

Mistakes, Misfiring and Trident: Britain's Flawed Nuclear Deterrence

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Nuclear weapons are considered the strategic silverware of nation states. Occasionally, they are given a cleaning and polishing. From time to time, they go missing, fail to work, and suffer misplacement. Of late, the UK Royal Navy has not been doing so well in that department, given its seminal role in upholding the doctrine of nuclear deterrence. In January, an unarmed Trident II D5 nuclear missile fell into the Atlantic Ocean after a bungled launch from a Royal Navy submarine.

The missile's journey was a distinctly shorter than its originally plotted 6,000 km journey that would have ended in a location somewhere between Africa and Brazil. In language designed to say nothing yet conceal monumental embarrassment, UK **Defence Secretary Grant Shapps** called it "an anomaly" while the Labour opposition expressed concern through its shadow defence secretary, **John Healey**. An anonymous military source was the most descriptive of all: "It left the submarine but it just went plop, right next to them."

The anomaly in question, which Shapps witnessed on board the HMS Vanguard, took place off the coast of Florida during a January 30 exercise at the US's Navy Port site. Its failure is the second for the missile, which was also tested in 2016 and resulted in its automatic self-destruction after veering off course and heading to the United States. It was therefore galling for the Defence Secretary to then claim in a [written statement](#) to Parliament that Trident was still "the most reliable weapons system in the world", a claim also reiterated by the missile's manufacturers, Lockheed Martin. With a gamey sense of delusion, Shapps continued to argue that the test merely "affirmed the effectiveness of the UK's nuclear deterrent, in which the government has absolute confidence. The submarine and crew were successfully certified and will rejoin the operational cycle as planned."

Reports of the misfiring were [first noted](#) in *The Sun*, a newspaper otherwise given to bellicose airings and tits-and-bums rhetoric. “The government has absolute confidence that the UK’s deterrent remains effective, dependable, and formidable,” Shapps [insists](#). “That is why we are continuing to invest in the next generation of Dreadnought Class ballistic missile submarines, in extending the life of the Trident missile and replacing the warhead, to keep us safe for decades to come.”

This is tickling, if only for reiterating talking points supplied by the Ministry of Defence. In its statement to *The Sun*, the MoD expressed much confidence that,

“HMAS Vanguard and her crew [had] been fully capable of operating the UK’s Continuous At-Sea Deterrent, passing all tests during a recent demonstration and shakedown operation (DASO) – a routine test to confirm that the submarine can return to service following deep maintenance work.”

In all of this, Shapps comes across as a mock figurine and stuffed effigy, with the MoD the exemplar of wishful thinking. If nuclear deterrence ever had any reason for existing, it would surely do so on the presumption that the platforms launching the warheads would work. As David Cullen of the Nuclear Information Service saliently [notes](#),

“The whole point of billions we are spending on the nuclear weapons programme is that it supposed to work, and be seen to work, at the prime minister’s command. Without that assurance, the entire endeavour is a failure in its own terms.”

Even at the best of times, deterrence, as a claim, is the stuff of fluffy fiction, astrological flight and fancy. It is unverifiable, speculative, highly presumptuous. Who is to know if a nuclear weapon will be fired at any point, at any time, against any target, on whatever pretext presents itself?

The madman theory suggests that such a weapon will be deployed, though we are not sure when this might eventuate. Keeping company with such a theory is the rational, mass murderer type who takes comfort in the prospect that 100 humans might survive a holocaust killing billions. Shoot and take your chances. Human stupidity glows with the hope that errors will be healed, and mass crimes palliated.

In actual fact, the true proof of such deterrence would lie in hellish murder: weapons launched, catastrophe ensuing. Those recording such evidence are bound to be done by coarse skinned mutants with plumbing problems.

The Trident misfiring episode can be seen in one of two ways. First, it illustrates the point that we are here because of dumb luck, having survived error, misunderstanding and miscommunication. In the second sense, it yields an uncomfortable reality for the war planners in White Hall: Trident may not work when asked to.

Whether a system fails because of faulty machinery or accident, the problem of misfiring does not go away. At some point, a misfire with potency will result in deaths, though we can perhaps be assured that Trident may simply fail to live up to the heavy sense of expectation demanded of it. We can hope it just plops.

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