

Britain: No central control over nuclear arsenal

Peter Reydt

24 November 2007

In September, the world was stunned by news of what was described as an isolated mistake. A US Air Force B-52 bomber flew over the length of the United States armed with six cruise missiles. Each missile carried nuclear warheads that individually contained a yield of up to 150 kilotons—more than 10 times greater than the US bomb that levelled Hiroshima at the end of the Second World War.

The incident evoked Stanley Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove*—the black comedy starring Peter Sellers about a delusional air force commander giving the unilateral order for an unprovoked nuclear first strike against the Soviet Union.

A recent report by the British Broadcasting Corporation's *Newsnight* programme on the UK's nuclear weapons evoked Kubrick's Cold War satire once again.

In 1998, the last Royal Air Force nuclear bomb was withdrawn. Until then, the programme revealed, the RAF's nuclear bombs were armed simply by turning a bicycle lock key with no other security on the bomb itself.

Furthermore, *Newsnight* explained, up to this day, there is a deliberate policy to allow British submarines the capability to launch nuclear missiles without any central control or oversight by the government.

The US, Russia and France have systems in place to prevent a Dr. Strangelove scenario of a rogue individual launching a nuclear strike. According to the BBC, this makes Britain the only nuclear power without a fail-safe.

In 1960, the American government under President Kennedy introduced a system called Permissive Action Links (PAL), which was fitted to every American nuclear bomb. To detonate a bomb, it was now necessary for the correct code to be transmitted by the

US Chief of Staff and dialed into the nuclear device. Until 1991, the US submarine fleet was exempted from this arrangement. It was then that a fail-safe commission, under President Bush senior, decided to introduce PAL to the Navy as well, and by 1997 this was installed on all nuclear submarine missiles.

When there was an attempt to introduce a similar system in Britain in 1966, it led to ferocious resistance by the Royal Navy, and it was subsequently deemed unnecessary.

Newsnight showed papers from the National Archive, marked top secret and atomic. In these, the Chief Scientific Adviser Solly Zuckerman, who advised the then-Labour government's Defence Secretary, Denis Healey, suggested that Britain needed to install PAL on its nuclear weapons to keep them safe. "The Government will need to be certain that any weapons deployed are under some form of 'ironclad' control," he wrote.

But the Royal Navy was apparently deeply insulted by the implication that its officers were not be trusted absolutely: "It would be invidious to suggest...that Senior Service officers may, in difficult circumstances, act in defiance of their clear orders," it replied.

The plans were duly mothballed and the RAF bombs, as long as they existed, were not fitted with PAL. Even today, the Royal Navy's nuclear devices remain free from such safeguards.

Newsnight reported that there is a deliberate policy to allow submarines the capability to launch nuclear missiles without an order from Whitehall. This is apparently so as to maintain a nuclear deterrent under conditions in which Whitehall is no more.

Britain is confident, it says, that the Dr. Strangelove scenario could never happen because the company of a British trident submarine is trained to spot a "rogue

commander” and deal with him or her.

The Defence Ministry (MOD) responded to the *Newsnight* programme by stating that it was “satisfied that robust arrangements are in place for political control of the use of the UK’s strategic deterrent and these controls are tested and audited.”

The MOD stated that “A rigorous system of processes ensures the safety and thoroughness of the operating system for the UK nuclear deterrent.”

“Launching a Trident missile from a submarine is a complex activity,” it continued. “Prior to launch, the command and control structure on board the submarine would *need to be satisfied that the Prime Minister has issued instructions* to launch nuclear weapons. A coordinated effort involving key individuals from the boat’s company of 150 is required to launch the missile. The *number of participants* required to act in concert means that the ‘Permissive Action Link’ type safeguards found in other systems are not relevant in the SSBN domain” [emphasis added].

“We don’t discuss the detailed arrangements,” an MOD spokesman added, declining to respond to questions about the BBC report.

In short, the prime minister alone needs to be seen as having given the go-ahead for a nuclear strike. And launching a missile is apparently more complicated in Britain than it is in the US, France or elsewhere. So the wise-heads of the crew’s members will make sure no one gets the wrong idea. Even the talents of Kubrick and Sellers would find it difficult to ridicule further something that already reads like a satire.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact