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Analysis and thoughts on the development
of the humanitarian initiative on nuclear weapons

EFFECTIVE MEASURES FOR NUCLEAR DISARMAMENT

Nuclear realities: Worlds apart

NPT

The party politics of British nuclear electioneering and the diplomatic stratagems of global nuclear order seem to operate in entirely different worlds.

By Nick Ritchie

May 2015 saw the election of a Conservative majority government in the United Kingdom for the first time in 17 years and a fractious NPT Review Conference in New York that resulted in [stalemate and recrimination](#) over nuclear disarmament, and also on next steps towards a zone free of nuclear weapons and other WMD in the Middle East. The latter issue prevented the Review Conference reaching an outcome. What have these two developments—the Review Conference, and the British election—got to do with one another? Unfortunately, very little.



HMS Victorious a Vanguard class submarine, arriving at HM Naval Base Devonport for a major refit.

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The British political class remains committed to retention of nuclear weapons as a 'necessary' element of long term national security. Pre-election polls were predicting another coalition but the permutations on offer would not have altered Britain's nuclear trajectory, despite the Conservative's politically effective narrative that Labour's Ed Miliband would have [sold out](#) on Trident to secure support from the anti-nuclear Scottish National Party for the keys to Downing Street. The fact remains that all three main Westminster parties supported the UK retaining nuclear weapons and going ahead with replacing the current Trident strategic nuclear weapons system in some form. The Liberal Democrats favoured a slimmed down cheaper option but they are a spent political force after being disproportionately blamed by the electorate for some of the last Coalition government's failings. Both Labour and the Tories remain fully committed to the programme initiated by [Tony Blair in 2006](#) to replace Trident with a like-for-like system and keep the United Kingdom in the nuclear weapons business well into the 2060s. Any combination of political parties, formal coalitions, or minority government would have been able to combine Labour and Conservative majority support for full Trident replacement in a free vote in the new parliament.

The NPT was predictably absent from the debate, as the Guardian's [Richard Norton-Taylor](#) recently lamented. This was symptomatic of a general [dearth](#) of any serious discussion on foreign and defence policy during the campaign on Russia, Islamic State, energy security or [climate change](#), for example. Trident was discussed but only in party political terms. In a debate on defence policy hosted by the Royal United Services Institute and Forces TV on 24 April [General Sir Richard Shirreff](#), (NATO's Deputy Supreme Allied Commander for Europe from 2011 to 2014), said: 'the political leadership has studiously avoided any serious debate on defence at any stage in this election, less a bad tempered spat on Trident, which frankly was ill-informed and pretty infantile' (at 20 minutes).

So the political theatre of nuclear politics played out simultaneously in two arenas: at the international diplomatic level in the month long NPT Review Conference and the domestic parochial level in the six week election campaign. What is clear, however, is that local nuclear party politics trumped international treaty obligations in the United Kingdom. Britain went to the NPT planning and hoping for some form of roll over of the 64-point [Action Plan](#) agreed by consensus at the previous review conference in 2010. This included a commitment to 'To further diminish the role and significance of nuclear weapons in all military and security concepts, doctrines and policies'. Yet the election debate did exactly the opposite. Labour and the Conservatives eulogised nuclear weapons and nuclear deterrence as they [competed](#) for votes. They locked themselves into a performative nuclear dance in which each tried to outdo the other's patriotic commitment to 'national security' and [protection of the citizenry](#) through continued deployment of weapons of mass destruction. Here, the Conservatives played the 'strong on defence' card favoured by right leaning parties that framed [disarmament as emasculation and duplicitous 'weakness'](#). It is a narrative that says *our* national protection and security through the threat of nuclear disaster is unquestioningly necessary and acceptable. It insists that a global security system of nuclear haves and have-nots is somehow permanently sustainable, deaf to the [voices of dissent](#) from the majority world massed at the NPT Review Conference.

What the United Kingdom and the other NPT nuclear weapon states faced at *this* Review Conference, however, was a groundswell of support for significant progress on nuclear disarmament evidenced in the 107 states that signed the '[humanitarian pledge](#)' initially authored by Austria at the third international conference on the Humanitarian Impact of Nuclear Weapons in Vienna in December. The pledge commits its adherents to pursue 'efforts to stigmatise, prohibit and eliminate nuclear weapons in light of their unacceptable humanitarian consequences' and 'fill the legal gap for the prohibition and elimination of nuclear weapons'. The accumulation of signatories at the NPT reflected deep concern about the lack of progress on nuclear disarmament and the continued modernization and veneration of nuclear weapons in nuclear-armed states. Rolling over the 2010 NPT Action Plan, promises of further incremental cuts in nuclear forces, more pledges on transparency from the nuclear weapons-states were never going to suffice, though these are welcome and necessary. What was required were [concrete actions](#) to step back from the practice of nuclear deterrence, and these were simply not forthcoming.

The United Kingdom's [delegation](#) acknowledged the 'frustration at the perceived slow pace of global disarmament... most evident at a number of international conferences on the humanitarian impact of the use of nuclear weapons.' It agreed that 'devastating humanitarian consequences could result from the use of nuclear weapons', but then said 'Our deterrence doctrine—and the robust safety and security measures we have put in place—were developed in the full knowledge of those potential consequences.' In other words, the practice of nuclear deterrence remains the solution to preventing calamitous nuclear violence. This is indicative of two things, both inherent features of humanity's troubled relationship with nuclear weapons: first, the idea that nuclear weapons perpetually solve the problems they create through perfection of parsimonious deterrence practiced according to an objective form of instrumental rationality across all nuclear-armed polities for all time; and secondly the embedding of this idea in political and strategic cultures.

The problematic practices of nuclear deterrence and the fallibility of its abstract logic of state interaction (and generally a militarized and masculinized version of 'the state') have been well [documented](#). In fact, the problem of [nuclear risk](#) inherent in complicated socio-technological systems and complex and asymmetric nuclear relationships and cultures has been an important component of the humanitarian critique. Recent allegations by Royal Navy submariner [William McNeilly](#) of safety and security lapses involving the United Kingdom's Trident submarines and the Clyde Naval Base near Glasgow question Britain's 'robust safety and security measures' declared at the NPT. They add further weight to an [international body of evidence](#) on the challenges of safely operating a nuclear weapons enterprise designed to deliver nuclear weapons at relatively short notice on a permanent basis without any chance of catastrophic mishap, including in the [United Kingdom](#).

An excellent article by Michael Krepon in the current edition of *Survival* speaks to this theme and asks '[Can deterrence ever be stable?](#)' He argues that deterrence stability is a mirage, that nuclear weapons do not create stability and security but incentivise risk taking and intensify crises. At root is the extreme difficulty of linking the use of nuclear weapons to any rational system of political means, as Anthony Burke has eloquently argued in an essay on '[Nuclear reason: at the limits of strategy](#)'. The sheer destructiveness of nuclear weapons conflates ostensibly rational practices of nuclear threat-making with deeply emotional dread and raw fear. As [Alex Wellerstein](#) puts it, 'the method of persuasion is threatening to burn

everybody alive'. Nevertheless, as Burke argues, a powerful 'belief in the utility of nuclear weapons, and in the ability to develop rational and controllable strategies for their use in deterrence and war' was and remains widespread: 'a conviction in the rationality of nuclear weapons as instruments of the state'.

This leads to the second challenge: nuclear culture, or more accurately a political culture of '[nuclearism](#)' that refers to an almost naturalized belief that nuclear weapons and nuclear deterrence are an inevitable, necessary and enduring component of major power relations, an unquestioned solution to national security threats, and for the UK, part of what makes Britain '[great](#)'. It is nuclearism that helps explain the commitment to nuclear weapons in Britain and the tenor of the recent political debate. Nuclearism has created a 'regime of nuclear truth' embedded in our political culture, one that assigns powerful values to nuclear weapons, including electoral value. The British culture of nuclearism has been vigorously challenged over the past decade as sceptics and critics have explored ways and means of weaning the body politic off its reliance on nuclear weapons, but the roots of nuclearism run deep.

The same applies to NATO and, by extension, the European Union. NATO's 2012 [Deterrence and Defence Posture Review](#) was established to resolve differences over the role and value of nuclear weapons evident when the Alliance revisited its 'strategic concept' in 2010. The review reaffirmed the centrality of nuclear weapons to NATO, including those of the United Kingdom: 'The supreme guarantee of the security of the Allies is provided by the strategic nuclear forces of the Alliance, particularly those of the United States; the independent strategic nuclear forces of the United Kingdom and France, which have a deterrent role of their own, contribute to the overall deterrence and security of the Allies'.

Nuclearism abounds in NATO in ways that are shaped by—and shape debate in—the United Kingdom, and this thinking also permeates the European Union. NATO's commitment to nuclear defence, the presence of American nuclear weapons in European states, and the nuclear arsenals of the United Kingdom and France make it very difficult for the European Union to say or do anything progressive on nuclear disarmament. Its policy in this area is largely limited to the NPT's other two pillars of [non-proliferation](#) and peaceful uses to the consternation of some of its members. This has been compounded by Russia's recent aggressive behaviour and nuclear threat-making against NATO and EU member states, the lack of transparency over its stockpiled theatre nuclear forces, and threats to deploy nuclear weapons in Crimea and Kaliningrad, succinctly outlined by [Nikolai Sokov](#). The result is that Europe still remains the most nuclearized continent in fact and thought a quarter-of-a century since the end of the Cold War. Some European states have sought to challenge this continental nuclearism through the so-called 'humanitarian initiative', including Norway, Ireland and Austria. They have met sustained political resistance in the name of forging a consensus that reproduces a nuclearist culture. The division in Europe is symptomatic of a wider divide in global society between the majority world that eschews nuclear weapons as a basis for security and a minority of powerful states that valorises them; it is not a cause of the divide, as [some commentaries](#) have suggested.

A major problem, with respect to the United Kingdom at least, is that it is seen as perfectly legitimate to value nuclear weapons as highly prized assets and to rest their asserted security benefits on a idealised and unproblematic conception of deterrence. Part of this legitimacy comes from the NPT, which recognised the United Kingdom, along with the Soviet Union (and later its nuclear successor state, the Russian Federation), United States, France and China as 'nuclear-weapon states' in 1968 because they had exploded a nuclear device before January 1, 1967. This legal status as a nuclear-weapon state is routinely translated into a language of permanent entitlement, legal rights, and [international political legitimacy](#).

A new international legal instrument to prohibit nuclear weapons for *all* states—a '[nuclear ban treaty](#)' proposed by many governments at the Vienna International Conference on the Humanitarian Impact of Nuclear Weapons in December 2014—would strip British nuclear weapons of their veneer of legitimacy and substantially diminish the domestic political values assigned to these weapons. Such a shift in the international normative context of nuclear weapons would begin to wither the roots of cultural nuclearism in the United Kingdom. In the meantime, the party politics of British nuclear electioneering and the diplomatic stratagems of global nuclear order in New York seem to operate in entirely different worlds.

This is a guest post by Dr. Nick Ritchie, Lecturer in International Security at the University of York, and an advisor to UNIDIR's project on the humanitarian impact of nuclear weapons.

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