Limited Nuclear Wars – Myth and Reality

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Summary

The dramatic recent escalation of rhetoric and military posturing on the Korean peninsula has reawakened suggestions that the United States could use relatively low-yield nuclear weapons in a limited or tactical operation to neutralise North Korea. Indeed, both the idea of nuclear 'first strike' and their 'flexible' usage on and off the 'battlefield' are deeply rooted in historic and current NATO and UK doctrine on nuclear weapons. Given the extraordinarily militarised nature of the inter-Korean border and, increasingly, that between NATO and Russia, the potentially cataclysmic nature of any nuclear exchange must be urgently recalled and avoided at all costs.

Introduction

One of the most common misunderstandings about nuclear weapons in general and Britain's nuclear weapons in particular is that nuclear strategy is solely about deterring an opponent from attacking you by threatening that opponent with all-out destruction in response. Given the growing risk of a nuclear confrontation over North Korea it is appropriate to point out that this has never been the case. Ever since the start of the nuclear age nuclear weapons have been seen as useable weapons and appropriate in certain circumstances for fighting limited nuclear wars.

As a member of NATO Britain retains the option of using nuclear weapons first and has the means to do so. This briefing is intended to serve as a reminder of this. It will do so by concentrating specifically on British policy, both within NATO

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and out-of-area, but this applies just as much to the other seven full nuclear powers and, no doubt, to North Korea as well. It applies very much to the United States in particular and its current president, Donald J Trump, who has made it clear that the United States will not allow North Korea to develop the ability to target the continental United States with nuclear weapons.

Early history

When Hiroshima and Nagasaki were destroyed in August 1945 these weapons were seen in air force circles as direct descendants of the mass bombing of cities with conventional weapons using a thousand bombers or more. The raids on Hamburg and Dresden and especially the firestorm raid on Tokyo each killed tens of thousands of people so the perception after Hiroshima and Nagasaki was that the primary difference between conventional and nuclear weapons was one of cities being destroyed by one atom bomb from a single plane rather than five thousand tons of high explosive bombs from many planes. Indeed the US Army Air Corps and the nuclear weapon industry had already set in motion the industrial structures to destroy two Japanese cities every month until surrender.

By 1948 the United States had an arsenal of fifty atom bombs and was already starting to develop the far more powerful thermonuclear weapon or H-bomb. Britain came on the scene rather later. While it first tested a nuclear weapon in 1952, it was not until the late 1950s and early 1960s that it could start deploying its *Valiant, Vulcan* and *Victor* strategic bombers in large numbers. These, too, were seen in the context of the British involvement in the area bombing of German cities, but Britain was also an early adherent of the idea of fighting limited nuclear wars, an issue that was seen as particularly relevant in the Middle East and Eastern and South Eastern Asia.

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Thus there were nuclear-capable *Canberra* bombers and nuclear weapons deployed to RAF Akrotiri in Cyprus from 1961 to 1969 to support the Central Treaty Organisation (CENTO), the South West Asian equivalent of NATO. These were replaced by *Vulcans* until 1975. From the mid-1960s there were regular detachments of V-bombers to RAF Tengah in Singapore and the Royal Navy had nuclear-capable *Scimitar* and *Buccaneer* strike aircraft on aircraft carriers such as *Eagle, Ark Royal, Centaur* and *Victorious* over a 16-year period from 1962 to 1978.

From the early days of the deployment of nuclear weapons by states such as the Soviet Union, the United States and Britain there is ample evidence that both military and political leaders accepted the possibility of limited nuclear war. It was expressed in Britain, for example, by the then Minister of Defence, Harold Macmillan, speaking in the House of Commons in 1955:

> **“ “...the power of interdiction upon invading columns by nuclear weapons gives a new aspect altogether to strategy, both in the Middle East and the Far East. It affords a breathing space, an interval, a short but perhaps vital opportunity for the assembly, during the battle for air supremacy, of larger conventional forces than can normally be stationed in those areas.” (Hansard, volume 568, column 2182, 2 March 1955). ”**

NATO and nuclear first use

As one of the founder members of NATO, and the second to develop nuclear weapons, Britain was involved in NATO nuclear planning from the very early years of the mid-1950s. In those early years and until the late 1960s, NATO nuclear policy was codified in document MC14/2 known as the “tripwire” policy which planned a massive nuclear response to the initiation of war by the Soviet bloc.

While the United States maintained massively greater nuclear forces, and a wide variety of weapon types, Britain also had a significant arsenal which eventually developed to include an array of strategic and tactical systems. These included the Polaris submarine-launched ballistic missiles, free-fall

bombs of variable power and anti-submarine nuclear depth bombs as well as nuclear-capable 155mm and 203mm artillery and Lance short-range nuclear missiles, the last three utilising US nuclear warheads under a dual control system. Thus, for several decades, all three branches of the British Armed Forces focused their operational planning around use of forward-deployed tactical nuclear weapons.

By the latter part of the 1960s the Soviet Union had developed its own array of tactical systems and NATO responded by modifying “tripwire” and developing “flexible response”. This was encoded in MC14/3 of 16 January 1968 and envisaged the limited use of mostly low-yield warheads early in a conflict against Warsaw Pact troops and their immediate logistic support in the belief that they might be “stopped in their tracks”. If that failed, a more general nuclear response might ensue.

Britain was very much part of this move, its nuclear forces were normally committed to NATO and UK personnel played significant roles within the NATO Nuclear Planning Group. This move away from deterrence through massive assured destruction was rarely publicised by the British government, one exception being an exposition of the policy offered to the House of Commons Select Committee on Foreign Affairs two decades after the transition to flexible response:

> **“ “The fundamental objective of maintaining the capability for selective sub-strategic use of theatre nuclear weapons is political – to demonstrate in advance that NATO has the capability and will to use nuclear weapons in a deliberate, politically-controlled way with the objective of inducing the aggressor to terminate the aggression and withdraw. The role of TNF [Theatre Nuclear Forces] is not to compensate for any imbalance in conventional forces. The achievement of conventional parity could have very positive consequences for the Alliance’s strategy of deterrence. But it would not, of itself, obviate the need for theatre nuclear forces.” (Third Report of the House of Commons Select Committee on Foreign Affairs 1987-88, p.35, para. 6.) ”**

What was very little understood at the time in the public domain was that NATO’s flexible response approach was not just the preparedness to use nuclear weapons first in response to a conventional military attack from the

Soviet bloc but to do so at an early stage in such a conflict. This was made clear by SACEUR (the Supreme Allied Commander, Europe), General Bernard Rogers, in an interview published in early 1986:

"Before you lose the cohesiveness of the alliance – that is, before you are subject to (conventional Soviet military) penetration on a fairly broad scale – you will request, not you may, but you will request the use of nuclear weapons". (*International Defence Review,* February 1986)

NATO's flexible response policy remains broadly in place to the present day and nuclear planning allows for many different targeting options. This also applies to the United States where such options are constantly updated to allow for changing political situations. In an interesting reflection on relative economic and political strength, Russia also sees nuclear weapons as intrinsically of greater relevance given the low capabilities of its conventional military forces compared with those of the Warsaw Pact at the height of the Cold War.

Britain's out-of-area operations and nuclear weapons

Since the end of the Second World War the United Kingdom has been one of the most active countries to be involved in overseas wars. The majority of these were wars of the late colonial period, but many others have been more broadly based, from Korea through to former Yugoslavia as well as the more recent and intensive post-9/11 conflicts across the Middle East and North Africa. Throughout all this period the UK has maintained its wide-ranging tactical and strategic nuclear options, even though the size of the arsenals is smaller than thirty years ago.

Two of the most controversial conflicts, the Falklands/Malvinas War of 1982 and the first Gulf War of 1991 have both had a nuclear connection. After

Argentina occupied the Falkland Islands in early 1982 the UK government under Margaret Thatcher despatched a substantial naval task force and six days after it left Britain *The Observer* reported that

> **“ “It is almost certainly carrying tactical nuclear naval weapons – atomic depth charges carried by *Sea King* helicopters and free-fall bombs carried by *Harrier* jump jets – as part of NATO equipment.” (11 April 1982) ”**

Later reports indicated that many of the weapons from the smaller warships were transferred *en route* to an auxiliary supply ship, the RFA *Resource* which proceeded to the South Atlantic with the rest of the fleet but was deployed away from the most intense areas of action during the subsequent war. It is not clear whether this also applied to the nuclear weapons that may have been deployed on the two aircraft carriers, HMS *Invincible* and *Hermes* and there were also multiple if unconfirmed reports that the Thatcher government was prepared to deploy a Polaris missile submarine to the mid-Atlantic to bring it within range of Argentina. (Paul Rogers, “Sub-Strategic Trident: A Slow Burning Fuse”*, London Defence Papers 34,* Brasseys, 1996)

Nine years after that war the UK government committed substantial forces to a US-led multinational military coalition to evict the Iraqi forces that had invaded and occupied Kuwait in August 1990. At the time there was considerable

concern that Iraq had a useable arsenal of chemical weapons and a clear indication of UK willingness to use nuclear weapons in response came in an interview with a senior army office attached to the 7th Armoured Brigade which was leaving for the Gulf. He confirmed that an Iraqi chemical attack on UK forces would be met with a tactical nuclear response. (*Observer,* 30 September 1990).

Deliberate ambiguity

During the 1990s, after the end of the Cold War, the UK government, under the leadership of the Conservative Prime Minister John Major, scaled down Britain's nuclear arsenals in a series of unilateral moves, ceasing to deploy dual-control US nuclear artillery and missiles and withdrawing the WE.177 tactical nuclear bombs and depth bombs between 1992 and 1998. US-owned B61 tactical nuclear bombs continued to be deployed at RAF Lakenheath for another decade and still are based in Belgium, Germany, Italy, Netherlands and Turkey under enduring nuclear sharing arrangements with those host countries.

In order to preserve a British "sub-strategic" capability, a low-yield variant of the standard high-yield Trident thermonuclear warhead has since been deployed, although terms such as "tactical Trident" or "Sub-Strategic Trident" are no longer used in government publications. Neither is there any specific reference in official publications to the UK maintaining a policy of potential first-use of nuclear weapons.

Instead a generic description of the UK nuclear posture appears in successive defence white papers, the 2015 statement being an example:

> **“ Only the Prime Minister can authorise the launch of nuclear weapons, which ensures that political control is maintained at all times. We would use our nuclear weapons only in extreme circumstances of self-defence, including the defence of our NATO Allies. While our resolve and capability to do so if necessary is beyond doubt, we will remain deliberately ambiguous about precisely when, how and at what scale we would contemplate their use, in order not to simplify the calculations of any potential aggressor. (*National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review 2015,* para 4.68, page 34, November 2015) ”**

It should be borne in mind that, while British ambiguity on nuclear first use is echoed by its NATO allies in Washington and Paris, as well as its assumed adversary in Moscow, there is nothing intrinsic about such a posture. China has consistently maintained a policy of no first use and normally stores its warheads separately from its delivery systems to prevent any accidental or malicious usage. India and Pakistan are also formally committed to no first use.

Conclusion

This brief summary of elements of the UK nuclear posture is intended as a reminder that such a posture is far more complex than simply providing a last-ditch deterrence against nuclear attack. Moreover, this applies very much for the United States which has a far wider array of nuclear weapon types and has been at the forefront of NATO nuclear planning, including the first use posture.

Should a conflict arise between the United States and North Korea it is by no means certain that Britain would be involved, given public attitudes within the UK, although a joint RAF/US Air Force/Korean Air Force exercise was held in South Korea late last year for the first time in several decades. Even so, at a time of heightened tensions over North Korea's nuclear ambitions the concern should be that a crisis could escalate to the use of nuclear weapons, especially with an unpredictable incumbent in the White House.

Given Britain's propensity for considering the idea of out-of-area nuclear first use and limited nuclear war, one would hope that there is also a full understanding of the considerable dangers of such a posture. If so, what should follow is a determination to do everything possible to advise President Trump against even considering this option in the case of North Korea.

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