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## **Nuclear Weapons Abolition by UK Alone Would Still Herald New Era**

by Peter Jones

Since the dawn of the nuclear age, all countries have been officially committed to eliminating these weapons. Today, some of the most influential politicians and officials of the nuclear era are talking seriously about actually doing it.

In January 2007, former U.S. secretaries of state Henry Kissinger and George Schultz, along with former defence secretary Bill Perry and former senator Sam Nunn wrote in the Wall Street Journal calling for the world to move toward the elimination of nuclear weapons.

Their reasoning was purely strategic. Noting that deterrence had been necessary during the Cold War, they argued that it is not applicable to a world of small and unpredictable nuclear-armed states. The most sensible strategy is to embark upon incremental steps aimed at eliminating nuclear weapons. They published a second Journal piece in January, 2008, outlining practical steps.

In the U.K., then-foreign secretary Margaret Beckett joined those advocating a renewed commitment to nuclear abolition in a speech on June 25, 2007. Meanwhile, the Australian government has launched a second round of the "Canberra Commission," a group of international experts with a mandate to develop ideas for nuclear abolition.

It would be folly to interpret all this as heralding the inevitable end of nuclear weapons. But this debate may have an important impact in Britain as it comes in conjunction with the period in which the U.K. must commit to renewing its deterrent by starting the process of replacing its Trident missile submarines and their nuclear weapons.

Plans to do so passed in Parliament in March, 2007, and the spending of serious money will commence in a few years. The vote was controversial. A number of Labour MPs called on Britain to become the first nuclear

weapons state (recognized as such in the Non-proliferation Treaty — the NPT) to disarm.

It will take decades to build and operate new submarines. While estimates vary, the cost is reckoned at upwards of about \$130 billion Cdn over 30 years. Polls show that many Britons are uncomfortable with the U.K.'s defence relationship with the U.S. — of which nuclear collaboration is a cornerstone. A large part of this is likely due to the disastrous Bush presidency, but even his successor may find the British public placing less value on the “special relationship.”

Of course, British politics will not remain static. Gordon Brown must face election and may lose. If the British Conservative party comes to power the replacement of the Tridents is more likely. Even if Brown wins, there is a considerable lobby for replacement and the U.S. will also press for it.

This lobby argues that nuclear weapons are required in a world where states such as Iran are seeking nuclear weapons, and that they preserve the U.K.'s increasingly tenuous seat at the top table of international politics. Margaret Beckett made the first point in her speech, which was aimed at trying to reconcile the contradiction between Britain's commitment to nuclear abolition and the replacement of the Tridents.

However, there are no credible scenarios in which Britain will alone face a threat that would require a unilateral nuclear response. Moreover, the argument that nuclear weapons are the ultimate guarantor of security is an argument for proliferation, not against it; if it is necessary for Britain to have nuclear weapons for its security, why is it any less necessary for others?

As to the “top table” argument, will it still be true in 2025? Will nuclear weapons still be a ticket to the top table for a country which is a middle power compared to such emerging giants as China and India? And if the price of that seat is continued subservience to the U.S., will the British people want it?

By contrast, nuclear abolitionists argue that giving up the deterrent will place Britain at the forefront of efforts to design a new top table. Britain would be the first nuclear weapons state within the NPT to fulfil the commitment all of them made to disarm. It is the growing suspicion that these countries have no intention of ever disarming, which is one of the factors eroding international support for the NPT.

Perhaps the greatest challenge the nuclear abolitionists face, however, is the sense that nuclear weapons will always be with us; that they cannot be “dis-invented.” This view was addressed by Beckett in her 2007 speech.

When William Wilberforce began his famous campaign, the practice of one set of people enslaving another had existed for thousands of years. He had the courage to challenge that paradigm; and in so doing he helped to bring an end to the terrible evil of the transatlantic slave trade. Would he have achieved half as much, would he have inspired the same fervour in others if he had set out to “regulate” or “reduce” the slave trade rather than abolish it? I doubt it. And so, too, with nuclear weapons.

So, too, one might say that the Cold War once appeared an eternal fact. Right up to the moment that it ended, most international relations experts would have laughed at the idea that the entire edifice of that confrontation could simply crumble overnight. But it did.

This is perhaps the strongest argument the nuclear abolitionists have. In the case of the U.K., they can argue that even if it does not by itself end the nuclear weapons era, the impact of one of the original nuclear weapons states renouncing these weapons would so dramatically alter the prevailing paradigm that it must surely hasten that day.

And they no longer consist entirely of left-wing “peace” activists. They are joined by some of the most unabashedly “realist” of men who have spent a lifetime wielding nuclear weapons, and who now believe that the security of humanity requires that we eliminate them once and for all.

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