a revival under the successive administrations of Tony Blair. The first strategic Defence Review of the Blair 'era' (1998) would cast the government's retention of nuclear weapons in a somewhat 'reluctant' tone, arguing that although “the world would

⁸³ The Guardian, *DATABLOG – Facts Are Sacred: Army Cuts: How Have UK Armed Forces Personnel Numbers Changed Over Time?*, (8th March 2016), <<https://www.theguardian.com/news/datablog/2011/sep/01/military-service-personnel-total>>, [Last accessed 02/05/2019].

⁸⁴ (The) Prime Minister of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, *GOV.UK: Oral Statement to Parliament - PM Commons Statement on Future of Trident: 18 July 2016*, (2016), <<https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pm-commons-statement-on-future-of-trident-18-july-2016>>, [Last accessed 12/05/2019].

⁸⁵ BBC, *BBC News: Trident Lets UK Punch Above Weight - US Defence Secretary*, (13th February 2016), <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-35566480>>, [Last accessed 01/05/2019].

be a better place if such weapons were not still necessary, [...] the conditions for complete nuclear disarmament do not yet exist”.⁸⁶ Despite this apparent shift in rhetoric however, Trident’s military role continued to be emphasised as the greatest value of the system. Officially described as providing a deterrence against other nuclear powers in place of the late Soviet Union, it is this that no doubt prompted the Blair government’s assessment that the dynamics of deterrence had not changed since the Cold War.⁸⁷

Although nuclear conflict no longer posed as grave a danger as during the Cold War then, the latent threat posed by other nuclear states meant that Trident would remain “a necessary element of the capability we need to deter threats from others possessing nuclear weapons”⁸⁸, in the words of the 2006 Defence White Paper. No longer faced with a monolithic conventional and nuclear enemy to deter, Britain’s post-Cold War administrations would instead argue that the Soviets’ disintegration gave way to a number of smaller, more dangerous adversaries. From the nuclear ambitions of ideological “hardliners and extremists”⁸⁹ in Iran, to the emerging threat posed by nascent nuclear powers such as North Korea,⁹⁰ the decay of the ‘old certainties’ offered by Cold War bipolarity⁹¹ left the UK facing a plethora of potential nuclear adversaries, where it had previously faced only one. The prospect of nuclear proliferation would lend Trident military purpose in this uncertain new age.

As a corollary to its primary purpose of defending the British Isles from these ‘new’ potential adversaries, the importance of Trident to the UK’s NATO allies would also continue to be touted,

⁸⁶ Dodd, T, and Oakes, M, *The Strategic Defence Review White Paper*, Research Paper 98/91 (House of Commons Library, 15th October 1998), p.31.

⁸⁷ (The) Secretary of State for Defence, and (The) Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, *The Future of the United Kingdom’s Nuclear Deterrent* (White Paper), (London: Her Majesty’s Stationary Office, 2006), p.17.

⁸⁸ *ibid.*

⁸⁹ *ibid*, p.5.

⁹⁰ (The) Prime Minister of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, *GOV.UK: Oral Statement to Parliament - PM Commons Statement on Future of Trident: 18 July 2016*, (2016), <<https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pm-commons-statement-on-future-of-trident-18-july-2016>>, [Last accessed 28/04/2019].

⁹¹ (The) Secretary of State for Defence, and (The) Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, *The Future of the United Kingdom’s Nuclear Deterrent* (White Paper), (London: Her Majesty’s Stationary Office, 2006), p.5.

providing an “essential contribution”⁹² to European security through collective security arrangements. As in earlier, Cold War decades, Britain’s possession of an independent arsenal enhanced “the overall deterrent effect of allied nuclear forces”: whilst “potential adversaries could gamble that the US or France might not put themselves at risk of a nuclear attack in order to deter an attack on the UK or [her] allies”,⁹³ Trident provided an overlapping layer of nuclear security that any rogue nuclear power would need to anticipate. This not only made a nuclear attack on the UK and Europe less likely, as defence sources would argue,⁹⁴ but no doubt also lent Britain greater diplomatic weight in European circles - although the Soviet threat was ultimately gone, British nuclear weapons still offered a fail-safe against questionable American commitments, commitments that might be even more in doubt now that Washington’s nemesis bordering Europe had dissolved.

Although always purported to act against the threat posed by *other* nuclear powers however, the military argument in favour of Trident would be significantly reinforced in government assessments by the security environment that would emerge after the 9/11 attacks in 2001. The emergence of well organised and funded international terrorist networks such as *Al-Qaeda*, and more recently ‘*ISIS/ISIL*’, represented a fundamentally “new threat”⁹⁵, and one in which the UK’s nuclear deterrent, although not directly intended to deter,⁹⁶ could still play a critical role in certain circumstances.⁹⁷ Specifically, in something of a departure from the limited, politically motivated terrorist campaigns of the past, these ‘new’ religious terrorist groups represented an existential threat to sovereign states,⁹⁸ and one that believes its “objectives can be advanced by inflicting mass

⁹² (The) Secretary of State for Defence, and (The) Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, *The Future of the United Kingdom’s Nuclear Deterrent* (White Paper), (London: Her Majesty’s Stationary Office, 2006), p.17.

⁹³ *ibid*, p.18.

⁹⁴ Dodd, T, and Oakes, M, *The Strategic Defence Review White Paper*, Research Paper 98/91 (House of Commons Library, 15th October 1998), p.31.

⁹⁵ (The) House of Commons Defence Committee, *A New Chapter to the Strategic Defence Review: Sixth Report of Session 2002-03*, Vol. 01 (HC 93-1), (London: The Stationary Office Limited, 2003).

⁹⁶ GOV.UK: *Policy paper: The UK’s Nuclear Deterrent: What You Need to Know*, (February 2018), <<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/uk-nuclear-deterrence-factsheet/uk-nuclear-deterrence-what-you-need-to-know>>, [Last accessed 06/05/2019].

⁹⁷ (The) Secretary of State for Defence, and (The) Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, *The Future of the United Kingdom’s Nuclear Deterrent* (White Paper), (London: Her Majesty’s Stationary Office, 2006), p.20.

⁹⁸ Berman, E, *Radical, Religious, and Violent: The New Economics of Terrorism*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2009).

casualties”.⁹⁹ With this being the case, the danger is that such groups may seek to acquire the relevant nuclear materials for a ‘dirty bomb’ or other type of nuclear attack. Although the likelihood of such scenarios may seem farfetched, government assessments have warned that “there seems little doubt that terrorist organisations could obtain the necessary materials for chemical, biological or radiological weapons”.¹⁰⁰ As “their record demonstrates a determination to kill large numbers of people”,¹⁰¹ a Defence Committee report observed, “we can see no reason to believe that people who are prepared to fly passenger planes into tower blocks would balk at using such weapons”.¹⁰²

Due to the daunting technological hurdles involved in planning and carrying out such a sophisticated attack,¹⁰³ however, it is generally presumed by the British government that a state level sponsor would be required at some stage of the process, whether in supplying materiel, preparatory facilities (such as labs) or technical expertise – there is therefore a risk, as an offshoot of nuclear proliferation, “that some countries might in future seek to sponsor nuclear terrorism from their soil”.¹⁰⁴ Although Trident is manifestly unlikely to exert any sort of deterrent effect over the genocidal mindset of such terrorist groups, and government sources acknowledge as much, the possibility of nuclear retaliation from the UK “should influence the decision making of any state that might consider transferring nuclear weapons or nuclear technology to terrorists”.¹⁰⁵ In this way, although conceived of a decade earlier to deter a hostile superpower with extensive nuclear and conventional arms, the strategic triumvirate could still be used to outline a key role for Trident in providing for the security of the United Kingdom, despite the radically altered geopolitical dynamics that existed in this new, post-Cold War world.

⁹⁹ (The) House of Commons Defence Committee, *The Threat from Terrorism*, Second Report of Session 2001–02 (HC 348–I and HC 348–II), (London: The Stationary Office, 2001), accessed at <<https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200102/cmselect/cmdfence/348/34802.htm>>, ‘New Terrorism?’, Paragraph 26, [Last accessed 06/05/2019].

¹⁰⁰ *ibid.*

¹⁰¹ *ibid.*

¹⁰² *ibid.*

¹⁰³ *ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ (The) Secretary of State for Defence, and (The) Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, *The Future of the United Kingdom’s Nuclear Deterrent* (White Paper), (London: Her Majesty’s Stationary Office, 2006), p.6.

¹⁰⁵ GOV.UK: *Policy paper: The UK’s Nuclear Deterrent: What You Need to Know*, (February 2018), <<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/uk-nuclear-deterrence-factsheet/uk-nuclear-deterrence-what-you-need-to-know>>, [Last accessed 06/05/2019].

Evaluating the Strategic Utility of Trident Today

Despite the demise of the specific, historical circumstances that compelled the UK to maintain nuclear weapons, and adopt Trident in the first place then, British policymakers since 1991 have continued to invoke the same underlying strategic dynamics that justified the nuclear deterrent throughout the course of the Cold War. Often, this has largely been achieved by switching out the late-Soviet Union for a new, wider grouping of 'other nuclear powers', shoehorning contemporary threats into a pre-existing model: their military function, for example, once meant to guard against the threat of Soviet ICBMs raining down on British soil, now purports to deter rogue states with weapons of mass destruction, or to dissuade such actors from passing their weapons to terrorist proxies. Similarly, in their 'systemic' role, Britain's post-Cold War retention of Trident reflects a pattern of continuity – nuclear weapons remain a prominent and highly valued resource, helping to lend Britain an importance in international spheres that would otherwise be endangered by its atrophied conventional military power, especially in terms of its status within NATO and its relationship with the United States.

To some extent, the effort to justify Trident's existence in the wake of the Cold War is understandable - although commissioned by Britain for a Cold War environment, and the strategic challenges that such an environment brings, the Soviet Union would collapse a full two years before Trident could actually enter service aboard Royal Navy submarines. It therefore made some sense, as both a face-saving exercise and in terms of strategic prudence, to retain the system, at least until the missiles or the submarines carrying them reached the end of their natural shelf life; scrapping them immediately upon entering service would be an embarrassing waste of time and money, and although the greatest threat on Britain's radar had disappeared, the shape of the emerging post-Cold War order (and the threats it might contain) had yet to fully reveal itself.

Yet by the time that Parliament, encouraged by Theresa May's government, voted to maintain Britain's Trident weapons in 2016, more than twenty years had passed since Trident first entered service. With such a significant amount of time having now passed since the Cold War's end, and with Britain's nuclear capability up for review, this should have presented an excellent point at which to scrutinise the role that such weapons actually play in relation to British security. We have already seen

how the key pillars of the strategic triumvirate, which has directed so much of successive governments' thinking on nuclear weapons, has been adapted to fit the decade or so immediately following the end of the Cold War. Yet even taking into account these changes, and looking at Trident's purported objectives and the international environment that Britain finds itself in today, does Trident really offer any strategic value as outlined by the strategic triumvirate?

Trident 'Today' – Trident's Value under Cameron and May

In the government's own words then, what are the 'official' roles of the British nuclear deterrent, *Trident*, today? Although the exact phrasing varies depending on the source, it is possible to identify three core functions of Trident today, based upon material published by the government – the 2015 *Strategic Security Review*, the inaugural address by the current Prime Minister, *Theresa May*, to the House of Common in 2016, and the information provided on government web pages devoted specifically to the UK's nuclear deterrent. These key roles, which various contemporary government sources refer to, can be identified as follows:

1. Deterring attacks by hostile nuclear/conventional powers on the United Kingdom today;¹⁰⁶
2. Deterring potential nuclear threats to NATO or UK allies, now or in the future;¹⁰⁷
3. Dissuading hostile powers from sponsoring acts of nuclear terrorism on UK soil.^{108 109}

As can be seen from the above, each of these three key functions articulated in government discourse is an explicitly *military* function, in terms of where they would fall in the strategic

¹⁰⁶ (The) Prime Minister of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, *National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review 2015: A Secure and Prosperous United Kingdom*, (London: Her Majesty's Stationary Office, 2015).

¹⁰⁷ GOV.UK: *Policy paper: The UK's Nuclear Deterrent: What You Need to Know*, (February 2018), <<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/uk-nuclear-deterrence-factsheet/uk-nuclear-deterrence-what-you-need-to-know>>, [Last accessed 27/04/2019].

¹⁰⁸ *ibid.*

¹⁰⁹ (The) Prime Minister of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, *GOV.UK: Oral Statement to Parliament - PM Commons Statement on Future of Trident: 18 July 2016*, (2016), <<https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pm-commons-statement-on-future-of-trident-18-july-2016>>, [Last accessed 28/04/2019].

triumvirate. Yet we have also seen that Britain's nuclear deterrent, and Trident in particular, is not retained solely for an expressly military purpose – to that end, although never publicised in government defence documents discussing Trident, we can use other primary sources, such as parliamentary Defence Committee reports,¹¹⁰ to reasonably infer that the below are also perceived by contemporary policymakers to be benefits of Trident:

4. Continuing to maintain close military/intelligence/political cooperation with the United States (*political*);
5. Preserving the UK's international status as a world power (*systemic*)

In order to answer the overarching question of this thesis – identifying the contemporary strategic utility of Trident – these purported roles and benefits of Trident will now be assessed in light of Britain's contemporary strategic environment, with specific reference to their place in the strategic triumvirate.

The Military Utility of Trident – The Abstraction of Deterrence

As has been noted above, the only explicitly recognised roles of the Trident system in government defence reviews, policy statements and presentations, are military in nature. These key roles – deterring hostile powers from attacking the UK and its NATO allies, or from sponsoring nuclear terrorism against the UK – all essentially continue the tradition of Trident as exerting a deterrent function against external threats and the possibility of attack.

Regardless of the state in question, the suggestion that Trident offers any sort of influence in deterring attack from other (especially nuclear) powers rests on a number of questionable assumptions. Most obvious amongst these assumptions is the underlying question of rationality that underpins classic notions of nuclear deterrence – that potential adversaries will recognise that the potential *costs* of engaging a nuclear armed power, far outweigh any potential *benefits* of doing so. “The essence of deterrence” is quite literally “the creation of a state of mind in the enemy which

¹¹⁰ (The) House of Commons Defence Committee, *The Future of the UK's Strategic Nuclear Deterrent: The White Paper*, Ninth Report of Session 2006–07, Volume II: Oral and written evidence, Report HC 225-II, (London: The Stationary Office Limited, 2007), ev.126.

prevents the enemy's aggressive actions due to the fear of the consequences".¹¹¹ This assumption - that states constitute 'rational actors', and make rational decisions - is a bold one, and is fundamental to the workability of deterrence as a concept; remove rationality from the equation, and deterrence fails. The argument of rationality does, on the surface, seem convincing of course – it is obviously hard to imagine that any actor, state or otherwise, would wish to take a course of action that could perceivably risk a nuclear exchange; the stakes are simply too high. Yet in exhorting Trident's function as a military 'deterrent', the government is directly asserting the rationality of potential adversaries.

Implicit in this assumption of rationality then is the suggestion that other states would be more likely to attack the United Kingdom if it *did not* possess nuclear weapons. In both a logical and practical sense, this assumption that Trident is the defining factor preventing foreign aggression is highly misleading – “the very nature of deterrence is such that it cannot be demonstrated to work”¹¹², and “we cannot verify that it is deterrence rather than other factors” that have prevented war between the world's nuclear powers.¹¹³ In short, the fact that the UK has not been attacked since it has held Trident missiles should not be taken to imply causality. Certainly, nuclear weapons have failed to prevent conventional conflict breaking out between India and Pakistan in Kashmir. With this in mind, the only sensible conclusion that can be arrived at, is that the link between deterrence and conflict avoidance is circumstantial at best - it is therefore perplexing that the British government consistently refers to Trident as a deterrent against “the most extreme threats to our national security and way of life”¹¹⁴, a confidence that is epistemically indefensible.

If Trident's value as a 'deterrent' suffers from notable deficiencies at the more abstract, theoretical level then, it is additionally unclear whom exactly Trident deters against, and under what circumstances (short of a total-war scenario) it would be brought to bear in a crisis. Recent Strategic Security Reviews conducted by the government list the deterrence of a “low probability but very high impact risk of a large-scale military attack by another state”,¹¹⁵ on the UK or its NATO allies, as chief amongst Trident's military functions. This key duty, previously eclipsed somewhat in importance

¹¹¹ Marullo, S, 'The Ideological Nature of Nuclear Deterrence: Some Causes and Consequences', *The Sociological Quarterly*, Vol. 26, No. 3, (Autumn 1985), pp. 311-330, p.312.

¹¹² *ibid*, p.318.

¹¹³ *ibid*.

¹¹⁴ (The) Prime Minister of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, *National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review 2015: A Secure and Prosperous United Kingdom*, (London: Her Majesty's Stationary Office, 2015), p.34.

¹¹⁵ (The) Prime Minister of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, *Securing Britain in an Age of Uncertainty: The Strategic Defence and Security Review*, (London: The Stationary Office, 2010), p.10.

during the War on Terror years by the focus on threats from non-state actors, has undergone a something of a renaissance in recent years thanks to what the 2015 Strategic Security Review refers to as a “resurgence of state-based threats”.¹¹⁶ Specifically citing the likes of North Korea’s continued nuclear testing, such sources more prominently identify *Russia* as returning to the fore of British deterrence concerns – as Theresa May herself stated in her maiden address to Parliament, “the threats from countries like Russia and North Korea remain very real”¹¹⁷, an assessment fuelled by Russian efforts to “modernise and upgrade its military, including its nuclear forces”, its increasingly regular “nuclear exercises and rhetoric, with threats to base nuclear forces in Kaliningrad and Crimea”, and “its military activity around the territory of our Allies, and close to UK airspace and territorial waters”.¹¹⁸

Yet the nature of contemporary grievances between Russia and the West largely revolve around territorial questions, and perceived NATO and EU encroachment further into Russia’s traditional ‘sphere of influence’ in Eastern Europe.¹¹⁹ Tensions, such as those surrounding Russia’s seizure of Crimea in 2014, if they ever do blossom into direct conflict between Russia and NATO, will likely be highly localised in nature, with conventional forces predominating – these would be geopolitical battles with measured, specific objectives, not the apocalyptic all-out struggle for survival envisioned during the Cold War, and it would benefit neither side to escalate an engagement to the point where a nuclear exchange becomes likely. Indeed, barring a grave miscalculation – something that remains a danger, thanks to the British government’s insistence in remaining “deliberately ambiguous about precisely when, how and at what scale” Britain would contemplate using such weapons, “in order not to simplify the calculations of any potential aggressor”¹²⁰ – Britain could only legitimately use its own

¹¹⁶ (The) Prime Minister of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, *National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review 2015: A Secure and Prosperous United Kingdom*, (London: Her Majesty’s Stationary Office, 2015).

¹¹⁷ (The) Prime Minister of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, *GOV.UK: Oral Statement to Parliament - PM Commons Statement on Future of Trident: 18 July 2016*, (2016), <<https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pm-commons-statement-on-future-of-trident-18-july-2016>>, [Last accessed 21/05/2019].

¹¹⁸ (The) Prime Minister of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, *National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review 2015: A Secure and Prosperous United Kingdom*, (London: Her Majesty’s Stationary Office, 2015), p.18.

¹¹⁹ Trenin, D, ‘Russia Leaves the West’, *Foreign Affairs*, (July-August 2006), Vol. 85, No. 04, pp.87-96.

¹²⁰ (The) Prime Minister of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, *National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review 2015: A Secure and Prosperous United Kingdom*, (London: Her Majesty’s Stationary Office, 2015), pp.34-35.

arsenal once the country had already been fired upon, as using them in response to anything less would be grossly disproportionate. Even in such a drastic scenario, their deterrent effect would, by definition, have had to have failed in order for them to be brought into play. With Trident too disproportionate a response for any conventional form of warfare then, and only legitimately usable once the UK is under a nuclear attack and its deterrent value has therefore already failed, the case for Trident's lauded role as a defender of the UK and its allies from hostile powers is questionable to say the least.

Yet contemporary government sources also suggest, as has been noted at this chapter's opening, that the Trident weapon system may offer some value to British security in providing a deterrent effect against acts of nuclear terrorism – or at the very least, against the *sponsoring* of it by hostile states. Unfortunately for this assertion however, the case for Trident as a deterrent against state sponsored nuclear terrorism is scarcely more convincing than the standard argument for Trident as a nuclear deterrent. Indeed, although its terrorism-deterring role is listed as a separate function from the deterrence of other *states*, and despite dealing with a security threat posed by *non-state actors*, the underlying dynamics are virtually indistinguishable - in both cases the deterrent effect is directed against the decision to engage in hostilities by a state level actor, whether it is sponsoring terrorist proxies or attacking Britain directly. As such, the argument that Trident *lessens* the likelihood of nuclear terrorism is afflicted by the same discrepancies and contradictions as the main deterrence argument, as well as some key additional ones.

In particular, the 'Trident against terrorism' argument suffers from the enduring questions of retaliation and legitimacy that are inherent in questions surrounding nuclear weaponry – namely, the question as to under what circumstances are hostile actors successfully deterred. Although these considerations also apply to questions surrounding traditional inter-state deterrence, they become particularly salient in discussions of attacks by proxy, such as would occur in an instance of sponsored terrorism directed against Britain. As deterrence relies, after all, against the threat of retaliation against an aggressor, the effectiveness of the concept would seem to become significantly less effective as more actors become involved in the process of any attack. Most obviously, a rogue regime might conceivably sponsor nuclear terrorism against Britain despite the UK's possession of Trident, reasoning that the use of unaffiliated, non-state actors (an international terrorist network, for example) introduces a sufficient level of confusion as to who Britain should then identify as the culprit.

Such a scenario poses serious implications for government reasoning. The key to deterrence is inculcating a fear of retaliation in any adversary – yet if the adversary in question can attack via a third party, with reasonable chances of obscuring their involvement as sponsors, then direct retaliation is unlikely, and the barrier to engaging in hostilities in the first place is therefore removed. Even if the

sponsor behind a successful (or attempted) attack could be identified convincingly, the deterrent effect of Trident would already have proved worthless, and it seems unlikely that the sponsor state would incur nuclear strikes in retaliation – such strikes in exchange for a single terrorist incident, regardless of its size, would be grossly disproportionate, and the potential backlash that would be suffered from the international community would no doubt serve to confine any military response from the UK to conventional arms.

Whitehall's 'White Elephant'?

The Military, Political and Systemic Costs of Trident

In terms of the purely military arm of the strategic triumvirate then, Britain's Trident weapons hardly seems to be the "essential"¹²¹ component of UK security that the government makes out – indeed, the term deterrent itself is fundamentally contestable, with it being far from clear that it serves to "deter the most extreme threats" to national security.¹²² Yet apart from it being questionable as to whether Trident actually can be said to serve the military functions that the government has laid out, there is a compelling case to be made that the system is not only defunct in any practical sense, but may even be actively harmful to the wider military, political and systemic elements of the strategic triumvirate that governs British thinking on such weapons.

Once again, the most obvious area in which this is evident is the military sphere, where the overreliance on a nuclear deterrent, coupled with the costs of such weapons, has led to decades of successive cuts in conventional capabilities in order to support the country's nuclear arsenal. As such, Britain's conventional military forces have now atrophied to the point where "the UK is no longer capable of defending its own national shores", and is unable to launch military operations independently, and without significant assistance from allies.¹²³ Looking only at Britain's navy, the UK's resources "are insufficient to meet today's commitments never mind providing ASW [Anti-Submarine

¹²¹ (The) Prime Minister of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, *National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review 2015: A Secure and Prosperous United Kingdom*, (London: Her Majesty's Stationary Office, 2015), p.34.

¹²² HM Ministry of Defence, and the Defence Nuclear Organisation, *The United Kingdom's Future Nuclear Deterrent: 2016 Update to Parliament*, (20th December 2016), p.1.

¹²³ Forsyth, R (Commander, Royal Navy), *www.whytrident.uk: IV - Can the UK Afford Both Trident and Adequate Conventional Forces*, (2019),

<<http://www.whytrident.uk/v-cantheukaffordbothtridentandadequateconventionalforces>>, [Last accessed 27/05/2019].

Warfare] defence of the new carriers” that have only recently begun to enter service – worse still, the Royal Navy is now so meagre in size and strength that “if a state of hostilities developed there is no capacity for attrition”.¹²⁴

Apart from the obvious problems that such glaring weaknesses cause for national self-defence, this shortfall in conventional capabilities has also left Britain woefully underequipped to meet the challenges of its contemporary strategic environment. As has been noted, nuclear weapons have only really held relevance for the UK in the hypothetical context of a total, great power war involving the Soviet Union, or later, Russia. Yet post-Cold War security trends have moved inexorably away from such a scenario – even with recent tensions over Crimea, “fear of general European war has virtually disappeared from the list of immediate security concerns for the UK. Attention is instead focused on terrorism, organised crime and cyber-espionage, and on whether, and in what circumstances, to intervene in conflicts in other parts of the world (most recently Afghanistan, Libya and Syria). This could change if hostile nuclear powers were to emerge in the Middle East or if there were a return to nuclear confrontation with Russia or China. As long as such scenarios remain remote, however, the UK’s nuclear force will be irrelevant to immediate security concerns”.¹²⁵ In short, old patterns of conflict, specifically “war between states in which the aim is to inflict maximum violence”, are quickly “becoming an anachronism”, as Mary Kaldor points out.¹²⁶ British policymakers, in close consultation with the defence establishment, have recognised this since as early as Tony Blair’s first government in the 1990s – *that* administration’s 1998 Strategic Defence review counselled that “the nature of conflict has therefore changed. The wars of the future are less likely to be *between* states, but rather within them, with instability and conflict spreading across international borders”.¹²⁷ To prepare Britain for this reality, the Review therefore advocated a revamp of the military, so that it be “flexible, highly capable, mobile and responsive, i.e. they need to be prepared for expeditionary operations. In the

¹²⁴ Forsyth, R (Commander, Royal Navy), www.whytrident.uk: IV - Can the UK Afford Both Trident and Adequate Conventional Forces, (2019),

<<http://www.whytrident.uk/v-cantheukaffordbothtridentandadequateconventionalforces>>, [Last accessed 27/05/2019].

¹²⁵ Chalmers, M, ‘Towards the UK’s Nuclear Century’, *The RUSI Journal*, Vol. 158, No. 06, (2013), pp.18-28, pp.19-20.

¹²⁶ Kaldor, M, *New and Old Wars: Organised Violence in a Global Era*, (John Wiley & Sons, 2013).

¹²⁷ Dodd, T, and Oakes, M, *The Strategic Defence Review White Paper*, Research Paper 98/91 (House of Commons Library, 15th October 1998), p.14, [Italics added].

words of the Secretary of State, “In the post Cold War world, we must be prepared to go to the crisis, rather than have the crisis come to us”¹²⁸.

This vision of Britain as a conventional military power, capable of “projecting power [...] quickly and for longer periods”, and independently of allies “whenever necessary”,¹²⁹ is something that was embraced as recently as 2015 by David Cameron’s government – yet this grandiose vision, which would suit the post-Soviet security environment and allow Britain to exert actual, practical agency over global events as they occur, is being damaged by the UK’s commitment to its nuclear deterrent. Quite simply, the perpetual budget constraints of a UK sized country mean that the UK must decide whether to “pour billions of dollars into building a new fleet of ballistic missile submarines or use the money to maintain its diverse conventional armed forces capabilities”.¹³⁰ The maintenance of both is no longer a feasible option.

Counterproductive as the maintenance of Trident is in military terms, the drain it places on Britain’s ability to conduct robust conventional operations of any size is also severely damaging to Britain’s systemic and political interests in the strategic triumvirate. With little real expeditionary capability, the UK’s ability to play an active role in international security and protect the material interests of itself and its allies is greatly diminished – although Britain’s nuclear weapons will no doubt ensure that it retains a certain vestigial prestige, it will be token recognition in place of the real global influence that comes with an active ability to shape international affairs, especially at times of crisis. All of this damage to Britain’s *systemic* position, supposedly enhanced by the retention of nuclear weapons, is occurring exactly at a point in time when Britain’s political influence and reputation have already been badly damaged by its shambolic ‘Brexit’ saga.

Worse still, the *political* benefits previously rendered by the strategic triumvirate now find themselves under pressure - the lauded ‘Special Relationship’ that Britain shares with the United States finds itself quietly under question from the American side, in the face of Britain’s myopic attachment to nuclear weapons. Although much of the Special Relationship is of course built upon a shared history, culture and political outlooks, much of it stems from practical security cooperation, of

¹²⁸ Dodd, T, and Oakes, M, *The Strategic Defence Review White Paper*, Research Paper 98/91 (House of Commons Library, 15th October 1998), p.15.

¹²⁹ (The) Prime Minister of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, *National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review 2015: A Secure and Prosperous United Kingdom*, (London: Her Majesty’s Stationary Office, 2015), p.29.

¹³⁰ Oswald, R, *Nuclear Threat Initiative (NTI): U.K. Must Balance Trident Renewal with Ability to Conduct Traditional Military Campaigns*, (1st May 2013), <<https://www.nti.org/gsn/article/uk-renewal-trident-will-impact-ability-conduct-traditional-military-campaigns-us/>>, [Last accessed 27/05/2019].

the kind most recently displayed in the invasion of Afghanistan and the 2003 Iraq War. At a time when “the United States would like to be able to rely more on its European allies” to shoulder responsibility for international security, “many experts doubt that even the strongest among them, Britain and France, could carry out their part” of an operation even as limited as the 2011 airstrikes in Libya¹³¹ – “both are struggling to maintain their own nuclear deterrents as well as mobile, modern armed forces” and “the situation in Britain is so bad that American officials are quietly *urging* it to *drop* its expensive nuclear deterrent”.¹³² As a senior US Defence official was quoted in *The New York Times* as saying, “either they can be a nuclear power and nothing else or a real military partner”.¹³³ For a country that has previously relied upon its nuclear weapons to buoy its international influence on the world stage, and ensure the closest possible security coordination with the world’s most powerful country, these changes in strategic reality do not yet seem to have fully registered in government discourse.

¹³¹ Erlanger, S, ‘Memo from Europe: Shrinking Europe Military Spending Stirs Concern’, *The New York Times*, (April 22nd 2013).

¹³² *ibid.*

¹³³ *ibid.*

Conclusion

Turning to the overarching question of this thesis then, and considering the preceding chapters, what *is* the contemporary strategic value of the UK's nuclear deterrent? This is a question that, if asked of any British government official today (or indeed, at any point since the UK became a nuclear power), would no doubt elicit a response encompassing themes that have become familiar over the course of this investigation. Ever since Britain's entry onto the international stage as the world's third nuclear power, the value of nuclear weapons to Britain has been understood and articulated largely through the idea of the strategic triumvirate that has featured so centrally in this thesis – this triumvirate, consisting of the *military*, *systemic* and *political* benefits for a UK operating within a fraught international environment, has outlined the key points in favour of such weapons, from the perspective of Britain's political and defence establishments. Although more popularly understood by the wider public as simply a 'necessary evil', a regrettable precaution required to discourage attack from hostile powers, an understanding of the strategic triumvirate highlights how such weapons have in fact always played a much more complex role in a British context, seen to be serving a deliberate function in multiple areas of strategic concern. These key areas – deterring foreign aggression, reinforcing Britain's international status, and co-opting the closest possible political and security cooperation with the world's most powerful country, the United States – shaped Britain's maintenance and renewal of such capabilities for the duration of the Cold War, articulating the value of a weapon system whose use was, paradoxically, unthinkable.

Yet aside from the question of whether such rationale could justifiably be applied to the original Cold War era in which it was first articulated, British policymakers have continued to apply this model of thinking to the country's nuclear forces up to the present, and in the case of the 2016 Parliamentary vote on whether to renew Britain's nuclear capability, using it as a basis upon which to assert the deterrent's continuing strategic value to the UK. Indeed, despite a quarter of a century passing since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the very strategic environment that the triumvirate was devised for, Britain's Trident nuclear deterrent continues to be widely viewed by policymakers through the three lenses of the strategic triumvirate: offering *military* benefits in the form of strategic deterrence, shoring up Britain's *systemic* reputation as a key international power, and continuing the

UK's deeply privileged *political* relationship with the United States (*which yields military and systemic benefits in and of itself*). But with the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the end of the Cold War, and the tectonic shifts in Britain's strategic environment that have taken place, just how applicable is the triumvirate model in assessing the value of nuclear weapons to Britain, today?

Having explored the Cold War context of the strategic triumvirate, its role in driving Britain's acquisition of Trident, and the triumvirate's application to the UK's contemporary strategic environment, perhaps the most striking observation to be made is that the UK's nuclear arsenal nowadays appears more and more subject to the law of diminishing returns, if not an outright handicap to Britain's strategic goals. Take the explicitly stated *military* purpose of Trident today, for example, which has been examined in the preceding chapter – even in its Cold War heyday, in which the calculating logic of nuclear deterrence was largely held as sacrosanct within government and defence circles, the practical, real world effectiveness of nuclear weapons as a deterrent against attack was debateable. Indeed, the very logic of nuclear deterrence rested on what are, at best, highly suspect assumptions of rationality, escalation, and legitimacy of use. If such logic was questionable during the Cold War, in which the international environment seemed to make the UK's retention of such weapons outwardly prudent, the problem must be doubly so now, in a world that has since moved decidedly *away* from bipolarity and the threat of total war between great powers. As has already been noted, there is *no* possible way to prove that a nuclear arsenal actually exerts a deterrent effect and prevents hostilities - add in the fact that such weapons are so disproportionately destructive that they could *only* legitimately be used in response to a nuclear attack themselves, and their monumental futility from a logical standpoint is obvious; they can only be used once an adversary has already launched a nuclear attack themselves, at which point their deterrent function has, by definition, failed.

The questionable military usefulness of Trident has, in turn, been exacerbated by a strategic environment whose security trends since the Cold War have shifted firmly *away* from devastating wars of survival between the world's great (or at least *nuclear*) powers. The emergence of 'new wars', of the kind popularised by Mary Kaldor's book '*New and Old Wars: Organised Violence in a Global Era*', has seen the security focus of many industrialised nations, not least in the West, move instead towards highly specialised tasks such as nation building, stabilisation, and counter-insurgency and policing operations, in a concerted effort to combat the increasing prominence of international terrorism that emerged in the 1990s and early 2000s. These new trends in warfare, exemplified by the occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq, emphasise the return to importance of conventional military forces, especially troops, in achieving objectives that fulfil larger strategic goals – nuclear weapons, in contrast, cannot

stabilise failed states, win hearts and minds, or train local authorities in the battle against terror cells and inter-ethnic strife.

It is important to note, of course, that the British government *has* made some concessions to this shift away from warfare with state-level peers, and *has* attempted to reconcile the strategic triumvirate with this military shift towards combatting non-state actors. As a government handout on the Trident states, “while our nuclear deterrent is not designed to deter *non-state actors*, it should influence the decision making of any state that might consider transferring nuclear weapons or nuclear technology to terrorists”.¹³⁴ Yet rather than a substantive reflection on the relevance of nuclear deterrence today, it reads much more like an attempt to shoehorn contemporary relevance into the argument for Trident – as has been noted in this thesis, there is little empirical evidence that nuclear weapons would deter this kind of sponsored attack, especially if the sponsor calculated that there was a likelihood they could escape retribution through plausible deniability. Even in instances where the culprit regime *could* be positively identified beyond reasonable doubt, what role would Trident play in any response to, say, a nuclear suicide attack on Birmingham, Manchester, or London? Certainly, a conventional military response would seem the only likely answer – as a Parliamentary Committee on the UK’s nuclear deterrent has noted, “in today’s so-called “second nuclear age” where national survival is probably not at stake, threatening to devastate another society in total or in large part is neither appropriate nor credible”.¹³⁵ Indeed, the first use of such weapons may even constitute a war crime under the Geneva Conventions, and the International Criminal Court Statute (2002) of Rome.¹³⁶

Somewhat bizarrely, successive British governments, even whilst attempting this reconciliation of Trident to Britain’s current strategic challenges, have happily accepted a conflicting need for much more robust conventional forces, and a refocus on traditional hard power capabilities as a means of exerting agency in today’s international system. At the dawn of the Blair era of governments in 1998, policymakers readily acknowledged “that the world is an increasingly unstable and unpredictable

¹³⁴ GOV.UK: *Policy paper: The UK’s Nuclear Deterrent: What You Need to Know*, (February 2018), <<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/uk-nuclear-deterrence-factsheet/uk-nuclear-deterrence-what-you-need-to-know>>, [Last accessed 11/06/2019], [Italics added].

¹³⁵ (The) House of Commons Defence Committee, *The Future of the UK’s Strategic Nuclear Deterrent: The White Paper*, Ninth Report of Session 2006–07, Volume II: Oral and written evidence, Report HC 225-II, (London: The Stationary Office Limited, 2007), ev.30-31.

¹³⁶ Forsyth, R (Commander, Royal Navy), *Nuclear Information Service: The Case Against UK Trident: A Naval Officer’s Perspective*, (2018), <<https://www.nuclearinfo.org/blog/cdr-rob-forsyth-rn-ret%E2%80%99d/2018/07/case-against-uk-trident-naval-officer%E2%80%99s-perspective>>, [Last accessed 08/06/2019].

place where indirect threats to the UK still persist and can arise in many areas around the globe. In this scenario a requirement for *more mobile, responsive and flexible armed forces is called for*. To this end the [1998] SDR [Strategic Defence Review] signifies a *major shift towards expeditionary armed forces, involving the rapid deployment of sustainable military force often over long distances.*¹³⁷

This need to reinvigorate Britain's conventional forces was echoed near verbatim as recently as 2015, in that year's Strategic Defence Review, only a year prior to the renewal vote on Trident: the 'Joint Force 2025' plan affirms the UK's goal to "be able to deploy a larger force more quickly. By 2025, this highly capable expeditionary force of around 50,000 [...] will include: A maritime task group centred on a Queen Elizabeth Class aircraft carrier with F35 Lightning combat aircraft; A land division with three brigades including a new Strike Force; An air group of combat, transport and surveillance aircraft; A Special Forces task group".¹³⁸ Among other things, it also commits the UK to expanding its military capabilities "into new areas, including cyber and space",¹³⁹ as well as being able to simultaneously conduct "multiple additional operations, ranging from specialist missions such as counter-terrorism or counter-piracy, through to broader, more complex operations"¹⁴⁰ far from the British Isles.

With the increasing importance of expeditionary operations conducted by conventional forces then, British policymakers do appear to have been quick to recognise the need for ambitious revitalisation schemes for their traditional units – yet whilst such plans demonstrate that Britain's security environment has now moved on from the kind of monolithic, state-centric challenges for which Trident was designed and best suited, they find themselves hamstrung by the exorbitant costs of maintaining Trident. Indeed, for a country of Britain's size, maintaining the sizeable and robust conventional capability sketched out in recent defence reviews may well prove dichotomous with keeping a nuclear deterrent – "the consequential effect of running [the] existing 4 Vanguard class submarines and investing in preparations for their replacement is that all 3 services have taken

¹³⁷ Dodd, T, and Oakes, M, *The Strategic Defence Review White Paper*, Research Paper 98/91 (House of Commons Library, 15th October 1998), Summary, [Italics added].

¹³⁸ (The) Prime Minister of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, *National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review 2015: A Secure and Prosperous United Kingdom*, (London: Her Majesty's Stationary Office, 2015), p.29.

¹³⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁴⁰ *ibid*, p.30.

massive cuts in capability”.¹⁴¹ Although few politicians seem willing to openly say as much, “the UK’s conventional war-fighting capability is being sacrificed to preserve its nuclear one”.¹⁴²

Not only is Trident largely obsolete in the military terms framed by the strategic triumvirate and identified by the government then, but it is also actively harming Britain’s broader military competence – a phenomenon which damages the supposed systemic and political benefits of the nuclear deterrent in turn. With the increasing importance of conventional deployments around the globe, and at a point when the United States is actively haranguing allies to shoulder a greater role in such international operations, Britain’s dependency on nuclear weapons has come back to haunt it. Although it may be true that nuclear weapons do lend a certain prestige to their possessor, they are of little practical use, and a Britain neutered of the military capabilities to contribute to international operations will swiftly find itself side-lined in international affairs as an observer, rather than a shaper, of events.

It may yet be the case, of course, that a convincing case for a British nuclear armament in the 21st century could be made. Although the ‘new’ strategic trends that have emerged since the Cold War, and which have broadly been accepted by British policymakers, do appear to nullify the circumstances in which nuclear weapons may once have been beneficial, this is no guarantee that such dynamics could not return – however unlikely it may seem. In addition, despite the very shaky epistemic logic of nuclear deterrence, its critics may be unjustly underestimating its practical power – where two nuclear adversaries *do* share similar conceptions of deterrence and escalation, for example, they may well be discouraged from engaging in aggression towards one another, under threat of retaliation.

Yet the overall picture of government thinking that emerges upon close examination today is one of apparent incoherency, and which verges on explicit self-contradiction. At its root, this incoherency stems from the continued application of the strategic triumvirate model, which, based on readings of the government’s own sources, is drastically in need of reassessment. The strategic triumvirate has been highly successful in one sense, of course, in that it has been adapted enough in

¹⁴¹ Forsyth, R (Commander, Royal Navy), *www.whytrident.uk: IV - Can the UK Afford Both Trident and Adequate Conventional Forces*, (2019),

<<http://www.whytrident.uk/v-cantheukaffordbothtridentandadequateconventionalforces>>, [Last accessed 08/06/2019].

¹⁴² Forsyth, R (Commander, Royal Navy), *Nuclear Information Service: The Case Against UK Trident: A Naval Officer’s Perspective*, (2018),

<<https://www.nuclearinfo.org/blog/cdr-rob-forsyth-rn-ret%E2%80%99d/2018/07/case-against-uk-trident-naval-officer%E2%80%99s-perspective>>, [Last accessed 08/06/2019].

order to survive the demise of Britain's Cold War adversary - yet it has also contributed to a dualistic British security culture, one that heralds the demise of total war¹⁴³ and talks up the need for conventional hard power one minute, but which will tout a resurgent nuclear threat and Trident's indispensability¹⁴⁴ the next. Based upon their own analysis and recommendations since the Cold War then, it is hard to reasonably conclude that Trident's contribution to the achievement of wider strategic objectives, as set out by successive governments, is anything other than negligible – and worse still, it may now be decidedly *harmful* to these new priorities, constraining the UK's ability to adapt to them. Although this thesis does not doubt the sincerity of belief that successive administrations have placed in Britain's nuclear deterrent, it is increasingly clear that when it comes to Trident's contemporary strategic utility, the government is arguing against itself – whether it will listen to those same arguments going forward, remains to be seen.

¹⁴³ (The) House of Commons Defence Committee, *The Future of the UK's Strategic Nuclear Deterrent: The White Paper*, Ninth Report of Session 2006–07, Volume II: Oral and written evidence, Report HC 225-II, (London: The Stationary Office Limited, 2007), ev.30-31.

¹⁴⁴ (The) Prime Minister of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, *GOV.UK: Oral Statement to Parliament - PM Commons Statement on Future of Trident: 18 July 2016*, (2016), <<https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pm-commons-statement-on-future-of-trident-18-july-2016>>, [Last accessed 12/06/2019].

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