



The
Delusional
Thinking
behind a Policy of
'Nuclear
Deterrence'

dedicated to Gill Reeve

Medact

challenging barriers to health

Contents

Introduction	1
Background	1
A brief history of nuclear weapon development and proliferation	2
Early history	2
The Cold War	2
Post Cold War: concepts and myths	3
The role of delusional thinking in the myth of nuclear deterrence	4
The influence of the 'in-group'	4
The delusional nature of nuclear deterrence: examples since 1997	5
Other issues that facilitate delusional thinking	8
Distance and asymmetry – the effect on our psyche	8
Military thinking patterns	8
Hubris Syndrome	8
Obstacles to dialogue	8
Conclusion & Recommendations	9
Specific actions that can be taken by citizens	9
References	10

Advisors

Dr Frank Boulton BSc, MD, FRCPEd, FRCPath,
Board of Trustees Medact
Professor Robert A. Hinde CBE, FRS, Hon FBA, FRCPsych
Mr Bruce Kent Vice President Pax Christi
Dr Sarah Koch Dipl. Psych (Social Psychology) and
qualified mediator
Dr Guinevere Tufnell MA (Cantab), MBBS, FRCPsych,
Dip. Systemic Therapy, Retired Consultant Psychiatrist
Mr Ben Zala Bachelor of International Relations (Hons),
Sustainable Security Programme, Oxford Research Group

Authors

Dr Lynn Barnett Dip.Soc.Stud,M.Phil, PhD, MACP, FRAI
Ms Marion Birch BA, MSC, SRN, SRM, Director Medact
Dr Elizabeth Waterston MB, ChB, MRCPGP

Research Assistant

Mr Donald Uzu

Editor

Alison Whyte – Medact

Design

Sue MacDonald – SMD Design

This report is dedicated to Gill Reeve, former Director of Medact, co-founder of ICAN-UK and committed anti-nuclear campaigner, whose many years of creative work towards a peaceful future without nuclear weapons was an inspiration to us all.

The financial support of the Lipman-Miliband Trust is gratefully acknowledged.

Published by

Medact 2013

The Grayston Centre, 28 Charles Square,
London N1 6HT, United Kingdom

T +44 (0)20 7324 4739

F +44 (0)20 7324 4734

[E info@medact.org](mailto:info@medact.org)

www.medact.org

Registered charity 1081097 Company reg no 2267125

Medact is the UK affiliate of the International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War (IPPNW)

© Medact 2013

“Nuclear weapons have shown themselves to be completely useless as a deterrent to the threats and scale of violence we currently face or are likely to face, particularly international terrorism. Our independent deterrent has become virtually irrelevant, except in the context of domestic politics.”¹

Field Marshall Lord Bramall, General Sir Hugh Beech, General Lord Ramsbotham, 2009

Introduction

Twenty-one years ago the national conference of the Medical Campaign against Nuclear Weapons (MCANW) questioned the thinking behind the nuclear arms race. MCANW's members were particularly concerned that this race was continuing despite positive signs of a more peaceful future beginning to emerge at the end of the Cold War. The conference, organised by MCANW's Study Group on Psychosocial Issues in the Nuclear Age, addressed in particular:

- why those favouring international cooperation rather than confrontation had so far failed to change the nuclear status quo, despite public opposition to nuclear weapons²
- why many political leaders appeared to be resistant to changing their nuclear policies.

This report reconsiders these issues in the context of the 21st century. It aims to understand what is behind the continued belief in a policy of nuclear deterrence on

the part of many members of the UK government. This is particularly important in an age of increasingly asymmetrical warfare and economic instability, ever more sophisticated technology, and the aftermath of the 'War on Terror'.

We know that our decision makers do not want to inflict another Hiroshima or Nagasaki on the people of another nation. Yet this threat continues to be part of the UK's national defence strategy. This report concentrates on the delusional nature of the thinking that underpins a policy of nuclear deterrence.

We concentrate on the statements of decision makers because of their power and influence, and because these statements reflect the views held by some in wider society. In trying to throw some light on the thinking that underpins this policy, we hope to make it easier for our decision makers to abandon their belief in nuclear deterrence, and to contribute to the growing movement for the abolition of all nuclear weapons.

Background

Opinion polls show that the majority of UK citizens are against nuclear weapons³. However perceptions of the danger of the intentional or accidental use of nuclear weapons appear to have diminished⁴. This creates a dangerous space for complacency. The UK's official defence strategy does not take the threat of first use 'off the table'⁵, and nuclear weapons are considered to be an essential component of the UK's national security.

Nuclear weapons-related mistakes continue to happen:

- In 2006 Royal Navy investigators described an incident involving a nuclear submarine, which resulted in the death of two crew members as 'tragic', adding that it could have been 'catastrophic'⁶
- In 2008 a nuclear missile crew fell asleep while on duty⁷
- In 2010 HMS Astute, 'the world's most advanced nuclear submarine', ran aground off the Isle of Skye.⁸

Health professionals have a history of exposing the devastation that has resulted from and would be the result of any use of nuclear weapons. In the 1980s general practitioners in the UK refused to distribute the government's 'Protect & Survive' leaflet detailing what people should do in the event of a nuclear war, on the basis that the advice provided offered no protection. They joined with colleagues from many countries including the United States and the former Soviet Union to say that only abolition of these weapons would protect their populations.

In the 21st century clearer thinking is needed about the devastating threat the UK government's nuclear deterrence policy holds over the populations of other nations, including non-nuclear weapons states.

A brief history of nuclear weapon development and proliferation

Early history

Nuclear fission was discovered in Germany in 1938 by a team led by Otto Frisch, and in 1940 Frisch and a colleague wrote a memorandum on the possibility of making a nuclear bomb.⁹ In the UK this led to the formation of the Military Application of Uranium Detonation Committee (MAUD), whose mandate was to report on the feasibility of the UK producing such a weapon. In 1941 MAUD issued a report that clearly recognised the potential power of such a weapon. Despite the huge anticipated cost, this report said *"every effort should be made to produce bombs based on this route because of its anticipated destructive effect, both material and moral"*.¹⁰

In 1942 Germany demoted its research into the production of a nuclear weapon from a military to a civilian project, however the United States remained convinced that this work was ongoing. In 1941 the US invested heavily in the Manhattan Project, employing British and Canadian as well as American scientists, and entering into a joint agreement with Britain for this work the following year.

Meanwhile concerns were being raised on both sides of the Atlantic about the potential dangers of nuclear weapons. President Roosevelt said the prospect of a future nuclear arms race with Russia *"worried him to death"*,¹¹ while agreeing that the research should be kept secret from the Russians. Following Roosevelt's death, President Truman had clearly adopted a belief in the potential of nuclear weapons to deter possible enemies. Despite planning to drop a nuclear bomb on Japan, he said he hoped: *"future discussions would take place to ensure the new weapon became 'an aid for peace'"*.¹² On August 6th 1945, the United States exploded a uranium bomb over Hiroshima, and on August 9th, they dropped a plutonium bomb on Nagasaki.

Three months later the US, Britain and Canada issued a joint statement:

"We recognise that the application of recent scientific discoveries to the methods and practice of war has placed at the disposal of mankind a means of destruction hitherto unknown against which there can be no adequate defence and in the employment of which no single nation can have a monopoly".¹³

They stressed that it was the responsibility of the whole 'civilised' world to ensure that atomic energy was not used

for destruction but to promote the common happiness and prosperity of all peoples. They proposed that the UN establish a Commission, the United Nations Atomic Energy Commission (UNAEC), which came into being in 1946. Subsequent discussions to agree the way forward became difficult. The US insisted its nuclear weapons programme should remain unrestricted while surveys needed to establish baseline data and monitoring were carried out. This was not acceptable to the Soviet Union, which proposed a world moratorium on the production and use of nuclear weapons. This was rejected by the US.

The Cold War

From the 1950s to the 1990s the rationale for retaining nuclear weapons was largely the 'ultimate deterrent' of mutually assured destruction (MAD), based on the belief that *"men's fears will force them to keep the peace"*.¹⁴

MAD assumes that each side can destroy the other and therefore those in power will not attempt to do so. The assumption that opponents needed weapons with equal force reinforced the arms race. It also led to a diversification of nuclear delivery systems including nuclear missile silos, ballistic missile submarines and nuclear bombers.

During the 1970s the concept of the Strategic Defence Initiative (SDI) or Star Wars was supported by senior military figures at the Defence Intelligence Agency such as General Daniel O. Graham.¹⁵ The SDI planned for the development of ground and space-based systems to intercept incoming nuclear ballistic missiles.¹⁶ General Graham proposed that SDI could save lives by guaranteeing American invincibility. He believed that SDI was superior to MAD, which he considered unstable.

There were accidents and tense stand-offs during this period, details of which have emerged slowly. It was during this time that the UK government tried to reassure their citizens with advice on what to do in the event of a nuclear attack by distributing the leaflet *'Protect and Survive'*.¹⁷

Also during this time the UK government stated that nuclear weapons were needed for Britain to be taken seriously on the international scene. Aneurin Bevan said they were necessary to prevent a future British foreign secretary going *"naked into the conference chamber"*.¹⁸

Post Cold War: concepts and myths

With the end of the Cold War there was a reduction in tension between the US and the USSR; nevertheless the assumption that nuclear weapons were needed for national security and as a deterrent survived. The US Government's 1994 Nuclear Posture Review, the first comprehensive review of US nuclear policy, concludes that the US "*will retain strategic nuclear forces sufficient to deter any hostile foreign leadership...from acting against our vital interests and to convince them that seeking nuclear advantage would be futile.*"¹⁹

However as there were no longer two large superpowers confronting each other the MAD theory became less relevant, and different concepts of deterrence were promoted, including the notions of 'stable', 'extended' and 'limited' deterrence. Until today it is claimed that nuclear weapons are necessary not just against another nuclear state, but also against non-nuclear states and to deter the undefined risks posed by an '*unstable and unpredictable world*'.²⁰

'Stable deterrence'

This involved the acceptance of a series of assumptions:

- that nuclear weapons are the best guarantee against aggression
- that their possession involves minimal risk of accidental war or threat to other nations
- that leaders will be sufficiently aware of the consequences of their use to remain rational and to defuse situations that might lead to their use
- that the 'enemy' would refrain from striking first because they are rational and aware of the consequences.

'Extended deterrence'

According to this concept, which continues to shape the security policies of the nuclear weapons states and their allies, strategic nuclear weapons can not only protect the country that owns them but can protect allies of that country as well.

'Limited deterrence'

A third concept – 'limited deterrence' or limited nuclear war – makes the highly unlikely assumption that nuclear war could be contained.

There has been growing unease about the reliability of these concepts, the validity of the assumptions on which they are based, and the effectiveness of national security policies they underpin.

There have been some positive attempts to challenge the prevailing orthodoxy: the US and Russia negotiated the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaties (START) – although START 2 never entered into force. The Non-Proliferation Treaty was extended in 1995 and the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty was introduced in 1996. However new nuclear weapons have since been developed at considerable cost. These include the B61-11 'bunker-buster' and new warheads for the Trident submarine strategic missiles. The B61-12 presently in production has been estimated to need \$10bn for completion.²¹

The notion persists that nuclear weapons are more economical than conventional arms and large numbers of troops. This depends on NOT including an assessment of the devastating human cost and damage to infrastructure and the environment that the use of nuclear weapons would cause. There is also an enduring assumption on the part of politicians that they will lose votes if they abandon nuclear weapons.²² This assumption is not borne out by the apparent popularity of getting rid of them in Scotland.²³

At the time of writing there are nine nuclear capable countries: the US, Russia, China, France, the UK, India, Pakistan, Israel and North Korea. Other nations are aspiring to become nuclear capable. However there is also a renewed push for abolition with high profile initiatives,²⁴ global campaigns,²⁵ and most nuclear weapon states (including the UK) adopting the contradictory position of calling for abolition while retaining their nuclear weapons.²⁶

The role of delusional thinking in the myth of nuclear deterrence

"A delusion is a belief held with strong conviction despite superior evidence to the contrary".²⁷

Many people have delusional thought processes but they do not suffer from a delusional disorder. A common characteristic of a delusion is that it involves a fixed belief that is actually false but that is resistant to reason or to presentation of actual facts.

Characteristics that can be associated with delusional beliefs include:²⁸

- the expression of an idea or belief with unusual persistence or force, without questioning the belief, despite evidence to the contrary
- an attitude of secrecy or suspicion when the subject is being discussed, despite what appears to be a strong conviction and an irritable or even hostile response if the conviction is questioned
- a strong belief that is out of keeping with what one would expect the person to think, given their background.

The final characteristic needs careful consideration as it includes an element of subjectivity on the part of the observer.

In considering the statements of decision makers in this light we in no way mean to suggest that they have a delusional disorder. We are also aware of the pressures they can be under, and that they pursue policies they believe to be in the best interests of the country. We recognise that statements which appear to be based on delusional thinking may be made to support an argument in the hope that their irrational nature will be overlooked. However in trying to understand their policy of nuclear deterrence, we have to conclude that some politicians are using delusional thought processes.

There is also the contradiction that the threat decision makers choose to make against others in their public life would very likely be unacceptable to them as private individuals. For many people, a belief in nuclear deterrence would appear to indicate a split between personal and public morality.²⁹

The influence of the 'in-group'

In considering delusional thinking, the role of the 'in-group' is a key factor. Individuals tend to see themselves as belonging to various kinds of groups, and a group can be a political party, a nation or a military faction. "*Unthinkingly we adopt the mental posture of the group(s) to which we belong, a posture which may be quite irrational and dangerous for our survival*"³⁰ – as it is in the context of a belief in nuclear deterrence.

This collective mental posture results in 'groupthink', which occurs when '*a homogenous highly cohesive group is so concerned with maintaining unanimity that they fail to evaluate all their alternatives and options*'.³¹ As a result a group may make poor decisions because group pressures lead to a deterioration of "*mental efficiency, reality testing, and moral judgment*".³²

Groupthink is particularly problematic when combined with delusional thinking.

The implications and consequences of loyalty to an in-group and the feeling of security this provides can lead to delusional thinking as a result of suppression of individual thought and judgement. Individual doubts and questions may not be welcome if they contradict the group's denial of reality, for example if the groups' members believe in the safety of nuclear weapons. Individual responsibility may be transferred to the group, leaving the individual free of the restraining effect of guilt, respect for the opinions of others outside of the group, and the obligation to act.³³

On leaving an in-group – for example when leaving the working team on retirement – the influence of the group may decrease and people may express views contrary to groupthink. A possible illustration of this was the change of heart of four eminent retired statesmen, including Henry Kissinger and George Shultz, as indicated in a letter they wrote to the Wall Street Journal in 2007, which questioned the logic of maintaining nuclear weapons, and concluded with:

*"We endorse setting the goal of a world free of nuclear weapons and working energetically on the actions required to achieve that goal, beginning with the measures outlined above."*³⁴

"The more amiability and esprit de corps there is among the members of a policy-making in-group, the greater the danger that independent critical thinking will be replaced by groupthink, which is likely to result in irrational and dehumanizing actions directed against out-groups." Irving Janis³⁵

The delusional nature of nuclear deterrence: examples since 1997

Below we consider signs and symptoms that indicate various levels of delusional thinking in the context of parliamentary debates in the House of Commons between 1997 and 2012. Statements are included that are either specifically about, or mention nuclear deterrence and are recorded in Hansard, the edited verbatim report of proceedings in the House of Commons and the House of Lords of the UK Parliament.

1. A fixed belief that is resistant to reason or that conflicts with the facts

The claim that the possession of, and threat to use nuclear weapons will maintain peace has been compared to a child's 'comfort blanket' which forms part of a 'voodoo approach to security'.³⁶ The UK's nuclear weapons did not stop Argentina trying to take back the Falkland Islands.

It has been repeatedly said that nuclear weapons have "kept the peace" for the UK since the end of World War II.³⁷ In 2002 an MP stated that: "The independent nuclear deterrent provided security for the peoples of these islands for a generation". In the context of compensation for veterans who took part in nuclear tests he went on to say "These people were involved in testing the weapon that went on to keep the peace in Europe".³⁸ These statements ignore facts of which the MP must be aware: for example the conflicts in Northern Ireland and the Balkans.³⁹

It is repeatedly stated that the UK's nuclear weapons system is 'independent' in the sense that any use would be under the control of the UK Government alone. In 2006 the then Prime Minister said: "the independent nature of the British deterrent is again an additional insurance against circumstances where we are threatened but America is not."⁴⁰

However in reality the US could disable targeting by UK submarines, since targeting data on British Trident submarines is processed in the Fire Control System, which relies on US software, and Trident Missiles can only achieve the required level of accuracy with weather and gravity data from US sources.⁴¹ Evidence of the UK's dependency can be found in the Parliamentary debates, contradicting claims of independence. In a reply to concerns about the anticipated 'Millennium bug' a Minister said that "we were notified by that Department [the US Department of Defence] in December 1998 that the mission-critical subsystems of the Trident II, or D5, strategic weapons systems as operated by the Royal Navy had been certified as Y2K compliant".⁴²

2. The expression of an idea or belief with unusual persistence or force, without questioning the belief, despite evidence to the contrary

It is claimed that the UK keeps the Trident nuclear weapons system because it is a 'political' rather than a military weapon.⁴³ In 2006 the Secretary of State for Defence said that the UK's nuclear weapons were "not necessarily war-fighting weapons"⁴⁴ and in 2012 the Minister of State for the Armed Forces stated "they [nuclear weapons] are political not military weapons."⁴⁵

The implication is that as a 'political' weapon it will never be used militarily, despite this possibility not being ruled out in the most recent Strategic Defence Review⁴⁶. This description could lull people into the unwarranted belief that nuclear weapons will never cause the devastation of which they are capable.

3. The belief that a high level of threat can provide long term security

The 1998 Security Defence Review, stated, referring to the possible use of nuclear weapons, that despite there being "No threat on this scale ..in prospect" it would be "unwise to conclude that one could never reappear" and what was needed was a "longer term insurance".⁴⁷ When this Review was discussed in a debate an MP referred to Trident supplying the "fundamental guarantee of our security".⁴⁸

The belief in the possession of nuclear weapons as a guarantee of security is sometimes expressed in language which is quite aggressive for Parliamentary debates. For example the Secretary of State for Defence said in 1998 that "the deterrent is still there, still credible and no one should mess with us as a consequence".⁴⁹ This language promotes a government that wants to be seen defending the national in-group and providing a high level of security.

The belief that it is possible to guarantee security through the possession of weapons that, accidentally or intentionally, could result in millions losing their lives and a catastrophic environmental disaster⁵⁰ is clearly delusional in kind. It also promotes the national in-group while threatening dire consequences for others, rather than dialogue and understanding.

4. The projection of responsibility for security onto others, including the government, who may want to provide it / to be seen to provide it

In very dangerous and stressful situations which constitute a possible survival threat – such as a likely nuclear weapons attack – we are biologically limited to fight, flight or

“Nuclear weapons have shown themselves to be completely useless as a deterrent to the threats and scale of violence we currently face or are likely to face...”

Field Marshall Lord Bramall, General Sir Hugh Beech, General Lord Ramsbotham 2009

Trident provides the “*fundamental guarantee of our security*”

Member of Parliament 1998

“The deterrent is still there, still credible and no one should mess with us as a consequence”

Secretary of State for Defence 1998

“There is no evidence to suggest that the UK nuclear deterrent has any bearing on the pursuit of nuclear weapons by those who currently seek to develop them”

Minister of State for the Armed Forces 2011

The Ministry of Defence is “*a huge supertanker, well captained, well engineered, well crewed, with the system updated but with no one ever asking where the hell it is going*”

former Secretary of State for Defence speaking in 1998

“No threat on this scale [is] in prospect” however it would be ***“unwise to conclude that one could never reappear”***

Security Defence Review 1998

The UK’s nuclear weapons are “not necessarily war-fighting weapons”

Secretary of State for Defence 2006

“The essence of deterrence is uncertainty in the mind of a potential adversary”

Member of Parliament 1997

“They [nuclear weapons] are political not military weapons”

Minister of State for the Armed Forces 2012

freeze, and decision making commonly becomes severely compromised.⁵¹ Even thinking about the possibility of such an enormity is difficult. In such circumstances we prefer to defend ourselves psychologically against the reality of the threat by devolving the responsibility for the safety of family / community / nation onto others. Citizens may devolve this responsibility via their elected representatives, to their government, or by extension to other national or supranational bodies, such as NATO. Those to whom responsibility has been passed – such as governments – are then entrusted with 'managing' stressful and complicated situations in which there is a risk of nuclear weapons being used.

By this means, we are able to relax in the belief that nuclear weapons will never be used as governments will be able to rationally talk themselves out of all situations in which the threat of use exists. That they would always be able to do this is clearly unrealistic, if not delusional.

5. The nation as 'in-group': exaggerated fear and nationalism

Those in power can promote fear as a justification for certain actions. Fear as a driver of delusional thinking is linked closely to the management of stress in the 'in-group'. Extending far back into our past, the 'in-group' evolved in situations of hunting and gathering, when membership of one's cooperating group meant survival or death. Any threat – real or perceived – to the in-group or its members mobilised protective action.

Uncertainty about the reality or extent of a threat can undermine our sense of security, and reinforce the need to defend the in-group. In 2006 the then Prime Minister, following a lengthy description of possible threats, stated that "*the one certain thing about our world today is its uncertainty*"⁵². The subsequent statement by the Shadow Defence Minister, that "*the threat is now all around us*"⁵³, served a similar purpose.

A constant and unknowable threat of this kind, it is argued, creates the need for a strong response. Both the UK's National Security Strategy (2010) and the Strategic Defence and Security Review (2010) refer to an 'age of uncertainty' in their titles. In this context the phenomenon of the in-group and the associated groupthink feed into arguments justifying the right to keep nuclear weapons while "outsiders" do not have the right to acquire them.

6. A denial of the catastrophic threat being held over others in the name of peace

In 2001 an MP stated that "*in Baghdad, at least, they understand that the theory of deterrence could well result in the visiting on the regime of the most terrible destruction...*"⁵⁴ This appears to imply the impossibility that damage from a nuclear weapon could be minimised by aiming at a specific target.

How citizens of other countries are likely to feel when threatened by a policy of nuclear deterrence is completely ignored. In 2005 a Shadow Minister said that "*the nuclear deterrent undoubtedly works against certain forms of aggression that exist when one country has weapons of mass destruction and another does not*".⁵⁵ This inability to stand in the shoes of others appears pervasive. Statements by politicians have referred to a time when "*the countries with nuclear weapons feel able to relinquish them*".⁵⁶ There is no consideration of a future time when the countries without nuclear weapons no longer feel the need to try to obtain them.

7. A feeling of innate superiority and manifestations of the double standards this represents

In-group members may consider some nations or groups, in particular their own, as innately superior to others. This is a particularly dark side of the delusional thinking created by in-group behaviour. The attitude of the leaders of the nuclear weapons states and their belief in a 'safe pair of hands' implies – consciously or unconsciously – a presumption of innate superiority. This attitude is particularly difficult to understand given that the US was the first nation to produce and the only nation to use nuclear weapons in a conflict, yet this deeply flawed concept helps to support the case for nuclear deterrence. It is likely that it also helps people who claim to be rational to justify holding the threat of annihilation over others in the name of peace⁵⁷.

Maintaining a nuclear deterrent while advocating non-proliferation sends a very strong mixed message. It does not show an understanding of how decision makers in other countries may feel about the UK's possession of nuclear weapons, nor the likely desire on the part of some to acquire them to defend against such a threat. In 2011 the Minister of State for the Armed Forces said "*There is no evidence to suggest that the UK nuclear deterrent has any bearing on the pursuit of nuclear weapons by those who currently seek to develop them*".⁵⁸

When considering UK defence strategy an MP stated that "*the essence of deterrence is uncertainty in the mind of a potential adversary*",⁵⁹ as if the threat is just to the 'adversary' – possibly another government – instead of to a civilian population and potentially the populations of bordering countries. Perspectives change when the UK is imagined to be on the receiving end of the nuclear threat. In a debate on the Strategic Defence Review 1998 an MP stated that the prospect of a UK without nuclear weapons would result in "*blackmail by proxy*".⁶⁰ These contradictions feed into the exceptionalist argument that the UK somehow has a different status to other countries. This is not a good starting point for negotiations.

Other issues that facilitate delusional thinking

Distance and asymmetry – the effect on our psyche

The crew that dropped the bomb on Hiroshima commented on how safe they were compared to during bombing raids over Germany.⁶¹ This contrasted strongly with the destruction and death they had wreaked on the people below. Given the current proliferation in unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) the possibility of using them to deliver a nuclear warhead moves ever closer, threatening to depersonalise the killing process even further. Victims or potential victims will become even more remote from the perpetrators, making it easier to deny the human consequences of their actions.

Language is also a tool for distancing ourselves from the consequences, or potential consequences of our actions. It is easier to report “*two civilian casualties*” than the death of “*a well regarded solicitor aged 67 and his grandson sitting on his knee.*”⁶²

Military thinking patterns

While politicians appear to be making the final decisions on national security issues, these decisions are usually the result of interaction between military and political actors. Politicians are dependent on the military, which has a tendency to resist change.⁶³ The military involves absolute obedience to a clear chain of command, loyalty, and conformity. The underlying assumption of the military ‘*if you want peace prepare for war*’ encourages a perception that they – and the weapons they need – are indispensable for defence. This thinking will undoubtedly influence politicians, and may influence whether they exhaust all possible peaceful avenues to resolve conflict before resorting to military action.

A former Secretary of State for Defence described his Ministry as “*a huge supertanker, well captained, well engineered, well crewed, with the system updated but with no one ever asking where the hell it is going*”⁶⁴.

However there have been some signs that the armed forces are questioning the ongoing need for nuclear weapons, particularly at a time of cuts to the defence budget. In 2009

the former head of the armed forces, Field Marshal Lord Bramall, and two senior generals, wrote to *The Times*. Their letter said: ‘*Nuclear weapons have shown themselves to be completely useless as a deterrent to the threats and scale of violence we currently face or are likely to face, particularly international terrorism. Our independent deterrent has become virtually irrelevant, except in the context of domestic politics.*’⁶⁵

In 2010 General Sir Richard Dannatt, a year after he stood down as Chief of the General Staff, said that the Trident nuclear deterrent may not need replacing.⁶⁶

Hubris Syndrome

Hubris syndrome is characterised by excessive confidence in one’s own judgement, and an exaggerated self belief which can border on omnipotence and the belief that one is only accountable to history or to God.

Hubris has been found to be an occupational hazard for those in positions of power (political, military or financial) who are often isolated and under pressure.⁶⁷ It is clearly linked to some of the delusional beliefs described above, particularly the need to provide absolute security, and the persistent expression of beliefs that are completely lacking in evidence.

Obstacles to dialogue

Multilateral negotiations towards a Nuclear Weapons Convention, and the dialogue they would entail, are the way forward to avoid death and destruction. The ability to deny the need for this dialogue involves elements of fear, denial of reality, delusions of innate superiority and a desire to maintain status and power.

Language can also be an obstacle to meaningful dialogue in many ways particularly the insistence that nuclear weapons are ‘political’ not military weapons. While this may indicate a genuine desire that they will never be used, it also downplays the devastation that they threaten to cause.

Conclusion & Recommendations

Delusional thinking must be consistently challenged, wherever and whenever it is expressed. More holistic thinking that takes into account the views and situations of others is urgently needed in relation to nuclear weapons and nuclear deterrence, particularly an understanding that:

- a policy of nuclear deterrence holds the threat of devastation over others
- empathising with those who are threatened, and those who do not have nuclear weapons, would be a crucial step towards understanding the need for negotiations towards the abolition of all nuclear weapons.

We urge political leaders to begin negotiations towards a Nuclear Weapons Convention. Present nuclear disarmament campaigns encourage an understanding of the humanitarian consequences of any use of nuclear weapons.⁶⁸ There is already a draft model treaty for the phased elimination of all nuclear weapons; it drafts the steps that would be necessary to promote trust and ensure all partners fulfil their responsibilities.⁶⁹ It also shows that negotiations towards abolition are a practical possibility rather than an aspiration.⁷⁰

A positive approach to dialogue has been described as '*a state of ... empathic perspective-taking*'. This would help to reduce the 'us versus them' thinking patterns that are damaging to constructive dialogue.⁷¹ One example where this approach could be applied is in relation to Iran (see Box).

The general public needs to realise the particular and potentially catastrophic dangers of the threat still posed by nuclear weapons, and become more aware that political, military, and financial leaders are not invulnerable to delusional thinking, groupthink and hubris. If they knew that some of their elected representatives are overstating the need for a very dangerous and expensive weapon, particularly in difficult economic times, they would be more

likely to support abolition. This would also hold members of the UK government to account for the correct use of public funds.

Citizens can exercise their right to make clear that the existing balance of power is unjust, and that they do not wish their taxes to support maintaining this imbalance. In particular the threat to states that don't possess nuclear weapons from the UK's nuclear deterrent needs to be highlighted.

Military personnel with influence on strategy and expenditure need to be involved in this process, and are likely to be reconsidering strategy in the light of cuts to the defence budget.

Specific actions that can be taken by citizens

Follow parliamentary debates and highlight instances of delusional thinking by:

- writing to the person directly
- writing letters to the national and local press
- contacting your MP raising the concerns you have about their fellow Parliamentarians.*

Consistently make the point in discussions about cuts – including to the National Health Service and to education – that £97bn could be saved over the next 30 years if we stopped threatening others on the basis of a policy of nuclear deterrence.

Join existing campaigns that highlight these issues www.icanw.org

* all contacts can be found at <http://www.theyworkforyou.com/>

The 2012 Annual Report on the UK's 2010 National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review states that: 'It is clear from the Agency's latest report that Iran's nuclear programme continues to develop in a direction that offers no assurance of Iran's peaceful intentions.'⁷² It goes on to stress the need to increase pressure on Iran and to keep all options 'on the table'. It says that Iran must 'match our good faith'. Nowhere does it indicate any understanding of how threats from a nuclear armed nation with a previous history of interference in Iran's internal affairs may be perceived from the Iranian side.

A particular example of double standards (see p7 no 7) in the report is the statement that Iran needs to match the UK's 'good faith' and 'negotiate seriously' in the context of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). However Article VI of the NPT in fact refers to the need for nuclear armed states to disarm in 'good faith'.⁷³ Clearly this is not happening. In 2012 a £350m contract was awarded towards construction of a new generation of UK nuclear submarines and the Defence Secretary said "Our continuous submarine-based nuclear deterrent is the ultimate safeguard of our national security and the government is committed to maintaining it, both now and in the future."⁷⁴

References

- 1 Military Chiefs question Trident (2009) The Herald Scotland Jan 17 2009 <http://www.heraldscotland.com/military-chiefs-question-trident-1.900039> accessed 130912
- 2 Barnett & Lee (1981) *The Nuclear Mentality: a psychological analysis of the arms race*. Medical Campaign Against Nuclear Weapons ISBN 0-7453-0392-7
- 3 Glover J (2009) Voters want Britain to scrap all nuclear weapons, ICM poll shows The Guardian July 13 2009 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2009/jul/13/icm-poll-nuclear-weapons> accessed 110912
- 4 Bugliarello G (2010) *Nuclear Dangers* The Bridge Summer 2010 National Academy of Engineering
- 5 *Securing Britain in an Age of Uncertainty: the Strategic Defence and Security Review (2010)* Crown Copyright 2010
- 6 Zask A (2011) Us Submarine 'within metres of disaster' off British coast: report The Telegraph June 21 2011 <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/defence/8588756/US-Nuclear-submarine-within-metres-of-disaster-off-British-coast-report.html> accessed 301112
- 7 Pilkington E (2008) US missile alert crew falls asleep on the job The Guardian July 25 2008 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2008/jul/25/usa> accessed 220113
- 8 Hopkins N (2012) Navy submarine ran aground after series of errors, inquiry finds The Guardian Apr 23 2012 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2012/apr/23/navy-submarine-aground-errors-inquiry> accessed 301112
- 9 Brown A (2012) *Keeper of the Nuclear Conscience* Oxford University Press ISBN13: 9780199586585 ISBN10: 0199586586
- 10 Roberts F (1999) *60 years of nuclear history* Jon Carpenter Publishing ISBN 1 897766 48 3
- 11 Roberts F (1999) *60 Years of Nuclear History* Jon Carpenter Publishing ISBN 1 897766 48 3 P19
- 12 *ibid* p22
- 13 Declaration on Atomic Bomb By President Truman and Prime Ministers Attlee and King. Nuclear Age Peace Foundation http://www.nuclearfiles.org/menu/key-issues/nuclear-energy/history/dec-truma-atlee-king_1945-11-15.htm accessed 110912
- 14 Collins W (1870) from a letter Collins wrote to his German translator, Emil Lehmann, on 7 August 1870 <http://www.wilkiecollinsociety.com/newsletter/newsletter-spring-2009> accessed 301112
- 15 Centre for Media and Democracy (2008) Daniel O Graham Sourcewatch http://www.sourcewatch.org/index.php?title=Daniel_O._Graham accessed 101212
- 16 Ballistic Missile Defense Organisation Missile Defense Milestones 1944-1997 <http://www.fas.org/spp/starwars/program/milestone.htm> accessed 020113
- 17 Central Office of Information (1976) *Protect and Survive* pamphlet prepared for the Home Office. Her Majesty's Stationary Office ISBN 0 11 340728 9
- 18 Daily Politics (2007) Your Favourite Conference Clips BBC 2 Oct 3 2007 http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/programmes/the_daily_politics/6967366.stm accessed 101212
- 19 Warner (1998) Nuclear disarmament must be pursued step by step <http://www.fas.org/irp/offdocs/pdd/pdd-60-dd1402.htm> accessed 110912
- 20 Roberts G (2008) The Continuing Relevance of NATO's Nuclear Deterrence Strategy in an Uncertain World Comité de Surveillance OTAN http://www.csoan.org/textes/doc.php?type=documents&art_id=441 accessed 281112
- 21 Kristensen H (2012) B61-12: NNSA's Gold-Plated Nuclear Bomb Project FAS Strategic Security Blog <http://www.fas.org/blog/ssp/2012/07/b61-12gold.php> accessed 291112
- 22 Toynbee P (2012) On Trident, Miliband needs to be brave and jump ship The Guardian Oct 29 2012 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2012/oct/29/trident-miliband-brave-jump-ship> accessed 28 1112
- 23 Gordon T (2012) Scottish Constitution would ban nuclear weapons The Herald Oct 6 2012 <http://www.heraldscotland.com/politics/referendum-news/scottish-constitution-would-ban-nuclear-weapons.19078977> accessed 281112
- 24 The Global Zero Movement <http://www.globalzero.org/> accessed 301112
- 25 International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons <http://icanw.org/> accessed 301112
- 26 Miliband D (2008) A world without nuclear weapons <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2008/dec/08/nuclear-nuclearpower> accessed 301112
- 27 Princeton – Wordnet <http://wordnetweb.princeton.edu/perl/webwn?s=delusion> accessed 031212
- 28 Munro, Alistair (1999). *Delusional disorder: paranoia and related illnesses*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press. ISBN 0-521-58180-X
- 29 Hinde R (2007) *Bending the Rules* Oxford University Press ISBN 978-0-19-921897-4
- 30 Segal H (1997) *Psychoanalysis, Literature and War Papers 1972-1995* p134 Routledge
- 31 Groupthink summary <http://oregonstate.edu/instruct/theory/grpthink.html> accessed 301112
- 32 Janis I (1972) *Victims of Groupthink* P9 New York Houghton Mifflin

- 33 Hinde R (2007) *Bending the Rules: morality in the modern world from relationships to politics and war* OUP ISBN 978-0-19-921897-4
- 34 Shultz et al (2007) *A World Free of Nuclear Weapons* The Wall Street Journal Jan 4 2007 pA15 http://www.pugwash.org/reports/nw/nuclear-weapons-free-statements/NWFW_statements_USA.htm accessed 101212
- 35 Janis I L (1971) 'Groupthink' *Psychology Today* 5(6) pp43-46, 74-76
- 36 Green R (2011) *Security without Nuclear Deterrence* Introduction by Rebecca Johnson
- 37 Bradley M (1989) *Conflict Dynamics and Conflict Resolution in The Nuclear Mentality: a psychological analysis of the arms race*. Eds Barnett & Lee Medical Campaign Against Nuclear Weapons ISBN 0-7453-0392-7
- 38 Mr Gerald Howarth Aldershot Conservative December 4th 2002 They Work for You The UK Parliament Hansard Debates <http://www.theyworkforyou.com/search/?s=Mr+Gerald+Howarth&p=31> accessed 310712
- 39 Mr Gerald Howarth Aldershot, Conservative 4 December 2002 TheyWorkforYou The UK Parliament Hansard Debates
- 40 Tony Blair Prime Minister December 4 2006 TheyWorkforYou The UK Parliament Hansard Debates
- 41 Ainslie J (2005) *The Future of the British Bomb* pp12-13 WMD Awareness Program London <http://catalogue.sipri.org/cgi-bin/koha/opac-detail.pl?biblionumber=30732> accessed 101212
- 42 Mr Doug Henderson Minister of State, Ministry of Defence New Clause 5: Millennium Compliance (Defence) March 23 1999 They Work for You The UK Parliament Hansard Debates
- 43 Letter to Medact from Minister of State for the Armed Forces June 29 2012
- 44 Mr Geoff Hoon Secretary of State for Defence March 3 2003 TheyWorkforYou The UK Parliament Hansard Debates
- 45 Letter to Medact from the Minister of State for the Armed Forces June 29 2012
- 46 *Securing Britain in an Age of Uncertainty: the Strategic Defence and Security Review (2010)* Crown Copyright 2010
- 47 *The Strategic Defence Review (1998)* Modern Forces for the Modern World July 1998
- 48 Mr Doug Henderson Minister of State for Defence All Commons Debates November 12 1998
- 49 Mr George Robertson Secretary of State for Defence All Commons debates July 8 1998
- 50 Helfand I (2012) *Nuclear Famine: a billion people at risk* IPPNW / PSR <http://www.ippnw.org/nuclear-famine.html> accessed 220113
- 51 Dixon N (1989) *Why Do Leaders Mislead?* in *The Nuclear Mentality: a psychological analysis of the arms race*. Eds Barnett & Lee Medical Campaign Against Nuclear Weapons ISBN 0-7453-0392-7
- 52 Tony Blair Prime Minister December 2006 TheyWorkforYou The UK Parliament Hansard Debates
- 53 Gerald Howarth Shadow Minister, Defence; Aldershot, Conservative June 10 2008 TheyWorkforYou The UK Parliament Hansard Debates
- 54 Mr Menzies Campbell December 12 2001 TheyWorkforYou The UK Parliament Hansard Debates
- 55 Dr Julian Lewis Shadow Minister, International Affairs March 8 2005 TheyWorkforYou The UK Parliament Hansard Debates
- 56 Harvey N (2011) *Speech for the armed forces at Prospero House* <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/2011-12-07-uk-norway-nuclear-disarmament-verification-initiative-workshop> accessed 080113
- 57 Hinde R (2007) *Bending the Rules: morality in the modern world from relationships to politics and war* Oxford University Press ISBN 978-0-19-921897-4
- 58 Nick Harvey Minister of State (Armed Forces), Defence; North Devon, Liberal Democrat HC Debate 27 June 2011
- 59 Mr Menzies Campbell MP North East Fife All Commons debate Oct 27 1997 Hansard
- 60 Mr. John Wilkinson MP Ruislip-Northwood Oct 20 1998 Hansard
- 61 Theodore 'Dutch' Van Kirk navigator Enola Gay interviewed in *Dropping the Bomb* BBC <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/americas/4718579.stm> accessed 220113
- 62 Personal citation Mercy Heatley
- 63 Mackie A (1989) *Military Pomp & Nuclear Circumstance in The Nuclear Mentality: a psychological analysis of the arms race*. Eds Barnett & Lee Medical Campaign Against Nuclear Weapons ISBN 0-7453-0392-7
- 64 French D (1990) *The British Way in Warfare 1688-2000* pxi Unwin Hyman ISBN 0-04-445789-8
- 65 *Military Chiefs question Trident (2009)* The Herald Scotland Jan 17 2009 <http://www.heraldscotland.com/military-chiefs-question-trident-1.900039> accessed 130912
- 66 Kirkup J (2010) *General Sir Richard Dannatt: British nuclear deterrent is "not for ever"* The Telegraph Jan 20 2010 <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/7037318/General-Sir-Richard-Dannatt-British-nuclear-deterrent-is-not-forever.html> accessed 301112
- 67 Owen D & Davidson J (2009) *Hubris Syndrome: An acquired personality disorder?* *Brain* Feb 12 2009 doi: 10.1093/brain/awp008 <http://brain.oxfordjournals.org/content/early/2009/02/12/brain.awp008.full> accessed 291012
- 68 ICRC (2010) *Nuclear weapons: historic opportunity to ensure they will never be used again* April 20 2010 News Release 10/64 <http://www.icrc.org/eng/resources/documents/news-release/2010/nuclear-weapons-news-200410.htm> accessed 301112
- 69 Reeves & Williams *Nuclear Weapons Convention: Introduction* <http://icanw.org/nuclear-weapons-convention> accessed 301112 Full version <http://www.icanw.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/securingoursurvival2007.pdf> accessed 100113

12 The delusional thinking behind a policy of 'nuclear deterrence'

- 70 International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons www.icanw.org
- 71 Koch S (2010) in Dialogue on nuclear disarmament with decision makers IPPNW Germany. Berlin August 2010 http://www.ippnw.de/commonFiles/pdfs/Atomwaffen/dwdm_booklet2.pdf accessed 241212
- 72 Annual Report of the National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review <https://update.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/sites/default/files/resources/121128-Annual-Report-to-Parliament-on-NSS-and-SDSR.pdf> accessed 040113
- 73 The Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons <http://www.un.org/en/conf/npt/2010/npttext.shtml> accessed 040113
- 74 Norton-Taylor & Wintour (2012) Tories snub Lib Dems over Trident future The Guardian Monday 29 October 2012 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2012/oct/29/tories-lib-dems-trident> accessed 040113

The delusional thinking behind a policy of 'nuclear deterrence'

Twenty-one years ago the national conference of the Medical Campaign against Nuclear Weapons (MCANW) questioned the thinking behind a continuing belief in nuclear deterrence held by many political leaders.

This report considers this in the context of the 21st century. It aims to understand why many of today's politicians appear to believe that nuclear deterrence is an essential component of the UK's defence strategy. In particular it concentrates on the delusional nature of the thinking that underpins this belief.

Clearer thinking is urgently needed that takes into account the devastating threat the UK government's nuclear deterrence policy holds over the populations of other nations, including non-nuclear weapons states.

The report highlights statements made, mainly in parliamentary debates, between 1997 and 2012. It promotes clearer thinking that takes into account the views and situations of others. We hope this will encourage our decision makers to abandon their belief in nuclear deterrence, and to contribute to the growing movement for the abolition of all nuclear weapons.