BRIEFING PAPER

DOES BRITAIN NEED TO REPLACE TRIDENT?

YOU DECIDE

Tony Blair has put the question of a replacement for Britain's nuclear weapon system, Trident, onto the agenda for this parliament. A White Paper has been promised for later this year, which will outline the government's preferred options. Britain's choice will not only have national implications; it will also have ramifications for the course of nuclear non-proliferation and international security for generations to come. Any decision to commit billions of pounds of public money to a new nuclear weapon system requires convincing arguments that the continued possession of such weapons is compatible with UK security for at least another half a century (well into the 2050s).

‘Once in a Generation’ Decision

Assumptions underlying the oft-stated belief that nuclear weapons are necessary as a deterrent or an insurance policy need to be rigorously re-examined, particularly in light of significant changes in our overall security environment since the end of the cold war.

There needs to be a full and open debate on the salience and relevance of nuclear weapons for defence and national status, the changing nature of conflict, and the costs and opportunity costs – *before* any decision is made. Yet, past experience in nuclear decision-making and the significant expenditure already committed to refurbishing the Atomic Weapons Establishment at Aldermaston give rise to fears that the replacement for Trident may already have been determined in secret.

In its June 2006 report on “The Future of the UK’s Strategic Nuclear Deterrent”, the House of Commons Defence Committee was right to warn that a series of decisions being taken now under the rubric of ‘keeping options open’ may amount – by default or intention – to a decision to hold on to nuclear weapons.

Today, for the major security challenges facing Britain, including climate change and terrorism, nuclear weapons are totally irrelevant. In relation to another serious threat – nuclear proliferation – the continued importance Britain places on the possession of national nuclear forces is actually exacerbating the problem.

As the UN Secretary-General, Kofi Annan, has observed, without much greater progress towards the elimination of nuclear weapons, proliferation is likely to accelerate over the next two decades, with dangerous consequences for national and international security.

The Defence Committee also recognised that at the heart of the debate about Trident replacement is the question of Britain’s role in the world. A unilateral decision by the government to line-up the next generation of nuclear weapons will fly in the face of our treaty commitments. Instead, Britain’s policy needs to be directed towards devaluing nuclear weapons and promoting and sustaining multilateral non-proliferation.

We are not merely passive bystanders as the international and security environments change around us. Britain’s policies and actions can play a significant part in marginalising or revaluing nuclear weapons, preventing or abetting proliferation, and strengthening or undermining international law.

The Options

According to its original design specifications, the Trident nuclear weapon system – comprising four *Vanguard*-class nuclear submarines equipped with US Trident D-5 missiles, and sustained by a stockpile of nearly 200 warheads – was intended to be operational until the 2020s.

In advance of the government’s White Paper, the Defence Committee has identified four basic decisions to be considered: retention versus abolition; service life extension; future capability; and further investment in current capability.

Among the main options before the Ministry of Defence are:

1 Trident ‘like-for-like’ replacement

Replacing Trident with a practically identical system would be to signal ‘business as usual’. It would maintain existing arrangements with the United States and provide a large new submarine order for British ship-builders at Barrow. Advocates would also underline the importance of retaining compatibility with the US Trident system, the relative invulnerability of the submarines, and the accuracy and intercontinental range of the missiles. Decisions have already been taken to upgrade facilities at Aldermaston with, among other things, a sophisticated new laser (Orion) and a supercomputer, which make

it possible to produce a new generation of warheads without overtly breaching the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) that Britain has ratified.

By ensuring a strategic nuclear weapon capability into the second half of the 21st century, it would underscore the UK's intent to rely on nuclear weapons for the next five decades or more, thereby undercutting further progress in non-proliferation and disarmament. In addition to questioning Trident's relevance in the post cold war security environment, concerns will be raised about the system's size, cost, and the fact that it extends dependence on the United States. It could also run into difficulties if Scotland decided it no longer wished to host nuclear submarines at Faslane, on the Clyde.

2 A scaled-down capability – 'Trident-lite'

This option would reduce the number of boats, missiles and/or warheads, and probably entail an end to continuous at-sea patrols. 'Trident-lite' would encounter many of the same problems as a direct replacement, but might be presented as a less expensive option that takes further steps towards nuclear arms reductions, while still enabling Britain to retain nuclear weapons "for the foreseeable future".

3 Adapting Astute-class submarines

Britain is currently building a new generation of nuclear powered 'hunter-killer' submarines – starting with *HMS Astute*. These submarines were originally designed to deploy only conventional weapons, but there is now speculation that 2 to 4 Astute-class boats could be adapted to carry nuclear warheads on either a Trident missile (or comparable ballistic missile) or a nuclear version of the Tomahawk cruise missile (as deployed on some US submarines). This option could provide a more flexible nuclear arsenal that combines more 'usable' tactical weapons with strategic or sub-strategic roles. As with the other submarine-based options, this would perpetuate dependence on the United States for missiles and Scotland for a home-port. Combining conventional and nuclear weapons in a 'mixed' platform will also increase vulnerability and the risks of miscalculation.

4 Air-launched options

The least likely choice would be to equip long-range bombers with either cruise missiles or free-fall bombs. However, neither the MoD nor RAF appears interested, as the development of such bombers would be expensive and there would be increased risks and vulnerabilities across the board.

5 Service life extension

The service reliability of the existing Trident submarines could be extended. This would require a major refit of the hulls and nuclear reactors. Though less expensive than a full replacement, service life extension would not be cheap. Estimates vary as to whether it would buy an extra 15–20 years or only another five. Essentially, this option would defer the more fundamental decision about whether Britain wants to remain a nuclear weapons state, and if so, for how long. Proponents feel this could buy time during which the direction of world security might improve, thereby facilitating efforts to kick-start multilateral disarmament.

6 Managed transition to the abolition of nuclear weapons

A commitment not to develop a nuclear follow-on to Trident could significantly contribute to strengthening the non-proliferation regime, thus enhancing Britain's long-term security. It would go some way towards helping to create the "safer world" wished for by the government in its 1998 Strategic Defence Review, "in which there is no place for nuclear weapons". This decision would need to be taken in conjunction with an effective strategy for managing the transition to non-nuclear defence and facilitating the political, legal, technical and security conditions necessary for nuclear weapons to be eliminated globally.

Take time for an informed debate

The Defence Committee report stated: "…a genuine and meaningful debate is only possible with the active participation of the Ministry of Defence (MoD). The public should know what decisions will be required, when they must be taken and implemented, and what factors are driving consideration of the issue now."

It is neither necessary nor desirable to rush the decision through in haste. The government needs to undertake a comprehensive security and defence review that combines the perspectives of foreign affairs, defence, non-proliferation and international law. The review should analyse the roles assigned to nuclear weapons and the efficacy of theories of nuclear deterrence and use in the post-9/11 security environment, and include consideration of wider concepts of human security, as well as questions relating to safety and security of materials, components and facilities.

For a genuine public and parliamentary debate and decision, it is imperative that the government makes available its assumptions and provides a full breakdown of estimated costs covering all foreseeable elements under consideration, including estimates for decommissioning each option.

It is also important that opportunity costs be taken into account. These include resources that could be directed towards dealing with other problems, such as climate change and preventing terrorism, as well as other elements of the defence budget – for example, equipment shortfalls currently being experienced by the armed forces in Iraq and Afghanistan.

In a forthcoming report, entitled *"Worse than Irrelevant"? British Nuclear Weapons in the 21st Century,* these options are considered in detail, together with changes in the security and legal environment and the assumptions underpinning the current debate on Trident. The authors share the government's concerns about proliferation and strongly support the multilateral treaties and instruments that seek to prevent the acquisition and spread of nuclear weapons and weapon-usable fissile materials. They part company with the government over the relative emphasis it places on the various elements of the threat, and on the importance of preventing the development of further nuclear weapons as an integral part of a successful non-proliferation policy.

The report concludes that the global elimination of nuclear weapons is a more feasible – and more pressing – security priority than current official assumptions and policies acknowledge. Concerns are raised that the present direction of UK nuclear and non-proliferation policies can neither support nor deliver the more secure, stable and just international order that we all seek. Specifically, the authors conclude that the continuing importance attached to the high-level maintenance, modernisation and doctrine for the possible use of Trident serves to undermine this country's long-term security interests.

***"Worse than Irrelevant"? British Nuclear Weapons in the 21st Century,* by Rebecca Johnson, Nicola Butler and Stephen Pullinger, published in October 2006, provides a detailed analysis of the context and options for the Trident decision.**

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