



HISTORY & POLICY

Trident: is Britain strategically naked without it?

- Historians debate the nuclear deterrent

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Would scrapping the nuclear deterrent send Britain, in Nye Bevan's words, 'naked into the conference chamber', or is Trident now the military equivalent of the Emperor's New Clothes, comforting to the wearer but invisible on the world stage? As the Government prepares to announce whether it will upgrade the Trident submarines, two new History & Policy papers explore the strategic importance of the nuclear deterrent.

In [*Upgrading Britain's Nuclear Deterrent: from V-Bombers to Trident Replacement*](#), Matthew Grant of the University of Manchester reveals that the shadow of the Cold War hangs over today's policymakers, as every government fears that abolishing the deterrent would leave Britain 'unprotected'. In [*North Korea and the Nuclear Threat*](#), Jenna Phillips of Sidney Sussex College, Cambridge, argues that the Korean War demonstrated the hollowness of the atomic threat, as the stakes were so high the bomb's destructive potential could not be converted into political power. She calls for UN member states to apply stronger diplomatic sanctions against North Korea to deter it from developing nuclear weapons.

Dr Matthew Grant said:

"In every debate about the upgrading of Britain's nuclear deterrent, fears dating back to the Cold War era have triumphed over concrete criticisms. But in the current recession, the bill for nuclear weapons is under more scrutiny, as are the strategic benefits they are meant to bring.

"Policymakers assume that the deterrent helps preserve Britain's permanent place on the United Nations Security Council and her role in discussions of disarmament and non-proliferation; in 1957 Aneurin Bevan, as Shadow Foreign Secretary, famously

castigated supporters of unilateral disarmament for wanting to send him 'naked into the conference chamber'.

"But due to the continued lack of a British weapons system, replacing Trident would tie Britain too closely to a single ally, the outsize superpower of USA, and its global strategic interests, possibly at the expense of preserving more independence and flexibility and of closer co-operation with our neighbours in Europe.

"So far though, the current Government has followed its predecessors and elevated Trident to 'sacred cow' status; the same factors that have determined nuclear policy for the past forty years still hold sway in today's Whitehall."

Jenna Phillips said:

"The Korean War demonstrated that Western nuclear capability is not an effective diplomatic tool. The Truman government remained unwilling to authorise nuclear warfare, demonstrating to the Communist powers that the atomic threat was hollow: the bomb's destructive potential could not be converted into political power.

"Then as now, use of nuclear weapons would have wide-ranging international repercussions, creating a conflict that would be difficult to contain, arousing anti-Western feeling and counteracting President Obama's efforts to win-over Arab and Asian opinion.

"The only answer to the threat posed by North Korea today is for the United Nations, including Russia and China, to apply and maintain stronger diplomatic sanctions. While this could trigger the collapse of North Korea's economy, the threat of implosion is far outweighed by the danger of allowing the development of a fully-fledged, hostile nuclear state."

Notes to editors:

1. Matthew Grant's History & Policy Paper, [Upgrading Britain's Nuclear Deterrent: from V-Bombers to Trident Replacement](#), is published today at www.historyandpolicy.org. Matthew Grant is an Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) Postdoctoral Fellow in the School of Arts, Histories and Cultures at the University of Manchester. After completing his PhD at Queen Mary, University of London, he taught History at the University of Sheffield in 2007-9. His book, *After the Bomb: Civil Defence and Nuclear War in Britain, 1945-68*, will be published later this year by Palgrave Macmillan.
2. Jenna Phillips' History & Policy Paper, [North Korea and the Nuclear Threat](#), is published today at www.historyandpolicy.org. Jenna Phillips is currently completing a PhD at Sidney Sussex College, Cambridge University, on 'British policy during the

Korean War, 1950-1951'. She is funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), and was the Fox International Fellow from Sidney Sussex College to Yale University in 2006.

3. [History & Policy](#) is an independent initiative working for better public policy through an understanding of history. The initiative was founded by historians at the Universities of Cambridge and London and is based in the [Centre for Contemporary British History](#), at the [Institute of Historical Research](#), University of London. History & Policy is funded through a charitable grant from the Philanthropic Collaborative.
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