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The Third Law of UK Nuclear Policy: for Every Protestation There Is an Equal and Opposite Affirmation

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Introduction

In 1952 the UK tested its first nuclear device, securing itself as the third member of the ‘nuclear club’ and guaranteeing its position of power on the international stage for decades to come. Despite consecutive UK governments’ continuous support for and renewal of the nuclear program, the UK’s nuclear arsenal has remained a contentious issue on the basis of both ethical framework and the cyclical costs of acquiring new nuclear weapons amid the UK’s long-term economic stagnation. Given the political turmoil currently facing the EU and the UK, particularly in regards to a potential upset in the global axis of power and its implications for national security, the question of the UK’s nuclear program is of critical importance. This policy paper provides an expository overview of the major points of contention in the UK nuclear policy debate, with special attention given to objections and subsequent affirmations. Furthermore, we will examine the potential impact that the UK leaving the EU will have on the nuclear policy of both the EU and the UK. This examination will include the issues of: shifting power dynamics within the Union as France becomes the only NWS, the increased significance of the UK maintaining geopolitical power as an NWS post Brexit.

Timeline of British Weapons System

The UK cemented its position as a NWS in 1952, becoming the third country to successfully test an atomic bomb, behind only the United States and the Soviet Union. The 25 kiloton plutonium implosion bomb detonated off the western coast of Australia under the
codename “Hurricane” was designed to test the effects of a nuclear weapon\(^1\), and limit future dependence upon the weapons systems of the United States, whilst equally placing the UK as a pivotal world power.

Following the success of Operation Hurricane, the UK government reached the Nassau Agreement with the United States, which allowed them to procure a SLBM submarine based missile system.\(^2\) The British Polaris Programme was announced in 1962 and construction began in 1964. The success of Operation Hurricane lead to the development of the UK’s first deployable nuclear weapons: four submarine based missile systems, which made up the WMD arsenal until a replacement programme was announced under the Thatcher government in the 1980s.

The replacement of the Polaris Programme provoked considerable political debate, primarily due to the high costs associated with the renewal during a period of government spending cuts in other sectors. Yet, renewal went ahead underneath the conditions of the Cold War. Trident subsequently came into use in the 1990s, composed of warheads, submarines and missiles, and coincided with the end of the Cold War. The lifespan of the current Trident generation is coming to an end and is due to be retired in the 2020s. This has launched the current and ongoing discussions about the future of the UK nuclear deterrent.

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Protestations

Arguably more than any other Nuclear Weapon State (NWS), the United Kingdom’s nuclear deterrent programme has been, and remains, a contentious issue both publically and politically. Numerous protestations against the possession of a nuclear arsenal exist. However, financial, moral, and legal objections compose the principal rationale. This section will examine these areas of contention specifically in regard to the decision taken by the UK government to replace the Trident II D5 programme, which renews the UK’s nuclear arsenal and capabilities for the foreseeable future.

Financial Protestations

The costs of updating the Trident programme are considerable, with current outlay estimated to be upward of £50bn, which leads us to our first protestation: the costs of renewal for British taxpayers. As of March 2017, the UK national debt was estimated to stand at 1.73 trillion pounds, with the budget deficit for the fiscal year ending March 2017 standing at 19.1 billion pounds. Whilst these numbers represent a reduction in national debt and budget deficit debt, these diminations have acquiesced at the same as the introduction of austerity policy UK-wide. As such, government majority support for the renewal of the Trident programme has been met with notable opposition from sections of the public.

The vote for Trident D5 II renewal was backed by parliament with 472 votes to 117, with cross-party and cross-bench support of the programme from everyone except the Greens and the SNP. A Survation poll conducted for the SNP in January 2015 showed 47.2% of Scottish people

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opposing a new generation of nuclear weapons being based on the Clyde, with 31.6% in favour. Correspondingly, further polls suggest that support for replacement of Trident is lower in Scotland than it is south of the border. However, a 2014 survey conducted by left-wing newspaper The Guardian on WMD awareness found 79% of respondents to be against renewal of the Trident nuclear missile system, suggesting opposition or at the least disinterest in renewal amongst sections of the population.

A further financial remonstration is made by Harley. Harley discusses the costs and benefits of nuclear weapons defence exports, arguing not for a comprehensive cost-benefits analysis of UK defence exports but rather evincing the industrial offsets, value added industrial capabilities for the UK market, and export potential as considerations for government replacement of Trident. Using demanding data sets, Harley presents these sides of the financial argument and concludes that the “economic costs are opportunity costs in the form of forgone alternative” through a conceptual basis and information framework, and highlights the inherent economic tradeoff of WMD renewal. As such it is not inconsistent that a counter argument to the high public costs of Trident, is the expostulation of opportunity costs for the industries and shareholders who benefit from the defence industry. It is therefore not unreasonable to consider how this economic tradeoff may be regarded as a political asset which outweighs any potential electoral deficit born of the use of public funds for renewal during a time of austerity measures.

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Disarmament/minimal deterrence

Since 1956, the UK government has maintained the posture of nuclear deterrent, not nuclear arsenal. The 2006 Defence White Papers conduct by a UK government commission declares the UK nuclear program has only been used to deter acts of aggression against [the UK’s] vital interest, never to coerce other states. Furthermore, the White Paper reasserts the uncertainty of international politics, and the strategic environment in which the UK operates, stating a possible emergence of threat from new or old adversaries, as well as asserting an act of nuclear terrorism cannot be ruled out, as grounds for renewing the Trident arsenal. 9

The findings of this white paper, are however contested by scholars, most prominently, Nick Ritchie. Ritchie states, ‘…it is barely conceivable that British nuclear deterrent threats and the consideration of using nuclear weapons against Russia or China will ever be part of the solution to future confrontations’10. Moreover, Ritchie argues that in the unlikely event of nuclear terrorism, any nuclear response by the UK would be viewed as disproportionate, and inimical to western political objectives11. Furthermore, the concept of ‘vital interests’ could be challenged, along with the premise that the protection of these unspecified vial interests, can become coercions in themselves. The UK’s strategic security position has transmuted since the establishment of the nuclear program during the Cold War era, with changing global threats which call into question the necessity, and even utility, of a WMD arsenal.

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9 Ibid.

10 Ritchie, Nick, "Deterrence dogma? Challenging the relevance of British nuclear weapons." p. 85

11 Ibid. p. 89–90
In a secondary article Ritchie presents the view of UK nuclear strategy asseverating, ‘British nuclear policy has long been characterised as one of ‘minimum deterrence’”\textsuperscript{12}…that is, no more weapons than is necessary to deter an adversary. This concept in itself is ambiguous at best, as none of the conditions are quantifiable and can be reshaped. Ritchie even seems to unintentionally disprove his own argument concluding the [nuclear deterrent] “capacity exceeds UK requirements”\textsuperscript{13}. The 2010 Strategic Defence Review noted, “it is right that the United Kingdom should retain a credible, continuous and effective minimum nuclear deterrent for as long as the global security situation makes that necessary”\textsuperscript{14}. This leads into one of the major areas of contention: the changing global security landscape vs global zero arguments, questioning the necessity and moral impasse of the UK retaining and renewing a nuclear arsenal whilst promoting global non-proliferation.

**Non-Proliferation Obligations**

Article VI of the NPT which the UK ratified in 1968…states the objective of furthering the goal of nuclear disarmament. HM Government would argue they are indeed complying with their international treaty obligations toward disarmament, announcing a decrease in the delivery mechanisms of nuclear weapons, as well as the number of warheads allowed on each ship in the July 1998 Strategic Defence Review (SDR).\textsuperscript{15} The 2010 SDR went a step further reducing the maximum number of deployable warheads to forty per submarine, with the goal of reducing the


\textsuperscript{13} Ritchie, Nick. “Minimum Nuclear Deterrent”, 2011: 17


stockpile by the mid-2020’s. \(^\text{16}\) And yet, when examining the figures more closely it becomes apparent that despite a reduction in warheads, the tonnage of warheads is increasing, meaning the actual destructive nuclear capacity of the UK is either increasing or remaining the same. “In evaluating the destructive power of a nuclear weapon, it is customary to use the concept of equivalent megatons (EMT). Equivalent megatonnage is defined as the actual megatonnage raised to the two thirds power (EMT\(^{2/3}\)). A single 40kt (0.04mt) Polaris warhead represents 0.12 EMT. A single 100kt (0.1mt) Trident warhead represents 0.22 EMT. 32 Polaris warheads therefore represent 3.74 EMT, whilst 40 Trident warheads represent 8.61 EMT – a 230% increase in EMT”\(^\text{17}\). A 2010 cross-party Trident Commission Report stated, “As a nuclear weapon state, the UK has a grave responsibility to maintain its arsenal safely and securely, and to be at the forefront of the multilateral disarmament process. Some fear that if the UK were to decide on a full like-for-like Trident renewal, giving the UK the same or better capabilities…we would risk transmitting the message that we are not serious about moving…towards the elimination of nuclear weapons”\(^\text{18}\).

**Moral Protestations**

Any discussion of weapons of mass destruction must consider the moral aspect of the argument. This paper does not intent to address the various moral objections about the presence of nuclear weapons, nor their use, but rather primarily considers the general public posture toward nuclear objection. The moral aspect, whilst relevant tends again to play out more in public opinion than in policy position. Andrea Berger an employee of The Royal United Services


\(^\text{17}\) Ritchie. “Minimum Deterrence”, 2011, p. 18

Institute states, “…even in the most extreme circumstances…the humanitarian consequences of [deploying nuclear weapons] would be so grotesque as to be unfathomable”\textsuperscript{19}. Her opinion is not alone, yet many other scholars are sceptical of the potential ‘moral’ impact of getting rid of nuclear weapons. Whilst it can be argued that the reduction to total elimination, could send a positive message to non NW states, or those currently in development, it could also be argued that the UK has a moral obligation to other states who depend upon the protection provided by the UK nuclear program- eg the European Union.

The United Kingdom is arguably one of the strongest EU defence postures…as one of only two member states possessing ‘full-spectrum’ military capabilities.\textsuperscript{20} The consequences of the UK’s decision to leave the European Union are yet to be seen, however, there will be a considerable impact on EU Common Foreign and Security Policy. The European Union met in September 2016 noting, “the result could impact the future of the British Trident system and the loss of decision making power with the CFSP, which implements disarmament and non-proliferation agreements”\textsuperscript{21}. The conventional weapons capabilities of the EU are currently supplemented by both the UK and French NW programmes, and are provided with significant financial support. HM Government has indicated a desire to maintain close defence relations with the EU post-Brexit. However arguably more than ever, the influence and role of the UK as a pivotal world power will be assured through the possession of NW’s. The future implications for EU security policy post Brexit will be prepended further, later in this paper.

\textsuperscript{19} BBC. “A guide to Trident and the debate about replacement”, 18th July 2016. Andrea Berger of The Royal United Services Institute (RUSI).

\textsuperscript{20} Institute for Government. “Brexit Explained: UK-EU defence and security cooperation”. 2017

II. Nuclear Weapons after Brexit

Using Sagan’s three models of proliferation, this section will examine how and why the UK’s decision to exit the European Union will affect UK nuclear policy. The UK’s exit from the EU does not intrinsically change their nuclear policy, because “the power to develop and implement security and defence policy lies with member states, not the EU.” That is, there are no legal mechanisms requiring a change. Furthermore, evaluation under Sagan’s three models suggests that the incentives for the UK to retain their nuclear weapons will only increase after the UK leaves the Union.

Security Model

According to Sagan’s Security model, states make decisions to develop nuclear weapons or to exercise nuclear restraint based on their position in a “multipolar world.” Before examining changing military and security threats to a post-Brexit UK, it is significant to consider how the poles around the UK will shift as the UK leaves the EU. As an EU member state, the UK has participated in CSDP, an effort set up at the 1998 St. Malo Summit “designed to allow EU members states to combine their security and defense efforts should the need arise.” While the past decade has been characterized by the efforts of many member states to build a closer, more integrated EU defense policy, the UK has resisted further integration; it vetoed an increase in the European Defense Agency (EDA) budget for six consecutive years and vetoed the establishment of EU military headquarters in Brussels. Without the UK, however, the EU will

22“Brexit Explained: UK–EU defence and security cooperation.” Institute for Government
23 Sagan 62
24 “Brexit Explained: UK–EU defence and security cooperation.” Institute for Government
likely be able to implement a more integrated defense policy; it has already increased the EDA budget. While the UK resisted the fiscal contributions and additional responsibilities necessary to further integration while in the Union, if the integration proceeds without the UK, the UK may find its position outside an ever-closer Union is more troubling than inside. While even a more-integrated EU is unlikely to pose a direct military or security threat to the UK, the sentiments of isolation that stronger EU defence force will create are likely to encourage the UK to double down on its position as an NWS.

Sagan’s security model postulates that states develop nuclear weapons to “protect their sovereignty and national security” by “balance[ing] any rival state that develops nuclear weapons by gaining access to a nuclear deterrent.” Given the UK’s long history as a NWS with a deterrent system as well as the global climate of nuclear proliferation, additional distinct threats to sovereignty and national security are unlikely to emerge after a UK exit from the EU.

Under Sagan’s security model, nuclear restraint is exercised because “external security threats [are] radically change or reevaluated” leading to a perceived “absence of the fundamental military threats that produce positive proliferation decisions.” To apply this model to an independent UK, we must consider how already existing threats will be evaluated differently as a result of Brexit. The 2014 Trident Commission Final Report lays out the three types threats the UK faces which make it necessary to maintain their nuclear weapons. In her 2016 speech about the renewal of Trident, her first as Prime Minister, Theresa May discussed all three also as reasons that the UK must retain its nuclear capacity. Comparison of the language between the two suggests that there has been no significant reevaluation that would produce changes compatible with nuclear restraint.

27 Sagan 57
28 Sagan 61
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<td>Current Nuclear State</td>
<td>“The first is a re-emergence of a nuclear threat from a state with a significant nuclear arsenal and overwhelming conventional capabilities, and with an aggressive posture. The only current example of this possibility is Russia.”</td>
<td>“There is the threat from existing nuclear states such as Russia. We know that President Putin is upgrading his nuclear forces. In the past two years, there has been a disturbing increase in both Russian rhetoric about the use of nuclear weapons and the frequency of snap nuclear exercises. . . . There is no doubt about President Putin’s willingness to undermine the rules-based international system in order to advance his own interests.”</td>
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<td>New Nuclear State</td>
<td>“The second possibility is an existing or emerging nuclear-armed state that attains global reach and enters into direct strategic</td>
<td>“There is the threat from countries that wish to acquire nuclear capabilities illegally. North Korea has stated a clear intent to develop and deploy a nuclear weapon, and it continues to work towards that goal, in flagrant violation of a series of United Nations Security Council resolutions. . . . There is, of course,</td>
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The competition with the UK.
The danger that North Korea might share its technology or its weapons with other countries or organisations that wish to do us harm.

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<th>New Nuclear Threat</th>
<th>“The third is the emergence of a future massive overwhelming threat involving bio-weapons or other comparable mass destruction technologies still unknown in which a state might consider the explicit use or threat of use against the UK, but be deterred by the UK’s possession of nuclear weapons.”</th>
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<td>“There is the question of future nuclear threats that we cannot even anticipate today. . . . Once nuclear weapons have been given up, it is almost impossible to get them back, and the process of creating a new deterrent takes many decades. We could not redevelop a deterrent fast enough to respond to a new and unforeseen nuclear threat, so the decision on whether to renew our nuclear deterrent hinges not just on the threats we face today, but on an assessment of what the world will be like over the coming decades. It is impossible to say for certain that no such extreme threats will emerge in the next 30 or 40 years to threaten our security and way of life, and it would be an act of gross irresponsibility to lose the ability to meet such threats by discarding the ultimate insurance against those risks in the future.”</td>
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**Domestic Politics Model**
According to Sagan’s Domestic Politics Model, decisions concerning restraint or proliferation are made not on the basis of what “serves the national interests of a state” but instead what serves “the parochial bureaucratic or political interests of at least some individual actors within the state,” particularly “the state’s nuclear energy establishment,” “important units within the professional military,” and “politicians.” This model complicates the previous one because “international threats are seen as being more malleable and more subject to interpretation and can therefore produce a variety of responses from domestic actors,” which implies that “security threats are not the central cause of weapons decisions” but are instead “windows of opportunity.”

As the UK Government navigates its departure from the EU, a primary interest of the Conservative Government is protecting its majority in Parliament. Given that a Conservative Government proposed and executed the Brexit Referendum and that another Conservative Government will preside over the negotiation and execution of Brexit, the Conservative Party is in a particularly vulnerable position should the UK suffer as a result of leaving the EU. Consequently, particularly in the domestic policy arena, the UK Government is incentivized to employ policies that will at minimum appear to mitigate the challenges presented by Brexit.

As discussed above, further EU defense integration without the UK will cultivate feelings of isolation and fear of inferiority among British nationals. The Government can effectively respond to these sentiments by both directing military fears elsewhere and appearing to secure the nation against perceived developing threats. This is accomplished through treatment of military and security threats that emphasize potential, ambiguous, future threats that can be responded to through nuclear weapons retention, rather than emphasizing concrete and particular

31 Sagan 65
32 Sagan 65
threats such as Iran, Russia, or North Korea which can only be resolved through specific policies and actions. Thus it is clear that while expressly opposing “retaining a military nuclear capability as a general insurance against an uncertain future,” the Government actually promotes the retention of nuclear weapons because “if there is more than a negligible chance that the possession of nuclear weapons might play a decisive future role in the defence of the United Kingdom and its allies, in preventing nuclear blackmail, or in affecting the wider security context within which the UK sits, then they should be retained.” The particular stress on retaining nuclear weapons as a deterrent against potential future threats puts the Conservative Government in the position of appearing to protect the nation, while actually creating and subverting a threat in order to gain more political support.

An additional harm the UK faces as a result of Brexit is economic downturn and job loss. In encouraging the renewal of Trident, the Government makes the case that the UK’s nuclear program is not just about defense but is also about providing “30,000 jobs here in the United Kingdom” as well as “the development of skills here in the United Kingdom that will be of benefit to our engineering and design base for many years to come.” The domestic politics need for positive job growth incentivizes the Government to renew Trident and in so doing to guarantee a certain amount of jobs.

Sagan further posits that “major internal political changes” are often conduits to changes in policy favoring restraint. The resignation of David Cameron as Prime Minister and the formation of a new Government following the UK’s vote to leave the EU would potentially serve such a purpose. However, there has not been a major shift in the Government’s position since the

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36 Sagan 69
May Government entered power, as demonstrated by May’s speech mirroring the 2014 Trident report. This is not surprising, however, given that before becoming Prime Minister, Theresa May served as Home Secretary for six years, a post that included responsibility for “security and terrorism.”37 A continuity in nuclear weapons policy between the Cameron Government and the May Government is therefore to be expected.

Norms Model

According to Sagan’s Norms model, “military organizations and their weapons . . . are part of what modern states believe they have to possess to be legitimate, modern states.”38 These “perceptions of legitimacy and prestige” shift over time, but seem to consistently influence states’ decisions.39 Thus, according to Sagan’s third model, the decision to proliferate or restrain is ultimately a question of defining and increasing legitimacy and prestige. As the UK leaves the EU and loses the distinct legitimacy and prestige associated both with their general membership and particularly privileged position in the EU, they will need to reemphasize alternative types of legitimacy and prestige all of which are achieved through the retention of weapons arsenal.

While the UK forfeits certain international power by leaving the EU, it retains its prestige as one of five nuclear weapons states. The legitimacy and prestige associated with the UK’s status as an NWS becomes more important after Brexit because it can be leveraged in multiple, varied arenas in place of the legitimacy and prestige associated with EU membership. The form of legitimacy and prestige resulting from the UK’s nuclear capabilities is anchored in the ability to effectively protect the self and others from nuclear threats and is thus amplified through retention of nuclear weapons.

37“Ministerial role: Secretary of State for the Home Department.” Gov.uk.
38 Sagan 74
39 Sagan 76
The first form that this legitimacy and prestige takes is the capabilities to protect the UK from nuclear threats through the deterrent system. This prestige is rooted in the exclusive nature of membership in the NWS club. Particularly revealing is Theresa May’s language that “we will maintain the most significant security and military capability in Europe.” The superlative here emphasizes not just that the UK has robust military capacities, but that they are the highest capabilities in Europe. This suggests that as the UK leaves the EU, one particularly important way for it to maintain prestige is to maintain the nuclear weapons system that sets it apart from the rest of Europe. Furthermore, given the economic and political vulnerability of the UK during the transitional period, nuclear weapons provide assurance of the UK’s unmistakable place at the top. The sense of invincibility created by the nuclear weapons was communicated by May when she said that the through the “retention of our own independent deterrent” the UK is able to “send an unequivocal message to any adversary that the cost of an attack on our United Kingdom or our allies will always be far greater than anything it might hope to gain through such an attack.” In other words, the legitimacy accorded the UK through its nuclear weapons takes the form of an assurance of particular safety rooted in its elite membership in the NWS club.

The second form that this legitimacy and prestige takes is the power to negotiate global issues of nuclear proliferation as a member of the NWS club. Over the course of its membership in the EU, the UK was able to consistently leverage the power of its economy and military forces to direct the EU in directions it found most suitable. While the UK will lose the legitimacy associated with this negotiating power as it leave the EU, and will, in some ways, be at the mercy of EU members states as they make policies that affect the UK going forward, it retains a very powerful seat at the nuclear negotiating table. This seat will become more important in a post-

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Brexit world as the Government seeks to affirm that the UK is still able to leverage its power to achieve its own ends. Without its nuclear weapon status, the Trident Commission's Final Report argues, “it is doubtful that the UK would retain continuing influence on the thinking or process of nuclear negotiations if it ceased all its nuclear weapon activities.” Therefore, given the increased importance of the legitimacy of that influence, it is clear the UK will retain their weapons.

The third form that this legitimacy and prestige takes is the UK’s position as defenders of non-nuclear states. May argues that “being recognised as one of the five nuclear weapons states under the nuclear non-proliferation treaty confers on us unique responsibilities, because many of the nations that signed the treaty in the 1960s did so on the understanding that they were protected by NATO’s nuclear umbrella, including the UK deterrent.” The UK’s nuclear weapons allow them to maintain a status as protector of other states - a status that makes the UK necessary and important to many states. Thus, though the UK will face a certain degree of international isolation as a result of its exclusion from the EU, its responsibilities to other non-nuclear states ensure a certain degree of international cooperation.

**Conclusion**

Thus it has been shown that there are many objection and contending affirmations for the retainment of UK nuclear deterrent capabilities. The current global trend toward nuclear proliferation, in defiance of persistent international pressure in favour of non-proliferation led by the NW5, is promoted continually as the principal rationale for UK nuclear posture. Along with the arguments of an uncertain global strategic environment, and the necessity of nuclear parity with peer adversaries in the face of an impending Brexit, the retainment of nuclear capabilities is

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arguably more necessary than ever. The expository review of affirmations and protestations of Trident renewal, as well as the theoretical framework of Sagan suggest the incentives for the UK to retain their nuclear weapons will only increase after the UK leaves the European Union.

Bibliography


