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Opinionator

Exclusive Online Commentary From The Times

July 14, 2010, 9:00 pm

Run Silent. Run Deep. Run Obsolete.

By [TIMOTHY EGAN](#)



[Timothy Egan](#) on American politics and life, as seen from the West.

Tags:

[‘Dr. Strangelove’](#), [cold war](#), [MAD](#), [nuclear war](#), [submarines](#), [Trident](#)

QUILCENE, Wash. — We’re digging clams and picking oysters on one of the longest days of the year. It’s a huge bounty, this *frutti di mare*, bringing to mind what the natives always said about Puget Sound: when the tide is out, the table is set.

And then the waters roil and there appears off the horizon a vessel that could destroy much of the world in an eyeblink.

It’s one thing to see an orca breach, a nine-ton black-and-white flash of Indian art come to life, or a great blue heron swoop for prey, its thin legs unfolding like the collapsible frame of an umbrella. All seems right in the world.



Steve Miller/Associated Press The USS Wyoming, a Trident submarine, in 1996.

But when a 560-foot-long Trident submarine breaks the surface, carrying a nuclear payload that could wipe out

any number of cities, you have to check the time and place. Is this 2010, or 1964?

Just as the Russian spies, with their Facebook poses and quaint plans to get Secret Informations about the Google, made us realize the cold war maintains a peculiar grip, catching a glimpse of a nuclear submarine prompts a similar reaction. The doomsday architecture of Mutual Assured Destruction is still very much in place. The sub was bound for Naval Base Kitsap, home to what the Seattle Times in 2006 called the largest nuclear weapons storehouse in the United States.

These vessels have helped to keep the peace for decades; the service of the men and women who run silent and deep and nearly undetectable is laudable. But what about the policy behind MAD? Is it as outdated as those spies?

As the sea leg of the triad of nuclear deterrence, the Trident submarines provide “the nation’s most survivable and enduring nuclear strike capability,” as stated by the Navy. Their mission is to launch a massive and final lethal blow in the event that the worst has happened: “nuclear combat toe-to-toe with the Ruskies,” in the memorable drawl of Major T. J. “King” Kong, the Slim Pickens character in “Dr. Strangelove.”

MAD makes sense in a rational world: the Russians or Chinese would never try to wipe us out, because we would then wipe them out. They want to live well and prosper, as do we.

But MAD makes less sense at a time when the enemies of civilization are cave-dwelling religious fanatics who target cartoonists and kill innocent children at soccer telecasts and think, if they die in nuclear Armageddon, a sexual reward awaits them in heaven.

American policy, as stated in the Nuclear Posture Review updated by the Obama administration in April, rightfully targets nuclear proliferation by rogue nations — North Korea and Iran — and nuclear terror by free-agent zealots as the top priority. But then it also continues the cold war triad of nuclear deterrence — MAD.

Yes, the report notes that the United States and Russia have reduced strategic nuclear weapons by about 75 percent since the end of the cold war. And the new Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty backed by Obama and facing a round of hearings in Congress would scale those weapons back even more.

“It is in the United States’ interest and that of nearly all other nations that the nearly 65-year-record of nuclear non-use be extended forever.” Such is the goal, as stated in the review.

And despite Mitt Romney’s uninformed posturing against the treaty, Republicans with the most knowledge of American defense strategy, led by Senator Richard Lugar of Indiana, say the new pact would continue the works of Presidents Reagan and Bush the elder to deescalate cold war tensions while upgrading overall deterrent strategy.

But why not kill the cold war altogether? Deconstruct MAD, or take a couple hundred cities off the hit list? Even if this treaty goes into effect, the United States will retain 240 ballistic missiles just on the submarines alone, according to information presented to Congress.

Why not a much larger reset? The deterrence would still be there, even with a pair of submarines, let alone the dozen-plus out there now, not to mention the new class of extraordinarily costly submarines under construction.

These new submarines may cost about \$8.2 billion each to build, the Congressional Budget Office reported a few months ago. The first one, always the most pricey, may run up to \$13 billion, which would make it the most expensive Navy vessel ever built. In May, Defense Secretary Robert Gates questioned whether the cost of all these new ships was worth it in the big view of getting the most safety for the most buck.

His legitimate query was greeted by a collective ho-hum. MAD and all its budget-busting infrastructure is just so

much a part of the scenery now.

What we will get for those billions are sleek new nuclear-armed behemoths to replace the sleek old nuclear-armed behemoths, all in service to a dinosaur policy. Once the subs are in use, they will likely perform the same tired mission, ready to fire the last shot in a world going down. Meanwhile, above the surface of the ocean, crazed religious leaders in tents and Flintstone huts plot murder against innocents using Radio Shack rejects.

The purpose of these subs, like MAD itself, is rarely questioned. As so they glide in and out of Puget Sound, as the seasons roll by and the decades pass, powered by the inertia of a policy dating to black-and-white television, spies in ill-fitting suits, and a fear of Domsday just a few ticks of the clock away.

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1.
Rockdapenguin
Seattle, WA
July 14th, 2010
8:10 pm

While I usually agree with Mr. Egan's articles, I take exception with this particular article. The United States may currently be fighting against terrorist organizations, but the specter of armed conflict is always present in this world. Today's friendly relations with China or Russia, may quickly change depending on any number of circumstances. Our nuclear submarine fleet is a major deterrent for China from taking the imprudent steps of invading Taiwan. The maintenance of this fleet is of the utmost importance to national security. The submarines

and the aircraft carrier fleet are two of the most important tools the United States has to project its power overseas.

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