

NO TRIDENT REPLACEMENT

No new nuclear weapons

No new nuclear arms race

A CND BRIEFING

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NO TRIDENT
REPLACEMENT

INTRODUCTION

In March 2007 the House of Commons passed a government resolution supporting ‘the steps necessary to maintain the UK minimum strategic nuclear deterrent beyond the life of the existing system’. Despite concerted pressure on both Labour and Conservative MPs to support the resolution, 161 MPs voted against it, including Liberal Democrats, Scottish Nationalists, Plaid Cymru and 89 Labour MPs. It was the largest backbench Labour rebellion on a domestic policy issue since 1997 and reflects widespread public opposition (see Box 2). Paradoxically, the resolution also supports taking ‘further steps towards meeting the UK’s disarmament responsibilities under Article VI of the Non Proliferation Treaty.’ The Foreign Secretary was conciliatory on the day, stating ‘Today’s decision does not mean that we are committing ourselves irreversibly to maintaining a nuclear deterrent for the next 50 years’¹.

The Defence Select Committee report, published just a week before the vote, raised a host of questions left unanswered by the government. A number of the concerns raised by that Committee, in the three Inquiries it conducted, are addressed in this briefing, and are central to the debate: that nuclear weapons are absolutely no use against the main security threat that we currently face — terrorism; that it is widely acknowledged that we currently face no nuclear superpower threat; that serious questions exist about the ‘independence’ of Britain’s nuclear weapons. In considering these and other issues not covered by the Committee, we argue that a decision to replace Trident would actively promote nuclear weapons proliferation and would trigger a new nuclear arms race.

We conclude that now is the moment to take an initiative that can help shape a safer world, to move away from nuclear weapons and choose security systems more appropriate to the present day. We detail how such a step would bring us into line with our obligations, under the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty — unfulfilled for over 30 years — to disarm our nuclear weapons.

BOX 1

WEAPONS OF MASS DESTRUCTION — COST-EFFECTIVE SECURITY?

Trident

- £12.52 billion to procure in 1998 figures²
- Over £1.5 billion every year just to run³
- Almost £1 billion to date on facilities to refit the submarines⁴
- Additional costs for decommissioning the system when it becomes obsolete around 2025

Aldermaston Weapons Establishment

- (produces and maintains our nuclear warheads)
- Huge investments are presently being made in infrastructure, workforce and equipment — capital costs have increased by £278 million in the last five years⁵
 - £1 billion additional funding allocated from 2005 to 2008⁶

Preparatory work on possible options for any ‘future deterrent’

- £10 million to be spent 2006-2008⁷

New nuclear weapons system

Replacing Trident with a similar system could cost at least £25 billion. Add running costs, over a 30 year lifespan at over £1.5 billion every year⁸, and the total cost is over £76 billion. This is £76,000,000,000

‘...unacceptably expensive, economically wasteful and militarily unsound.’

Gordon Brown

on Trident, Official Report, 19 June 1984; Vol.62, c.188.

THE SECURITY CHALLENGE

It is widely agreed that one of the main security threats facing Britain today is terrorism carried out by non-state actors. The first DSC Inquiry concluded that: 'The most pressing threat currently facing the UK is that of international terrorism. Witnesses to our inquiry overwhelmingly argued that the strategic nuclear deterrent could serve no useful or practical purpose in countering this kind of threat.'⁹ In October 2005, Prime Minister Tony Blair also came to this conclusion, 'I do not think that anyone pretends that the independent nuclear deterrent is a defence against terrorism.'¹⁰

Nuclear weapons cannot have a role to play in responding to such a threat for several reasons. Principally, we already know from the terrible attacks in New York and London that possession of nuclear weapons by a nuclear weapon state does not dissuade terrorists. Secondly, terrorists could never present any accurately located target for such a weapon of indiscriminate devastation. The Weapons of Mass Destruction Commission suggests that what are needed instead are 'foreign policies that do not lead groups of people to turn to terrorism out of a sense of despair or humiliation.'¹¹

NO IMMINENT NUCLEAR THREAT

The Trident system was developed by the US specifically for the context of the Cold War scenario to be able to win an actual nuclear war against a hostile, massively armed state. Despite the Cold War coming to an end, with the Soviet Union dissolving in 1991, the UK went ahead with acquiring Trident which was launched in the mid 1990s with the last submarine entering service in 2001.

According to the government's Strategic Defence Review 1998, 'there is today no military threat to the United Kingdom or Western Europe. Nor do we foresee the re-emergence of such a threat'¹². This is reiterated by the DSC Inquiry, 'Witnesses to our inquiry did not believe that the UK currently faces a direct or impending military threat from any of the established nuclear weapon states'¹³.

PROTECTION FROM FUTURE THREATS

Tony Blair states in the Defence White Paper 2006, 'We believe that an independent British nuclear deterrent is an essential part of our insurance against the uncertainties and risks of the future.'¹⁴

However, rather than providing insurance against an unspecified future threat, replacing Trident will increase the danger of nuclear proliferation and will contribute to a new nuclear arms race. The DSC Inquiry report observed that, in the event of a state needing to be discouraged from aggression, nuclear weapons are not the only means of doing so, and that deterrence 'can be exercised by a spectrum of options' including 'economic sanctions', 'robust diplomatic pressure' and 'conventional military options'.¹⁵

If the UK envisages at least another 50 years of British security being based on threatening other populations with mass destruction then we encourage other states to do the same and thus paradoxically we increase our security risk rather than decrease it. This was succinctly explained by Nobel Laureate Professor Sir Joseph Rotblat, 'If some nations — including the most powerful militarily — say that they need nuclear weapons for their security, then such security cannot be denied to other countries which really feel insecure. Proliferation of nuclear weapons is the logical conclusion of this nuclear policy'.¹⁶

In effect, by choosing nuclear weapons ourselves we are practically increasing the likelihood that they will be used as more states will follow our example and the destructive capability and numbers of nuclear weapons will increase thus leading to a nuclear arms race. Whether by accident or intention as long as there are nuclear weapons there is always the danger they will be used.

‘Can there be any threat more alarming, in today’s world, than that of a nuclear or biological weapon falling into the hands of terrorists, or being used by a State, as a result of some terrible misunderstanding or miscalculation? The more States have such weapons, the greater the risk. And, the more those States that already have them increase their arsenals, or insist that such weapons are essential to their national security, the more other States feel that they too must have them, for their security.’¹⁷

Kofi Annan,
Former Secretary
General of the United
Nations

USABLE NUCLEAR WEAPONS

In its response to the Defence Select Committee Inquiry the government maintains that: ‘We do not see Trident as a weapon system for fighting wars, but as having a fundamentally political role in deterring aggression. We would only ever contemplate its use in extreme circumstances of self-defence.’¹⁸

The implication of the ‘deterrent’ notion, as suggested above, is that the weapons would never be used, and certainly only if the existence of the country was at stake. Contrary to this however, the 1998 Strategic Defence Review assumes that Trident also has a sub-strategic role and, ‘The credibility of deterrence relies upon retaining an option for a limited strike that would not automatically lead to a full scale nuclear exchange.’¹⁹ The first DSC Inquiry defines this kind of attack as a ‘sub-strategic strike’, which ‘would involve the launch of one or a limited number of missiles against an adversary as a means of conveying a political message, warning or demonstration of resolve.’²⁰

In 2002, prior to the war on Iraq, the then British Defence Secretary Geoff Hoon indicated on more than one occasion that Trident might also actually be used in a first strike capacity as a pre-emptive attack against a proportionate threat (including chemical or biological weapons threats) and that this could be against a non-nuclear weapon state.²¹ More recently the Defence White Paper states that ambiguity will deliberately be maintained and therefore, ‘we will not rule in or out the first use of nuclear weapons.’²²

Also contrary to the assertion above, the UK is enhancing the Trident system and making it more flexible and therefore more usable. For example, in 2003 new computers were installed on Trident submarines which mean the missiles can now be rapidly retargeted²³ and £28.4 million has been spent on acquiring a new fire-control system (to be deployed in 2010) which will improve their targeting.²⁴ An upgrade to the nuclear warheads has also been scheduled. The government describe this as a ‘relatively minor upgrading and refurbishment during the first half of the next decade.’²⁵ This will enable Trident warheads to remain in service until at least the 2020s.

THE MYTH OF INDEPENDENCE

We are currently bound into a nuclear framework with the US by a unique bilateral agreement, the 1958 Mutual Defence Agreement (MDA)*. Under this agreement collaboration covers all aspects of nuclear weapons design, development and maintenance. All features of the UK system — the platform, delivery system and warheads of Trident depend on US support. The Trident II D5 missiles are leased from a US missile pool and are manufactured, tested and serviced in the US; Trident warheads are based on a US design and several of their crucial components — without which they would not work — are manufactured in the US and purchased off-the-shelf by the UK. Our system is also reliant on US software for all aspects of targeting.²⁶

Considering how the UK’s foreign policies have so mirrored those of the US and how closely our government seems to join in with US military initiatives including the Iraq war, one would also question how politically dependent our nuclear weapons system is on the US’s approval of its use.

It is unlikely that we would use it without US agreement. Trident submarines are assigned to NATO and this relationship would probably continue in the event of a future system being commissioned. Both NATO and the US have a first strike policy.

* The renewal of the MDA in 2004 was believed to be breach of the NPT in a legal opinion from Rabinder Singh QC and Professor Christine Chinkin, Matrix Chambers — see <http://www.peacerrights.org/projects/nuclear/articles/150>

BOX 2

THE MAJORITY OF BRITISH PEOPLE OPPOSE TRIDENT REPLACEMENT

72% of the British public do not want Trident to be replaced now

36% of the British public believe climate change is the greatest threat to the security of the UK now, second only to terrorism (51%)

58% believe climate change will be the greatest threat to our security in 20 years time

Populus/More 4 Survey, February 2007

59% of the British public oppose replacing Trident when presented with the cost (the equivalent of building around 1,000 new schools at current prices)

ICM poll, July 2006

54% opposed when an identical question was asked in a *Greenpeace/MORI poll, September 2005*

**THE ‘MINIMUM’
SYSTEM OF
WEAPONS
OF MASS
DESTRUCTION**

Our nuclear weapons system Trident consists of almost 200 nuclear warheads launched from US Trident missiles, carried on four submarines; each warhead has about eight times the explosive power of the Hiroshima bomb. Replacing Trident can only be described as re-armament. Yet, a decision to replace it with a system that has fewer warheads or submarines, means that the government tries to claim that moves to disarm have been made. It is repeatedly asserted that replacing the previous nuclear weapons system Polaris/Chevaline with Trident was a substantial reduction in the UK’s nuclear armaments, that Trident is a ‘minimum deterrent’ and under the NPT the UK ‘has an extremely good record of meeting our obligations’.²⁷

Apart from the terrible potential for destruction that even one nuclear weapon has (see Box 3), these claims are completely misleading as, to date, Trident is the most capable and advanced nuclear weapons system ever to be deployed by the UK.²⁸ Its missiles are faster, have almost double the range, are more accurate and can hit more targets than the previous system. According to Dr Rebecca Johnson from think-tank Acronym, claims that the system has been detargeted and is on several days notice to fire are empty when this procedure can be very quickly reversed.²⁹

In 1994 the Defence Select Committee noted, ‘Trident’s accuracy and sophistication in other respects does — and was always intended to — represent a significant enhancement of the UK’s nuclear capability. We have invested a great deal of money to make it possible to attack more targets with greater effectiveness using nominally equivalent explosive power’.³⁰

The government is not choosing a new nuclear weapons system that is any less capable or usable than the current system. The plan is to upgrade Trident missiles and order a new fleet of purpose built submarines, most likely to be developed by BAE Systems. The UK missiles come from a US pool and the UK government is to take part in a planned programme by the US Navy to upgrade the missiles with a life extension plan. Hans Kristensen, Director of the Nuclear Information Project, believes this programme will ‘increase mission flexibility’.

OUR INTERNATIONAL LEGAL OBLIGATIONS

THE NUCLEAR NON-PROLIFERATION TREATY (NPT)

Widespread international concerns about the dangers of proliferation and the spiraling nuclear weapons stocks of the nuclear weapon states resulted in the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty coming into force in 1970. The UK was one of the five states that had already acquired nuclear weapons by that stage and those states without nuclear weapons agreed not to acquire them in exchange for those with nuclear weapons agreeing to disarm. The UK does not have the right to possess nuclear weapons under the treaty; instead it is legally bound to disarm:

ARTICLE VI OF THE NPT

‘Each of the Parties to the Treaty undertakes to pursue negotiations in good faith on effective measures relating to cessation of the nuclear arms race at an early date and to nuclear disarmament, and on a Treaty on general and complete disarmament under strict and effective international control.’

NPT REVIEW CONFERENCE 2000

Further commitments to disarm under the NPT were made at the 2000 Review Conference where 13 practical steps were agreed, Step 6 being to: ‘Accomplish the total elimination of their nuclear arsenals leading to nuclear disarmament to which all States parties are committed under Article VI of the NPT’.

Moreover the UK and the four other declared nuclear weapon states signed a final document giving ‘an unequivocal undertaking to accomplish the total elimination of their nuclear arsenals’.³¹

A replacement of Trident would commit the UK to owning nuclear weapons until at least 2050 which, since the NPT came into force in 1970, would mean 80 years of complete failure to disarm.

INTERNATIONAL COURT OF JUSTICE

The International Court of Justice ruled in 1996 that ‘the threat or use of nuclear weapons would be generally contrary to the rules of international law applicable in armed conflict and in particular the principles and rules of humanitarian law.’³²

REPLACEMENT OF TRIDENT

A legal opinion by Rabinder Singh QC and Professor Christine Chinkin, Matrix Chambers, on ‘The Maintenance and Possible Replacement of the Trident Nuclear Missile System’ affirmed that the replacement of Trident is not only likely to constitute a breach of Article VI of the NPT but would also be a material breach of the treaty itself.³³

BOX 3

POTENTIAL DESTRUCTIVE CAPABILITY OF OUR 'MINIMUM' NUCLEAR WEAPONS SYSTEM

■ One Trident warhead has eight times the explosive power of the atomic bomb called 'little boy' dropped on Hiroshima in 1945 killing over 140,000 people.

■ Thus one Trident warhead aimed at a city could kill over a million people (as well as causing severe injuries to countless others, destroying almost the entire infrastructure and radioactively contaminating the whole area and beyond for decades to come).

■ Around 48 warheads are carried on each of the four Trident submarines and each warhead can reach a separate target. If all of the warheads from one submarine were fired at once they could potentially kill a population around the size of the UK.

'Nuclear, biological and chemical arms are the most inhumane of all weapons. Designed to terrify as well as destroy, they can in the hands of either state or non-state actors, cause destruction on a vastly greater scale than any conventional weapons, and their impact is far more indiscriminate and long-lasting'

The Weapons of Mass Destruction Commission

A PRACTICAL AND REALISTIC SOLUTION

It is not unrealistic for the UK to decide to free itself from nuclear weapons as required by the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. Four countries — South Africa, Belarus, Kazakhstan and Ukraine have already done so. The UK is only one of a handful of states that actually possesses nuclear weapons. In contrast 180 non-nuclear weapon states have signed the NPT. None of these countries possess nuclear weapons; their safety is not dependent on owning them. Although there are 39 countries in the world, in addition to the five declared nuclear weapon states, that have nuclear power or research reactors and the capability to produce nuclear weapons, nearly all of them have chosen not to possess them. Many of these countries have also signed treaties which cover large parts of the world including Southeast Asia, the South Pacific, Latin America and Africa that are specifically nuclear weapon free zones.

A decision by the UK not to replace Trident would not only greatly strengthen the viability of the NPT but would enhance Britain's standing with the vast majority of the countries in the world that overwhelmingly demand that nuclear weapon states should fulfil their obligations to disarm.

JOBS AND SKILLS

A final argument used by nuclear weapons advocates is the supposed potential of a replacement of Trident to create thousands of new jobs that will benefit the local economy. Apart from the fact that investment in any other area can also create economic growth and substantial job opportunities — without providing a means of mass killing and destruction, this argument does not take into account the massive costs of a new programme which mean that any jobs created are heavily subsidised.

Dr Steven Schofield, in his report *Trident and Employment*, stresses that, 'employment levels will be lower and costs will be higher than on the original Trident programme. A conservative estimate would put employment at 35-40% less while costs on FOS [follow on system] will be anywhere between 25%-100% more. In employment terms, therefore, FOS represents a very poor rate of return for a multi-billion pound investment.'³⁴

It is also argued that there will be a loss of skills if the UK chooses not to continue with a nuclear weapons system. If Trident were allowed to continue until it became obsolete then this would give ample time for the government's Defence Diversification Agency to put into place effective employment diversification strategies.

At Aldermaston Atomic Weapons Establishment, Dr Rebecca Johnson suggests that the scientists' expertise and resources should rather be focused on issues of verification, decommissioning and the dismantling of nuclear facilities and secure disposal of weapons-usable materials.³⁵ Schofield argues that up to 30,000 skilled jobs could be created by a major programme to generate new industries in offshore wind and wave power.

CONCLUSION

The commitment to holding a debate and deciding vote in the House of Commons was a welcome step forward for accountability in government decision-making. However the debate was limited in scope and many questions have been left unanswered. There had been no real consultation process; no structured opportunity provided by the government in which ordinary people could engage. The government has not taken into account the concerns of the majority of the British public who do not want Britain to re-arm by replacing Trident.

The precipitate nature of the decision appears to have been politically motivated. Several experts asserted that the lives of the existing submarines could be extended by 15 years making it possible for a decision to be delayed, but the Ministry of Defence and defence contractors urged an early conclusion.

By taking this decision now, the government has pre-empted the discussions and potential initiatives that may be taken at the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty Review Conference, due to be held in 2010. Such a decision can only send negative messages to the rest of the world, encouraging proliferation – even as we urge non-proliferation on the part of other countries. The years leading up to the Review Conference should instead be the time when our government advances its commitment to disarming as required under the NPT.

When the time comes to consider the actual construction of the replacement submarines the Prime Minister must consider what impact the decision will have on both national and global security at a time when we face no nuclear super-power threat. Rather than safeguarding us from unknown future threats, a new British nuclear weapons system is likely to escalate tension, contribute to a new nuclear arms race, and increase a global orientation towards nuclear weapon possession. The greatest contribution that Britain can make to international security is to seize the opportunity not to replace our nuclear weapons system. This would respect our commitments to the NPT, correspondingly progress and strengthen the treaty, and help create a climate where states turn away from nuclear weapons rather than towards them.

Hans Blix, former nuclear weapons inspector, recently proposed a world summit to discuss nuclear disarmament, and has also advocated the outlawing of nuclear weapons. A Nuclear Weapons Convention, like those designed to ban chemical and biological weapons, would be a significant contribution to world peace — the model of such a treaty covering issues such as verification, inspection, criminality and control of fissile materials has already been lodged with the United Nations.

If Britain were to initiate a world summit on disarmament, this would enormously enhance Britain's standing in the world — the desire for global abolition of nuclear weapons is strong internationally. But this desire will remain unfulfilled until the brave step is taken which pulls us out of the vicious nuclear circle.

Hans Blix,
former nuclear
weapons inspector,
Chair of the Weapons
of Mass Destruction
Commission

'The world must aim at achieving a ban on both possession and use of nuclear weapons, in the same way as bans that apply to biological and chemical weapons. All states — even the great powers — must prepare to live without nuclear weapons and other weapons of terror.'³⁶

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