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Performing Nuclear Weapons

How Britain Made Trident
Make Sense

Paul Beaumont

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I dedicate this to book to lax word limits.

FOREWORD

The UK is currently in the process of replacing its Trident nuclear weapon system at very great expense, beginning with the production of a new Dreadnought-class of ballistic missile submarines. At the time of writing, plans have been revealed for a new nuclear warhead based on a US design to replace the current arsenal that equips the UK's Trident submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs). These missiles are leased from a common pool of US Trident II (D5) SLBMs under the 1963 Polaris Sales Agreement amended for Trident in 1982. The UK will also continue to participate in the US Navy's programme to sustain and modernise its Trident stockpile through to the 2080s. All of this is intended to enable the UK to deploy strategic nuclear weapons well into the second half of the century.

The debate on this Trident replacement programme ran for a decade or so from around 2006–2016. It proved deeply controversial for a number of reasons: the cost of the programme and its military and wider social opportunity costs; Scottish independence and the 2014 referendum; the strategic necessity of investing another generation of nuclear weapons given the shift in global security away from direct state-based armed threats to the survival of the state and towards overlapping transnational collective security challenges; and in terms of the resurgence of global pressure for serious progress towards nuclear disarmament and the delegitimisation of nuclear weapons. The opportunity costs of staying in the nuclear weapons business gained more salience in the context of the

austerity programme introduced after the 2008 global financial crisis, the unprecedented effect of the Covid-19 pandemic on the UK economy, and the decision to exit the European Union.

The UK mission to provide “continuous at-sea deterrence” by having at least one of its four nuclear-armed ballistic missile submarines at sea at all times is known as Operation Relentless. The drive to retain nuclear weapons has been correspondingly relentless. But in order to understand the contemporary politics of this debate, we need to know how we got here, and this is the great service Dr. Beaumont has done through his detailed research on the politics of procuring and replacing Trident. He asks the vital “how possible” question about the UK’s retention of nuclear weapons. Why did it make sense for those politicians at that time to procure this “Rolls Royce”¹ system of mass destruction in the 1980s? Why did it make sense to *retain* nuclear weapons then and again in the 2000s? In doing so, he hones in on the vital questions of: what does Trident mean, where do those meanings come from, who gets to say, what political work do they do, and what are the possibilities for changing them?

To that end, this book unpacks the system of meaning through which the continued possession of nuclear weapons made sense for the UK policy elite, first under Thatcher and then later in a transformed geopolitical context under Blair. In the 1980s, the current Trident missile system, Vanguard-class submarines, and Holbrook warhead were all procured to replace the aging Polaris missiles, Resolution-class submarines, and Chevaline warhead. In the mid-late 2000s, the British nuclear roundabout was given another spin. Dr. Beaumont shows us how a British nuclear “regime of truth” enables all of this. It constructs actors, nuclear weapons, and threats in particular ways so as to render the procurement of Trident and its successor as necessary, legitimate and “common sense”. In that way, this book enables us to see discourses of nuclear weapons as fundamentally constitutive of the weapons and the states that deploy them. We can see how social constructions of the weapon and the state inform—or co-constitute—each other: states possess nuclear weapons and in important ways are possessed by them.

¹ Colin McInnes, *Trident: The Only Option?* (London: Brassey’s Defence Publishers, 1986), p. 42.

Moreover, the analysis engages with arguments connecting the continued retention of nuclear weapons to concepts of security, identity, and status. These concepts are not mutually exclusive but knit together into a system of values and positive meanings that can change but that can also become deeply entrenched as “social facts” in a strategic culture. A core assertion routinely presented as a social fact is the nuclear peace hypothesis² that conflates the correlation between the existence of nuclear weapons and the absence of all-out major power war after 1945 with direct causation.

Understanding the social construction of nuclear weapons is essential if we are to ever attain a world without nuclear weapons. Meanings will have to change, sometimes in quite difficult ways. This will need discursive contestation and political mobilisation to challenge the structures of power that reproduce the systems of meaning through which nuclear weapons are made to make sense for the few. The 2017 Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons that entered into force in January 2021 is the next step in this process. The treaty has directly challenged the discourses that frame nuclear weapons as legitimate and necessary, including in the UK. Instead, it has framed them as illegitimate weapons of unacceptable violence.

By explaining and dissecting the social construction of British nuclear weapons in detail, this book helps us to better understand the contingency of the discourses, practices, and power structures involved and the possibilities for change therein.

January 2021

Dr. Nick Ritchie
University of York, York, UK

² Benoit Pelopidas, “A Bet Portrayed as a Certainty”, in G. Shultz and J. Goodby (eds.) *The War That Must Never Be Fought: Dilemmas of Nuclear Deterrence* (Stanford, Hoover Institution Press: 2015), p. 11.

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Everything that follows would have remained a figment of my untapped imagination had Norway followed Britain's higher education policy. Therefore, I would first like to put in writing my eternal thanks to this cold, jagged, and generous country for granting *utlendinger* like me the opportunity to study here without prohibitive fees and then pay me a living-wage to do a Ph.D. A close second to Norway, I must next thank Benjamin de Carvalho for his support in guiding me through this long process, and for consistently offering constructive criticism: encouraging me to think big, and guiding me away from the stupid. Without him, this book would be unrecognisable and immeasurably worse. Beyond Ben, I owe a debt of gratitude to the good people of the International Law and Policy Institute (ILPI) for taking me on as an intern and thus giving me the opportunity to do learn from experts in the field, while also allowing me to spend a sustained period reading, debating, and writing about nuclear weapons. In particular, my mentor at ILPI, Torbjørn Hugo Graff, was instrumental to lighting the intellectual fire that would lead to this book. I would also like to thank Iver Neumann for his feedback upon an earlier version and for giving me the confidence to push on with the book project. I am also grateful to my colleagues at Noragric, and later NUPI, for providing such a hospitable work environment: a special hat-tip here should go to Bill Warner, Halvard Leira, Katharina Glaab, and Kirsti Stuvøy, who in different ways have been formative to my research. Outside of my workplace, I am also privileged to have such smart and generous

friends to bounce ideas off and argue with about nuclear weapons and international relations: Pål Røren, Rolf Hansen, Joakim Brattvoll, and Anders Bjørkheim have helped shape my thinking, and thus sharpen the arguments found here. Back in the UK, decades of discussions with Andy White and David Hughes about British politics have no doubt contributed to this book as well. Meanwhile, I am indebted to John Todd and Anton Lazarus who sadistically agreed to read, proof, and comment on earlier versions, for such a small fee I am certain they later regretted it. I should also thank my online “sit down and write” group—comprised of Felix Anderl and Audrey Alejandro—who helped push me over the line and get the revisions done in a far timelier fashion than would have been the case otherwise. Finally, my partner Kathleen Rani Hagen warrants a special mention for her all-round support, but also her patience for my many annoying work-habits.

CONTENTS

1	Introduction: Problematising the Maintenance of Nuclear Weapons	1
2	Explaining Britain's Bombs	21
3	Nuclear Regimes of Truth	55
4	Constructing the Nuclear Weapon Problem	85
5	Thatcher's Nuclear Regime of Truth	113
6	Blair's Nuclear Regime of Truth	159
7	Conclusion	215
	Appendix: Methodological Reflections	229
	Index	241

ABBREVIATIONS

BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
CASD	Continuous At-Sea Deterrence
CND	Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament
EU	The European Union
IAEA	The International Atomic Energy Agency
ICAN	The International Campaign for Abolishment of Nuclear Weapons
ILPI	The International Law and Policy Institute (Norway)
IR	International Relations (the discipline)
MoD	The Ministry of Defence (UK)
MP	Member of Parliament (UK)
NAM	The Non-Aligned Movement
NATO	North Atlantic Alliance Organisation
NNWS	Non-Nuclear Weapons State
NPT	Non-Proliferation Treaty
NWFW	Nuclear Weapons Free World
NWS	Nuclear Weapons State
RUSI	The Royal United Service Institute
SDP	Social Democratic Party (UK)
SSBN	Ships Submersible Ballistic Nuclear (Ballistic missile equipped submarines)
TASM	Tactical Air-Surface Missiles
TPNW	Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons
UN	United Nations



CHAPTER 1

Introduction: ProblematISING the Maintenance of Nuclear Weapons

“Atomic weapons are useful because of the stories people tell about them, the fears those stories inspire, and the actions by which people respond to those fears”

—John Canaday¹

This book investigates *how* it is possible that a state maintains nuclear weapons.² This is unusual. The conventional nuclear research agenda does not consider the maintenance of nuclear weapons much of a puzzle. In short, nuclear weapons are seen as so obviously useful for a state engaged in “self-help”, that no right-minded government would ever willingly give them up (Chapter 2). Nuclear weapon possession has thus prompted a great deal of investigation into how best to *manage* these weapons, but far less on how states maintain them. Indeed, Security Studies, informed by Realism (e.g. Waltz, 1979), was traditionally concerned with

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² Doty (1993, p. 298) provides in my view the most lucid account of what “how-possible” questions entail: “In posing such a question, I examine how meanings are produced and attached to various social subjects/objects, thus constituting particular interpretive dispositions which create certain possibilities and preclude others. What is explained is not why a particular outcome obtained, but rather how the subjects, objects, and interpretive dispositions were socially constructed such that certain practices were made possible”.

studying nuclear weapons management strategies: deterrence and arms control, and addressing the security challenges that changing nuclear technology posed to the Cold War nuclear balance (Buzan & Hansen, 2009; Freedman, 2004; Williams & Krause, 1996). After the Cold War, Security Studies—efforts at “widening” notwithstanding—switched its nuclear focus from deterrence to anti-proliferation (Krause & Latham, 1998). Meanwhile, maintenance of nuclear weapons by great powers remained largely ignored. Instead, one finds variations of the puzzle: Why do *non*-nuclear weapons states exist? (Hymans, 2006) Those few that did pose the opposite “why” question, tend to debate the factors that cause states to *acquire* the bomb: whether they be security (the dominant answer), prestige, or domestic interests (Sagan, 1996). One might assume disarmament research would be promising; after all, if a state ceases to maintain its nuclear weapons it has *de facto* disarmed. However, as Levite (2009) lamented, disarmament remained much understudied not least because of the absence of data to work with. Moreover, until recently, what disarmament research had been undertaken typically sought to explain the few states that have already given up or reversed their nuclear weapons programmes. Again, this angle precludes puzzling over how countries *maintain* their nuclear weapons.³

However, over the course of the last decade, Security Studies has begun to wake up. A new “wave” of more critical nuclear scholarship has emerged, running parallel and intermingling with the successful transnational movement to establish a treaty banning nuclear weapons (Borrie, 2014; Bolton & Minor, 2016; Fihn, 2017). Diverse in their objects of analyses, and theoretical approach, this “new wave” of nuclear research shares a scepticism to the narrow materialist ontologies that characterise conventional security scholarship (Lupovici, 2010; Rublee & Cohen, 2018). For instance, the interpretivist wing, of what Lupovici (2010) termed the “4th wave” of deterrence scholarship, illuminates how social contexts are crucial to understanding how threats become “threats”, why certain countries consider nuclear weapons to be necessary while others abscond, and what societal functions nuclear deterrence play beyond those written on the tin (e.g. Lupovici, 2016; Ritchie, 2016). Meanwhile, the “nuclear norms” research agenda has provided compelling explanations for the non-use of nuclear weapons (the “nuclear taboo”) and a

³For a review of the conventional nuclear research agenda see Sagan (2011).

sophisticated theoretical lens for making sense of the norm contestation that has animated the Non-Proliferation regime in the last decade (Ruble & Cohen, 2018; e.g. Tannenwald, 2007, 2018). This new wave of critical scholarship has also permeated British nuclear scholarship: William Walker (2010, 2018) and Nick Ritchie (2010, 2016, 2019) in particular, have pioneered an array of interpretivist concepts—e.g. actor network theory, identity, norms, among others—to shed light upon, and sometimes contest British nuclear weapons policy (see Chapter 2). Ultimately, by broadening the horizons of nuclear research, this burgeoning body of interpretative scholarship has made nuclear weapons policies far more amenable to systematic, empirical analysis and enabled security scholars to escape their positivist straightjacket.

Indeed, strip away realist *doxa* regarding the desirability of nuclear weapons and a research agenda-defining international puzzle emerges. Only nine nuclear weapon-armed states exist, while 186⁴ get by without nuclear weapons, and most seem quite content with their non-nuclear status.⁵ Moreover, at least 50 countries have the technical capability to build nuclear weapons yet only nine have chosen to do so (Hymans, 2006, p. 457). Rather than chomping at the bit to join the nuclear club, most non-nuclear weapons states have instead imposed stricter limitations on their ability to develop nuclear weapons. Indeed, going beyond the measures that are required by the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), in July 2017, 122 states voluntarily adopted the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW). Considering that non-nuclear security is the norm, and maintaining nuclear weapons relatively odd, the realist puzzle becomes a function of their theoretical commitments rather than empirics (Hymans, 2006). Thus, instead of asking why non-nuclear weapons states have *not* acquired the bomb, it would make more sense to consider the few states that maintain such unpopular, yet expensive weapons to be the puzzle.

⁴There are 188 signatories to the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), 183 of them have signed as Non-Nuclear Weapons States (NNWS). Currently four countries are not signatories: Pakistan, India, Israel, and North Korea (which withdrew in 2003). India, Pakistan, and North Korea have openly tested nuclear weapons, while Israel's nuclear weapons programme is an open secret.

⁵Most seem content with not having nuclear weapons, but are not necessarily content with the Nuclear weapons states (NWS) continued possession of nuclear weapons.

Indeed, taking this puzzle as its starting point, the following chapters seek to make nuclear weapon states *strange*. Picking up and running with Nick Ritchie's (2013, 2016) notion of "nuclear regimes of truth", this book problematises the *discursive maintenance* of nuclear weapons in the UK. While various answers to *why* states acquire nuclear weapons have been posited, these explanations typically ignore the ongoing processes of legitimisation that keep these weapons in service: how the social and material objects constituting these reasons are constructed, maintained, remodelled, reified and sometimes discarded. This book does not dispute any one of these explanations per se but contends that governments have considerable power in *producing* the security, status, and domestic political meaning that enable the maintenance of their nuclear weapons. Indeed, because nuclear weapons are represented to "work" by not being used, this book contends that their deterrence utility is *transcendental*—what nuclear weapons have (or have not) deterred is impossible to prove (Chapter 4). This transcendental quality of nuclear weapons discourse grants nuclear states a peculiar flexibility in representing the weapons' benefits; however, it also has a flip-side. In the absence of proven "effects", the positive meanings attached to nuclear weapons also require considerable imagination, adaptation, and thus discursive labour to remain salient, avoid decay and thus enable maintenance. To be clear then, by investigating the maintenance of nuclear weapons, I do not mean documenting meticulously the materials required to keep the nuclear weapons system going nor endeavouring to reach inside the minds of policymakers and uncover why they made consecutive decisions to renew British nuclear weapons. Rather, this book investigates the UK governments' role in constructing the social world within which it is embedded: how the consecutive UK governments (re)produced a foreign policy discourse that constituted their nuclear weapons as legitimate and desirable.

To undertake this task, this book conducts a longitudinal discourse analysis of the UK's nuclear policy of two key periods: 1980–1987 and 2005–2009. By historicising and deconstructing several of the UK discourse's nuclear "truths" "from "Thatcher to Blair", the book documents how maintaining the UK's nuclear weapons has often required difficult and not always entirely successful discursive labour. Indeed, look closely, and several of the axioms that underpin Britain's nuclear rationale require considerable imagination and careful narration to become plausible, let alone accepted. For instance, consecutive governments have

relied upon a peculiarly British version of the “nuclear peace” to legitimate maintenance, asserting that its nuclear weapons have “proven” to work in the past and thus can be expected to work in the future (Chapters 5 and 6). As Thatcher (1984) put it the UK’s “nuclear deterrent has not only kept the peace, but it will continue to preserve our independence”. Yet, the only proof provided is absence: what Britain’s nuclear weapons have deterred exists only in the collective imagination. In other words, the attacks to which Thatcher alludes will forever remain transcendental; existing in an alternative reality in which Britain did not maintain nuclear weapons. However, instead of arguing—like so many have before (Chapter 2)—that Britain’s nuclear peace is a myth, this book documents how the nuclear peace is maintained and reproduced: What stories need to be told, evidence presented, and alternatives marginalized, in order to keep Britain’s “nuclear peace” in currency? Exploring this, as well as the other moving parts of Britain’s nuclear regime provides the topic of this book.

THEORISING NUCLEAR REGIMES OF TRUTH

This book’s problematisation of *maintenance* is grounded in (my reading of) Foucault’s notion of *Regimes of Truth*.⁶ Rather than conceiving language as reflective of reality, this book holds that language is a *productive* meaning-producing force in its own right (Chapter 3). In short, this approach assumes that no physical or social object has an *a priori* social meaning that transcends social construction and therefore every “truth” contained in language must be considered political. Here, what depiction of the world dominates over other alternatives is not the result of it being a superior reflection of reality, but a function of *productive* power: the power to produce, circulate, distribute, and regulate statements about the social world that form more or less coherent frameworks—*discourses*—for making the world intelligible. These discourses have political consequences; they constrain what we think of, and therefore what we can

⁶This book builds upon (and complements) Nick Ritchie’s conceptualisation of the UK’s nuclear policy as a regime of truth. However, as Chapter 2 will explain, my discursive approach differs substantially because it conducts a longitudinal analysis that spans two governments’ decision for renewal, problematises the process of meaning production across time, and draws upon a different analytical framework (Hansen, 2006).

do (Neumann, 2008, p. 62). As *regime* suggests, truths require maintenance: discursive labour to keep functioning. Indeed, rather than treating the international as external reality whose truths we can reveal with careful objective study, this book investigates the UK government's complicity in producing, maintaining, and modifying a *regime of truth* about the international and surrounding its nuclear weapons that makes nuclear maintenance possible.

While my reading of Foucault underpins this book's problematique, I also draw upon Lene Hansen's *Foreign Policy/Identity Nexus* framework to structure the analysis (Chapter 3). In brief, Hansen develops a systematic framework for analysing how particular foreign policies are (de)legitimated via reference to states' collective identities. However, this book does not merely use Hansen's framework, but seeks to develop it. Indeed, like a lot of post-positivist work, Hansen's framework privileges identity construction over policy representations. While Hansen's Foreign Policy/Identity nexus can accommodate more emphasis on policy representations, Chapter 3 suggests she under-theorises it at the expense of collective identity construction. Chapter 3 addresses this weakness by incorporating *nukespeak* and theorising the role of metaphors in foreign policy nexi.⁷ Second, I suggest that Hansen's assumption that foreign policymakers seek merely legitimate and enforceable foreign policies occludes how long-term policies may generate explicitly positive and desirable meanings. Indeed, as Foucault (1980, p. 119) noted, productive power—manifested by and through discourse—does not only repress—far from it—but induces pleasure as well as social pressures. Chapter 3 will thus theorise why adding *desirable* to the assumed objectives of foreign policymakers can provide greater analytic depth to Hansen's framework, and allow it to better illuminate non-urgent, long-term foreign policies, such as nuclear weapons maintenance. Finally, building on this incorporation of desirability, Chapter 3 theorises how Hansen's conception of *degrees of Otherness* can be utilised to illuminate instances of *status seeking* in the international and help understand how nuclear weapons enable Britain to perform privileged international status, at least to its domestic audience. Chapter 3 will also elaborate on how treating international status as a discursive phenomenon can contribute to the burgeoning

⁷As my analysis will show, I certainly consider identity constructions to be key to understanding the UK's nuclear policy, just that their interplay with policy representations should be analysed more closely and explicitly.

status literature in IR (e.g. Beaumont, 2017; Ward, 2017; Wohlforth, De Carvalho, Leira, & Neumann, 2018).

THE UK CASE: ACQUIRING, MAINTAINING AND RENEWING TRIDENT

The UK constitutes an intriguing case for problematising the discursive maintenance of nuclear weapons. Since 1952, Britain has spent tens of billions of pounds building, maintaining, upgrading, and modifying its nuclear weapons systems.⁸ Parallel to the material manifestations of the bombs themselves, consecutive UK governments have produced hundreds of thousands of words attaching meanings to the UK's nuclear weapons and their nuclear weapons policy. From the UK's earliest nuclear "gravity bombs", to the UK's current nuclear submarine launched inter-continental ballistic missile system (Trident), consecutive UK governments have necessarily had to present their nuclear weapons to their domestic public as legitimate and desirable, and thus ultimately as a good and right allocation of resources.⁹

However, all this does not happen in a vacuum; the UK government does not have a monopoly on imbuing its nuclear weapons with meaning. Rather, the government is just one socially powerful actor within national politics, and one state among many more in the international. To borrow Derrida's (1984) term, nuclear weapons sustain a "fabulously textual" realm in which governments, institutions, politicians, anti-nuclear activists, academics, security professionals, newspapers, and

⁸For example, the current nuclear weapon system, Trident, cost more than 15 billion to acquire, and around 3–4% of the defence budget to run (Hartley, 2006, pp. 678–679). The total life cycle costs of the current system (Trident) are expected to be 25 billion (at 2005/6 prices). While opponents dispute some of these figures, whether UK nuclear weapons are considered a good use of resources tends to come down to whether one believes in the security benefits accredited to British nuclear weapons: if one believes nuclear weapons keep the UK safe they are cheap, if one believes they are "worse than irrelevant" and dangerous they are a waste of money (see Chapters 4, 5 and 6). Hence, this book focuses much more on the representations that account for Tridents utility and legitimacy rather than the economic representations.

⁹It is important to note the difference between the decision-making and the ultimate presentation of policy. Particularly in the early years, nuclear decision-making was made in secret without parliamentary approval. The decision made was only later announced and presented to the public. Nonetheless, even though the decision was taken beforehand, the future decisions depended on the acceptance of those earlier decisions.

other states provide competing representations of what the UK's nuclear weapons mean, what they do, and what they have done. Indeed, the fact that nuclear weapons—through deterrence—are said to work by not being used, encourages wildly divergent accounts of the UK's nuclear reality. Analysts have little concrete successes or failures to ground their arguments, but must instead make do with a fuzzy peace correlation, continuously patrolling but hidden nuclear submarines, and a great deal of words. For example, David Cameron (2010), the former Prime Minister, was fond of claiming that the UK's nuclear weapons were the UK's “ultimate insurance policy”, which has kept the UK safe for 60 years. At the same time, some defence analysts, such as Michael MccGwire (2006), claim those same weapons are “irrelevant” and offer little more than a “comfort blanket” that merely make the UK *feel* safe. For the UK to maintain its nuclear weapons then, it requires a sufficient number, or at least the necessary people, to share an understanding closer to Cameron's rather than MccGwire's.

Maintaining the acquiescence of sufficient numbers of Britain's citizenry has not always been easy. More than any other nuclear-armed state the UK's nuclear weapons programme has been contested in mainstream politics (Quinlan, 2006). Indeed, the UK government's nuclear regime of truth has undergone several periods of sustained contestation. In the 1950s the UK's nuclear weapons laboratory at Aldermaston was a constant site for mass protests; moreover, in 1964, 1983, and 1987 Labour stood for election on the promise of removing all nuclear weapons from UK territory.¹⁰ While in 2007, the New Labour government managed to set in motion the process of renewing its nuclear weapons until the 2060s, it sparked a considerable fight in parliament. The Labour leadership had to enforce a three line whip on their party to ensure the bill passed¹¹ and even then, they had to rely upon the opposition party to get the bill passed (Ritchie, 2012). Moreover, domestic public opinion—which has generally hovered around 50% approval for

¹⁰ Although Labour won the election, they reneged on their promise to disarm the UK's nuclear weapons. Instead of getting rid of the UK's nuclear weapons, they merely decided to cut the number the UK would purchase from the US from five nuclear Polaris submarines to four (Scott, 2006).

¹¹ Enforcing a three-line whip on a party implies that anyone that votes against the party line will receive severe reprisals, and risk getting thrown out of the party. Indeed, four Labour ministers resigned their posts in the cabinet in order to vote against Trident.

Trident— has long seemed ambivalent to nuclear weapons, even if this has not always been reflected in the policies of the mainstream parties.¹² Thus, the British case illustrates how presenting maintaining nuclear weapons to be a legitimate foreign policy can prove difficult, and thus why investigating their discursive maintenance is a potentially fruitful object of inquiry.

Nonetheless, in conducting a discourse analysis of the UK's maintenance of nuclear weapons I am eschewing the traditional puzzles of most British nuclear weapons research (Chapter 2). Until fairly recently it remained almost untouched by the post-positivist turn in IR. Most analyses of British nuclear weapons policy have focused on the following questions: Why does the UK have nuclear weapons?¹³ Should the UK have nuclear weapons?¹⁴ How have decisions to acquire particular nuclear weapons been made?¹⁵ What are the problems and dilemmas associated with the UK's nuclear policy?¹⁶ Most of this research (implicitly) takes language as reflective of reality and assumes a mind-independent world amenable to objective analysis; certainly, these works do not problematise the discursive maintenance of the UK's nuclear weapons. To be sure, some scholars have begun to mobilise, if not the methodology, at least some of the terminology of this approach (Ritchie 2010, 2012, 2013; 2016; Walker, 2010, 2018). However, as Chapter 2 explains, they serve to open doors to the problematising the *discursive* maintenance of Trident rather than walking all the way through them.

¹² However, it should be noted that this level fluctuates wildly depending on the how the question is phrased. Regardless, this indicates that the approval of nuclear weapons maintenance cannot be taken for granted in the manner realists typically assume. See Byrom (2007) for analysis of British public opinion towards nuclear weapons.

¹³ See, Scott (2006), Ritchie (2010), and Stoddart and Baylis (2012).

¹⁴ See Ritchie (2009), Beach (2009), Beach and Gurr (1999), Lewis (2006), MccGwire (2005, 2006), and Sliwinski (2009).

¹⁵ See Freedman (1980), Ritchie (2009), Ritchie and Ingram (2010), Stoddart (2008), and Willett (2010).

¹⁶ Some notable examples of what is a popular theme: Freedman (1980), Quinlan (2006), Ritchie (2008, 2012), Rogers (2006), Witney (1994), Freedman (1986, 1999), Walker (2010), and Clarke (2004).

BRITISH NUCLEAR PUZZLES

The book's empirical analysis zooms in upon the UK's two most recent big nuclear-acquisition decisions: the purchase and defence of the Trident nuclear weapons system by Margaret Thatcher in 1980, and Tony Blair's decision to begin the process of acquiring a "like for like" replacement of Trident in 2007. Specifically, it will analyse two key nuclear periods of foreign policy discourse: Thatcher government's representation of its nuclear policy from 1979 to 1987, and the Labour government's representation of its nuclear policy between 2005 and 2010.¹⁷ Choosing these two periods has the advantage that it neatly straddles the Cold War and captures how the UK's nuclear discourse adapted to new and very different circumstances. Moreover, it offers the methodological bonus that the main part of the nuclear policy that the UK needed to present as legitimate and desirable—the acquisition and then the renewal of its Trident armed nuclear submarines—was similar for both periods.¹⁸ This combination of theory and empirics leads to the research question that animates this book's analysis:

- How have consecutive UK governments managed to represent their purchase, renewal, and maintenance of nuclear weapons as legitimate, enforceable, and desirable between the decision to purchase the first Trident nuclear weapons system in 1980 and the decision to initiate renewal in 2007?

In answering this question, the book seeks to contribute to the momentum behind the new international disarmament agenda (e.g. Egeland, 2018; Ritchie, 2013, 2019; Sauer & Reveraert, 2018). Put simply, if the anti-nuclear movement can better understand how states maintain support for their nuclear weapons programmes, they can better understand how to undermine them (Ritchie, 2013). Ceasing to maintain

¹⁷I focus on the discourse around these periods because UK's nuclear maintenance to a large extent depends on these cyclical renewal decisions. Except for the continual but usually peripheral whirring of the anti-nuclearist movement, the discursive activity around UK's nuclear weapons lulls in the down-time between major decisions on renewal (see Beaumont, 2013).

¹⁸Comparing the rationale for two very different policy decisions would undermine comparative analysis of how those policies were represented. See Moses and Knutsen (2019) on the pitfalls of comparison in social science.

nuclear weapons, after all, is the same as disarmament. Indeed, security scholars are increasingly recognising the need to take investigation into maintenance seriously, for example, Ritchie (2010) argues: “[T] here are wider obstacles to relinquishing nuclear weapons that must be examined in order to understand why states retain nuclear weapons and will find it difficult to abandon them, even if the strategic security threats that motivated their original acquisition have diminished or faded altogether” (see also Ritchie, 2013, 2016). Meanwhile Walker (2010) sensibly suggests that giving up weapons implies “idiosyncratic implications” for each nuclear-armed state and therefore analysts should focus on understanding each state’s specific relationship to their nuclear weapons in order to better understand how they can be persuaded to give them up. This book follows Walker and Ritchie’s suggested research agenda. Indeed, this question opens up several puzzles related to British nuclear weapons policy.

The conventional way of problematising nuclear possession involves looking for various objective proliferation triggers that can explain why these states acquired nuclear weapons: the dominant answer usually given is “security”. Once nuclear weapons have been acquired though, few scholars have investigated how the security threats (justifying the weapons’ existence) are produced and maintained. While accepting that acquiring working nuclear weapons is generally considered the hard bit of putting together a nuclear weapons programme, states (to varying degrees) still need to justify the continuous costs of their nuclear weapons to their populace.¹⁹ Informed by *Securitisation* theory,²⁰ this book investigates how those threats *become* threats; threats that justify nuclear weapons in the UK, while prompting little more than a shrug among non-nuclear weapons states (NNWS). However, this book also investigates how the UK constitutes other positive meanings for its nuclear weapons, beyond security alone. Indeed, most states certainly do not represent nuclear weapons desirable in the way Britain presents them to be, nor do they seem especially envious of the status and security some assert nuclear weapons afford. Indeed, as Hugh Beech wryly notes, Germany and Japan do not seem “unduly concerned” nuclear blackmail,

¹⁹ Krebs and Jackson (2007) for example suggest that even policies that appear to be supported by consensus require a justifying “frame”.

²⁰ See Buzan, Waever, and De Wilde (1998) for the seminal early text and (2005) Balzacq for a contemporary research agenda.

so why should the UK? (2009, p. 37) Thus, lest Britain turn into Japan and Germany, maintaining the need for the bomb requires (re)producing threats and (thus) functions for its nuclear weapons, functions that must also adapt to fit changing international circumstances. This book analyses how this is achieved: how the UK has maintained a discourse that represents its nuclear weapons as necessary when many other countries apparently do fine without them.

Second, this book speaks to a specific nuclear legitimacy problem prompted by the end of the Cold War. During the Cold War, the UK frequently justified the UK's purchase of nuclear weapons as necessary to defend against the threat from the Soviet Union. When the Soviet Union disintegrated it left the UK's nuclear weapons without its former *raison d'être*. Given UK seemed to want to keep its nuclear weapons, this presented a political problem. Indeed, Nicholas Witney (1994), of the Ministry of Defence, wrote at length about how the UK government needed to "refurbish the rationale" for its nuclear weapons in the post-Cold War era and concluded that none of the options available to the UK appeared unproblematic. Thirteen years later, with a new nuclear-acquisition decision fast approaching, finding a convincing rationale remained elusive. As McGwire (2006, p. 640) put it succinctly in 2006: "Today the Soviet threat is no more and we are at least 750 miles from the nearest areas of political turbulence. Anchored off Western Europe, with allies and friends on all sides, Britain is unusually secure. Do we still need nuclear weapons?" McGwire's answer was a resounding no, but the government's was a resounding yes. This book seeks to understand how the UK found a sufficiently convincing and legitimate nuclear rationale in the post-Cold War era that successfully marginalised alternative oppositional representations, such as McGwire's.²¹

Third, the UK, like many of the nuclear weapons states now vigorously pursues anti-nuclear proliferation policy, while simultaneously maintaining, upgrading, and renewing its own nuclear weapons programme. This policy has led to accusations by Non-nuclear states—particularly those in the Non-Aligned Movement—that nuclear weapons states such as the UK practice a hypocritical system of "nuclear apartheid". While

²¹ It is worth noting that McGwire was certainly not alone, nor his opposition short-lived. A member of the Navy, respected security scholar and Sovietologist he wrote at length throughout the 1980s on what he considered to be the folly of deterrence, see McGwire (1984, 1985, 1986, 1994, 2001, 2005).