



## **Report on Wilton Park Conference WP827**

### **THE FUTURE OF NUCLEAR DETERRENCE IN THE NORTH ATLANTIC ALLIANCE**

**Thursday 12 – Saturday 14 October 2006**

1. After the demise of the international power structure of which nuclear deterrence was both a product and a tool, the utility of the strategy will hinge on the type of threats likely to remain or emerge over the next 20 years. Three key trends in the international security environment can be identified: the first is a continued but uneven economic growth resulting in a widening socio-economic divide. The second, and simultaneous, trend is a growth in communication flows and literacy, producing a heightened social frustration as the marginalized become more conscious of their marginalisation. The third is continuing and possibly growing environmental constraints, as competition for key resources in very few regions of the world increases and climate change produces potentially dangerous social movements.

2. In this environment, the Atlantic security paradigm, which is largely one of control and is thus essentially about preserving the status quo, faces difficult challenges which it may be unable to cope with. To utilise James Woolsey's comment that 'we have slain the dragon but now live in a jungle full of poisonous snakes', we may discover that strategies which rely on taming that jungle find that the snakes fight back in unexpected and virulent ways.

3. Consequently, some regard nuclear deterrence as being as much a remnant of past thinking as horse cavalry, and at the very least as unlikely to have the same centrality that it has had for the last 50 years. Others go still further: the former UK Foreign Secretary Robin Cook referred to them as 'worse than irrelevant', and

argued that their continued presence was an impediment to addressing real security challenges. Looking into the past, it has always been difficult to show decisively that nuclear weapons by themselves deterred anyone, and it may be naïve to ascribe deterrence to a single factor.

4. Yet, even within this environment, proponents claim there are at least four cases where deterrence may have some role. One is the continuing existence of classical great power deterrence between the US, Russia and China. Nuclear deterrence may not be *needed* between these three, but it will probably remain a fact of life. If that is indeed the case, it may be very difficult for the US and Russia to develop a normal political relationship.

5. A second is nuclear deterrence against the use of other WMD, which may be significant in that it can underline that any gains from using chemical and/or biological weapons will be small relative to the cost.

6. A third is the use of nuclear deterrence by regional powers to stave off the possibility of intervention by the US and its allies. However unwelcome in the North Atlantic alliance, this form of deterrence could prove highly effective. Moreover, it may well be the key motivation behind nuclear proliferation, as states may regard nuclear weapons as instruments for influencing the behaviour of the major world powers. Those states that have recently sought nuclear weapons have claimed deterrence as their rationale for doing so, and although it may be self-evident in the Alliance that intervention is solely about aiding allies, in other regions that can look rather like the right of the major powers to maintain or re-adjust international order to their design. There is a tendency to refer to 'nuclear blackmail' when that might just as easily be referred to as deterrence in the wrong hands.

7. A fourth is terrorism, on which it is difficult, on the face of things, to see deterrence having significant effect. However, international terrorism often depends on state support, and it is there that deterrence may yet have some role to play.

8. Alongside the issue of the utility of nuclear deterrence is that of nuclear use. It has been more than fifty years since the sole use of nuclear weapons, and it is widely accepted that the taboo on use is rooted in the experience of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. While it might be that the further we are from those events, the weaker the taboo becomes as complacency sets in, it is also possible to see the passage of time acting as a reinforcer of the taboo as it becomes more unquestioned and habitual.

9. Predicting the effect of nuclear use on the taboo is difficult, and again a number of different scenarios can be envisaged. One, of course, is that the taboo is broken or eroded, with serious consequences for nuclear deterrence, which relies on the concept of unimaginable horror as a consequence of actions. If those consequences become imaginable following nuclear use, a likely consequence would be that nuclear use would act as a stimulant to proliferation. The opposite possibility is that the taboo is in fact *reinforced* by nuclear use, in which case this might act as a stimulant to disarmament or at least provide a disincentive for proliferation. The effect on deterrence would probably therefore be to reinforce deterrent strategies, although at an appalling price: the 'user state' would have to be prepared to pay that price, and the additional ones of breaking the taboo, international outrage, likely loss of moral standing and conviction.

10. From a disarmament perspective, it is difficult or impossible to see any moral or practical efficacy in maintaining deterrence as a policy, but this does not necessarily mean that the weapons employed in deterrence serve no purpose. They can demonstrate how to 'put the genie back into the bottle' in practical and ethical terms. Nuclear disarmament and roll-back of existing arsenals is politically and technologically complex operation, and 'learning by doing' may be their key purpose.

### **The US and Russia**

11. Despite the changing proliferation dynamics of the past decade, the nuclear landscape remains dominated by two nuclear superpowers: the US and Russia. These are the two longest-standing and perhaps the most closely-intertwined of all the non-allied nuclear powers. Certainly they are the two for whom future

reductions are most dependent on each other. Many in Washington feel that US nuclear policy is misunderstood at best and misrepresented at worst. Several claims about the US arsenal and US nuclear policy are open to challenge: allegations of overt nuclear reliance are questionable in light of conventional military strategy and the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) reductions, and repeated assertions that the nuclear threshold is being lowered are not matched by real developments in strategy where nuclear weapons remain very much weapons of last resort.

12. An understanding of what does drive US nuclear policy ought to include three factors, the first of which is an uncertain security environment characterised by several potential adversaries that may not be as well-understood as was the case with the Soviet Union during the Cold War. The second is the change in force requirements produced by this environment. Nuclear weapons are unlikely to be weapons of choice in most circumstances, requiring a different decision-making calculus and a broader range of strike capabilities. The third factor is the status of nuclear weapons: they, and deterrence, remain a critical component of US strategic posture as set out in the 2001 Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR). The role of nuclear weapons displays continuity (the place of extended deterrence, the Cooperative Threat Reduction Programme, the testing moratorium) but also change (a broader range of deterrence goals, shifting alliance contexts, and a less-prominent role in military strategy).

13. This raises a number of technical issues concerning stockpile and infrastructure. The shifting international security environment and the centrality of nuclear deterrence to US strategy require a deterrent posture that is flexible across a range of scenarios. This in turn requires the nuclear infrastructure and the stockpile to be reconfigured in order to be more responsive to strategic goals in such a way that the test moratorium can be maintained. The current Administration has decided that the reliable replacement warhead (RRW) is the most effective means of developing nuclear warheads while still maintaining commitments to nuclear reductions and the test moratorium. For its advocates, the RRW offers a means to design and manufacture new warhead designs without the need for testing.

14. Like the US, Russia has clearly stated that it regards nuclear weapons as vital for its security, but also that it does not reject its obligations under Article VI of the NPT (in both cases it may be hard to reconcile these two). Beyond this similarity, however, it appears that the post-Cold War debate has followed a different course. An indication of this came with the switch from declaratory no-first-use to possible first-use strategy in large-scale aggression or cases deemed critical to national security, and another one was the explicit threat to use nuclear weapons in response to non-nuclear threats. What form such threats might take is unclear: Russia does not appear to seriously fear either nuclear attack or invasion.

15. It also appears that the leadership Moscow does not, on the whole, place great faith in the efficacy of nuclear deterrence as a strategy, and it is possible to discern a Russian belief that the Bush Administration has a similar view. For critics, this is evidence of an excessive Russian faith in the ability to control nuclear weapons and their effects. The legacy of Soviet-era thinking may be seen here, in that the presence of nuclear weapons from theatre-range to intercontinental strongly suggests a strategic willingness to use nuclear weapons extensively and early in a conflict should it be deemed necessary. Moreover there is little evidence of a Russian belief that nuclear escalation after first use would be inevitable

### **East Asia**

16. In East Asia, where the salience of nuclear deterrence is increasing rather than fading (a key contrast with this region and Europe), the picture changes tone once again. China's nuclear strategy, for example, can be difficult to explain solely with reference to deterrence: that theory does not adequately explain why Chinese nuclear weapons have never been put on alert, or why China continues to keep warheads and missiles separate. For Beijing, the key nuclear threat is not nuclear attack but nuclear *coercion*. That is to say, China is less concerned about being deterred than by the prospect of being forced to yield to pressure by nuclear-armed states. A better term for its strategy therefore, is counter-coercion.

17. For Japan, a non-nuclear weapon state, concerns over Chinese nuclear modernisation, the nuclear policy of North Korea, and a perceived vulnerability of

energy security and sea-lanes combine to set the tone for the national security environment. A new integrated security strategy is currently being shaped, based around five elements: assurance and deterrence via the US-Japan alliance, active missile defence, dissuasion and offensive defence via arms control and the Proliferation Security Initiative, possible anticipatory self-defence when an attack is imminent, and damage control in the event of an attack. The core pillar here is the alliance with the US, and as long as this remains strong Japan is unlikely to seek any offensive nuclear capability.

18. India is a nuclear-armed state but not one accepted as such by the established nuclear powers. Its perspectives on nuclear deterrence are, not surprisingly, heavily drawn from Cold War experiences, and although that conflict is over the nuclear age is not. The factors influencing Indian perspectives on deterrence are a blend of the specific and the general. A key example is the India-China-Pakistan triangle: deterrence between unequal powers is not a new thing, but the triangular nature of this deterrent relationship does not have a clear historical corollary. Moreover, two of the three are engaged in a sub-conventional armed conflict that is unlikely to be resolved soon, and this again is a new factor in deterrence. A further complication is the lack of clarity over 'red lines', which is to say the event that would precipitate a nuclear response. India and China have both stated that the only such event is nuclear attack (or possibly a catastrophic chemical and/or biological attack), but for Pakistan there may be other 'red lines': territorial incursion, economic strangulation via blockade, or perhaps more ambiguous psychological factors. Nonetheless, nuclear deterrence has contributed to stabilisation in India-Pakistan relations.

### **Conventional Weapons and Deterrence**

19. Alongside the evolving role of nuclear weapons and deterrence is a debate over the extent to which new developments in conventional weaponry can complement or even substitute for nuclear deterrence. This debate is particularly prominent in the US, which has arguably the most technologically advanced conventional weapon systems in the world. The new triad that is taking shape in US nuclear policy has reduced nuclear reliance, but at the same time may necessitate improvements to existing nuclear weapons to meet contemporary threats. Examples

of such tasks cited in the Nuclear Posture Review include attacks on hardened, deeply-buried targets or counter-force attacks on mobile nuclear-armed missiles; elsewhere, the possibility of nuclear-tipped missile defence has been mooted. It can be argued, however, that new advanced conventional weapons may meet some of those threats just as effectively as new nuclear weapons, without the potentially damaging effects on non-proliferation or the nuclear taboo.

20. On the other hand, it does not automatically follow that advanced conventional weapons can replace, rather than complement, nuclear weapons. Despite advances in accuracy and destructive capacity, conventional weapons have a much greater reliance for effectiveness on knowledge of the target: its depth below ground, its precise location, its physical characteristics. Uncertainty in these areas can drastically reduce effectiveness, and this may require non-conventional options in deterrence.

### **Europe and Nuclear Deterrence**

21. Europe is home to three of the world's nuclear-armed states and a fourth has nuclear weapon stationed there, but deterrence has declined markedly in salience. The unlikelihood of the continent seeing new nuclear powers, a large-scale war, or nuclear weapons being stationed on the territory of new NATO members all combine to mean little debate on nuclear deterrence. It is unlikely, however, that NATO will abandon its commitment to nuclear weapons in its strategy and it is therefore probable that a debate will need to take place at some point. Factors that might lead to a renewed debate are the nuclear policy followed by Iran, the evolving relationship between Russia and NATO, and the possibilities of missile defence.

22. Britain, as the world's first 'small' nuclear power, has a longer experience of how such states use deterrence against much larger nuclear powers than any other state. That may give it some insight into how emerging nuclear states think, although it perhaps gives less into how the UK might itself practice nuclear deterrence. At the moment, however, the UK is perhaps the only state in Europe to have had a high-profile debate about its nuclear future, something triggered by the government's 2003 White Paper, which stated that a decision was required during the life of the current Parliament.

23. The uses to which the UK might put nuclear deterrence are less than clear: the government has simply said that nuclear weapons remain the ultimate guarantor of national security, but has not elaborated a clear strategy. There may therefore be a need for the UK to develop a 'triad' all of its own, one comprised of diplomacy, deterrence and missile defence. The first two of these are long-standing elements of British policy, but the last is undeveloped. Thus far, Britain has tended to deal with missile defence and deterrence quite separately: despite the previous aversion having ebbed since the demise of the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty, there has been no clear attempt to devise a policy embracing both defence and deterrence.

24. France, unlike the UK, has not had the same debate over its nuclear future, and it is unlikely that a future government will implement any radical changes. However, some have predicted increased UK-France cooperation in the future: the two states have compatible doctrines and both have stated that nuclear deterrence is about more than simply protecting national interests. The insuperable barrier here, of course, is the Anglo-American nuclear relationship, the framework of which makes it difficult or impossible for other bilateral relationships to flourish. It is, however, possible to imagine a future in which both the UK and France declared that their nuclear deterrents could be used for protecting the interests of the EU.

25. Although the main impact of an Iranian nuclear weapon would be upon the strategies of existing nuclear powers, it is often claimed that there might also be an added impact upon the calculations of non-nuclear states. In particular, Turkey might feel compelled to re-evaluate its nuclear policy in light of a nuclear Iran. Several states inside and outside NATO have, like Turkey, experienced a certain loss of faith in the ability of non-proliferation regimes to deliver on their security; something that leaves extended deterrence (something widely regarded as considerably more problematic than central deterrence) as their prime guarantee against new nuclear adversaries. The implications of this are extremely troubling: it is very possible that the next wave of nuclear proliferation (assuming that there is to be one) will include allies of the US and possibly NATO members. This, at present, is a possible scenario rather than a likely one. Turkey's security policy is inextricably bound with EU accession and it is at present impossible to imagine the EU accepting

a new nuclear state. Nonetheless, the alternative is a reinforced extended deterrent, which may therefore include an enhanced role for missile defence.

### **NATO and Nuclear Deterrence**

26. The Alliance has reduced but not yet relinquished its reliance on nuclear weapons: their presence in NATO posture and in Europe is a key pillar of NATO in both the political and the military sense. Although the original rationale disappeared with the end of the Cold War, nuclear advocates claim that deterrence still holds key purposes for the Alliance. One is the familiar one of hedging against resurgent powers. Although this may be a distant prospect, it is not yet distant enough warrant removing nuclear weapons from NATO posture. Moreover, if the weapons were removed, reintroducing them in a deteriorating security environment would be an escalatory move in a way that maintaining existing arsenals is not. Another purpose is assistance to non-proliferation: it can be argued that the 'nuclear umbrella' is a significant reason why some NATO members have not developed nuclear weapons of their own.

27. Cutting against this inertial resilience in NATO's nuclear posture is the possibility that the declining *prominence* of nuclear weapons may be a bellwether of declining *interest*. In this perspective, the short-run maintenance of the status quo but absence of any clearly-defined role for nuclear weapons may mean, in the medium-to-longer run, the withering-away of NATO's commitment to nuclear weapons.

28. This possible drift towards zero is not only a product of an ill-defined mission. European public opinion tends to be either indifferent or opposed to a continued nuclear role for Europe, especially when that involves US nuclear weapons stationed on this side of the Atlantic. It is also widely known that the US is, in many circles, unconvinced about the need for a continued role in Europe. An accident involving nuclear weapons, or a decision to use them as a bargaining chip in future arms control negotiations, could also strengthen such a trend. It is also possible that the weapons remain because Europeans believe the US wants them, while the US believes the same about Europeans, and in fact neither sees much real utility in maintaining this presence.

29. Is this something to be concerned about? The answer to this question lies in the role we ascribe to US extended deterrence and the utility of nuclear weapons in it. It is possible to argue that extended deterrence is becoming less convincing: European NATO members were reluctant to show strong conventional deterrence for Turkey prior to the war in Iraq, there was no noticeable deterrent effect on Iran's alleged nuclear ambitions, and the inability of the Alliance to respond to Turkey's request for defence in 2003 had been very damaging for NATO's military credibility.

30. Beyond these problems, the crisis of extended deterrence goes deeper. Questions about the credibility of an extended deterrent guarantee with a nuclear element persisted during the Cold War, and grew during the 1990s after the end of the bipolar confrontation. There is, nonetheless, a certain inertial strength to the role, if only because the alternative of an EU force makes little sense outside the context of the breakdown of the Alliance leaving behind a rump confederation. NATO's nuclear future, therefore, will depend on a mix of US, British and French national nuclear forces and possibly a NATO missile defence system.

### **'Rogue States' and Terrorists**

31. What role can deterrence, and complementary methods such as threat reduction, play in addressing the threats posed by 'rogue states' and terrorist groups? It was noted that the language of deterrence has become near-universal: terrorist groups such as al-Qaeda speak of deterring US presence in the Middle East, North Korea claims its nuclear programme is concerned solely with deterrence of attack. The open nature of such claims, particularly when accompanied by concrete developments such as the North Korean nuclear test, necessitates a similarly high-profile policy response. Five key responses can be identified: ignoring or belittling the development as changing little; containment via sanctions, blockades and interdiction; suppression of the new capability by military attack; defence in depth, including with missile defence; and political engagement strategies.

32. All of these can be pursued against 'rogue states' but containment and engagement are difficult or impossible with non-state actors. This leaves a combination of ignoring, suppressing or defending in depth. Although the issue of nuclear terrorism may seem a distant prospect, ignoring such a catastrophic

probability, however slight, is a deeply unattractive policy. Suppression is similarly difficult, as there are few if any military targets, although targeting known state sponsors may produce results. Defence in depth must therefore be accorded high priority against terrorist actors, but it can also be argued that a threat reduction programme with potential state sponsors may also prove fruitful by encouraging moves away from the language of deterrence and towards that of common interests.

33. Deterrence of 'rogue states' is a problematic exercise, and the Bush Administration has expressed grave reservations about the reliability of deterrence as a tool for dealing with such states. Part of this can be traced back to a long-standing general dissatisfaction with deterrence that persisted during the Cold War, but it is also rooted in a perception that certain states are too impenetrable or too unpredictable for deterrence to be a reliable way to influence their behaviour.

34. Despite this scepticism, it was argued that deterrence will become more, not less, important in US policy on regional powers armed with weapons of mass destruction. The US is in the process of fighting what it feels will be a very long war against violent extremism and non-state actors, and the pre-9/11 emphasis on maintaining the ability to deter regional state actors has consequently been revised. Rather than a downplaying of deterrence, the task is to find ways to boost US confidence in existing deterrent capabilities.

35. This may mean developing new uses for conventional deterrence, and/or a more flexible range of options for nuclear weapons. The former will require testing concepts of conventional deterrence against new requirements, the latter may need new weapons. Such new nuclear weapons are likely to inflame the current debate over the moral necessity and strategic wisdom of pursuing such a course, but that should not mask the fact that contemporary threats may not be satisfactorily countered by existing weapons. However, this itself should not blind us to what may be the most important factor in successful deterrence, which is the willingness of the deterrer to act.

## **Conclusions**

36. Many of the parameters and defining features of contemporary debates about nuclear deterrence are perennial ones: the moral implications of such threats, the reliability of others' reactions to them, the strategies required, the implications for non-proliferation and arms dynamics. Yet it seems clear that, once again, it is necessary to revisit those features to assess whether and how they can be applied to a changed security environment.

37. It is the proponents of deterrence who have the most intellectual work to do in consequence. Those who have argued that nuclear deterrence is morally indefensible, unreliable or demonstrably unworkable are unlikely to have had their position significantly changed by the end of the Cold War, the events of 9/11, or the recent developments in Iran and North Korea. Those who have maintained that deterrence is necessary and workable have been compelled to reassert both those things, and it is here that the challenges lie.

38. A key argument – arguably *the* key argument – in favour of preserving deterrence is *unpredictability*. The historical record on predicting new threats or imminent conflicts is not impressive, and this inability to be certain of a safe future is given as a principle reason to maintain a nuclear deterrent capability. This rests on one of two assumptions: either that deterrence is existential and deters most or all actors, or that it is highly manipulable and can be technologically and militarily tailored to counter a wide variety of threats.

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