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Tell people something they know already and they will thank you for it.
Tell them something new and they will hate you for it.

War With the Ghosts

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What are our nuclear weapons for, and who controls them?

By George Monbiot. Published in the Guardian 22nd March 2010

Sharing our nuclear deterrence with France is out of the question. Last week the government slapped down a French offer to reduce the costs of our submarine patrols, by taking turns to prowl the same seas rather than duplicating the effort and occasionally crashing into each other. This proposal, it said, would cause “outrage”, on the grounds that it’s an unacceptable erosion of sovereignty(1). Using a system leased from the United States, on the other hand, presents no such difficulty. When the government says our sovereignty is threatened, it means that another nation might disrupt the orders it receives from Washington.

So we must maintain the pretence that this is ours alone, and sustain our extravagant doctrine of “continuous at-sea deterrence”. Deterrence against what? Nazis? Aliens? Killer jellyfish? Our Trident missiles, due to be replaced and deployed at a cost of several tens of billions(2), have no visible strategic purpose. They are the reification of a fantasy: a fantasy that the United Kingdom is still a defining world power and that our enemies present an existential threat. As usual, the government is preparing for the last war, building a fantastical Maginot Line against the enemies of a previous century, the ghost armies that haunt the official imagination.

Let’s begin with the sovereignty issue. When I once made the mistake of stepping into a Blockbuster video shop, I found myself walking past aisle after aisle of Hollywood movies. Then I came across a tiny section labelled “foreign”, which contained about a dozen European films. Either Hollywood’s hegemony was such that the US was no longer perceived as another country or Blockbuster had adopted the US definition of foreign and imported it 4000 miles into the UK. The same confusion governs this country’s defence policy. The other side of the Channel is foreign. The other side of the Atlantic isn’t.

As Dan Plesch shows in his report on British weapons systems, we have no independent deterrent(3). Since 1943, when the UK joined the Manhattan Project, our nuclear weapons programme has relied on crumbs from the US table. The US has granted us a franchise on parts of its programme, which it has graciously allowed us to rebrand with the Union flag.

Our Trident missiles are currently leased from the United States. The warheads they carry are based on a US design (the W-76) and manufactured at the Atomic Weapons Establishment in Berkshire. Its factory is a copy of a nuclear plant at Los Alamos and it is two-thirds owned by the US companies Lockheed-Martin and Jacobs Engineering(4). The firing system is designed and built in the US; so is the missile guidance system(5). The missiles are aimed with the help of US satellites. The subs themselves are designed and built in the UK, but use US components and US reactor technology(6). There might be the odd shaving brush and plastic cup on board that was designed and manufactured entirely in the UK, but that’s about the limit of our deterrent’s independence.

Our dependence doesn't end there. In 2003 the then UK defence secretary, Geoff Hoon, announced that he would restructure the armed forces to make them "inter-operable" with those of the US(7). The idea that our government, which has renounced sovereign control of its forces, could launch a nuclear attack without the blessing of – or instructions from - the United States is ludicrous. Yet it will not contemplate even sharing patrols with France.

Both the government and the opposition assert their virility by rejecting offers of power-sharing from Europe, while accepting offers of subordination from the US. Never do they find themselves obliged to explain why. Those who most loudly proclaim themselves patriots are the first to demand that we prostrate ourselves before the United States.

So to the second issue, the question succinctly put by Field Marshall Lord Carver: "Trident – what the bloody hell is it for?". The Defence green paper contends that the system's purpose is to "deter and prevent nuclear blackmail and acts of aggression against our national interests that cannot be countered by other means"(8). Let's spend a moment unpacking that.

It's true that other states (eight to be precise) possess nuclear weapons, though none is currently willing or able to use them against us. This could change. But states possess nuclear weapons because other states possess them or might acquire them. Every nuclear state uses the same argument as the UK's: it might be blackmailed by someone else with nuclear weapons.

The only certain means of preventing nuclear blackmail is multilateral disarmament. The only route to multilateral disarmament is for the nuclear powers to show that they are serious about junking their weapons. The non-proliferation treaty commits the nuclear powers "to pursue negotiations in good faith on ... nuclear disarmament"(9). In return, other nations promise not to acquire nuclear weapons. By failing to honour their side of the bargain in the name of defending themselves from proliferation elsewhere, the nuclear nations invite other countries to proliferate.

But the very power of these weapons defuses the threat they present. The consequences of using a nuclear weapon are such that other nations know you're not really going to do it. The only question you have to ask yourself is this: if a country subject to someone else's nuclear blackmail launches its nuclear weapons, is it more or less likely to get nuked? Everyone knows the answer, which is why nuclear weapons are useless as a credible strategic threat. They might have some use against a non-nuclear power, but in that case the nuclear blackmailer is you, not the enemy. As WH Auden noted in his poem *The Quest*, "In theory they were sound on Expectation,/Had there been situations to be in;/Unluckily they were their situation"(10).

A government serious about preventing nuclear blackmail would be ready to bring something decisive to the non-proliferation review in New York in May. The UK's claim that we're working towards full multilateral disarmament while investing £70-odd billion in nuclear rearmament doesn't exactly have the ring of conviction. Our government sticks to this course even as President Obama insists that he will "take concrete steps towards a world without nuclear weapons"(11). It clearly doesn't believe him, or it wouldn't be investing in a new weapons programme. It will be interesting to see how quickly the UK's nuclear deterrent collapses if the US dismantles its own Trident missiles.

This is the only force which will kill our nukes. The opinions of parliament, where MPs launched one of their biggest revolts when asked to approve a new Trident programme, and the public, which has turned sharply against rearmament(12), count for nothing. Only when the US orders it to do so will our government decide, autonomously and of its own volition, that our sovereign interests are best served by abandoning our nuclear programme. Until then, as social services are cut, this fairytale budget won't be

touched. The government must please its imaginary friends and fight its imaginary enemies.

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