

THE CERTAINTY OF UNCERTAINTY

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Human society, globally, is confronted by 'a long hot century': climate chaos, conflicts over non-renewable resources, confrontations over renewables, system overload from population expansion, clashes of inter-cultural ignorance, the long war against terror, the rise of new superpowers, the stress on multilateral institutions to deliver the goods...and on and on.

There is also the additional danger of nuclear weapons proliferation, spread by a civil nuclear renaissance, the erosion of anti-proliferation norms, and the embedding as strategic commonsense of the view that nuclear weapons are the 'ultimate insurance'. Mohamed El Baradei, Director General of the IAEA, recently said that there are roughly three dozen countries 'with civil nuclear power, who have the technologies and understanding to develop nuclear weapons in a short period of time'. A basic assumption about the future must be that international security will be more rather than less dangerous with up to 50 nuclear weapons states.

A second basic assumption concerns uncertainty. On 4 December, on the occasion of the White Paper on Britain's WMD commitment, Tony Blair said: 'the one certain thing about our world today is uncertainty'.

If we take the certainty of uncertainty as the starting point, the challenge for Britain is to choose policies that will minimise risks, but without ever thinking we can eradicate all uncertainty. The core issue, then, is the balance of risks. In my judgement, renewing Trident (in whatever form) will ratchet up the risks: the bigger danger for Britain is not North Korea acquiring a few devices, but the spread of a global WMD strategic culture. Renewal at this point might appear prudent for Britain, thinking unilaterally, but steady-as-we-go is unwise if the context changes, and the context is changing. And the government and its loyal opposition are about to make a strategic blunder of the first order.

Uncertainty is certain in world politics, but there are more or less predictable dimensions to it. Uncertainty isn't just one undifferentiated thing, as the PM seems to imply. What is more, the government is choosing to emphasise the most unpredictable dimensions of uncertainty, and to make these the bedrock rationale for renewal.

The more predictable uncertainties of a world in which nuclear weapons are spreading include: an increased risk of nuclear war escalating out of a conventional regional war;

increased risks of accidental war; greater risk of inadvertent war; 'loose nukes' and the danger of material falling into the hands of terrorists; the erosion of NPT regime restraints; the growing unwillingness of states to accept double standards ('We can have them/You shouldn't'); unrivalled opportunities for nuclear entrepreneurship (of the A.Q. Khan type); the unintended negative consequences of proliferation and modernisation (sparking off security dilemmas among neighbours); and the deepening of the strategic commonsense that nuclear weapons represent a state's 'ultimate insurance'.

The more unpredictable uncertainties, arising out of Britain (specifically) eliminating its WMD, include: weakening the so-called special relationship with the United States; becoming a target for nuclear blackmail or attack by 'rogue states'; risking being a target for nuclear terrorists sponsored by a state; and opening itself up to invasion. Ultimately, if global abolition were ever achieved, there would be the risks of cheating or 'break-out'.

Last week, the government 'best-cased' the predictable (negative) uncertainties. That is, it played them down or ignored them - the Prime Minister shamelessly avoided mentioning the NPT in the Commons. At the same time, it 'worst-cased' the unpredictable uncertainties. That is, it played them up - the White Paper postulated the preposterous notion that a state might 'sponsor' nuclear terrorism against Britain. Blair said this was 'not utterly fanciful' - a phrase that suggests he may have suspected it to be a little bit fanciful. It is actually too fanciful to take seriously: handing over immense destructive power to terrorists they cannot ultimately control is not how any government behaves. By best-casing the most predictable uncertainties (minimising their danger) and worst-casing the least likely (maximising their danger) the government sought to persuade us of the prudence of staying in the WMD business.

This is flawed reasoning. The prudent course is to try to head off the predictable uncertainties of proliferation, while seeking to reduce the unpredictable uncertainties of abolition - and progress with the former (by what I will shortly describe as constructive non-renewal) would greatly assist the latter.

Flawed reasoning is also evident in the use of history. Supporters of renewal claim that nuclear weapons kept the 'peace' during the Cold War, served us 'well', and will continue to 'work'. This best-cases the past and does not begin to engage with the future.

(You will notice that I have not used the term 'British nuclear deterrent': that's because I am not convinced it has deterred anything, so do not give the label to what remains to be demonstrated.) On the past, we may have survived the Cold War more through luck than judgement: don't forget the near catastrophes of 1962 (Cuba) and 1983 (Abel Archer). But whatever one's view of nuclear history, how relevant are its lessons for the dynamics of a radically different world of up to 50 nuclear states? Deterrence would be infinitely more complex; crisis stability would be less predictable; transition dangers would be multiple; and nuclear learning would be primitive.

We are on the cusp of a multipolar nuclear world – 'the tipping point' is the nice phrase of the organisers. Does Britain hedge its bets (as the government calculates) by remaining a nuclear player, and so contribute to bring about a global WMD strategic culture (as many of us see it, but the government fails to)? Or does it pursue a policy of constructive non-renewal, seeking to re-invigorate anti-proliferation institutions and norms? These are big questions; and they raise the issue of British influence on these matters.

The White Paper said it would be 'highly imprudent to mortgage our long-term national security' against the assumption that if Britain gave up its deterrent, others would be encouraged to follow suit'. There is a point there, but only half a point. It cannot be assumed that others would follow suit, of course, but what about the other half of the equation, namely the demonstration effect on threshold states of British renewal? If powerful and unthreatened Britain needs WMD, less powerful and more threatened governments elsewhere will feel it prudent and legitimate to take the WMD route – thereby adding to the momentum of the predictable dangers mentioned earlier.

For British non-renewal to have positive impact on WMD spread would depend partly on how it was done. A major security-enhancing opportunity would be thrown away if the Trident system were left simply to rust away in the 2020s. This is why there should be constructive non-renewal. By this I mean attempting to reenergise the NPT regime through agreeing to denuclearisation (including intrusive verification) in the context of working with other states (specifically the New Agenda Coalition and the Vienna Ten) which have shown a strong commitment to non-proliferation institutions and norms. Constructive non-renewal, focused on reenergising the NPT regime, led by the first non-superpower member of the

nuclear club and a Permanent Member of the UNSC, in concert with a large group of like-minded partners, has some potential to engage threshold states.

Blair's course threatens this. Even the scaling down trailed in the White Paper is unhelpful. It is actually worse than unhelpful, it is dangerous, for in the guise of reduction it is another version of steady-as-we-go, with all the predictable dangers already mentioned. The trailed reduction is essentially a sop to try and buy off opponents. It is another sign of the government's cavalier attitude to the NPT. One can act *out of respect for* a particular norm or agreement, or one can act *in accordance with* a norm or agreement. The proposed reduction is a blatant example of acting in accordance with, not out of respect for the NPT obligation (endorsed by the ICJ in 1996) to pursue nuclear disarmament under international control. If the British government was animated by acting *out of respect for* that obligation, the government could have decommissioned a boat and reduced the warheads any time after they were first deployed. The proposed reduction is a version of business-as-usual, and a clumsy gesture offered at its own convenience, showing no respect to anybody – or their intelligence.

A final piece of flawed reasoning is Blair's conviction that nuclear weapons represent 'the ultimate insurance'. In the European security community, historically a cockpit of war, war is now regarded as 'unthinkable'. The 'ultimate insurance' against war is politics, not nuclear weapons. Stable peace comes through complex interdependence, shared institutions and norms, multi-level social interaction, and trust-building and trust-affirming commitments. Nuclear weapons cannot be 'the ultimate insurance' against war because they depend on making war thinkable: deterrents require their possessors to credibly commit to going to war. British society's choice is to contribute to replicating this traditional version of national security, or contributing to constructing a global security community of laws, institutions, and norms, in which the NPT regime is a major part of the scaffolding.

The government's rush to renewal, imprudent in relation to the balance of risks, is all the more inexcusable because an immediate decision does not have to be taken. Choosing to promote WMD as the 'ultimate insurance', rather than pursuing constructive non-renewal, will predictably increase the momentum of one of the most dangerous threats facing human society in our long hot century.