

Commentary on the UK Trident Alternatives Review

The government published its Trident Alternatives Review earlier today. This short briefing gives an immediate response. BASIC will later this year be publishing the results of the Trident Commission, considering the broader issues that form the context of the decision.

Today's technical government review has highly political roots in the desire by Liberal Democrats to ask two key (strategic, political) questions:

- i) are there cheaper options that maintain a credible minimum nuclear deterrent capability appropriate to the changed circumstances of the 21st century?
- ii) are there options that offer greater flexibility to enable Britain to respond to future developments in the strategic environment, and to enable Britain to have credible negotiating positions at any future multilateral disarmament talks.

Danny Alexander, speaking at RUSI on the report at lunchtime today, said that the report supported his view there was a credible alternative involving the construction of three submarines and what he called a high readiness focused deterrence posture, retaining the ability to return to continuous patrols in time of crisis but not otherwise requiring continuous patrolling. He said that this would realise savings in cash terms of some £4 billion, much of which would land in the late 2020s.

The Review is an important contribution to the public debate in that it presents more information in the public domain than ever on the options and demonstrates healthy divisions at the heart of government. However, the review has a number of limitations in its scope and in the assumptions made. It does not address:

- i) Non-nuclear options, and the more basic question: should Britain have nuclear weapons in the 21st century?
- ii) The evolving nature of the security context for the question of whether nuclear deterrence has relevance, and also therefore one must question whether it can adequately answer the question of what a minimum deterrent could be.
- iii) The opportunity costs – the choices foregone and impacts on security because of investments ploughed into nuclear weapons investments.
- iv) The international politics surrounding nuclear non-proliferation, and the opportunities Britain has to influence other states and achieve progress under the non-proliferation regime.

Equally importantly, the review contains within it key assumptions. It defines a minimum deterrent, that whilst not fully attached to a Continuous at-sea deterrent (CASD) posture, is nevertheless close to it – the independent capability, “to deliver at

short notice a nuclear strike against a range of targets at an appropriate scale and with very high confidence”, and to maintain this capability for an extended period. This is a tough requirement, and rules out significant further reductions in patrols and readiness, and some dual-capable options that could otherwise prove attractive. But how necessary is this requirement in a world where the government assesses the probability of the emergence of a strategic nuclear state-based threat to be very low, and where we have strong and healthy alliance relationships?

The UK places NATO at the heart of its national security, and allocates its nuclear capability to Alliance operations. This requirement for independent operation, one that Danny Alexander admitted was a core assumption in answer to a question from me at RUSI earlier today, shows little faith in the long term health and capabilities of the Alliance, and sends the rather strong message internationally that in the last analysis Britain, the country politically and strategically closest to the most powerful state in the world, does not have faith in its bilateral or multilateral alliance relationships. What does this do for confidence in international regimes, and for the UK’s non-proliferation policy?

If Britain does not yet have the confidence in the international security situation to give up nuclear weapons entirely, or feels somehow that it has responsibilities to its NATO allies to shoulder the nuclear burden with the Americans and French, then it could more unambiguously pool those assets with its NATO partners, and ensure a solid and reliable continuous at-sea deterrence. This would realise substantial savings that blow those mentioned in the TAR out of the water.

Why do we have to cling onto the expensive fig leaf that the British nuclear system is operationally independent, when we know that there are no politically credible scenarios when the UK would be firing its nuclear weapons against the wishes of the Americans? Those keen to resist reductions have jumped on any suggestion of reducing patrols as creating a ‘part-time deterrent’. But isn’t that exactly what we need today, something that is flexible and appropriate to the threats we face... or

are we really saying that the current situation demands a permanent Cold War response? Britain needs to be in a position to offer something on the global table of nuclear disarmament, and this requires a greater level of flexibility than many seem willing to contemplate.

If CASD were dropped in 2016 and the independent operation requirement relaxed, and if the two newer Vanguard submarines were to have their fuel removed and to be mothballed, the life of the current fleet could be extended by perhaps an additional seven years, enabling a number of savings to be realised: delayed and reduced capital spend (only two submarines) and reduced running costs. It would also open up a desirable flexibility in the UK posture, reflecting changed circumstances. This and other similar options were not explored in the TAR report.

Much of the analysis in the report revolves around assumptions behind the length of time it would take the UK to develop a new warhead for the Trident missile (17 years) and a new warhead for any new delivery system like a cruise missile (an additional 7 years on top). These lead-times appear to rule out many alternative options on that basis that there is insufficient time to develop the warhead for those alternatives, before the current submarines reach the end of their useful life around 2030.

If the nuclear deterrent really is the national asset that many claim, these lead-times could surely be reduced significantly. They compare unfavourably with the widespread estimates of Iran’s capabilities to field a nuclear weapon in months from scratch and without allies. The Americans have shared much of their Trident warhead specifications with us, are they really unwilling to share the development of their future air-launched cruise missile warheads with us?

Today’s review will inform the final deliberations of the Commission, and both documents should play an important role in the forthcoming debate over the future of Trident.

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