

A BASIC Guide to Interpreting the Trident Commission's Concluding Report

July 1st 2014

Headline Commission Messages

UK's possession of nuclear weapons:

- 1) The Commission states that UK national security depends upon the health of the international system and reducing the threat of nuclear weapons. Britain should be at the forefront of global efforts to promote nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation.
- 2) It agreed HMG needs to chart more credible paths towards global disarmament.
- 3) It rejected several arguments in favour of renewing Trident, particularly as a general insurance policy against uncertainty or to back up our global influence, but agreed that Britain should retain nuclear weapons for deterrence against possible overwhelming threats from hostile nuclear-armed states and as a contribution to NATO.
- 4) The debate should therefore focus on the likelihood of these potential threats emerging, the utility of nuclear weapons in responding to them, how we can meet our obligations as a state brandishing nuclear weapons to the international community, and the most effective contribution we can make to the capabilities and cohesion of NATO.

Posture and systems:

- 5) The Commission was not convinced by alternatives to the Trident ballistic missile submarine system. It did not seek to challenge the view implied in the Trident Alternatives Review that other systems were unproven and risky.
- 6) It recommended a tightening of declaratory policy, that the UK would not threaten use of nuclear weapons against states that do not possess nuclear weapons, or against the threat or use of chemical or biological weapons (at least with current available technologies). It recommends that nuclear weapon states discuss issuing simultaneous declarations that establish that the sole purpose of their arsenals is to deter the threat of use of nuclear weapons.
- 7) The Commission recommends the 2015 Defence and Security Review considers further changes to targeting and reductions in warhead numbers.
- 8) Some Commissioners feared the four new submarines would be more reliable and therefore be seen as a step up in UK nuclear capability.
- 9) The Commission was divided over UK abandoning continuous patrolling, though there was agreement that there may be scope for greater coordination with the United States and France.
- 10) The Commission recommends MoD publish a technical assessment of options for further delay prior to Main Gate.

Steeped in a political culture that assumes it is too difficult for any leading politician to change course, it seems all too easy for decision-makers in Westminster to forget the magnitude of the decision facing the UK over the renewal of its nuclear arsenal. The possession of and implicit threat to use nuclear weapons presents a number of deep challenges to our national status and integrity.

This is not to say we simply wash our hands and walk away, but it does mean that we have a heavy responsibility to weigh up these complex decisions carefully and transparently in open debate. The Commission is looking to focus the debate on those weighty national security questions they believe should frame the political debate. This guide gives BASIC's interpretation of the what the Trident Commission concluded.

Should the UK retain a nuclear arsenal?

The Commission considered the arguments in turn, and rejected some of those often deployed in favour of investing in a follow-on system.

Specifically, the Commission rejected:

- Blair's '*general insurance against an uncertain future*';
- to back up the UK's status, military intervention, or influence in global outcomes; or
- to maintain a jobs/submarine industrial base.

These arguments were deemed insufficient to justify possession of nuclear weapons. Further, the Commission considered that appealing to them weakens Britain's non-proliferation objectives.

Commissioners agreed that the health of the global strategic environment, particularly nuclear non-proliferation, is critical to national security and is a central consideration. They talk of the need for Britain to maintain its '*glide path down towards disarmament*', to ensure that the renewal decisions the next government will be taking have consistency with the trajectory set by successive recent governments, and that the UK should continue to be '*at the forefront of the multilateral disarmament process*'.

They believe that strategic nuclear deterrence plays a stabilising role in global relations, but they remain conscious that this comes at some risk, both in the potential use of nuclear weapons and in driving their spread. Therefore, they support the calls for stronger global multilateral disarmament moves, and they conclude that Britain needs to do more to promote such moves amongst the nuclear-armed states, and should be far clearer in articulating the route we need to chart to achieve them, and how we bring about the conditions necessary.

BASIC and the Trident Commission

BASIC set up the Trident Commission in 2011 as an inquiry into Britain's nuclear weapon policy. Its final report represents the collective views of the eight Commission members after engaging in an intense three-year process. Every member is highly respected and with particular deep experience within the British state and institutions close to it. One of the Co-chairs (Des Browne) was the Defence Secretary tasked by Tony Blair to steer his decision to start Trident renewal through Government and Parliament in 2006/7. Another (Malcolm Rifkind) is currently Chair of the Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament, and one of the most public advocates for an uncompromising, robust response to Russia's actions within the Ukraine this year. Commission members hail from the senior ranks of our national security community.

It is not a challenge to the Government, but rather an analysis to inform opinion from an experienced perspective that has national security at its heart. We could have approached this from a different direction, such as:

- the best UK strategic contribution to reducing global nuclear dangers;
- the most effective contribution to NATO security or the promotion of British values abroad;
- the status and power of the UK within the international community.

These are dimensions discussed in the report, but in the context of their impact on national security. A national security approach inevitably focuses attention upon threats and worst-case scenarios in a manner that can hamper the establishment of trust between states. Nevertheless, we took this direction because of the nature of the decisions and the identities of those tasked with making them.

BASIC has a clear mandate to actively promote global nuclear disarmament, and has tended to publish opinions in the past highly critical of the British government and of positions similar to those expressed in this report. BASIC's involvement with this Commission may thus surprise some people.

The Commission's Concluding Report does not represent BASIC's views, though we assisted Commissioners drafting it and we stand resolutely by its publication as a valuable contribution to the debate in this country at this crucial moment in the renewal cycle.

We hope that readers and commentators will not skim through it trying to find snippets in support of their existing views, or find fault on the basis of disagreement. Rather, we expect it to stimulate a deeper level of debate within the national security frame that is highly relevant to national decision-makers. We believe that even within this particular frame there are important considerations often underplayed.

Paul Ingram, BASIC Director

Trevor McCrisken, BASIC Chair

The principal, specific justification

Ultimately, the Commission's conclusion that Britain should retain nuclear weapons at this stage revolves around its statement:

'If there is more than a negligible chance that the possession of nuclear weapons might play a decisive future role in the defence of the United Kingdom and its allies, in preventing nuclear blackmail, or in affecting the wider security context within which the UK sits, then they should be retained.'

Explicitly aware of the dangers of UK ambiguities in nuclear policy when referring to future threats that drive proliferation, the Commission states that relevant justifications for Britain retaining nuclear weapons is 'a narrow band of potential strategic threats involving the [future] threat or use of nuclear weapons by a state against the UK or its allies', as well as its contribution to effective NATO capabilities. These threats were summed up as the re-emergence of a massive state-based threat involving an experience similar to the Cold War, or the emergence of a new nuclear-armed (or similar genuine mass-destruction technology) state with global reach and in direct strategic competition with us. At heart, the Commissioners believe the debate over Britain's possession of nuclear weapons ought to consider the likelihood of such threats emerging, and whether our continued possession of nuclear weapons could play a decisive role in determining the emergence or not of future threats.

The Commissioners also point out that there is no room for bluffing here; delivering a credible nuclear deterrent effect involves the believable willingness to use nuclear weapons and accept the consequences. There are considerable challenges in doing this whilst claiming to be a responsible member of the international community and staying within the rule of international law; challenges which ultimately the Commission believes are surmountable. As a nuclear weapon state we have a grave responsibility to articulate how we achieve this and continually review our justifications.

Alliance relationships

Considerations around Britain's responsibilities to the health of NATO and its relationship with the United States featured heavily in the Commission's deliberations. The report states, 'we cannot expect the United States to shoulder indefinitely the awesome responsibilities that lie in providing extended nuclear deterrence to Europe, particularly if the United Kingdom were to abandon its own nuclear force.' Nevertheless, Commissioners were sceptical of any strategy that relied indefinitely upon the health of NATO and the long-term commitment of the United States to European security.

They do not agree that retaining nuclear weapons on the basis that the United States cannot be relied upon indefinitely undermines the credibility of the US nuclear guarantee to other allies, primarily as this is an issue of continued possession by a recognised nuclear weapon state and as a strengthening of Alliance capabilities, as opposed to a choice to acquire. This distinction, however, may not be seen in the same light within states dissatisfied with the pace of disarmament, particularly those aggrieved by the perception that states are using existing nuclear arrangements to maintain a disproportionate influence within the global community.

The disarmament glide path

The Commission is of the view that Britain has a respectable record of nuclear reductions since the end of the Cold War. Unlike the United States and Russia, the UK has always had a minimum deterrence doctrine, a dynamic commitment to retain only so many nuclear weapons required for a high confidence of deterring any nuclear threat. It also recognises the need to take responsibility to reduce the level of tension with any possible adversaries to encourage mutual reductions.

An agenda for action

In that tradition, the Commission calls upon the government to:

- consider additional steps 'that could be taken now without additional risk to the security of the UK';
- assess the conditions for further steps; and,
- develop proactive strategies to bring them about.

This would communicate our serious resolve to fulfil our collective responsibilities and move with other nuclear weapon states down the ladder. It suggests that the next Defence and Security Review in 2015 consider further reductions in warhead numbers and a reassessment of nuclear targeting criteria in a manner that truly fits minimum deterrence.

We see an implicit criticism here of the tendency to speak fine words about change but sit comfortably in the status quo thinking that the prime responsibility lies with other nuclear armed states. However, Commissioners are also clear in their view that it would not be effective to exit the nuclear game alone in the hope that this would encourage others to follow. This raises the question of where the right spot is to situate UK nuclear weapons policy such that it ensures we maximise our positive impact on reducing global nuclear dangers and encouraging fellow nuclear armed states into a cooperative diplomatic posture.

There were some differences between Commissioners on their level of concern about the impact of current Trident renewal plans on global perceptions of Britain's glide path downwards. Some thought that there was a real issue that replacing the four existing Vanguard submarines with four Successor submarines could amount to a significant upgrade in the capability of the fleet. The new submarines are likely to have better reactor designs, greater reliability and more sustainable patrolling capabilities. Others did not think this amounted to much beyond a simple renewal of the systems.

Choice of system

Though the Commission received evidence from several sources, notably background paper 5 published with the concluding report, and then the Trident Alternatives Review, it did not feel qualified to make a definitive judgement on the pros and cons of particular systems. However, it considered the risks associated with any alternative and the cost savings too speculative to be in a position to recommend any change in system away from ballistic missiles on large dedicated submarines. The expense of this option is partly offset by the nature of the collaboration with the United States and the established facilities and practices. The Commissioners agreed that Trident 'meets the criteria of credibility, scale, survivability, reach and readiness' in a manner currently unmatched by other systems.

Posture

Declaratory policy, in which a nuclear armed state will express the purpose of its nuclear arsenal and issue guarantees to other states that they will not be targeted, was recognised by the Commission as an integral responsibility for any nuclear armed state. The Commission recommends that the government consider tightening declaratory policy further, for example to declare that UK would not threaten the use of nuclear weapons against a biological or chemical attack, unless circumstances were to change radically, and would not threaten their use against states that do not possess nuclear weapons. It also thought that it could be beneficial for the nuclear weapon states to consider a joint declaration that the sole purpose of their arsenals was to deter the use or threat of use of nuclear weapons against them or their allies. This could be a step toward simultaneous declarations amongst nuclear weapon states on sole use, and at a later stage, no first use.

Patrolling

The UK has maintained a strict policy of continuous patrolling (CASD) throughout and since the Cold War. The Commission approached the question of support for CASD from the perspective that further steps down the disarmament ladder would at some stage involve taking submarines off patrol, were the conditions conducive to doing so. Some Commissioners thought that this would require similar moves by the other nuclear weapon states, whilst others thought the security situation sufficiently stable for the foreseeable future for Britain to make this move now but maintain a capacity to increase patrols should crisis threaten. The Commission pointed to 'an opportunity to initiate a full conversation with the United States and France on the conditions that could allow the allied nuclear weapon states to consider closer coordination of their continuous patrolling posture.'

The reason why CASD is seen as so important in the debate is that it is a litmus test for Britain's resolve to exercise genuine minimum deterrence and to move further down the ladder in response to a national security situation devoid of strategic threat. The relaxation of CASD is also seen by some as a dangerous first step that could involve sleep-walking into disarmament through neglect.

Further Delay

Ultimately, the Commission points out that if it were possible a further delay would have a number of advantages – in cost, technology development and diplomatic terms. The recent decision this year to refuel the existing Vanguards may extend their expected life by several years, allowing further delay with minimal risk to patrolling capabilities – if so the Commission would recommend the Government publicly report their technical assessment prior to Main Gate 2016.

To download the Concluding Report of the Commission, its background papers, previous briefings and written evidence:

www.basicint.org/tridentcommission

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