

## 'NATO and nuclear independence' from The Guardian (6 February 1963)

**Caption:** On 6 February 1963, the British daily newspaper The Guardian analyses the question of the United Kingdom's nuclear deterrence and speculates on both its independence and its future.

**Source:** Beaton, Leonard. "Nato and nuclear independence" from The Guardian. Manchester: The Guardian. 06.02.1963, p.10.

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# NATO and nuclear independence

by Leonard Beaton

*The first of two articles.*

**T**HE view that Britain either cannot or should not remain a nuclear Power is still gaining supporters. At the same time, however, the case for maintaining a serious British nuclear force is being steadily reinforced by the uncertainties about the future of Western Europe, the relations of Americans and Europeans, Chinese expansionism, and disarmament. A new situation has also been created by the decision in Washington that only military targets in Russia should be attacked in a major war unless the Russians themselves have attacked cities. Political benefits in the form of a non-nuclear club or some other concession from others have never seemed particularly likely if Britain abandoned her nuclear force. There has never been less prospect of them than at present.

When people talk about an independent British deterrent they introduce two separate issues: the idea of the deterrent and the idea of independence. Both are misleading. The word deterrent belongs to the period of massive retaliation and has the dangerous simplicity of that strategy built into it. It suggests that the only serious war which is likely to happen is one in which both sides set out to kill as many people as possible. In such a war Britain would probably be more or less obliterated. The Soviet Union would be laid waste by the Americans alone and much of their effort, let alone any other Western effort, would be what is known in the jargon as over-kill.

While this is arguable enough, massive retaliation is no longer the way in which anyone is likely to fight a major war. The capacity to destroy all great centres of population is an ultimate sanction without which no one can seriously challenge a major Power. But it exists to deter and is likely to be used even in major war for that purpose.

The American Government has openly abandoned warfare against populations except in retaliation for a Russian attack on cities. It has in effect accepted the fact that airfields, rocket bases, and radar stations in America and Britain could be attacked by the Russians and the response would remain controlled and deliberate. There would be no massive retaliation. This strategy puts reason into control of the forces of destruction and insists that at no stage should it be accepted that the situation has passed beyond political choice.

While this is undoubtedly one of the most hopeful developments of our time, it makes the choice of targets in a major war a matter of the first importance. A massive attack on purely military targets in Britain, in particular, could wipe

out a high proportion of the population. The ability to deter the choice by the Russians of certain specific targets during a major nuclear conflict could wholly alter the destruction which was done in Britain or other areas for which the British Government felt a special responsibility.

In addition to this, it must be recognised that the future of the alliance is by no means clear-cut. In the last eighteen months the British Government has publicly embraced the doctrine that NATO should be built on two pillars, Europe and America, with its implication that Europe should become a major Power in its own right. It is hard to imagine such a development leading to anything but an American withdrawal from Europe; and Mr Kennedy has gone so far in the last fortnight as to anticipate this possibility with pleasure. "The day may come," he said, "when Europe will not need the United States and its guarantees. I don't think that day has come yet, but it may come and we would welcome that."

Without reading too much into this statement, the fact remains that in the last three weeks the United States has gone from uncritical admiration for the countries of the EEC to something close to hostility. The threat of agonising reappraisals has been regular enough over the years to show that the American commitment to Europe depends on a political choice which is deliberately renewed. As Western Europe's power grows, it is bound to assert itself; and if this does not lead to a steady American disillusionment we may count ourselves fortunate.

It is also interesting to note how readily it is assumed that those who do not build modern weapons cannot build them. By avoiding duplication with the Americans over Skybolt or Polaris, Mr Macmillan has been trying to save money. But in the process he seems to have convinced both British and American opinion that Britain could not provide herself with a reasonably invulnerable nuclear force even if she chose. This is not the case and the belief that it is has done nothing for Anglo-American relations. To go out of the nuclear weapons business altogether would have the same effect over a wider field.

If Britain intends to take a part in the creation of a Western European Great Power, she will obviously remain a nuclear Power and would presumably take the lead in producing a heavy nuclear force. If a Western European union comes into existence without us, we would want to provide for our own security in the new European situation which would arise if the Americans withdrew. If, as now happily seems more

likely, most Europeans work for Atlantic rather than European unity and the Americans remain fully committed, NATO is likely to be the centre of European nuclear power. Britain has a long lead in nuclear technology in Western Europe and could obtain a position of influence in the command and organisation of this force. But to do this, we should have to remain effective as a nuclear Power.

It is generally believed that by taking a part in a NATO force and by committing the V-bombers and the Polaris fleet to NATO Britain is in some way ceasing to be an independent nuclear Power. Since this view is apparently held by so serious a soldier as General de Gaulle (and was implicit in the strict national rôle which has been enforced on almost all of Bomber Command up to the present), it must be taken seriously. But the basis for it is impossible to discover.

Many people seem to imagine that NATO forces are at the free disposal of Supreme Allied Commanders, who are invariably American. The truth is that they are national forces with a clear-cut national chain of command. Control over the multinational ships and submarines which the Americans would like to have NATO create will be difficult to place in any political authority and is likely to end up with the American President. But this will not be true of the British V-bombers or Polaris submarines. Their commander will be subject to the Chiefs of Staff and the Prime Minister in his national rôle. In his NATO rôle he will be subject to an allied supreme commander who will in turn be answerable to the NATO Council, which takes decisions unanimously.

Independence cannot be lost to NATO until the alliance has an authority capable of waging war in its own right. At that time an Atlantic union will exist. Governments will have given up the control of war and peace to the rulers of this union. Britain cannot surrender herself to such an authority because it does not exist. NATO remains an alliance of independent Powers; and where they are nuclear Powers they are independent nuclear Powers.

Options could, of course, be lost by accepting certain NATO targets or by agreeing to have the force used at an early stage in a war. This is the nature of alliances; but an intelligent partner gains in influence over others what he loses over his own forces. Apart from these deliberate choices, there is no evidence at present that the arrangements which the British Government has accepted for the V-bomber or Polaris forces will undermine their independence in any fundamental way.

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