

Building bigger nuclear weapons will make us even less secure

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Without any public debate, these new missiles give others an excuse to flout the non-proliferation treaty

In nuclear politics, every action is justified by the response it provokes. The US explains its missile defence programme by claiming that other states are developing new weapons systems, which one day it might need to shoot down. In response, Russia has activated a new weapons system, the Topol-M, designed to “penetrate US anti-missile defences”.

Israel, citing the threat from Iran, insists on retaining its nuclear missiles. Threatened by them (and prompted, among other reasons, by his anti-semitism), the Iranian president says he wants to wipe Israel off the map, and appears to be developing a means to do so. Israel sees his response as vindicating its nuclear programme. It threatens an air strike, which grants retrospective validity to Ahmadinejad’s designs. And so it goes on. Everyone turns out to be right in the end.

Tomorrow the deadline passes for the only objection anyone is likely to be allowed to make to the latest £100m of government spending on Britain’s nuclear capability. West Berkshire council is permitted, on planning grounds, to ask the government for a public inquiry into whether the Orion laser project at Aldermaston should go ahead. The government is under no obligation to grant it. No one else has any power to impede the scheme. The Orion programme seems to be one of those projects whose purpose will be determined after it has begun, but it appears to have something to do with evading the comprehensive test ban treaty. It might help British engineers to design a new generation of bombs without having to test them. If so, it will strengthen the suspicion that the government is considering not only replacing our existing Trident missiles, but also building a entirely new class of weapons to accompany them. In 2002, a spokesman at Aldermaston suggested that the plant might start building either mini-nukes or nuclear warheads for cruise missiles.

Three weeks ago, the Royal Navy announced that it is spending £125m upgrading the Faslane naval base on the River Clyde in Scotland. The base houses the submarines which carry the UK’s Trident missiles. Like the Orion project, the spending has been approved before parliament or the public has had a chance to decide whether it is necessary: what it means, in effect, is that the Trident replacement programme has already begun.

The defence secretary explains that a new missile system is necessary because “some countries” have not been “complying with their obligations under the non-proliferation treaty”. In response, therefore, the UK will refuse to comply with its obligations under the non-proliferation treaty. This provides other countries with their justification for . . . well,

you've got the general idea. Last week, France joined the exclusive club of responsible nations (the UK, US and North Korea) which have threatened other countries with a preemptive nuclear strike. What greater incentive could there be for the rogue states Chirac spoke of to "consider using . . . weapons of mass destruction"?

Unlike the British parliament, the US Congress has been permitted to vote on such matters, and despite a great deal of bellyaching from the administration, has bravely sought to block a new nuclear weapons programme. For two years in a row it has refused to approve the money for George Bush's "robust nuclear earth penetrator", a mini-nuke which could have reduced the threshold for first use. But now it seems to have been duped.

Last year it approved initial funding for something called the "reliable replacement warhead" programme. The administration maintained that this was nothing more than the refurbishment of existing nuclear weapons. The legislators chose to believe it. David Hobson, a Republican who sits on the House Appropriations Committee, and has led the fight against new weapons, was persuaded that "this is not a sneaky way to get a whole new powerful warhead type of thing in the future. We're not trying to do separate missions than those the warheads were designed for today." Ellen Tauscher, a Democrat who is fiercely opposed to proliferation, insisted "this is about tinkering at the margins of the existing weapons systems, nothing more". The programme would concentrate on replacing a few non-nuclear components, such as wires and electronics, in order to extend their life.

They seemed naive then and they seem more naive today. The US has already spent about \$60bn maintaining and refurbishing its weapons under a separate programme, called "stockpile stewardship". It wasn't easy to see why it needed a new scheme. Even before the reliable replacement warhead programme had been approved, the outgoing deputy head of the Nuclear National Security Administration (NNSA) had let slip that a new generation of weapons was "not the primary objective, but (it) would be a fortuitous associated event".

Now the associated event is beginning to look like a primary objective. A couple of weeks ago, the San Francisco Chronicle interviewed the head of the NNSA, Linton Brookes. "I don't want to mislead you," he admitted. "I will personally be very surprised if we can get the advantages we want without redesigning the physics package."

The "physics package" is the nuclear warhead. He went on to explain that the warheads "will require new pits" (the "pit" is the plutonium core in which the reaction begins). "We are going to need to melt them down and recast them." The new warheads would be bigger than the old ones. This is beginning to look like "a whole new powerful warhead type of thing".

Writing in the online magazine OpenDemocracy a few days ago, the professor of peace studies Paul Rogers suggested that an early candidate for replacement under the new programme would be America's Trident missiles. If this is the case, it "would suit the British very well, with the prospect of close collaboration and maybe even the sharing of some development costs".

So, without any proper public debate on either side of the Atlantic, both nations might have begun developing a new nuclear weapons programme which could last for 40 or 50 years. Throughout that period, their missiles will continue to provide everyone else with an excuse to flout the nuclear non-proliferation treaty.

When Iran is referred to the UN security council, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad will be able to turn every accusation it makes back on his accusers. He will insist that the council's members are asserting a monopoly of ultimate violence; that while there is as yet no definitive evidence that he is in breach of the nuclear non-proliferation treaty, no one can doubt that they are. He will point to America's tacit endorsement of Israel's nuclear status and its overt endorsement of India's. He will assert that the enforcement of the global nuclear regime discriminates against Muslim states. And though he is wrong about many things, he will be right about all that.

This is not to say that the horripilation Iran's nuclear programme inspires is unjustified; nor is it to claim that no other state would seek to develop or maintain nuclear weapons if the official nuclear powers gave theirs up. But the refusal of the members of the security council to make any moves towards disarmament, their threats of pre-emptive bombing and their quiet development of new weapons systems guarantees the failure of both the UN and the International Atomic Energy Agency. Nothing could make us less secure than the billions we are spending in the name of security.

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