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# Trident or Trust-Building?

**Ken Booth**

**Despite the prospect of possibly 40-plus states being armed with nuclear weapons by mid-century, governments and public opinion in key countries continue to exhibit radical complacency. The US failure to embrace Gorbachev's proposal in 1986 to move towards nuclear abolition by 2000 is a stark warning to the British political community as it considers the rationality of the government's 2007 decision to replace the Trident nuclear missile system. As in 1986, the consequences of business-as-usual in a changing world could be disastrous over the longer term.**

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Are humans doomed to international conflict? Many people believe it is so, because something called "human nature" is intrinsically warlike, or because of original sin or other God-related causes, or because states are trapped into a logic of struggle by the condition of international anarchy. Those holding such beliefs understand history to be a determined story, with humans reduced to being the puppets of biology, God, or destiny. If you are not a determinist, then you will understand the past differently; you will see it as having been potentially open to human agency, and will agree with the great peace researcher, Kenneth Boulding, who liked to quip that "Things are as they are because they got that way". For Boulding, humans have always had choices, though often we have made the wrong ones.

The corollary of believing that the past was open to human agency is to believe that the future is also open. To believe this does not of course mean that benevolent future change will ever be easy — far from it, for change has always to move against the grain of the present — but a non-deterministic position does not demand that we have to start with the dismal assumption that this is the best of all possible worlds. Boulding himself used to emphasise the many examples of real lives which offer models of peaceful futures rather than the negative images emphasised by all manner of "human na-

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ture pessimists” and “structural determinists”. He talked about former enemies who became reconciled, religious and racial groups who lived in mutual tolerance, and the overwhelming preference for negotiation and compromise rather than violence in our daily lives – and on and on. A long and powerful regressive self-image has pervaded human history (the violent dimension of it magnified these days by the media) but real life is not a state of “war of all against all”. Again as Boulding used to like to say – to encourage his audiences that there are empirical grounds for hope – “If it exists it is possible”. He would then go on to point out the existence of innumerable actual cases of human harmony from which we could learn.

In the light of these preposterously brief observations about the nature of history, I want to argue that rational human agency has a potentially decisive role in the traditionally warlike arena of international politics. There were decisive moments of choice in the past, and there are real choices to be made about the future. The “iron cage” in which we sometimes feel we live is in our minds, not in reality. Nowhere is this more apparent at present than in relation to the critically important issue of nuclear weapons, and I will argue below that what sometimes seems to be the safe choice for policymakers (business-as-usual) can turn out to have terrible long-term consequences. From this general proposition, discussed in relation to a wrong turning taken at a nuclear crossroads faced by the superpowers in 1986, it will be suggested that the present British government risks making a similar error. As we approach the 2010 Review Conference of the 1968 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), it is difficult to overestimate the significance of the potential dangers of the Treaty’s collapse. Failure will open the door to the spread of nuclear weapons to an increasing number of states. This is a danger that has crept up on governmental and public opinion almost everywhere. The general complacency has been deafening, yet the costs of making bad choices could be every bit as far-reaching as climate change, and for some regions, the risks could be even more devastating.



A Trident II missile being launched. Photo: U.S. Military/ Department of Defense.

**“Reality control”**

George Orwell famously wrote about “reality control” in his book *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. In one passage he warned: “Who controls the past... controls the future: who controls the present controls the past.” During the Cold War and since, “reality control” on the issue of nuclear weapons has overwhelmingly been in the hands of pro-nuclear experts arguing in favour of “the deterrent”. They have maintained that the future is always uncertain, and so it is safer to keep nuclear weapons because they have “kept the peace”. This belief has been enshrined as historical common sense in many peoples’ minds. There have always been critics of the reduction of nuclear history to such a bumper-sticker slogan, but this powerful belief must be comprehensively challenged if we are sensibly to discuss the place of nuclear weapons in international politics through the twenty-first century. As it happens, this is a good time for engaging in such a debate, for the passage of years since the end of the Cold War, and the emergence of new historical evidence, gives us greater scope for examining the past with critical distance. I would counter the bumper-sticker by emphasising four alternative understandings:

First, the Cold War should above all be remembered as a time of potentially catastrophic danger to civilised life on Earth. There were well-known flash-points (the Cuban Missile Crisis and various Berlin crises) but there were also less familiar moments of danger (notably the “Able Archer” episode in November 1983, which was arguably the second most dangerous episode in world history). As well as such eyeball-to-eyeball confrontations, dangers also arose out of the mutual incomprehension between some governments and their leaders.

Second, the Cold War revealed the impossibility of nuclear strategy. Now into the seventh decade of the nuclear era, strategists still find it difficult to devise a credible and rational military use for nuclear weapons. Even if they were used against a state that could not retaliate in kind, the opprobrium such a war crime would bring to the perpetrator would represent a political disaster as well as a human catastrophe.

Third, nuclear history reveals the continuing importance of the “human dimension” at multiple levels. It matters greatly whether trust (or its opposite) can develop between key leaders, and it matters if public involvement can be generated to support positive change (as was the case with massive public involvement in the World Court proceedings in the mid-1990s, which led to a decision inclining towards making nuclear weapons illegal).

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Fourth, and finally, nuclear history shows the importance of making diplomatic hay while the sun shines in relation to the building of security institutions (like the NPT) that promise to generate reassurance and trust between states. If these are not put in place when circumstances are propitious, the opportunity might not arise again, or as promisingly, for many years, and in the meantime great risks might be run. In this respect, the governments of major powers have generally shown an unwillingness to take diplomatic or disarmament risks to build trust and institutionalise security co-operation; this has been the case even when they have possessed a high margin of safety in terms of military balances. This makes the leap of trust represented by the creation in 1950 of the European Coal and Steel Community (which proved to be a massive step towards building a European security community out of a historically war-torn continent) such a diplomatic rarity. Giving way to the norms of the politics of mistrust has been much more to the taste of politicians and officials.

It is the last of these four lessons I want to develop, and I will begin by highlighting a missed opportunity to advance the organisation of world security in 1986.

### **The crossroads of 1986**

Over the past few years I have often thought of what might have happened had the Reagan Administration in 1986 responded positively and comprehensively to the timetabled plan proposed by the new Soviet leader, Mikhail Gorbachev, which aimed to bring about nuclear abolition by 2000.

It did not happen, of course, but what would international politics have come to look like if the White House had responded positively? This is counterfactual history, but it is not far-fetched given where Ronald Reagan's amazing anti-nuclear journey had taken him by 1986. As a presidential candidate, and then first-term President, Reagan had become infamous for his homespun simplicity about the world and his pro-nuclear bluster. But on the latter at least he changed dramatically as a result of experience. In particular, his outlook was shaken by the Able Archer crisis, which convinced him that a nuclear holocaust was not only possible, but might arise out of misperceptions on the part of superpower decision-makers. The chastened Reagan thereafter spoke of the desirability of rejecting "all nuclear weapons"; he declared them to be "totally irrational, totally inhumane, good for nothing but killing, [and] possibly destructive of life on earth and civilisation." He failed, however, to persuade all his Administration of this (though George P. Shultz, his Secretary of State, was sympathetic — note this fact for later) and he also failed to persuade Gorbachev that the development of "Star Wars" technology by the United States was

compatible with nuclear abolition.

If the White House had put all its energy into working with Gorbachev to move towards nuclear abolition by 2000, it is interesting to speculate about the impact of their symbolic and radical moves towards that end on politics and policymaking elsewhere. It is conceivable, for example, that a British Labour government might have come to power after the election of 1987, returned to power because of its far-sighted commitment to nuclear disarmament rather than being marginalised for many years because of it. In an election campaign in the after-glow of a historic superpower commitment to nuclear weapons abolition, the Labour Party could have advertised its (then) anti-nuclear credentials with pride, not least the claim that “unilateralists are multilateralists who mean it”.

If the first three powers to test nuclear weapons – the US, the Soviet Union, and the UK – had then begun to take major steps towards zero, even if by the mid-1990s they had become stuck over eliminating the last few hundred or more weapons, would India and Pakistan have flaunted the norms of such a denuclearising international community in 1998? Would either of them that year have conducted nuclear tests to join the “club” when the club’s first three members were disbanding it – showing by their words and deeds that they no longer considered nuclear weapons to be the ultimate guarantors of national security, while at the same time breaking the link between nuclear weapons and status (the idea, for example, that a Permanent Member of the UN Security Council must be a nuclear armed state)? What is more, China, which had for long been a rhetorical supporter of nuclear abolition, would presumably also by the mid-1990s have taken positive steps towards zero, and this would have dampened down the regional rationale for India’s decision to begin the nuclearising of South Asia.

If the White House had answered Gorbachev’s call in 1986, a decisive anti-nuclear dynamic would have been injected into the international politics of the 1990s. The demonstration effect of the first four nuclear nations acting out of serious respect towards their NPT commitment to abolish nuclear weapons would also have boosted the UN’s power to stop proliferation. In a book published in 2001, Jonathan Schell argued that if the leading nuclear weapons states (NWS) were to take serious steps towards abolition they “would possess a degree of will to enforce non-proliferation” that the UN Security Council then lacked. Against what would be an increasingly embedded anti-nuclear global common sense, Schell claimed persuasively that a non-nuclear nation seeking openly to develop a bomb “would arouse the anger and retaliation of the world”. If that were the case then, it would have been even more so ten years earlier, in the “new world order” atmosphere of the immediate post-Cold War years.

Let us speculate further. If all the UN Security Council’s Perma-

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ment Members had worked towards nuclear abolition through the late 1980s/early 1990s, is it conceivable that Saddam Hussein would have risked developing even a primitive nuclear weapons programme at the time? If this had not been the case, then the fateful series of steps that led to the 2003 war would not have been taken. Equally, had the world over the previous fifteen years been going in the opposite direction, it is also very unlikely that any Iranian policymakers would have flirted to any serious degree about developing nuclear weapons, and so there would have been none of the talk in the United States in recent years about attacking Iran.

As it was, the opportunity to construct a new anti-nuclear order of global security governance was not taken in 1986. The White House decided to play safe, as it saw it, and this posture left Gorbachev to retreat from his nuclear zero option to a strategy of so-called minimum nuclear deterrence. This is not to say that there was no dismantling of superpower nuclear arsenals in the 1990s, but what took place was incremental and pragmatic, reflecting narrow nationalist thinking rather a desire to construct a new anti-nuclear world order. Nuclear stockpiles shrank as the fear of superpower war declined, but the opportunity to construct institutions that might generate global reassurance and trust was lost.

Looking back on what did not happen in 1986, a case can be made that the opportunity Reagan missed played a part in setting US policy on the road that led to the disastrous war in Iraq, the shaming of US society at Abu Ghraib, and the widespread discrediting of the United States more generally. The short-sightedness of the White House played its part in putting in place the conditions for the spread of terror in the Middle East today, from roadside bombs to WMD scenarios, and it helped create the conditions for today's fears of anarchy in a nuclear-armed Pakistan.

In short, was the missed opportunity of 1986 the gravest mistake in the whole history of post-1945 US foreign and security policy? If you agree, who should we then consider to have been the real realists of the time: Reagan's advisers, who pulled the anti-nuclear President back to business-as-nuclear-usual, or Reagan and Gorbachev, who both recognised the global dangers of living in a world of nuclear weapons?

### **Today's crossroads**

Let us now fast forward 20 or so years to the decision the Labour government in the UK persuaded itself had to be made in 2007 about the renewal of its Trident weapons-system, which will keep the UK as a NWS until mid-century. And let us ask ourselves: who are today's real realists in the business of assessing the risks of nuclear weapons?

Decisions about nuclear futures should be made in the widest

context of world security. The latter should include a recognition of the problems created by global business-as-usual, and not just managing problems within that status quo. In other words, this moment in history demands real long-term strategic thinking as opposed to assuming that we can behave tomorrow as we did yesterday. The current threat of nuclear weapons proliferation is one dimension of what I call *The Great Reckoning* — a world-historical crisis that confronts human society globally this century. It is *The Great Reckoning* because it challenges us collectively with the most fundamental problems of living together on this ever-smaller planet. A “reckoning” is when we come face-to-face with the costs of our behaviour: I believe that History is now catching up with us.

*The Great Reckoning* over coming decades will be made up of a concatenation of material dangers (“climate chaos”, the destruction of nature, population increase etc.), ideological and cultural conflicts (religious fundamentalism and clashes of uncivilisation), and at a deeper level still, the problems thrown up by the very ideas that made us — that gave global politics, economics, and sociology their particular contemporary characteristics (the domination of patriarchal values, the statist and nationalist norms of the Westphalian system, proselytising religions, racial thinking, the predatory and divisive dynamics of capitalism, and the appetites of consumer democracy). We live in enormously challenging times.

A new nuclear age is another danger. Its likelihood is threatened by two developments. First, the so-called civil nuclear renaissance (which makes the transition from peaceful to military purposes of nuclear energy ever-easier, and increases the risk of terrorists gaining access to nuclear material); and second, the erosion of the reassurances that the NPT — the world’s most comprehensive and successful security regime — has given to its members about each other’s anti-nuclear commitments.

We stand at a nuclear crossroads, with two clear choices. If one road is taken (business-as-usual) the risks will be those of states competing in an unregulated nuclear system — a world of radical nuclear multipolarity with potentially 20, 30, 40 or more NWS by the 2020s, 2030s, 2040s. I call this the MAD path — the path based on the old strategic assumptions of Mutual Assured Destruction. The other road depends on the NWS acting out of respect to their commitment in Article VI of the NPT “to pursue negotiations in good faith on effective measures... at an early date... to nuclear disarmament, and on a treaty on general and complete disarmament.” This road involves building a more co-operative society of non-nuclear or denuclearising states, thereby creating the institutions that offer some collective hope of security in a world of existential uncertainty. This future requires both the NWS and potential NWS to show by their actions that they deserve to be trusted. This will only occur if serious steps are taken by today’s NWS towards the goal of

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nuclear abolition. I call this the SANE path (Security After Nuclear Elimination).

Neither path is risk-free of course, but just as I would have preferred international relations to have faced the risks of a SANE strategy after 1986, so I would prefer that we were collectively working to embed nuclear trust-building in institutions rather than a future in which an increasing number of states put their trust in unilateral nuclear idealism (the belief that so-called deterrence will work for the rest of history).

Unlike the Cold War, there is now a rather strong body of opinion with a different interpretation of nuclear risks and realities. The experts no longer belong overwhelmingly to the pro-nuclear side. Of particular interest has been the growing number of US defence experts since the 1990s who have advocated the goal of global elimination. In recent years these have been joined by those who have become increasingly worried about the risks of nuclear proliferation. Among the latter, most notably, was the group of former policymakers (including George P. Shultz, William J. Perry, Henry A. Kissinger and Sam Nunn) who signed a letter to the *Wall Street Journal* (4 January, 2007) in which they called for "A World Free of Nuclear Weapons".

The traditional pro-nuclear dream world imagines that nuclear deterrence will "work" for the rest of history. International politics built on mistrust, however, is almost calculated to fail at some point. This is why, under the challenge of converging threats in the decades ahead, global security governance needs to be embedded as much as possible in institutions that help states practice co-operation and explore trust-building. More urgently than ever, humans must cultivate the identity of a *global-we* as opposed to the egoism of multiple I's. As it happens, there is a mass of good ideas and proposals about how to work towards this in relation to nuclear abolition, from implementing the "13 Practical Steps" agreed upon at the 2000 NPT Review Conference, to working through a variety of other sensible initiatives, including those recommended by the Canberra Commission, the Blix Commission, and the UN High-Level Panel Report. Above all, the NPT, as the centre-piece of the global non-proliferation regime, must be saved, and its 2010 Review Conference will be pivotal. The challenge for advocates of a SANE world, therefore, is not so much what to do, but how to build global political support.

### **Britain's choice: replacing Trident/constructing nuclear trust**

It is in the context of the threatening prospect of a steady increase in the number of nuclear weapons states that the UK political community faces the issue of Trident renewal. Nick Ritchie, a researcher at Bradford University, has recently written that it is the

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definite view of the British government that “replacing Trident is the answer”: but he then went on to stick the knife in by saying that the government “is not at all clear what the question is”. I agree, and hope in contrast that this article clarifies the question that confronts us. Simply put: does the decision to replace Trident help or hinder the slide into a dangerous world of radical nuclear multipolarity?

It is my view that saving the NPT regime must be a global priority if human society is to avoid the predictable dangers of a world of possibly 40-plus NWS by mid-century (with all this means in terms of the increased risks of accidental and inadvertent war, the temptations of nuclear use strategies, the enhanced access that terrorists will have to nuclear materials, the rising probability of regional conflicts escalating to nuclear war etc.). As it is, Trident renewal – by miscalculation or lack of imagination – will play a part in eroding the international security regime that has been built around the NPT. The government’s haste to announce its determination to renew Trident was significant in two main respects. First, it suggests that key British policymakers consider that they cannot assume the future effectiveness of the non-proliferation regime that has developed over the past 40 years, and so have decided (prematurely) to hedge against the prospect of future failure. And second, by this very decision, the government has undertaken to implement a policy that will itself contribute to bringing about the very outcome (nuclear proliferation) it wants to avoid. So, instead of London taking the opportunity to take a lead to save the NPT, and so attempt to rebuild anti-nuclear norms, its behaviour is being widely interpreted around the world as putting another nail in the NPT’s coffin.

The British government and its loyal pro-nuclear opposition have therefore made their choice: instead of seriously working to save the NPT by demonstrating respect for Article VI, they have decided to hedge against the Treaty’s eventual failure, reaffirm their faith in nuclearism, and (as it is sometimes nicely put) preach temperance to others from its own bar-stool. To the extent that the UK has international influence in these matters, therefore, the decision to replace Trident and remain a NWS until at least mid-century, will erode the prospects for maintaining existing anti-nuclear norms, while walking away from the opportunity to build a global security regime that promises to build a world free of nuclear weapons – an outcome even an arch military hard-liner like Kissinger recognises as urgently desirable.

I hope this article has made a plausible case that the failure of the US Administration in 1986 to take advantage of the opportunity to work towards the global abolition of nuclear weapons by 2000, and thereby seek to embed nuclear trust-building in a historic fashion, had enormous negative consequences for the foreign and

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security policies of many states — not least its own. Today, we face another nuclear crossroads: to save or erode the NPT regime. If, instead of playing its part in rebuilding the norms of the NPT regime before the 2010 Review Conference, the UK continues to press ahead with replacing Trident, will somebody in 20 or so years' time, as world security seeks to cope with the growing threat of radical nuclear multipolarity, be able to make the same charge against Blair/Brown (2007) that I have made against Reagan (1986)? Globally, human society faces a historic crossroads, and long-term realists (from Faslane-365 supporters to Kissinger) know there is only one rational choice, that of taking the SANE path of constructing the institutions of global trust-building. Short-termists, and "national interest" fundamentalists, however, are determined to make sure that this path will not be taken.

**Further reading:** The theoretical and empirical arguments of this article can be explored at greater length in Ken Booth and Frank Barnaby (eds.), *The Future of Britain's Nuclear Weapons: Experts Reframe the Debate* (Oxford Research Group, 2006); Ken Booth, *Theory of World Security* (Cambridge University Press, 2007); Ken Booth and Nicholas J. Wheeler, *The Security Dilemma: Fear, Cooperation and Trust in World Politics* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).