

# British Pugwash Group

## The 2008 Joseph Rotblat Essay

by Emmet Farragher

**An analysis of scenarios in which an independent British nuclear weapon could arguably be used, together with an examination of non-nuclear alternatives in each case.**

To quote the legendary American singer-songwriter Jim Morrison, “The future’s uncertain and the end is always near.” This sentiment forms the backbone of most arguments supporting an independent nuclear weapon for Britain. The logic of the argument is that in the decades to come, the world may change in ways we cannot predict, and that in this potentially dangerous future world Britain may need the security of a nuclear weapon. This argument has re-surfaced in the debate over the renewal of Trident, Britain’s submarine-launched ballistic missile system. The current Trident submarines will last until 2025. Since a new Trident submarine would take two decades to develop and build, the government believes that if it wants to renew Trident it needs to take the decision to do so this decade. - if the decision were made later, it would risk a gap between the systems, in which Britain would have no submarine-launched ballistic missile system. Consequently, in March of this year it took the

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decision, and plans for the renewal of Trident passed through parliament, not without considerable resistance. However, more recently, the outgoing foreign minister Margaret Beckett called for Britain to serve as a ‘disarmament laboratory’ and said that ‘new thinking’ was underway. So the debate on the independent British nuclear weapon is not over. An important part of this debate will be the analysis of possible future scenarios in which a British nuclear weapon might be used, examining, in each case, whether there would be a non-nuclear alternative.

In the forthcoming debate, the case for Britain’s nuclear weapon should not be based on a vague fear of the future. Possible scenarios in which this weapon could arguably be used need to be sketched out in as much detail as is currently possible. In this paper we consider three possible scenarios. In each case, the probability of its occurrence is perhaps low, but it would be rash to rule it out altogether.

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*The British Pugwash Group launched the Joseph Rotblat Essay Competition in the 2007-2008 academic year to honour the centenary of the birth of Professor Sir Joseph Rotblat, KCMG CBE FRS, one of the founders of the Pugwash Conferences on Science and World Affairs and of British Pugwash. A physicist concerned about the role of science in society, Rotblat shared the 1995 Nobel Peace Prize with the Pugwash Conferences “efforts to diminish the part played by nuclear arms in international politics and in the longer run to eliminate such arms”. Rotblat was an ardent advocate of young people and believed that drawing upon their creativity and energy is a crucial step in creating a better world.*

*The 2008 competition winner, Emmet Farragher, is a first year student studying physics at University College London.*

## **1. A surprise attack on Britain made by a member of the current ‘nuclear club’.**

This ‘club’ is made up of Britain, the U.S.A, Russia, France, China, India, Pakistan and North Korea, plus possibly Israel, Iran and Syria. Israel is widely believed to have nuclear weapons, though it has refused to confirm or deny this. Iran and Syria have been accused by a number of governments of currently attempting to develop nuclear weapons technology. Lewis Page once described the nuclear club as “three proper liberal democracies, and five other regimes ranging from a little bit worrying to quite bad news.” The five other regimes he was referring to were Russia, China, Israel, India and Pakistan. Of these, in the current political climate, Russia could be considered as quite worrying. In the last year UK-Russian relations have become tense. Despite this, it is unlikely that Britain would ever face a scenario in which an independent British nuclear weapon was used on Russia. Even if tension grew to the point where, for example, Russia cut off energy supplies to Britain, it is hard to imagine that it would retaliate by using nuclear weapons. Britain went through more than fifty years of Cold War without using its nuclear weapons. In any case, Russia would never risk launching a nuclear attack on Britain because of the possibility that America would come to the defence of its old ally. The same ‘Cold War’ considerations also apply to China, a superpower whose emergence is almost complete.

Britain would be more likely to face danger from a smaller nuclear state, if it came to be controlled by extremists opposed to British values. Such a “rogue” state might conceivably attack Britain with its arsenal without warning. One possible example of this scenario might be Pakistan, which currently has a very unstable political landscape. It cannot be excluded that at some time in the future, extremists opposed to Britain could come to power there. A similar situation could also arise in Iran, if it were to pursue a nuclear weapons programme, and extremist elements such as the Revolutionary Guard took complete control of the country. If Britain were attacked by such a rogue state, using nuclear weapons or other weapons of mass destruction, a British response using a nuclear

weapon might be conceivable. In this case Britain’s options would be limited. If it were really a surprise attack, it would clearly be too late for negotiation or sanctions, and a retaliatory attack might be made to limit further damage to Britain, provided that Britain’s nuclear capability had not been destroyed. Whether this retaliatory attack would be made using conventional or nuclear weapons would depend on the technological capabilities of the conventional weaponry available at the time: if conventional weapons were capable of destroying the enemy states’ nuclear sites, there would be no need for nuclear retaliation.

## **2. A developing threat of a nuclear attack by a ‘rogue’ state.**

It is in fact rather implausible that a nuclear attack by a rogue state would come as a complete surprise. That scenario pre-supposes that Britain had severely, and unpredictably, provoked the state in question, and that no third party had sought to defuse the situation. As Rodric Braithwaite, former British ambassador in Moscow, questions ‘What provocation would we have to give to drive the dictator to such a course? Would the Americans not find their own way of stopping the crisis before a nuclear exchange developed that was out of their control?’ Furthermore, a surprise attack is also made unlikely by the surveillance technology that exists today. Satellite technology, and other means of surveillance, enable government agencies to spot the tell-tale signs of nuclear weapons development, and this gives information which would typically transform the scenario from a short-term crisis to a longer-term process. If a potentially dangerous state unfriendly to Britain is found to possess, or to be developing, weapons of mass destruction, Britain has many more options. A nuclear attack could arguably be proposed, but it would be a very flawed argument. A pre-emptive nuclear strike would, at the very least, earn Britain the condemnation of the international community. It would also be a very dangerous move, which would unbalance the international landscape, and possibly lead to a retaliatory attack and to a very messy conflict. The longer-term nature of this scenario allows a number of non-nuclear alternatives to be considered. The most desirable

alternative would be to persuade the country in question to disarm itself of nuclear weapons or stop their development. Britain would join with the international community in attempting to encourage the disarmament of the country by diplomatic means e.g. through international economic and political tools such as negotiations, sanctions and the control of international aid. In recent times this approach has been successful, as the examples of North Korea and Libya testify.

The Republic of North Korea had been suspected of harbouring ambitions for nuclear weaponry since it withdrew from the nuclear non-proliferation treaty in 1993. In October 2006 North Korea claimed to have tested a nuclear weapon for the first time. These claims were quickly confirmed by U.S and Russian intelligence agencies. Since then, international negotiations have led to North Korea taking at least the first steps towards nuclear disarmament. This has been achieved through Six-nation talks involving North and South Korea, the U.S.A, Russia, China and Japan and through talks with the United Nations International Atomic Energy Agency. In a deal reached in February 2007, Pyongyang pledged to shut down its Yongbyon reactor within 60 days in return for 50,000 metric tons of fuel aid. A further 950,000 tonnes of fuel oil or an equivalent in economic aid will be sent to the North once it permanently disables its nuclear operations. The U.S also agreed to begin the process of removing North Korea from its list of state sponsors of terrorism. By July the Yongbyon reactor had been shutdown and all other North Korean nuclear facilities are scheduled to be declared and disabled by the end of the year.

The method of encouraging disarmament through diplomacy has also succeeded in persuading Libya to disclose and dismantle its nuclear weapons programme. Libya had been under UN sanctions for a number of years, largely due its weapons of mass destruction programs and involvement with terrorist activities. But in recent years there has been a difference in the diplomatic mood. After Libya renounced terrorism and agreed to pay compensation to the victims of the Lockerbie bombing of 1988, the UN lifted its sanctions against the country. In 2004 Libyan leader Col.

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Gadhafi announced his commitment to dismantle all weapons of mass destruction in his country and to allow full inspections. Gadhafi's decision is thought to have been largely influenced by his desire to improve Libya's economy and also for his country to come out of the diplomatic cold. This could not be achieved without the removal of sanctions, and for this he gave up his country's weapons programme. These examples show that the use of international diplomacy would be a viable, as well as the most desirable, method to pursue if Britain was faced with the scenario of an unfriendly country developing nuclear weapons. Both examples illustrate that these methods are often slow, and can take many years to get results.

At the end of the day, if the country in question refuses to respond to diplomatic pressures, there are still a number of non-nuclear alternatives available to Britain. It could turn to the use of conventional military weapons, e.g. seeking to disable the nuclear weapons facilities of the country in question, by means of a series of precise air strikes, or by an invasion or small military incursion. The air strike option in a scenario of this kind has some precedents. In 1981 Israel bombed an Iraqi nuclear plant near Baghdad. Their justification for the attack was their belief that the plant was designed to make nuclear weapons to be used against Israel. The attack, though technically successful, was globally condemned. More recently, in October of this year, Israel targeted an air strike on a suspected nuclear reactor in Syria. Britain's air force would clearly be capable of undertaking such an action, though for political reasons it would probably chose to do so in cooperation with other countries which saw the nuclear facilities as a threat.

The military incursion/invasion option also has precedents. An obvious (if un-encouraging) example of this is the invasion of Iraq in 2003, led by the United States and backed by British forces. An official objective of the invasion was "to disarm Iraq of weapons of mass destruction." No such weapons were found. Furthermore the invasion sparked off the ongoing conflict, which has been disastrous for both Iraq and the forces that invaded it. It has certainly not made Britain a safer place. After Iraq it is hard to imagine that

Britain would wish to invade a country in response to a scenario of this type. It should be noted that either option requires extensive and accurate intelligence information, which was clearly lacking in the case of Iraq. In this context, conventional military force is a much blunter tool than diplomacy. It can spark off a widespread conflict within the country, and it can alienate the belligerents from its allies and the world community in general. Nevertheless it would be preferable to the use of nuclear weapons. A nuclear strike by Britain on the country in question would put Britain in more danger, and would destabilise the world situation. It might achieve the short-term objective of destroying the suspected nuclear weapons facilities, but in the longer term it would severely decrease the security of the country.

Diplomacy is clearly the most desirable option to pursue in this scenario. Negotiations may need to be backed by international pressure, (e.g. sanctions) in a carrot-and-stick mode. However, it is vital that the diplomatic approach should not be cut short, as happened in the run-up to the invasion of Iraq. If Britain finds itself in this scenario again it must commit itself fully to diplomatic means. Only when all diplomatic avenues have been exhausted, should the use of conventional arms be considered. Hopefully, after the disastrous invasion of Iraq, this lesson will have been learned.

### **3. Nuclear attack by an international terrorist organisation**

So far the scenarios discussed have involved Britain being threatened by the nuclear capabilities of another country. However the rise of international terrorist organisations also brings with it the threat of a nuclear attack on Britain from one of these groups. In a scenario where Britain was attacked by a terrorist organisation using nuclear weapons, the options open to Britain would be extremely limited. A retaliatory nuclear attack could be considered. However, Britain would presumably feel itself unable to attack the country where the terrorists were based (even if that were known) unless it had convincing evidence that the country was in some way sponsoring the terrorist organisation. In some

cases, the aim of the terrorists' attack might be to provoke a retaliatory attack, and would play into the terrorists' hands. The only realistic way of dealing with this scenario is to stop it occurring. This will require the intelligence services of Britain in cooperation with other countries to track terrorist activities extremely accurately. In addition, a key preventative measure is the tight regulation of nuclear material, to minimise the risk of its falling into the wrong hands.

### **Conclusions**

The three scenarios described above are all ones in which could conceivably be argued that Britain might be driven to use its independent nuclear deterrent. Its freedom to do so would, of course, depend on how independent the British nuclear weapon system actually is. The reality is that the Trident system is to a considerable extent dependent on the USA. We purchase our Trident missiles from the USA, the USA maintains the missiles, and provides us with satellite guidance. As Rodric Braithwaite puts it, "One day, the US Congress may decide to withdraw these facilities. It would certainly do so the moment we fired off a missile without American permission." So our capacity for independent action is limited.

The first scenario, a surprise attack, might appear to give justification for a retaliatory nuclear attack in order to ensure the defence of the country. However, a retaliatory attack would not mend the destruction already caused to Britain, and might fail to prevent further destruction. It is much more important to focus on how to prevent Britain being attacked. In the second scenario, Britain becomes aware that a potentially hostile country possesses, or is developing nuclear weapons. A pre-emptive nuclear strike would be out of the question, for both pragmatic and political reasons. The best non-nuclear alternative would be the committed use of diplomacy to cool the situation and persuade the country to give up its nuclear weapons facilities. As a last resort, conventional arms could be used, either precision air strikes or an invasion force to destroy the nuclear facilities. If either of these methods were to be used, it would be crucial for the mistakes of the Iraq invasion not to be

repeated. The third scenario, a nuclear attack on Britain by a terrorist organisation, gives Britain a very limited range of options. Britain would not be able to strike back at the country where the terrorists were based (even if known) unless it had compelling evidence that the country was sponsoring the group. The only sensible option is to prevent such an event from happening through the use of smart intelligence gathering and strict control of nuclear materials.

The analysis of each of these scenarios shows that the use of a nuclear weapon is unlikely to be an effective response. It might, however, be argued that the nuclear weapon does not actually have to be used – its mere existence is sufficient to act as a deterrent. This argument is difficult to disprove, since it is hard to prove that a specific measure has deterred somebody from a course of action. However a counter-argument is that the British deterrent, rather than deterring nuclear warfare, is more likely to encourage other countries to develop their own nuclear weapons so they can feel more secure, thereby increasing international insecurity.

The analysis in this paper shows that Britain's possession of nuclear weapons confers no real benefit in any of these scenarios. Wherever possible, those scenarios should be prevented from occurring, through a commitment to disarmament and diplomacy, with a resort to conventional warfare only when those have totally failed. All the money and faith that have been invested in the British nuclear weapon system have given us no more than an illusion of security. It may have given us a place on the top table of international politics, but that is not a valid justification for possessing such a devastating weapon. At first sight, it might appear that giving up our independent nuclear weapon would be a gamble. However, our analysis of these scenarios shows that in reality we are keeping our nuclear weapons system in an attempt to preserve our status in the world, not to defend the country.

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