INTERVIEWS

As part of its continuing effort to provide readers with unique perspectives on critical national security issues, National Institute has conducted a series of interviews with key subject matter experts on a variety of contemporary defense and national security topics. In this issue of National Institute's *Journal of Policy & Strategy*, we present two interviews: one with David Lonsdale, Senior Lecturer, University of Hull, United Kingdom; and one with Bruno Tertrais, Deputy Director, Foundation for Strategic Research, France. The authors offer their perspectives on the importance of the alliance with the United States for their respective governments, discuss implications of the deteriorating national security environment, and share their views on the importance of nuclear weapons in the light of these developments. The interviews were conducted by Michaela Dodge, Research Scholar, National Institute for Public Policy.

An Interview with
David Lonsdale, Senior Lecturer
University of Hull, United Kingdom

Q. What are the British government's views regarding the value of the U.S. alliance? How important is it for the government?

A. It is pretty clear that the British government regards the alliance with the United States very highly. We still insist on using the special relationship title. In fact, the United States is our most important ally. We value the alliance for benefits to international security; we share and exchange military technologies, which is particularly important in the nuclear realm. We collaborate on military training, weapon systems' interoperability, and intelligence sharing.

Q. What is the value of extended nuclear deterrence?

A. Certainly, the British government generally recognizes that U.S. extended deterrence and forces, including nuclear, are essential to North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO's) security. The United Kingdom (UK) values the extended deterrence aspect of the U.S. nuclear posture, whilst also recognizing the significance of a European contribution to deterrence (complicating decision-making, etc.). The government recently increased the UK's warhead cap. It is not entirely clear as to what the rationale for the increase is. Some academics speculate whether there is a concern that U.S. extended deterrence is being stretched too thin, and perhaps the UK feels it may have to do more and make a bigger contribution to western deterrence.

The nuclear debate does not seem to engender large passions in the UK. The British public is, on balance, in favor of retaining the nuclear capability (particularly after Russia's invasion of Ukraine). Perhaps that is tied to perceptions of the UK as a medium power.

These interviews are adapted from, Michaela Dodge, *Trends in Allied Assurance: Challenges and Questions*, *Occasional Paper*, Vol. 4, No. 8 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, August 2024), pp. 41-46 and 55-61.

Nuclear weapons allow the UK to punch above its weight (e.g., as a Permanent Member of the Security Council of the United Nations and such). There was some debate about Trident replacement but, unsurprisingly, the replacement is moving forward. There is also some limited debate about the possible re-deployment of U.S. nuclear weapons to the UK.

Q. What is the British government's view of the credibility of the U.S. nuclear umbrella?

A. It would be surprising if the government openly expressed concerns. Nonetheless, the UK was unhappy about the U.S. handling of the Afghan withdrawal. Seemingly, UK advice was ignored; we were not really involved at all. Ultimately, the withdrawal seemed to be largely about U.S. domestic politics. The matter is not tied to assurance directly, but it raises concerns about how reliable the United States is as an ally. That being said, there have been moments in history when the alliance has not seemed as strong (e.g., Suez, Vietnam, etc.), but we have generally remained firm allies.

Q. What are the British government's views of the force posture requirements for extended deterrence?

A. Not surprisingly, the British government does not articulate specifically what the Western alliance needs.

From my perspective, it is important that we take steps to enable U.S. nuclear weapons on British soil if required, and that the British government speaks to the need to forward deploy U.S. forces to Europe. There should be greater U.S. presence in Europe's security environment, and we ought to consider expanding NATO's tactical nuclear options.

There is a vague sense that we need some increased flexibility and need to be able to match the Russians a bit more in terms of low-level capabilities. There is a strong sense that Russia's actions in February 2022 have changed the game. In the past, we feared escalation and antagonizing the Russians; now, their actions have opened the door to further debate on Western nuclear posture. At the same time, the British government is not discussing getting a new delivery capability in addition to Trident replacement. We will probably stick with the Trident replacement and create some flexibility with lower yield warheads.

Q. If the United Kingdom has concerns regarding the credibility of the U.S. extended nuclear deterrent, what are the root causes of these concerns with regard to the government's views and their priority?

A. We do not know for sure that there is a credibility issue with U.S. extended deterrence. U.S. force modernization programs are reasonably encouraging and desperately needed. Self-evidently, the requirement for U.S. force modernization stems from the Chinese and the Russian nuclear modernization programs.

From a UK perspective, Trident and warhead replacement are essential for the UK to credibly stay in the deterrence game. We also see discussions about the need for more

Western joint planning and more communication. Of course, the West needs enhanced capabilities, but also the West must be more coordinated.

There is also the matter of burden-sharing and how much we are spending on defense. Europe needs to do more. The UK public generally supports increased defense spending, which is driven by Russia's aggression and a little bit by China's military buildup and revisionist policies. On the other hand, there has been a long-standing debate in the UK about how much British forces were left to deteriorate over the past generation. That is changing, and hopefully the UK can lead the way and set an example for other NATO allies in Europe to follow. The UK sees NATO as the centerpiece of its security. In a British Foreign Policy Group poll from 2023, 75 percent of respondents think the UK is safer with NATO.[1] That is why the UK is eager to see more effective use of NATO.

Q. How does the U.S. extended deterrence need to change given the negative security developments, particularly China's rise and Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine?

A. Russia's aggression is regarded as the biggest threat in British public opinion polls, with China also identified as a security concern. In this sense, Russian actions seem to have driven a lot of changes in government policy, certainly in terms of emphasis.

Moreover, our government now shares an understanding that nuclear weapons are back in business. The UK never seriously discussed abolition, although successive governments aspired to some degree to arms control and disarmament. Officially, that stays the same, but it is a much more pragmatic approach and a realistic appraisal of the position. There is a recognition that we have to take nuclear strategy much more seriously, and we are a bit more conscious of tailored deterrence.

While substantial details are unavailable, there is some notion of flexibility in the UK's nuclear strategy, and some thinking is being done on enhancing NATO cooperation. The dual-capable aircraft (DCA) mission is seemingly a big factor for NATO, and the Alliance is discussing more broadly cross-domain deterrence.

My opinion is that to prevent a breakdown of deterrence in a regional context, we need a modern flexible response, even if U.S. strategic nuclear forces will always be the ultimate guarantor.

Q. One of the problems for extended deterrence is that some allies spend too little on their conventional defense. How does the United Kingdom perceive this unequal burden sharing on the part of some of the other well-off NATO members?

A. In some respects, the asymmetry does not seem to be a big debate, not in the way it is in the United States. The UK does not seem to feel that it is being short-changed by other European allies, perhaps because the UK is still trying to establish its relations with them

[1] Evie Aspinall, "Britons' Enduring Support for NATO," *British Foreign Policy Group*, July 11, 2023, available at https://bfpg.co.uk/2023/07/britons-enduring-support-for-nato/.

post-Brexit. Additionally, there is a broader recognition that we have allowed our defense sector to atrophy too much, and so we feel that we have to make these investments for our own security.

We still realize how valuable our Europeans relations are, but we are also trying to establish an independent position free from the European Union. We are also trying to build closer relations with the United States. In some respects, the UK seeks to continue to act as the link between the United States and continental Europe. Moreover, there is a general sense that NATO remains essential as the security environment continues to change.

Q. What steps could allied countries practically take to improve bilateral communication related to communicating their assurance requirements to the United States?

A. One of the problems for Western security is what is going on in U.S. domestic politics and the resultant instability in the U.S. decision-making process. While one always gets changes in presidential transitions, it seems like there used to be more consistency. For example, there was a consensus on the need to defeat the Soviet Union, but now there is some lack of consistency in U.S. positions and what the United States stands for. That is a problem, because we look to the United States for Western leadership. The call of the Western alliance during World War II was a call to defend our way of life and our shared common principles and notions.

Q. In your opinion, what would be the best way to promote an informed debate on U.S. nuclear weapons policy in the United Kingdom?

A. The general level of debate about nuclear strategy and policy is extremely poor. A part of it is naivete, because instinctively people want to take the minimum deterrence mindset and do not want to think about the unthinkable. That is a problem when it comes to a policy debate, because the policymakers can take the path of least resistance (for example, being in favor of a like-for-like replacement without considering warfighting or new capabilities).

More broadly, the West has lacked political leadership. We have not had good leaders since Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher. They had principles and clear positions, and they were excellent communicators. We need leaders like that again.

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An Interview with
Bruno Tertrais, Deputy Director
Foundation for Strategic Research, France

Q. What are the French government's views regarding the value of the U.S. alliance? How important is it for the government?

A. For all the talk about the French being independent-minded and sometime tricky allies, I think it is fair to say that the U.S. alliance is very important to them. The United States-France alliance is one of the oldest ones in the world, if not the oldest. The French have always been staunch defenders of Article V, believing that collective defense is NATO's core business.

Q. What is the most likely option to address the problem of the credibility of U.S. assurances in the French government's view? What is the government's primary driver behind this position?

A. Starting in the late 2000s, the French wanted to emphasize NATO as a nuclear alliance and the French were worried about some allies wanting to rely on missile defense more than nuclear deterrence (Germany in particular). The French wanted to emphasize that nuclear deterrence is the heart of the transatlantic alliance.

France is not a part of NATO's nuclear sharing, but nuclear sharing is important to the French. We welcome that as many European allies as possible are immersed in and participate in NATO's nuclear mission, because it gives these allies an idea of what the nuclear responsibilities are and allows them to share at least a modicum of strategic culture with France and the United Kingdom, the other two nuclear-armed states in Europe. The only reservation the French have is that the nuclear mission leads some of the NATO non-nuclear allies to buy F-35s at a cost that the French tend to think is an excessive drag on the defense budget.

A key question today is whether the dual-capable aircraft (DCA) mission should have a military credibility. Up until the mid-2010s, one could hear quite often in the transatlantic circles that the DCA mission was more political than military and that the military credibility of DCA was less important. Now, with the revanchist Russia and the next generation of aircraft becoming operational, the question is whether the military credibility of the DCA should become once again important. That is something that the United States and its allies should clarify.

Q. If France has concerns regarding the credibility of the U.S. extended nuclear deterrent, what measures could the United States take to help address these concerns?

A. There doesn't seem to be a consensus that Russia is a threat in the United States, not just in Europe. One can argue it is a case of a half-full, half-empty cup. The related question is

whether Russia is perceived as a threat and whether it will be perceived as such in the future. That Russia is weaker than it was thought is widely recognized. The Europeans see the reality that the United States is more present today than it was in the early 2010s. The United States is saying to the Europeans that they should increase their share of the defense burden, but why would they do that when they see that the Americans are more present than ever?

The United States being a geographically distant ally, the French have never believed in the very nature of U.S. extended deterrence. They do not believe that a distant country would risk its cities and populations for an ally (whether the belief is mistaken is a different problem). So the French have always considered the very notion of extended deterrence in Europe problematic. When the United States extends deterrence to Canada, it is more credible than the United States providing extended deterrence to Germany because Canada is much closer. Furthermore, anytime the United States refrains from supporting an ally, it is seen in Paris as a dent in the credibility of extended deterrence. In particular, President Obama's abstention in Syria was seen as undermining U.S. credibility and was a shock to the French. It underlined their concerns regarding U.S. credibility.

But the French believe that the mere existence of their own nuclear force provides a modicum of protection to their neighbors.

Q. One of the problems for extended deterrence is that allies spend little on their conventional defense. Why does France spend just below the NATO agreed threshold of two percent?

A. I am not sure that is the problem in itself. Why should it? Defense spending remains a sovereign decision. The two percent is a very poor metric to measure the actual contribution by allies to burden sharing. One has to look at the trajectory of defense spending over the past six years or so. The French perceive they are carrying their fair share.

From Europe's standpoint, the United States is there and picking up the slack. It would take a shock of a second Trump election to do that. Why should the Europeans do more just because the United States is asking them? It takes a lot of time for a country like Germany to change the political course. Now, a political course has been set but it will take time.

Q. How does the U.S. extended deterrence need to change given the negative security developments, particularly China's rise and Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine?

A. There are two opposite narratives. One, that what we do in Ukraine does not matter for China. The other, that what we do in Ukraine matters for China. But it is impossible to gauge whether Xi Jinping saw our collective attitude as glass half-full or empty. Our actions probably have bearing, but not to the point that they are the only critical factor.

Q. The United States continues to promote arms control policies and to expect that arms control policies can solve security problems. Some of these U.S. arms control endeavors appear to have damaged U.S. capabilities for extended deterrence and assurance (e.g.,

No First Use or NFU, Tomahawk Land Attack Missile/Nuclear retirement, or Presidential Nuclear Initiatives). What does the French government think about the tensions between pursuing arms control goals and the damage these goals cause to extended deterrence and assurance in the long term?

A. This is an issue where the French see the "software" more important than the "hardware." We tend to believe that U.S. statements, declaratory policy, and actions ultimately matter for extended deterrence more than how many warheads on which delivery systems the United States has. The French do not care that much about what the United States used to call the "second to none" policy. All things being equal, the perception of credibility of U.S. extended deterrence is more dependent on statements and declaratory policy than the offense-defense calculus.

Arms control is probably reconcilable with credible deterrence as long as one does not hamper extended deterrence. The French were and remain opposed not only to NFU but also to a "sole purpose" policy – they believe it would affect the very credibility of nuclear deterrence.

So the idea is that the attitude to nuclear deterrence matters more than the exact makeup of nuclear forces. That said, if a strongly stated commitment to nuclear deterrence and extended deterrence was accompanied by a complete divestment from U.S. nuclear modernization and infrastructure, then we would see incongruence and be nervous.

With regard to nuclear infrastructure, we do not doubt intentions of U.S. administrations to modernize and sustain the nuclear complex, but we look at results and think they are not there yet. On the other hand, we do not see it as absolutely critical for what we do see as the most important aspect of nuclear deterrence, which is whether Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping would believe that a U.S. president would be willing to use nuclear weapons on behalf of allies. We were concerned during the Trump Administration because the president's statements were erratic. Perhaps there was some benefit of being a bit unpredictable. The North Koreans were completely perplexed about President Trump, and maybe that was good for deterring them. But that very unpredictability may also be an obstacle to the credibility of extended deterrence in the long run.

Q. How does the French government communicate its policy preferences to the United States?

A. Washington and Paris maintain a strong bilateral dialogue on nuclear deterrence initiated in the 1990s. These are in-depth and very frank discussions that cover all topics of nuclear deterrence. And both countries – though I would say especially the United States – have been very transparent to one another. The dialogue is very important to the French who have always used it to speak their mind to the United States, perhaps more than in the public. Also, the French were consulted during the past two iterations of the Nuclear Posture Review process.

Q. What steps could the United States take to improve bilateral communication related to U.S. nuclear weapons and extended deterrence?

A. The United States at NATO should discuss how much NATO's DCA mission should be political rather than practical. One cannot invest as much as we do in the DCA mission if military credibility does not matter and that is something that is not very clear in the public debates. We want Russia to consider that mission militarily credible because the Alliance could be implicated rather early in a nuclear crisis (and this message should be made clear by the U.S. administration).

Q. How do we ensure that the military credibility is restored in the eyes of Moscow?

A. We should not foreclose the option of putting theater nuclear weapons in Poland, if only as a political signal to Moscow, and even though I don't think there would be a consensus in NATO for that. But we need to make clear to Russia that there are consequences for putting nuclear weapons in Belarus. Also, we have not yet discussed whether events in Ukraine should change missile defense policy in Europe and how that would change the nuclear posture in Europe.

Q. What steps could allied countries practically take to improve bilateral communication related to communicating their assurance requirements to the United States?

A. France does not have a large strategic community. The issue is fairly consensual within the government. Our strategic community takes a pretty realistic, hard-nosed view of the world (which differentiates us, for example, from the Germans, although they have made some headway).

Q. In your opinion, what would be the best way to promote an informed debate on U.S. nuclear weapons policy in France?

A. We are not going to have a public debate on U.S. nuclear policy in France, and we do not need to. It is not really a relevant question for France.

The problem we have is that some allies are very uncomfortable discussing nuclear weapons policy in Europe without the Americans being in the room. For example, it is difficult to foster a real debate between France and Germany, because some Germans would not discuss it without the United States being present. Perhaps it would be good for the United States to say that it is okay for allies to discuss these matters without the United States in the room.