

Where Next For Nuclear Abolitionists?

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During his service in the British Royal Navy from 1962 to 1982, Commander Robert Green flew nuclear-armed aircraft for nine years and served in the intelligence service. During his navy career he became disillusioned with nuclear deterrence. In 1991 he became chair of the UK branch of the World Court Project. He is now co-coordinator with his wife, Kate Dewes, of the Peace Foundation's Disarmament & Security Centre in New Zealand.

Following the Bush administration's Nuclear Posture Review (NPR), the April 2002 preparatory meeting at the UN in New York for the next review of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in 2005, and the 2002 UN General Assembly Disarmament Session, this is an appropriate moment to assess where the international anti-nuclear movement should focus their energies.

First, however, consideration will be given to how prospects for nuclear abolition could be affected by US responses to growing doubts about nuclear deterrence, including its plans for Ballistic Missile Defence (BMD). The focus on the US reflects the overwhelming influence of the world's first and sole remaining nuclear-armed superpower. The Bush administration has a lengthening track record of rejection of international treaties, linked to its near-contempt for international law and single-minded drive for military "full spectrum dominance".

There is thus an urgent need to explore "outside the box" ways to make progress towards nuclear abolition. These should try to build upon the few current campaigns which seem to have some traction, and lessons learned from three successful past campaigns: the World Court Project; the "Ottawa Process" which led to a treaty banning anti-personnel landmines, and the campaign for an International Criminal Court.

Responses to Doubts about Nuclear Deterrence

Almost the only encouraging aspect of current US nuclear policy is Bush's public admission of doubt about the effectiveness of nuclear deterrence against the primary threat: extremists armed with weapons of mass destruction (WMD). What is more, both his Vice-President Dick Cheney and Secretary of State Colin Powell rejected use of nuclear weapons against Iraqi forces in the Gulf War, [1] which means that any future comparable US nuclear threat would lack credibility.

One of Bush's responses has been to revive BMD in both its national and "theatre" forms, and to augment conventional offensive strike systems. Through this combination, he hopes to strengthen conventional deterrence and raise the threshold for use of strategic nuclear weapons. At first sight, this would appear to be a positive development for nuclear disarmament, especially after Bush and Putin signed the "Strategic Offensive Reductions" Treaty and with inauguration of the new NATO-Russia Council in May 2002.

Unfortunately, Bush's piecemeal approach with Russia excludes China, the only other nuclear-armed state with superpower potential. There are no plans for a NATO-China Council, or for sharing BMD technology with China. On the contrary, China understandably perceives

current US collaboration with both Japan and Taiwan to develop theatre BMD systems as threatening its land-based nuclear-armed intercontinental ballistic missiles, of which currently it is believed to have less than 20. As it modernises its arsenal of only about 400 nuclear warheads, China will be able to use US theatre BMD plans to justify expanding its nuclear capability. This will inevitably ratchet up India's, to which Pakistan will feel pressured to respond. Thus one long-term consequence of deploying BMD will be to stifle any further progress in nuclear disarmament, because the US will argue that it cannot make further reductions in light of these developments, and Russia will feel forced to follow suit.

Another US response to doubts about nuclear deterrence has been to make nuclear weapon use more likely. The NPR recommends using low-yield nuclear weapons against hardened or deeply buried non-nuclear WMD targets or bunkers where conventional weapons might be ineffective. This might be driven by the perceived need to restore US credibility in light of the Cheney/Powell decision in the Gulf War. However, it is an incitement to nuclear proliferation, as it would gut US assurances not to use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear NPT signatory states, including the "axis of evil" trio of Iran, Iraq and North Korea plus Libya and Syria. Since this became clear, the UK government has echoed its "master's voice" by warning that it too is prepared to use nuclear weapons if its forces, not just national territory, are subjected to WMD attack.

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One positive spin-off from US nuclear plans, the South Asian nuclear crisis, and US allegations of revived nuclear weapon development by Iraq and North Korea is that the issue of nuclear weapons is again high on the international media agenda. Of course, use of even one low-yield nuclear weapon by the US for the first time since Nagasaki (or by Israel) would cause worldwide outrage and reawaken the anti-nuclear mass movement - as would a nuclear war between India and Pakistan.

Nevertheless, acquisition by the five recognised nuclear states of their nuclear arsenals involved probably their greatest investment in financial, political and human terms since the Second World War. After over fifty years of their own propaganda, none of these governments would risk breaking out of the nuclear club without finding a replacement system with clear advantages to balance the perceived loss of security.

In struggles to overthrow oppression and injustice like the abolition of slavery and South African apartheid, there was often a phase when progress stalled before the status quo was shifted. The seemingly invincible regressive forces, no longer bothering to pay lip-service to progress, openly hardened their positions. One reason for this was awareness by the regressive forces that their arguments were failing, especially on the two anvils of practicality and the law.

At such moments, the key to further progress is to focus on practical projects which go to the heart of the issue and uphold the law, while helping to reduce the risk of nuclear war and shift the pro-nuclear mindset. Using these criteria, the following four candidates are offered for consideration:

- 1) **Challenge Launch-on-Warning.** The NPR claims that US strategic nuclear forces are not on "hair-trigger" alert. How does this square with

persisting reports that, despite Bush's determination to transform the US relationship with Russia and to "replace Mutual Assured Destruction with Mutual Cooperation", some 2,000 strategic nuclear warheads on each side are still held at "launch-on-warning" readiness? This must be challenged, using Alan Phillips' excellent Canadian Ploughshares paper, and perhaps by expanding the US "Back from the Brink" campaign. [2]

2) **Challenge Nuclear Deterrence.** Following directly from (1), the world must be told that the pro-nuclear deterrence lobby is faltering. Winning this argument is crucial to shifting the mindset against nuclear weapons, especially among the military. Little further progress towards nuclear abolition is possible without explaining why nuclear deterrence does not work, is immoral and unlawful, and there are more credible and acceptable alternative security strategies. [3]

3) **Offer More Credible Alternatives.** The UK holds most promise of becoming the first nuclear state to reject nuclear deterrence. It has cut its nuclear arsenal to about 185 warheads, the smallest of the recognised nuclear states, deployed in one delivery system: 16 submarine-launched US Trident ballistic missiles in each of four submarines, one of which is deployed at a notice to fire of "days". The UK government has to decide whether to replace Trident by around 2007. Exploiting US plans to convert four Ohio class Trident-equipped submarines to conventional armament, I have therefore proposed that the UK government should replace its nuclear arsenal with precision-guided, conventionally-armed cruise missiles plus special forces. [4] This would provide a more credible deterrence system, which the Navy would in principle support. The first "breakout" by one of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council would be sensational: the UK government would throw its weight behind the nuclear abolition movement, as Canada did so effectively in the campaign for a treaty banning landmines.

4) **Intensify Non-Violent Direct Action Upholding The Law.** Meanwhile, as another incentive for the governments of nuclear states to consider non-nuclear security options, carefully focused and sustained non-violent direct action campaigns in the nuclear states to uphold the law should be intensified. The UK Trident Ploughshares campaign, relying on legal attrition supported by the Acronym Institute, World Court Project, CND and other anti-nuclear groups, continues to embarrass the government, Royal Navy and police, with growing support from church leaders, politicians and such stars as Sir Sean Connery. The judiciary and government have been forced into a legal debate. This has moved beyond the 1996 World Court advisory opinion to confront the legal status of nuclear deterrence and possessing specific types of nuclear weapon with readiness and intent to use them, even against non-nuclear states and extremists. [5]

Notes

1. Colin Powell, 'A Soldier's Way' (Hutchinson, London, 1995), pp485-486.
2. See <http://backfromthebrink.policy.net/>; also Canadian Ploughshares Working Paper 02-1 'No Launch on Warning' by Alan Phillips MD (www.ploughshares.ca).
3. Robert Green, 'The Naked Nuclear Emperor: Debunking Nuclear Deterrence' (Disarmament & Security Centre, PO Box 8390, Christchurch, New Zealand, 2000) (www.disarmsecure.org).
4. 'Conventionally-Armed UK Trident?' (RUSI Journal, February 2002), pp31-34, available on request from robwcpuk@chch.planet.org.nz.
5. See www.tridentploughshares.org, www.acronym.org.uk, www.gn.apc.org/wcp, www.cnduk.org.