

The British threat

By hardening its policy on nuclear weapons, New Labour is encouraging proliferation

The paradox of modern warfare works like this: by enhancing our military strength, we enhance our opponents' capacity to destroy us. The Russian state developed thermobaric bombs (which release a cloud of explosive material into the air) for use against Muslim guerrillas. Now, according to New Scientist, Muslim terrorists are trying to copy them. The United States has been producing weaponised anthrax, ostensibly to anticipate terrorist threats. In 2001, anthrax stolen from this programme was used to terrorise America. The greatest horrors with which terrorists might threaten us are those whose development we funded.

Given that the most frightening of these technologies is nuclear weaponry, and given that the possibility that terrorists might acquire them becomes more real as the list of nuclear powers lengthens, we should be grateful to Tony Blair for encouraging disarmament in Libya. Though Libya's programme was less advanced than we were led to believe (its "4,000 uranium centrifuges" turned out to be merely centrifuge casings), and though Blair's enthusiasm was doubtless sharpened by the opportunities Libya offers to British corporations, we should not permit our reasonable cynicism to obscure the fact that, for just the second time in history, a state has voluntarily renounced its nuclear technologies. Libya, unlike India, Pakistan, Israel, North Korea or Iran, is now abiding by the terms of the nuclear non-proliferation treaty.

But amid all the backslapping last week, something was forgotten. This is that the treaty which Gadaffi has honoured was a two-way deal. Those states which did not

possess nuclear weapons would not seek to acquire them. In return, the states which already possessed them – the US, Russia, China, France and the United Kingdom – would “pursue negotiations in good faith... on general and complete disarmament”. Libya is now in conformity with international law. The United Kingdom is not.

At the end of next month, British officials will be travelling to New York for a meeting about the five-yearly review of the treaty. It is hard to see what their negotiating position will be. For they have precious little evidence of “good faith” to show.

It is true that, since the end of the cold war, the UK’s total nuclear explosive power has been reduced by 70%. But that appears to be as low as the government will ever permit it to go. The defence white paper, published in December, notes: “Decisions on whether to replace Trident are not needed this parliament, but are likely to be required in the next one. We will therefore... ensure that the range of options for maintaining a nuclear deterrent capability is kept open.” Trident stays until it reaches the end of its natural life, whatever the rest of the world may offer. And then? Nothing this government has said or done suggests that it would consider decommissioning those warheads without replacing them.

To this sin of omission we must add three of commission. The first is the UK’s support for the US nuclear missile defence programme, which could scarcely be better calculated to provoke a new arms race. This month the Fylingdales radar station in North Yorkshire is being upgraded to accommodate it.

The second is that the government has laid out £2bn to equip the Atomic Weapons Establishment at Aldermaston with the means to design and build a new generation of tactical nuclear weapons. In this respect, as in all others, we appear to be keeping the US company. Earlier this month, the US National Nuclear Security Administration released its budget documents for research into the “robust nuclear earth penetrator”, a first-strike bunker-busting bomb which, if developed, would blow the non-proliferation treaty to kingdom come. The US government had claimed that all it wanted to do was to conduct a feasibility study. But, the new documents show, it has now budgeted to design, test and start producing it by 2009.

The third is that our policy on the deployment of nuclear weapons has changed. In March 2002, for the first time in British history, the government suggested that we might use them before they are used against us. Since then, Geoff Hoon, the defence secretary, has repeated the threat several times, on each occasion further reducing the threshold. Put items two and three together and the UK begins to look like a pretty dangerous state.

So how does the government reconcile all this with its commitment to the treaty? By reinterpreting it. In October last year, Geoff Hoon told the House of Commons: “Under

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the terms of the nuclear non-proliferation treaty, the United Kingdom, the United States, France, China and Russia are legally entitled to possess nuclear weapons.”

The treaty says nothing of the kind. It’s a short and simple document, which anyone but Geoff Hoon can understand, and it says just two things about the nuclear weapons possessed by the five major powers: they mustn’t be transferred to non-nuclear states, and they must be dismantled.

Fifteen years ago, amid massive controversy, Labour abandoned its commitment to unilateral nuclear disarmament. Now Hoon’s rewriting of the non-proliferation treaty suggests that it is quietly abandoning its commitment to multilateral disarmament.

Or we could put it another way: that the Labour party has rediscovered its enthusiasm for unilateralism, as long as it’s someone else who is doing the disarming. As Jeremy Corbyn pointed out in a Commons debate last week, the government’s “non-proliferation unit” has recently changed its name to the “proliferation prevention unit”, to reflect the new policy of reverse unilateral disarmament.

How all this plays with the new nuclear powers is not hard to imagine. If a nation like Britain – whose prime minister poses as a broker of peace and disarmament – has abandoned the non-proliferation treaty, is installing the capacity to build a new generation of nuclear weapons, has asserted the right to strike pre-emptively and is beginning, in short, to look like a large and well-armed rogue state, then what possible incentive do other nations have to abandon their weapons?

Indeed, the lesson the weaker states will draw from the conduct of the major powers over the past year is that they should acquire as many nuclear weapons as they can. If you don’t possess them, you can expect to be invaded. If you do, you can expect to be left in peace, or (if you have oil) courted and bribed. And if you get rid of them, you would be an idiot to expect the big nuclear states to reciprocate.

Power, the new British doctrine appears to assert, grows out of the payload of a bomb. This may once have been true, when our enemies were states which had everything to lose by starting a nuclear war. But when your enemies are suicide bombers, and when they have no direct connection to a nation state, mutually assured destruction ceases to be a useful threat. Your intransigence merely encourages proliferation elsewhere, and so enhances the possibility that nuclear material will fall into the hands of terrorists. The more we assert our strength, the more vulnerable we become. #

George Monbiot's book The Age of Consent: A Manifesto For a New World Order is now published in paperback.