



# Britain Needn't Withdraw from the World Stage, but We Need a Vision

**Gabrielle Rifkind**

3 June 2015

*This article by Gabrielle Rifkind was originally published in the [Independent](#) on 30 May 2015.*

The world is a dangerous place. It always was and always will be. Britain's foreign policy has now shrunk into introspection and is characterised by strategic drift with little vision of how to create a safer world. Little attention was paid to foreign affairs during the election and now its primary area of focus is the EU referendum. Former foreign secretary David Miliband said last week: "Britain is now in political retreat and it is happening by default and by accident." Historically, the UK had a reputation for punching above its weight in international affairs; now it is punching well below it.

The UK defence budget fell by 9 per cent in the last parliament and the Government is now reportedly asking for an additional £1bn in savings. Analysts say that would make it harder to retain Britain's 2 per cent contribution to Nato defence commitments, while critics lament the cuts. But nobody seems to ask the question: "What is the money to be spent on and does it make the globe a safer place?"

The UK has much to offer in today's world: a first-class diplomatic service, a legendary intelligence service and a highly effective army. Despite our austerity economics, we still have the second-largest development aid budget in the world. There is much to be applauded.

But a succession of failed interventions in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya have bruised Britain's confidence in military action and our ability to resolve conflict by other means is not on the political agenda. Britain, though, still wants its

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place at the top table, particularly at the United Nations, and seems to think a nuclear-power status conferred by Trident and the size of its military force secures it. But is this the best way to maintain influence?

The Government is reluctant to rethink its policy on nuclear weapons and the role of the military. Conflict resolution, early-warning systems and mediation are key to a safer world and a safer Britain yet they remain the military's poor relations. The Foreign Office budget that pays for those things is currently 28 times smaller than that of the Ministry of Defence.

The UK giving up nuclear weapons seems to be off the mainstream political agenda for now and some would argue that, while the nuclear club exists, we cannot quit unless we work collaboratively with other nuclear states. But we do deserve a serious debate about the renewal of Trident and whether this is the best use of our resources to keep ourselves safe.

Despite repeated surveys showing majorities of British voters against renewing Trident, all three main parties exclude the examination of other options. Procuring a replacement for Trident's nuclear missiles and submarines will cost estimated £18bn-£26bn in the period 2016 to 2033. Running costs over the envisaged lifespan of the system will add another £70bn-£90bn at current prices. That is £2.2bn-£3bn every year – about twice what we currently spend on the Foreign Office.

The Trident programme was first developed at a time of heightened Cold War tensions. It was designed primarily to deter powerful Warsaw Pact forces faced by Nato in Europe. The real threats today, however, come not from communist countries with nuclear weapons but from the consequences of global inequality, climate change and the backlash from our own decade of military

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interventionism. Nuclear deterrence simply does not apply to the groups that would use terrorist tactics against us. Individuals who are prepared to die for their cause will not be deterred by such existential threats.

The UK could enjoy a new role by downsizing its nuclear-weapons programme. It could examine a policy of “No first use” of Trident and take it off permanent patrol. The recent failure of nuclear non-proliferation talks in New York to address any significant disarmament at a time when most nuclear-armed states are modernising their arsenals smacks of serious complacency by nuclear powers and the dangerous revival of outdated Cold War thinking.

The money saved by downsizing Trident could be redirected into ensuring the UK's reputation was not based on the threat of nuclear weapons but on our special skills in promoting peace. We could commit ourselves to become the world's leading specialist in conflict prevention and resolution. Teams of highly trained mediators could work quietly behind the scenes talking to “terrorists”, exploring opportunities for ceasefires and potential peace negotiations. Of course, this would involve working closely with other countries, as in many situations the UK could not act alone – but we could take a leadership role.

The aim would be to redirect our military capabilities, which should remain strong, well equipped and highly trained. Recent military failures require us to look again at how to use the military, not to view it in terms of the potency of its hardware, whether it be drones, attack helicopters or stealth fighters. Instead, the armed forces could be restructured from offensive fighting to a force for protection. It would work with local communities in parts of the world where violence looms and protect the people where possible, to ensure their security and thus create political space for early mediation.

A shift in political culture is now required. Our mindset on security seems to be at the heart of many of the world's problems. In the absence of imaginative thinking, we “play safe” and stick to what we know. Yet that “playing safe” is actually the least safe option. The UK can no longer establish its status in the world by force but there is another role as skilled, effective negotiators and mediators that is more important and constructive. It also happens to be one the British are very good at.

The 21st century may prove to be more lethal than even its predecessor. This is not because human nature has become any more destructive but because our weapons have become increasingly sophisticated while we humans have not. The combination of modern weapons and unreconstructed attitudes is a terrifying one. Seventy years on from the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, we need to take stock and change – or we will find ourselves walking mindlessly, deeper and deeper, into a world of nightmares.

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**Featured Image:** *Trident Nuclear Submarine HMS Victorious near Faslane, Scotland.* **Source:** [Flickr](#) | [UK Ministry of Defence](#)

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