

**Michael Middeke, “Anglo-American Nuclear Weapons Cooperation after the Nassau Conference: The British Policy of Interdependence,” *Journal of Cold War Studies*, Vol. 2, No. 2, Spring 2000: 69-96.**

Commentary by **Juhana Aunesluoma**, University of Helsinki  
*Published by H-Diplo on 15 January 2001*

Who was fooling whom?

As is well known, the possession of an independent nuclear deterrent was considered in Britain to be a crucial part of its great power status. When that status became increasingly questionable in the course of the Cold War, the political and psychological weight of its nuclear arsenal increased. But whether it simply possessed these weapons or not, or where they were produced, was not in the end what mattered the most. At the turn of the 1960s questions of technological dependence and the possible integration of Nato’s nuclear forces highlighted uncertainty about how independent Britain’s nuclear deterrence could in the end be.

The technological issues alone were sufficient to make the future of Britain’s independent deterrence questionable. Leaving that dimension aside, Michael Middeke’s article concentrates on the problem how the status of Britain’s nuclear arsenal became entangled with the politics of the Western alliance in the early 1960s. The Multilateral Force scheme in particular was seen in London to undermine the credibility of Britain’s already weakened case for independence. Also the concept of interdependence that had at first been used by the British to highlight their view that the nuclear relationship with the US was not just a one-way street, seemed an inadequate guarantee that even an appearance of independence might be preserved after the ambiguous compromise at Nassau in 1962.

Middeke describes how the British policy of interdependence turned out to be a double-edged sword after Nassau. What interdependence meant in practice was understood differently in London and in Washington. Instead of securing a degree of independence Macmillan hoped the rhetoric of interdependence would establish, the Americans saw in it a justification to coax the British into further concessions in the Polaris deal, and possibly even opening the way into multilateralism.

By taking a close look at the conceptual mess the Western allies made out of such terms as nuclear independence, interdependence and dependence, Michael Middeke offers a valuable viewpoint to the complex problems surrounding the politics of nuclear weapons within the Western alliance in the early 1960s. It is furthermore quite interesting to see how policy-makers on both sides of the Atlantic could, in a situation of uncertain policy goals and conflicting views within administrations, take refuge in the conceptual confusion they themselves had created.

“When nuclear independence was lost”, Middeke concludes, “the appearance of independence became more important” (p. 96). “The whole thrust of Britain’s nuclear diplomacy ... was intended either to maximize British independence or maintain the appearance of independence” (p. 73). As “[T]he main British objective was to ensure that Britain’s degree of political independence over nuclear forces would not be further diluted” (p. 95), the policy of interdependence was perhaps no more than a means

to an end, as Middeke concludes that Macmillan's real aim had been to maximize independence all the time.

The conclusion is that it was not what the exact operational or technological relationship between the different national nuclear forces were, but what it all looked like, that was significant, for the British at least. A multilateral force would make the British deterrence look less British, even if the bomb would have the Union Jack on it. None the less, when one thinks about the distance from the first policy goal of independence to the fall back position of appearing to be independent, it seems that the Macmillan government's worst deficiencies were in the credibility of their policy. What kind of a nuclear deterrence were they in the end trying to sell to their own people and to the world at large?

In the last analysis it may be true that in the Cold War as a whole it was not so important what the nuclear weaponry's actual technical qualities, operation procedures and command structures were. Most people in the world were terrified enough of what little they knew about these weapons to be impressed by the mere existence of them. Especially from the point of view of domestic politics in the early 1960s in Britain, and not just foreign and defense policy, the level of perceptions was very important. But even so, that an appearance of independence should have been such a central concern for the Conservative governments in 1960-64 does arise the question of who was fooling whom.

What if the whole episode can simply be explained by what it looks like in the first place: a policy of confusion; a policy with a clearly defined goal to maintain the independence, or the appearance of independence of Britain's nuclear deterrent, but lacking a positive program of how to achieve it. Just stalling multilateral plans that would have reduced the appearance of independence would not seem to qualify as a feasible long term policy. Besides command structures and decision-making processes, technology played a significant role too, as nuclear weapons never were "ready" in the Cold War but subject to continuous development the British could not keep up with alone.

After the cancellation of Blue Streak in 1960 and the subsequent twists and turns with the Americans culminating but not ending in Nassau in 1962, it is probably a relevant question to discuss how credible Britain's independent stance was in the first place at that point. Middeke points out that a policy of interdependence might have been used by British policy-makers to conceal the reality of dependence of the United States (p. 72). To conceal it from whom? And whatever the eventual target of their policy and rhetoric might have been, how well Britain's subservient position could have been concealed even in the best of circumstances remains somewhat unclear.

The problem all Western policy-makers faced was whether nuclear diplomacy would end up by increasing or decreasing the internal cohesion of the Western alliance. The British were clearly torn between two goals: the interests of the Western alliance in the Cold War as whole, and their own great power status. These were of course not fundamentally contradictory goals, but with nuclear weapons the British governments definitely put their own interest first. How successful their policy of interdependence aspiring to independence in the end was, remains problematic.

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