

Robert Forsyth – Nuclear Risk Reduction webinar – 20 September 2022

As you are aware I am a former submarine commanding officer who served for 2 years on a Polaris missile equipped nuclear submarine in the 1970s.

Much like US Defence Secretary William Perry, I have totally changed my mind and now oppose the use of nuclear weapons. I too have concluded that nuclear deterrence is a flawed concept. That States should even be contemplating First Use and not Sole Use [against nuclear weapons] is abhorrent. The prospect of a first nuclear strike based solely on intelligence – for that is what it would be - is, in all senses of the word, M.A.D.

Furthermore, the Ukraine war has demonstrated that, in Russian hands, nuclear weapons are deterring NATO from more direct action and so may well encourage other states to acquire them similarly to deter conventional threats.

I have argued long and hard that sustaining the enormous cost of UK Trident has eroded our military forces to a level such that we cannot seriously contemplate a conventional war and are even hard pushed just to support Ukraine's war by proxy.

All of this has clearly demonstrated the urgent need to recognise that the only way to avoid nuclear war is an outright ban on nuclear weapons as required under international law including the UN Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT).

Once it is clear, as surely it must be, that Russia's invasion of Ukraine has failed, Russia will need to integrate back into the rest of the world. This will be the time for the west to take a bold and imaginative step forward on disarmament in a way that encourages Russia – probably and hopefully under new leadership – to engage in disarmament negotiations.

Firstly - recognising that the presence of nuclear weapons based in Europe exacerbates rather than resolves conflict, the US should withdraw all of theirs retaining only its US based strategic strike missiles for the period of negotiations.

Secondly, NATO should declare a policy of No First Use and Sole Use as proposed by states and organisations at the recent UN NPT review. If nuclear weapons are a 'last resort' then give meaning to the phrase.

Thirdly, the UK and France should cancel their respective nuclear forces and notionally rely for 2nd strike protection on their US NATO partner during negotiations. With the resultant cost saving, UK can then rebuild its conventional forces.

Lastly, negotiations should be conducted with respect towards Russian dignity and not as winner's reparations. One of the main political drivers towards the war in Ukraine has been a failure by the west to support post-Soviet Russia integrating back into the world from which it had become totally isolated. We should not risk giving an extreme right wing leader the opportunity to replace Putin.