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The Challenges of Coherent U.S. Extended Nuclear Deterrence and Assurance

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The importance of US extended deterrence is often taken for granted in these circles. But I hope this panel will encourage you to think again about some of your assumptions. Preparing for it has certainly got me questioning some of mine.

Need I say that a strong extended deterrence is a core part of the posture and widely seen as very much in the interests of the United States. It has contained direct threats to US interests world-wide, and through assurance has contained the proliferation of nuclear weapons amongst allies.

This is important because it prevents the uncontrolled contagion of nuclear proliferation that our forefathers assumed was inevitable. And it means that crisis coordination is that much more stable amongst allies that could otherwise have their own ideas about the nuclear use threshold.

It enables the US to give allies confidence and demonstrated commitment.

Guy [Roberts] and I met a few years ago when he was Director of Nuclear Policy for NATO. He was the

spokesperson for burden sharing and the essence of the Alliance nuclear pact within Europe. European allies take some of the responsibilities on the margins for what is essentially a US nuclear extended deterrent. By hosting and training to deliver US B61 nuclear bombs in Europe.

But in essence NATO practice around the European deployment of the B61 is more about assurance of allies, not deterrence of potential adversaries.

Extended assurance: It's the glue that keeps any potential European paranoia in check. It's what is said to ensure a high level of cohesion and loyalty amongst allies, not only when facing the Russians, but also in support of the American foreign policy elsewhere.

Many of us saw the B61-DCA [Dual-Capable Aircraft] arrangements as an anachronism, left over from the Cold War. But most of you believe in it, are prepared to invest precious treasure in it, and I have no doubt Guy will today put a stout defence and explain why it remains important.

Unfortunately, perhaps, the credibility of this extended assurance does not fully permeate

through all America's allies, with or without the B61s in Europe. In your closest European ally, my home country, with representative colleagues here in the conference, where it ought to be steadfast, we Brits have a doubt of the long term US commitment to Europe and the UK. A sufficient doubt that we are prepared to allocate up to a third of our whole defence procurement budget to the renewed Trident nuclear weapon system over the next fifteen years. At a time when we are facing very tough decisions over military capabilities. American statesmen are already questioning the British future capability to act as the loyal ally it has been up to now.

But the independent UK nuclear deterrent is not only a drain on important alliance capability. It is ultimately an expression of a lack of faith in the US nuclear deterrent, and a body-blow to its credibility elsewhere.

And the living proof of that elsewhere will be brought to you today by Shmuel [Bar] here. Seen from Israel, sitting in a bad-ass part of the world where faith in God is strong but faith in one's allies is weak, extended deterrence looks different. Some are dangerously concluding it's every state for itself. Another body-blow for the global credibility of US extended nuclear assurance. One not lost on the Saudis who are starting to talk openly about reneging on their legal responsibilities to the NPT if their neighbour on the other side of the Persian Gulf were to get too close to a nuclear weapon capability.

Extended deterrence: It is time, my friends, that we faced up to some of the inconvenient truths... that it is we ourselves who are undermining the very thing we value - extended assurance.

It is hardly controversial in this audience to assert the importance of extended deterrence. We've heard it several times today. Heck, it's about the strongest argument given in the 2010 NPR for resisting further nuclear reductions beyond those negotiated with the Russians in new START, and for renewed investment in the nuclear weapons complex.

But extended assurance is a fragile thing. It relies upon one's allies having trust that you are prepared to risk all, even one's own cities, to threaten nuclear retaliation for acts that cross the line. That trust has to go long into the future, not just today. And this is not actually about hardware... it's about trust and confidence, and relationship... confidence that US core interests lie in drawing that line in the sand.

Extended assurance also relies upon allies swallowing some misplaced pride or rejecting the desire for the increasingly mythical status that nuclear weapons possession brings. And there is no shortage of a sense of place in the world when it comes to many of us.

So, what does a successful, sustainable strategy of extended deterrence take? As Guy will tell you, it takes constant vigilance, it takes assurance, clarity and transparency - that's why he was involved for those years in Brussels in the politics of the nuclear planning group and the training involving allies. It is a game of confidence, showing continued commitment and sacrifice.

It also takes consistent application - so that all allies can all have confidence.

In 2011 we launched the BASIC Trident Commission, with some of Britain's most respected authorities as members, co-chaired by Sir Malcolm Rifkind, Lord Browne and Sir Menzies Campbell. Our report is due in a few months' time, but it is already clear from our deliberations that Britain's relationship with America is key to the decision over Trident renewal.

It is equally clear that ultimately the strongest credible argument in favour of renewing Britain's nuclear weapons on a continuous and independent patrolling posture is the possibility that we Brits cannot ultimately rely upon the United States in the distant future. This may have some resonance with Shmuel's contribution later.

Can you come up with a scenario in which the Americans would not want to be involved and the British would need an independent nuclear deterrent? And would it be in America's interest?

And if the Brits are not confident, why should the Saudis be? My point is that we need to be careful about actions that may undermine credible extended assurance to the Saudis. That is unless we have a better plan.

The United States plays a critical role in Britain's ability to maintain an independent nuclear deterrent. The technical cooperation has been governed by the unique Mutual Defence Agreement of 1958 for over half a century. It is due to be amended and renewed in both Congress and Parliament in the coming months, as it is once every ten years.

At BASIC we have in the past tended to highlight the Treaty's stretching the spirit if not the letter of the NPT beyond breaking point.

But just as much of interest to this audience ought to be the Treaty's impact on assurance of other states. America is facilitating Britain's independence of strategic action on the basis ultimately that Britain cannot trust the American nuclear umbrella. But further, why is the government here hinting that it would be displeased if the UK did not constantly patrol in future?

These things are noticed by others, even when not openly expressed. And the whispering weakens relationships elsewhere. NATO circles are tight in this community. They don't talk about these things. But I have heard it in the Arab world, along with other resentments towards exceptional application of international nuclear rules.

And we should care a lot about how non-proliferation and confidence looks in the Arab world right now... if we care about international stability.

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It would be a mistake to think that America can determine the future of UK nuclear weapons policy,

but it has a great deal of influence. The debate in Britain will soon heat up in the context of September's referendum on Scottish independence, next May's General Election... and the final decision taken on the submarines in 2016. Reflect on the assumption, held in London and elsewhere that Washington will look poorly on any decision that does not maintain a continuous British deterrent patrol.

There is only one other third country that practices this level of submarine patrolling - France. Three allies separately maintaining expensive continuous patrolling. Against what? And at what sacrifice for other alliance capabilities?

Instead, in an age of austerity, perhaps it is time for the US government to be consistent and clearer about the principles it expects its other allies to exercise when considering major defence procurement projects such as this.

One such is smart defence - allies specialising in what they are good at, and devoting those capabilities more explicitly to the Alliance. We ought to be ensuring that rather than independence, Britain's nuclear deterrent is more explicitly devoted to the needs of the Alliance, to contributing to US extended assurance and deterrence in a posture of confidence in the Alliance and effective burden-sharing.

Continuous independent British patrolling, justified on the basis of independent crisis response as if the Alliance may not in future matter enough, undermines confidence in other states sheltering under the nuclear umbrella, where the pressures are far greater and the will of the United States to risk all far weaker. And that spells trouble.

And yet even whilst we think we are supporting such a posture we undermine it when we explicitly support the so-called independent nuclear arsenal of the UK, or implicitly protect the right of the Israelis to operate outside the constraints of the NPT, and ignore their responsibility towards the international community, and to the security and stability of their neighbourhood.

I promised I would take you to the United Kingdom. Yesterday I was in parliament for the launch of another report on Britain's nuclear deterrent. Rt Hon James Arbuthnot, Conservative Chair of the Defence Committee of many years standing, pillar of the defence establishment, one-time Defence Minister and previously tipped to be the last Defence Secretary, expressed his deep doubts about Britain's renewing Trident. But after a sophisticated and balanced review of the situation, he concluded that in the end he feared that a

Britain that was weak and without nuclear weapons would be inviting attack... even though he found it extremely difficult to find a single credible scenario in which Britain's nuclear weapons might be relevant independent of the United States.

