

FROM MILITARY COMMANDERS TO DISARMAMENT CAMPAIGNERS

AN EMAIL INTERVIEW BY SEAN HOWARD, *CAPE BRETON SPECTATOR*,
WITH RETIRED ROYAL NAVY COMMANDERS ROBERT FORSYTH
AND ROBERT GREEN

Note

Prior to his retirement from the Royal Navy in 1981, **Commander Robert Forsyth** served as Executive Officer (2nd in command; and, on two occasions, temporarily in command), of *HMS Repulse*, a nuclear-powered submarine armed with *Polaris* nuclear missiles ready to be fired at 15 minutes notice. He is the author of the 2020 book *Why Trident?* ([Why Trident - Home](#)).

During Commander Robert Green's 20-year career from 1962-82, he served as navigator in aircraft-carrier-based *Buccaneer* nuclear-armed fighter bombers with a designated target of a Soviet military airbase outside Leningrad (St. Petersburg), and anti-submarine helicopters armed with nuclear depth charges. From 1978-82 he served in key Staff appointments, closely involved in day-to-day nuclear operations and policy. During the 1982 Falklands War, he ran the Joint Maritime Intelligence Centre in Northwood, London, advising the Commander-of-the-Fleet. He is the author of *Security Without Nuclear Deterrence* (2nd Edition, 2018 [Security without Nuclear Deterrence - Spokesman books](#)).

The interview was conducted by email in late November and early December 2002. An abridged version was published in the January 4, 2023 edition of the *Cape Breton Spectator*.

1. Happy Banniversary? Gauging the Health of the Ban Treaty

Sean Howard: We are approaching (January 22) the second 'banniversary' of the entry-into-force of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW), the 'Ban Treaty' you both support ([The Treaty - ICAN \(icanw.org\)](#)). How do you assess the success of the treaty in not only growing its membership – now up to 68, with 91 signatories – but changing the global debate over nuclear abolition? And does the recent heavy-handed response of the US to Australia's decision to abstain on a pro-TPNW resolution at the UN ([US warns Australia against joining treaty banning nuclear weapons | Nuclear weapons | The Guardian](#)) suggest that Washington, and perhaps the other nuclear-armed nations, are far from dismissive about the treaty's ability to 'change the game'?

Robert Forsyth: The strong opposition by the P5 – the five nuclear-armed permanent members of the UN Security Council – to the TPNW is proof that they feel threatened by it. The addition of more states' signatures can only strengthen its political weight.

Robert Green: The TPNW represents a new, determined diplomacy of resistance, fuelled by frustration over the nuclear cartel modernising their arsenals. The TPNW's primary success has been to provide a more dynamic, humanitarian nuclear disarmament alternative to the sclerotic Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), which has been abused by the nuclear-weapon States (NWS) to create and sustain a strategy of nuclear apartheid. The TPNW's successful negotiation in July

2017 by 122 non-nuclear States, which I attended in the UN in New York, also: strengthened the stigmatization of nuclear weapons and thus nuclear deterrence, bringing them closer to being seen as unacceptably inhumane and destructive weapons of mass destruction (WMD), far worse than already-banned chemical or biological weapons; provided anti-nuclear campaigners with a new tool to raise public awareness and mobilize opposition to the NWS' modernization of their arsenals; and allowed the Red Cross/Red Crescent movement to intensify its focus on the humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapon use.

However, the TPNW has the following weaknesses: it is not universal, or comprehensive; it allows the NWS to join without first getting rid of their nuclear arsenals; Article 17 allows withdrawal if national security is threatened, thereby overriding the law; it excludes prohibiting transit and financing of nuclear weapons; there is no UN body to monitor compliance, unlike with the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC); and it includes an inalienable right to develop nuclear electricity generation, which provides NWS with waste byproducts to make nuclear weapons, and propulsion for submarines.

The treaty will probably slowly increase its signatories and ratifications, but its weaknesses preclude it from having any serious impact on persuading the NWS to change their reliance on nuclear deterrence. So the struggle to achieve a universal, comprehensive and enforceable nuclear weapons treaty, like the CWC, must continue.

And yes, the recent heavy-handed response of the US to Australia's recent shift of vote from 'No' to 'Abstain' on the TPNW resolution exposed how nervous the US-led NATO nuclear-armed trio are about the TPNW's threat to undermine the mafia-like imposition on their allies of obeisance to nuclear deterrence.

2. "If Deterrence Fails": Reviewing the Nuclear Posture Review

Howard: The declassified version of the Biden Administration's Nuclear Posture Review (NPR), belatedly released in late October ([2022 National Defense Strategy, Nuclear Posture Review, and Missile Defense Review](#)), has been castigated by many nuclear policy analysts, principally for failing to deliver on the President's own campaign promise to declare that the 'sole purpose' of US nuclear weapons is to deter, prevent, or respond to a nuclear attack. (See, for example, Lisbeth Gronland's scathing thumbs-down, 'The New US Nuclear Posture Review is a Major Step Backward,' in the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, [The new US nuclear posture review is a major step backward - Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists \(thebulletin.org\)](#).) Not as far-reaching as a No-First-Use posture (as it does not preclude a pre-emptive strike to *prevent* a first strike), a sole purpose declaration would nonetheless significantly limit the role of nuclear weapons in US policy, and logically open the door to a sharp reduction in the number and types of weapons in the arsenal. Instead, Biden's NPR bears a striking resemblance to Trump's 2018 NPR, rightly savaged by Biden and other Democrats for lowering the threshold for nuclear use, increasing the number of scenarios in which the US might 'go nuclear,' multiplying the 'purposes' a nuclear attack might serve, and dallying with the fantasy of a 'limited' nuclear war.

For despite the formulaic insistence of the P5 that "a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought" ([Joint Statement of the Leaders of the Five Nuclear-Weapons States on Preventing](#)

[Nuclear War and Avoiding Arms Races • President of Russia \(kremlin.ru\)](#)), both Russia and the US – and, thus, NATO – do in fact plan and prepare to ‘prevail ’ in what the Pentagon sometimes blandly terms a “post-detonation environment.” The Biden NPR, for example, cites as the third of three ‘roles’ for nuclear weapons (after deterring attacks and assuring allies) that their *use* would secure “US objectives if deterrence fails.” To be specific:

We will maintain...flexible nuclear capabilities to achieve our objectives should the President conclude that the employment of nuclear weapons is necessary. In such a circumstance, the United States would seek to end any conflict at the lowest level of damage possible on the best achievable terms...

And not only that, but the US will somehow magically manage to win such a war while still complying with the Law of Armed Conflict, protecting civilians from deliberate attack or indiscriminate harm! So my question to you both, as former senior officers in charge of nuclear weapons, is simple: what on Earth – what *Earth* – are they talking about?

Forsyth: The change in Biden’s posture on deterrence is a sad reflection on pork barrel politics. He almost certainly was considering the fact that the Democrats rely heavily on funding and votes from the defence industrial sector and, with the upcoming midterm elections he could not afford to lose these votes. He will also need to rally some Republican Congressmen – even more wedded to the defence sector – if he is to get any bills passed. The answer to your question is therefore ‘politics’. The question about what to do if (nuclear) deterrence fails is a major subject in its own right. Here are just a few observations:

- To start with, one could argue that it has already failed in Ukraine. In the face of nuclear threats from Putin, NATO has been deterred from getting directly involved militarily for fear of instigating the use of tactical nuclear weapons (TNW); indeed, it has clearly signalled that the response to TNW would be the massive use of conventional force. This sits entirely at odds with the NPR’s suggestion that the US could conduct and win a tactical nuclear war, implying the unlikely circumstance that Russia (or another adversary) would back down after the exchange of a few low yield strikes. Far more likely is that it would continue to escalate to a level at which there are no winners – just a long nuclear winter for all.
- I am also constantly appalled by how the US, UK & France feel able to justify the concept of first use in circumstances where they believe that there is an existential threat to their nation(s). Such a decision would have to be based on intelligence, a notoriously unreliable commodity – think Iraq or Ukraine. In doing this they lean, of course, on the ICJ’s failure to reach a majority opinion on whether or not use of nuclear weapons for self defence is justifiable. A further specious argument deployed is to suggest they would not deliberately target civilians; a highly academic distinction.
- Of course, back in my sea-going *Polaris* days, I had personally to consider what to do if deterrence failed. Was there any point in carrying out a second retaliatory strike if the Soviets launched one on NATO? We now know that they never had such an intention but were quite prepared to react if NATO fired first. The biggest danger, therefore, was an accidental misread and consequent launch, and 13 such near misses were well documented by Chatham House in its 2014 report ‘Too close for comfort’ ([20140428TooCloseforComfortNuclearUseLewisWilliamsPelopidasAghlani.pdf \(chathamhouse.org\)](#)). Interestingly, a number of *Polaris* Commanding Officers (COs)

made a very private personal decision that if deterrence failed then it was pointless to conduct a 2nd strike. Some decided to declare they could not fire at all and their careers suffered accordingly.

- The current practice of the UK Prime Minister writing a 'Letter of Last Resort' ([Letters of last resort: PM's early task to write to UK's nuclear sub commanders | Trident | The Guardian](#)) to a *Trident* submarine CO, instructing him what to do if he believed the UK Government had been totally destroyed, postdated my time. Leading International Humanitarian Law (IHL) opinions say that such a letter, relating orders from beyond the grave by a presumed dead leader, is totally illegal.

Green: This absurd state of military affairs – preparing to prevail in a nuclear war the P5 acknowledge can never be won – demonstrates the futility of US attempts to square the circle of sustaining nuclear deterrence (primarily to achieve its quixotic pursuit of hegemonic security and control over its nuclear vassal allies) while simultaneously claiming compliance with IHL. Any attempts to formulate a sole purpose declaration, or even a No First Use agreement, amount to tinkering around the edges of this fundamental contradiction. In *Security without Nuclear Deterrence* I concluded that nuclear deterrence should simply be called out as State-sponsored nuclear terrorism.

Putin's nuclear threat in relation to the Ukraine crisis has exposed the reality that nuclear deterrence is an irresponsible confidence trick which actually exacerbates insecurity, and is militarily incoherent because nuclear weapons are useless in seeking to gain any military advantage. In 1979, Admiral of the Fleet Earl Mountbatten of Burma concluded in his last speech, which he emphasised was also his most important one: "I have never been able to accept the reasons for the belief that any class of nuclear weapons can be categorised in terms of their tactical or strategic purposes." Putin's threat to use nuclear weapons to stop NATO interfering in his Ukraine operation is empty. This is because it would be a grotesque own goal for Putin to use even one so-called 'tactical' nuclear weapon there, inevitably prompting escalation by the US in reprisal, leaving a radioactive wasteland in one of the world's key agricultural areas, a medical and refugee catastrophe, and denying Russian access to its vital warm water outlets along the Black Sea coast.

The key to progressing serious nuclear disarmament is to puncture the delusion of nuclear deterrence. As I wrote in *Security without Nuclear Deterrence*: "Uncritical repetition by political leaders, careerist 'experts' and mainstream media of simplistic soundbites gave it the intellectual and moral aura of a state religion, to the point where it echoes the fable of the emperor with no clothes." I have resolved this by making the case for rejecting nuclear deterrence as impractical, politically unsound and counterproductive to our real security needs, as well as immoral and illegal. Moreover, there are alternative, non-nuclear strategies to deter war and secure just and lasting peace.

3. **Britannia's Scottish *Trident*: Challenging Britain's Nuclear Status Quo**

Howard: In a recent interview with Professor Paul Rogers ([Remembering the 'Brief But Brutal' Falklands War - The Cape Breton Spectator](#)), to mark the 40th anniversary of the Falklands War, I asked whether the triumphalist jingoism of that conflict helped end serious political debate in

the UK over Britain's nuclear weapons. Paul replied that, even without that glut of nationalism (that perhaps helped sow the seeds of Brexit) "nuclear possession was and is seen as a necessary part of big-power status. Apparently being able to kill 20 million people in a couple of hours is a sign of great power status and not the posture of a rogue state. It is a strange world, all part of the delusion of greatness." That spell seems so deep it may not even be broken by the immense and mounting costs ([£205 billion: the cost of Trident - \(cnduk.org\)](#)) of replacing the current *Trident* fleet with four *Dreadnought* submarines, equipped to fire a new, American-designed warhead. But it may well be broken if 'Global Britain' found itself without Scotland, and if the Scottish National Party (SNP) then honoured its long-standing vow to stand proudly for peace as a non-nuclear-weapon state, closing the *Trident* bases at Faslane and Coulport.

The British nuclear establishment is indeed a 'strange world'. Currently, policy is increasingly hawkish, with the 2021 Integrated Review raising the *Trident* warhead ceiling by 40% and abandoning transparency over stocks and deployed weapons ([Integrated Review 2021: Increasing the cap on the nuclear stockpile \(parliament.uk\)](#)). But with a post-Brexit Scottish breakaway quite possible in coming years, could this be the darkest hour before a non-nuclear dawn?

Forsyth: The Scottish breakaway regrettably is far from a given: (a) there are serious questions to be addressed on how to run an independent Scotland, not least the matter of currency, to convince even many SNP sympathizers; (b) unless Scots living in England are allowed to vote, the preponderance of English living in Scotland may well tip the vote against; (c) Westminster will have some punitive measures with which to threaten/influence swing voters. Nonetheless it serves the major purpose of keeping disarmament a live issue in the media.

The increase in warheads from 180 to 260 does not necessarily mean they will be deployed at sea. Each *Dreadnought* class submarine can only carry a maximum of 12 missiles with 8 warheads each, i.e. 96 warheads. Even if 2 submarines are deployed (by no means always achievable) the total number of warheads deployed would only (!) be 192.

The reasons behind the Government's announcement are the subject of some debate. Robert Peston (BBC) even speculated that there may in fact be no physical increase in the number of nuclear warheads at all and that the announcement was merely smoke and mirrors. Due to Ministry of Defence secrecy we will never know accurate numbers, but UK Nukewatch, which tracks warhead convoys to/from Scotland, will gain a good idea. Others have argued that the increase in stockpile numbers could be intended to accommodate the transition from the current Mk4/A warhead to the new replacement Mk7 warhead. However, that replacement programme is only in its design phase and will not enter service until the late 2030s. Any overlap between the decommissioning of the Mk4 and the entry into service of the replacement warhead is probably more than a decade away. Others have suggested that the intention was to persuade the US to move forward faster with its W93 warhead programme, which is inextricably linked to the UK's own programme.

Perhaps more worrying is whether the increase allows for a more 'limited' use of *Trident*, following the recent US deployment ([A Low-Yield, Submarine-Launched Nuclear Warhead: Overview of the Expert Debate \(fas.org\)](#)) of a 'low-yield' variant (W76-2) of its standard

warhead (W76). An increased cap could arguably provide some additional 'low yield' options for tactical use.

Green: Putin has done us all a huge favour by invoking nuclear rhetoric, and we need to exploit it. This is particularly important in the UK, where the public have recently woken up to other examples of political incompetence on finance and the economy. In the run-up to the 18 July 2016 'main gate' UK Parliamentary debate and consequent Government decision to proceed with *Trident* replacement, an opinion poll on the British public's attitude to nuclear weapons revealed that just 44% supported this (22% wanted *Trident* scrapped, 21% did not know, 10% wanted to replace the submarines but not arm them, and 4% chose none of these options). A further survey in March 2017 showed 75% support for the UK to join the UN negotiations for a TPNW; and in Scotland support rose to 82%.

A regular feature of every General Election is to challenge each potential Prime Minister whether they would "press the nuclear button". This misleading taunt is deeply offensive to submarine COs, who since 1968 have been delegated this dreadful political responsibility by successive posturing political leaders. The brutal reality is that this amounts to shameful abuse and mis-deployment of the Submarine Service, compounded by misdirection of dwindling defence budget money away from retaining sufficient usable attack submarines and other warships to fulfil the Royal Navy's historical core role. This has reached the point where conventional maritime deterrence capability has been eroded to the extent that any major aggression against UK vital interests could quickly require threatening a nuclear response.

The UK has struggled to find a role since losing its empire. The UK could be pivotal by exploiting its special relationship with the US, initiating a virtuous spiral. It is best-placed to be the first P5 member to break out from dependence on nuclear deterrence. As the first medium-sized power to decide that it had to have nuclear weapons, the UK was the role model for France, Israel, India and Pakistan. The UK nuclear arsenal is the smallest of the P5, and is deployed in only one system, *Trident*, on relaxed alert of several days' notice for use. If the UK were to announce that it had decided to reject nuclear deterrence, the US and UK anti-nuclear movements and an overwhelming majority of world opinion would erupt in support. One immediate domestic advantage, in light of the need for deep defence budget cuts, would be the opportunity cost of not replacing the four UK *Vanguard* class submarines. As initiator, organiser and energiser of a process that would start to shift Western attitudes from the current adversarial security paradigm to one embracing co-operative security, the UK would gain a global role it has not enjoyed since the British Empire was at its zenith. This time, however, its influence would be welcomed overwhelmingly as truly a 'force for good'.

The first anti-nuclear breakout by one of the P5 would be sensational, and would transform the currently sterile nuclear disarmament debate overnight. In NATO, the UK would wield unprecedented influence in leading the drive for a non-nuclear strategy. It would create new openings for shifting the mindset particularly in the US and France, and heavily influence India, Pakistan and Israel, as well as others wanting to join the 'nuclear club'. Moreover, it would open the way for a major reassessment by Russia and China of their nuclear strategies, for all nuclear forces to be de-alerted, and for multilateral negotiations to start on a comprehensive, universal and enforceable Nuclear Weapons Convention.

Some political and military diehards argue that it is critical for the UK to retain its nuclear arsenal because 'France must never be allowed to be the sole European nuclear power'. However, notwithstanding Brexit, for all the reasons laid out above the security needs of the British and all fellow Europeans demand that the UK and France move on at last from the Napoleonic Wars and loss of Empires and address the real security threats confronting them. The UK has the opportunity to set France a wiser and more responsible example. Finally, the ridiculous notion that France's greatness depends on possession of nuclear weapons should be exposed as demeaning to French citizens and culture. The reality is that threatening nuclear weapon use risks the annihilation of French culture within a devastated and poisoned land.

4. What Can Canada Do?

Howard: How significant a role can Canada, a non-nuclear-weapon state, potentially play in advancing nuclear disarmament? At the moment, neither dominant party, the Liberals and Conservatives, seem remotely interested in reviving the debate over NATO's nuclear policy – a debate which raged intensely through much of the Cold War, and also shaped Ottawa's serious bid in the 1990s to reform NATO policy (arguing for No First Use and against 'nuclear sharing,' the basing of US 'tactical' weapons in Europe). Canada was then NATO's 'nuclear nag'; now it is a lockstep lackey of Washington. Yet three parties – the New Democrats, the Greens, and the Bloc Quebecois – support Canada signing the Ban Treaty, as do 74% of Canadians, according to a 2021 national opinion survey. But even if a public and political debate could be revived – as you know, I have suggested a Canadian Citizens' Assembly on Nuclear Disarmament ([Some Assembly Required? - The Cape Breton Spectator](#)) – what difference might it realistically make, particularly to policy, strategy, and attitudes in the UK and US?

Forsyth: It would not be a game changer in the way the UK's unilateral disarmament would be, but it would add considerable weight to the constantly growing pressure on the P5 to do something more than talk. Canada is a leading member of NATO and the Commonwealth and could exert considerable internal pressure on its peers. It is something well worth fighting for. In particular, if Canada could achieve a Citizen's Assembly it would be an exemplar to encourage others to follow.

Green: During a 1993 speaking tour of Canada to promote the World Court Project, I was given a copy of a remarkable report ([Transformation Moment: A Canadian Vision of Common Security - The Report of the Citizens' Inquiry into peace](#); by Konrad Douglas ; Sioui - Paperback - 1992 - from Turtle Creek Books (SKU: A4566) (biblio.com)). Titled *Transformation Moment: A Canadian Vision of Common Security*, for me it was the security equivalent of discovering *The Ecologist* journal's *A Blueprint for Survival* ([The Ecologist January 1972: a blueprint for survival](#)). How about using it as the opening agenda for your Citizens' Assembly with a view to updating it, before mobilizing political and media support for a major new public debate on reviving Canada's leadership for true security? One aspect worth exploring would be to blend the two visions, exploiting the growing impact of Extinction Rebellion among young people.

5. Post-Nuclear Security: Global Zero and a New World Order

Howard: We are all agreed that the only dependable means of preventing nuclear war is nuclear abolition. What I want to explore further is how best to build a non-nuclear peace, a key question that will help determine how quickly we can escape the trap of ‘deterrence.’ I believe that the end of the Cold War could and should have ushered in an era of sustained demilitarization, nuclear and conventional, of world affairs, starting with the construction of a post-Bloc ‘Common European Home.’ Not least because of NATO expansion, that did not happen; but does that mean the chance has gone forever? More fundamentally, what do we really mean when we talk about ‘common’ or ‘indivisible’ security? Do we mean a reduction of armed forces and weapons to a point where territorial defence is still possible, but the invasion and occupation of other states is not – a world of ‘general and complete disarmament’ where war is no longer an instrument of foreign policy? Or do we mean a world where the nuclear threat is gone but conventional threats, while hopefully lessened, remain; a world where many nations still produce, export and import arms, where large numbers of people are (voluntarily or under compulsion) trained fighters, and where war is still a ‘trump’ card to hold or play?

Forsyth: The dangers of nuclear war have been only too apparent in this Ukraine war. When the war ends, as end it must, then that is the time seriously to address the issue of nuclear disarmament. Unless the rest of the world is prepared to sacrifice Ukraine for a false sense of peace with Russia, then Russia will be under new management and looking to regain its place in the world. Instead of imposing severe reparations, we should encourage and support the emergence of a new Russia which is welcomed and respected for all the good things it can offer. In return Russia should be required to match nuclear weapon reductions in concert with NATO and, in turn, jointly ‘encourage’, by all peaceful means, other nuclear states to follow suit. The end of the Ukraine war can emulate the opportunities the end of the Cold War briefly offered but was lost through an attitude of triumphalism by the west. Realism, however, says that to continue the path through to conventional disarmament is sadly not achievable within the foreseeable future.

Green: In 2013, following the first conference in Oslo promoting a humanitarian approach to nuclear disarmament which led to the TPNW in 2017, I was invited as the UK delegate to join a remarkable seminar hosted by the Geneva Centre for Security Policy (GCSP [Welcome | Geneva Centre for Security Policy \(gcsp.ch\)](https://www.gcsp.ch)) with representatives from all the other NWS. In my presentation on ‘Requirements and paths for building the new security architecture for a world without nuclear weapons,’ I argued that to escape the ‘security dilemma’ created by military alliances, a new security architecture could be built around a reformed UN Security Council (with its link between permanent membership and nuclear weapons broken), and existing non-provocative, more inclusive regional institutions. For example, NATO could be merged into an enlarged and strengthened Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). I also envisaged that if regional bodies could not resolve a local dispute, it should be required to be referred to the ICJ, citing as dangerous examples (all of which remain unresolved) conflicting claims to islands in the South China Sea, Kashmir, and the Falkland Islands/Los Malvinas.

Howard: Just to add: then and now, a major obstacle to building such an architecture is the toweringly disproportionate influence – rising to dizzying new heights since the Russian invasion of Ukraine – of the US military-industrial complex (and of course others). President Biden will

shortly sign a \$817 billion Pentagon budget, an increase of nearly half a trillion dollars from the turn of the century; and that figure excludes the \$30+ billion for the nuclear weapons complex run by the Department of Energy. Not only do the grotesque profits of US and allied arms corporations act to dramatically reduce national and international security and human well-being; they are an increasingly insidious factor driving the technological race to sustain the fantasy of military superiority.