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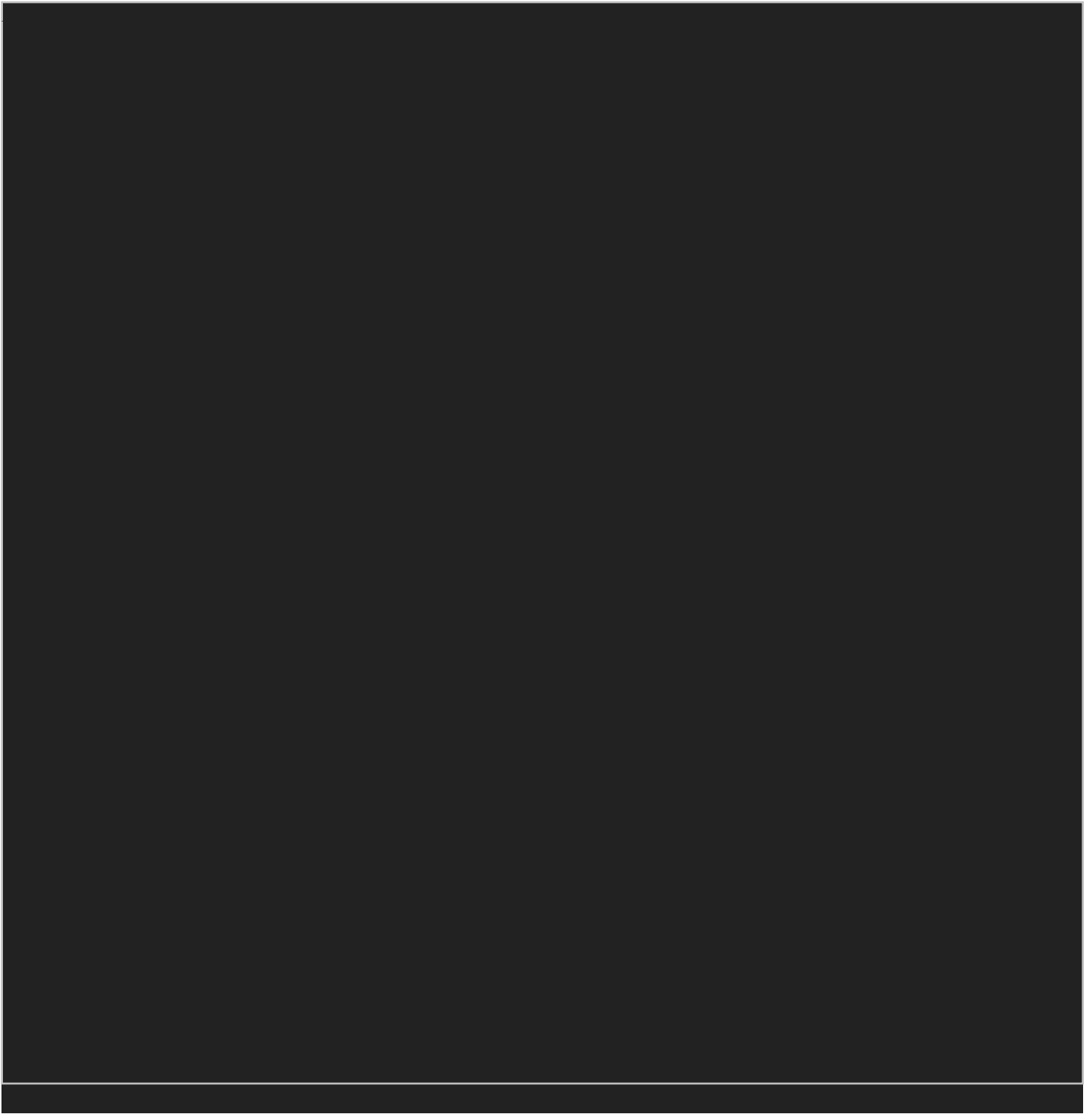
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Nuclear weapons: Big question is whether UK would use them in revenge – Alastair Stewart





HMS Victorious on patrol off the west coast of Scotland (Picture: Andy Buchanan/AFP/Getty Images)

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Published: 17:00

Tuesday 26 November 2019

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Only a handful of people know whether Britain's nuclear submarines would retaliate against a nuclear attack on the UK, writes Alastair Stewart.

Nuclear weapons are amongst some of the most controversial and emotive of issues. The recent news that the United States will no longer rely on floppy disks to operate its nuclear systems is a timely reminder that this is a very old debate indeed. Yet so much of the issue is bogged down in the morality of the technology that we seldom ask if they'd actually work in practice.

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No one beyond military circles ever publicly contemplates what the strategy and tactics of a nuclear war would be. Military affairs are a speciality, but it would be remiss not to speculate on the merits of weaponry that come at such expense to the public purse. In March 2007, Westminster voted to renew the UK's Trident nuclear submarine system with four new Dreadnought-class submarines costing £31bn expected by the 2030s.

The logic of nuclear weapons is Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD). As of 2019, nine countries have nuclear weapons. So, in the application, what would the use of atomic weapons look like from a British perspective?

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The UK is believed to have 215 nuclear warheads, of which 120 are active, but it has refused to confirm the exact size of its arsenal. Since 1998, the Trident programme has been the only operational nuclear weapons system in British service with four nuclear submarines. In April 2017, then Defence Secretary Michael Fallon said that the UK would use nuclear weapons in a "pre-emptive initial strike" in "the most extreme circumstances".

He also refused to confirm in a parliamentary answer if Britain had a 'first use' nuclear weapon policy so that no one could anticipate under what conditions the country would use them.

Four letters to four British submarine commanders

In general, we can assume that a nuclear attack against this country would be designed to either cripple or annihilate our infrastructure and population. On that basis, we can also deduce that if a state or countries were to undertake this attack, it would include taking out the government and the legislatures of this land.

After this, the surviving remnant of the UK government would, presumably, launch a retaliatory strike against the aggressor. The details of how a British Prime Minister would authorise a nuclear attack remains secret.

It's confirmed that at the beginning of their terms they write four identical letters of last resort to the commanding officers of the four British ballistic missile submarines. The messages contain orders on what action to take if an enemy nuclear strike has destroyed the British government and has killed or incapacitated the Prime Minister and an appointed deputy personal (usually a high-ranking member of the Cabinet).

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A 2008 BBC Radio 4 documentary 'The Human Button' described four key known options. The Prime Minister instructs the submarine commander to either: retaliate with nuclear weapons; not to retaliate; use their judgement or place the submarine under an allied country's command, if possible (the programme mentions Australia and the United States).

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The Ministry of Defence states that "the UK will retain...[a] minimum deterrence" and that "our nuclear deterrent is there to deter the most extreme threats to our national security and way of life, which cannot be done by other means".

So if the rump of the surviving UK is crippled and if our population is dying and generations condemned to illness and deformities from radiation sickness, do we strike back when the damage is already so reprehensible and long-lasting and our infrastructure and population obliterated? What, in short, would be the point when there's no public way to stop incoming missiles?

The need for revenge

When making the case to his Cabinet in 1940 against negotiating with Adolf Hitler, Winston Churchill said that: “If this long island story of ours is to end, at last, let it end only when each one of us lies choking in his own blood upon the ground.”

The question then, for those who survive those first mushroom clouds, would be whether to resign yourself to the end of days and defeat at the hands of cowards and thugs or support a retaliation that might take out as much of the enemy’s infrastructure and military capability as possible when you have all but been destroyed?

The standard argument against nuclear weapons is that they would never be used in a conflict situation. Few ask what we would do next if they're used against us – and that is the real moral question because they cannot be uninvented.

Broadly speaking the UK and international society have always frowned on attacks by civilians. If Britain was virtually wiped out, the decision-making would rest entirely with what is left of the UK and the instructions issued to its submarine commanders.

Suppose for a moment – for the sake of their survival – Nato nations did not invoke Article 5 for nuclear war (it has only been invoked once, on September 11).

Surely the rest of international society would condemn the UK for attacking when there was no point; when our country had already been wiped out? Would the world even turn on our submarines as we bombed the French Navy in 1940 to stop it falling into Nazi hands?

Brilliantly and as always forever timeless, 'Yes, Prime Minister' parodied the probability of an enemy ever knowing if a British leader would use nuclear weapons:

Prime Minister: "It's a bluff. I probably wouldn't use it."

Sir Humphrey: "Yes, but even though they probably certainly know that you probably wouldn't, they don't certainly know that although you probably wouldn't, there's no probability that you certainly would!"

In any event, this line of thinking offers a more realistic look at human nature, the need for revenge, rather than cerebral calculation on the purpose, cost and relevance of nuclear weapons and the nuclear deterrent.

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