

Memorandum from Andrew Dorman

It is an apposite time for the British government to ponder the issue of replacing its existing nuclear deterrent. The nations of the world, led by the United States, and with the United Kingdom playing the loyal supporting role, are wrestling with the issue of North Korea becoming a bone fide possessor of nuclear weapons, despite the best efforts of the world community.[\[1\]](#) Similarly the United Kingdom has been cooperating with its French and German partners to try and persuade Iran to place limits on its civilian nuclear programme and shy away from any attempt to also develop its own nuclear weapons.[\[2\]](#)

At the same time the United Kingdom's armed forces are struggling to meet their existing commitments.[\[3\]](#) Ever since the new Chief of the General Staff, General Sir Richard Dannatt, raised queries about Britain's deployment of forces in Iraq and the potential breaking of the army on this commitment there have been a series of public and private rebukes by serving and retired officers with the horror stories of defence housing being just the latest.[\[4\]](#)

It is within this context that the Prime Minister made his statement to the House of Commons outlining the government's case for maintenance of the British strategic nuclear deterrent.[\[5\]](#) This statement, much of which had already been leaked, instantly received the full support of the Conservative opposition whilst the Liberal Democrats argued that no decision needed to be taken.[\[6\]](#)

The statement and the accompanying white paper set out the government's intention to replace the existing Trident force with 3-4 new submarines each equipped with updated Trident submarine-launched ballistic missiles at an estimated cost of £15-20bn.[\[7\]](#) In an attempt to placate the anti-nuclear lobby within his own backbenches' Tony Blair also announced a further reduction in the overall size of the British nuclear arsenal from approximately 200 warheads to less than 160.[\[8\]](#) In other words he effectively sought to standstill.

The justification for this decision was threefold. Firstly, Britain must have such a system; secondly, that a decision needed to be taken now; and thirdly that a new force of nuclear submarines equipped with Trident missiles was the most sensible way forward.

The need for an independent nuclear deterrent?

The government's case although re-packaged remains the same as that confronting the Attlee government in 1946. Firstly, in an uncertain world, the United Kingdom needs to have the ultimate insurance policy that a nuclear deterrent is seen to bring.

It is just that, in the final analysis, the risk of giving up something that has been one of the mainstays of our security since the war, and, moreover, doing so when the one certain thing about

our world today is its uncertainty, is not a risk I feel we can responsibly take. Our independent nuclear deterrent is the ultimate insurance.[\[9\]](#)

The deterrence argument was easier to make when there was an obvious potential foe in the form of the Soviet Union. However, when, as the white paper suggests it involves non-state actors, such as al-Qaeda, it is far harder to justify and Blair argued in favour deterring would be supplier nations. This raises the question of whether the United Kingdom would ever be prepared to use nuclear weapons to punish a state whose regime has allegedly supplied nuclear material. It is extremely doubtful that any government could justify such a response, especially after Iraq and the dodgy dossier saga.

Secondly, that the retention of a Rolls-Royce system is needed if the United Kingdom wants to remain a major player in the international system. This is the classic 'Boys and Toys' argument and was reinforced in Blair's statement to the House of Commons by his reference to the other P5 members.[\[10\]](#) Put crudely - could any Prime Minister ever contemplate abandoning this prestige item, especially whilst the French retain an independent nuclear deterrent? The answer is clearly a resounding no and thus defence is potentially saddled with not a white elephant but a black submarine that nobody quite knows what to do with. In reality would any Prime Minister want to be remembered in history as the one who abandoned the nuclear deterrent especially if it is their successor's that will have to foot the bill? Legacies remain an important part of politics and explain why Harold Wilson did a rapid u-turn in 1964 over the nuclear deterrent. More recently John Nott continues to associated with cutbacks to the Royal Navy that 'were only saved by the Falklands War'.[\[11\]](#) The reality was significantly different and few remember him as the Secretary of State for Defence who began the move towards expeditionary warfare and facilitated the reorganisation of the British Army's approach to conventional warfare.

The need to replace now

A number of statements have been made by politicians from various parties and spokespersons for various pressure groups about the timing issue. The government have argued that at best the Trident force can have its' existing 25 year boat life extended by a maximum of 5 years which means that by 2024 it would become impossible to maintain a boat continuously at sea.[\[12\]](#) The main argument that such a decision can be delayed has focused on the American decision to undertake a much longer life extension programme for their Trident boats - the Ohio class. According to this argument it follows that if the Americans can lengthen the life of their boats so can the British.

There are a number of weaknesses in this argument. Firstly, there are no direct comparisons. We may have a similar type of car to

our neighbour but it does not mean that they will both last the same length of time. It is clear that the British and American boats are built to different designs, have differing safety requirements based on differing reactor authorising bodies and have been operated differently.

Secondly, the Americans have a greater number of boats which means if a fault does begin to emerge in one or two boats they will still be able to maintain their deterrent. The much smaller size of the British force means that there is little built in redundancy and such risks cannot be taken. This was clear at the end of the lives of the Polaris fleet which struggled to continue in service whilst the Vanguard-class was built. The government line is therefore plausible given the available information and the Liberal Democrat one nonsensical.

The Choice of Trident

The government's white paper outlines four potential options and indicates that others were considered. These are a new fleet of Trident boats; a surface force of three large warships equipped with Trident missiles; a force of 20 civilian aircraft carrying an unnamed nuclear cruise missiles with its own dedicated tanker fleet; and a force of Trident missiles in hardened silos in the United Kingdom.[\[13\]](#) The white paper argues that overall the most cost effective is a follow on to the existing Trident force.

However, there is a good deal of smoke and mirrors in these options and their associated costings. There are clearly a number of assumptions that have been made which are open to question. Considering each in turn:

1. Replacing Trident with Trident. The costings for this proposal do not include the long-term disposal costs. As the House of Commons Defence Committee have highlighted before the issue of long-term disposal of nuclear submarines has not been resolved and thus their associated costs are not included within the white paper's calculations. Some external estimated have indicated that this is quite considerable.

2. Surface force of 3 vessels equipped with Trident missiles. The white paper dismisses this option based on vulnerability and the costs associated with protection. These seem logical but this solution usefully negates having to put forward the submarines equipped with cruise missile argument. According to the white paper this would involve having to develop a new cruise missile. This is somewhat surprising given that the existing SSN force is equipped with Tomahawk Land Attack Missiles which could be modified to carry a nuclear warhead - the Americans equipped their submarine force with an earlier variant equipped with nuclear warheads during the latter part of the Cold War - or alternatively the French are acquiring a Storm Shadow variant for their submarine force. This could have its conventional warhead replaced by a nuclear one.

3. The civilian airliner option make a number of assumptions that

seem designed to inflate the cost. Firstly, why would a new air base need to be built? The RAF is currently in the midst of a major base realignment programme which is aiming to reduce its number of bases. Secondly, why does the cruise missile have to be a new one, why not just design a nuclear warhead for the Storm Shadow cruise missile that is currently entering service? Thirdly, why does the platform have to be a new civilian airliner, what about extending the Nimrod MRA4 production line and thus reducing the overall unit cost for the current Nimrod update programme? Fourthly, why has the range requirement risen so sharply compared to the existing trident force or its predecessors? Is this simply to ensure the need for a dedicated tanker force and thus raise the costs further? Fifthly, what compensatory savings would result from the Royal Navy shifting away from nuclear powered submarines?

4. Land based Trident missiles. The UK abandoned the idea of a land based system when it cancelled the Blue Streak intermediate-range ballistic missile. Vulnerability is a big issue and avoiding this option is a sensible one.

The state of defence

It would appear that the Trident replacement decision is now a foregone conclusion. Even if there is a significant backbench revolt amongst the Labour Party the Conservatives will ensure any vote is passed with the necessary majority. The white paper estimates that the cost of replacing the existing system as less than 5% of the defence budget thereby implying it isn't too much. Yet Tony Blair himself has called for an increase in defence spending.

A number of issues remain to be settled. Firstly, is this 'small' amount an addition to current defence spending plans or to be found from within them? Given the concerns expressed by a number of senior serving and retired officers' about the state of Britain's conventional equipment and service housing the nuclear decision may become the straw that breaks the camel's back when it comes to the military covenant.

Secondly, the replacement issue remains an element of where Britain fits within a post-Blair international system. Does it want to remain closely aligned with the United States using its military as a major lever of foreign policy or is time to rethink where Britain actually fits and what it stands for?

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[1] 'PM condemns North Korea's nuclear test', 9 October 2006, www.pm.gov.uk/output/Page10164.asp; Thomas Harding, Damien McElroy & Richard Spencer, 'Navy "too weak" for big role in Korea

blockade', *The Daily Telegraph*, 16 October 2006, p.1.

[2] See Jack Straw, 'Iran: The Path Ahead', Speech at the IISS, London, 13 March 2006, www.fco.gov.uk/servlet/Front?pagename=OpenMarket/Xcelerate/ShowPage&c=Page&cid=1007029391647&a=KArticle&aid=1140690103808.

[3] Tony Blair admitted in his recent defence lecture that commitments were higher than those planned for. Tony Blair, 'Our Nations' Future - Defence', 12 January 2007, www.number10.gov.uk/output/Page10735.asp

[4] Toby Helm, 'Army Chief went too far with his Iraq attack, says Blunkett', *The Daily Telegraph*, 16 October 2006, p.6; Benn Quinn, 'Keep the general, sack the ministers', *The Daily Telegraph*, 16 October 2006, p.6; 'We're going to see this through: General Dannatt on Iraq', *Defence News*, 13 October 2006, www.mod.uk/DefenceInternet/DefenceNews/DefencePolicyAndBusiness/WeAreGoingToSeeThisThroughGeneralDannattOnIraq.htm.

[5] Tony Blair, *House of Commons Parliamentary Debates*, Session 2006-7, 4 December 2006, (London: TSO, 2006), cols.21-4; for accompanying White paper see 'The Future of the United Kingdom's Nuclear Deterrent: Defence White Paper 2006', Cm 6994, (London: TSO, 2006).

[6] David Cameron and Menzies Campbell, *House of Commons Parliamentary Debates*, Session 2006-7, 4 December 2006, (London: TSO, 2006), cols.24-6.

[7] Tony Blair, *House of Commons Parliamentary Debates*, Session 2006-7, 4 December 2006, (London: TSO, 2006), col.23.

[8] Tony Blair, *House of Commons Parliamentary Debates*, Session 2006-7, 4 December 2006, (London: TSO, 2006), col.23.

[9] Tony Blair, *House of Commons Parliamentary Debates*, Session 2006-7, 4 December 2006, (London: TSO, 2006), col.21.

[10] Idem.

[11] See Andrew Dorman, 'The Nott Review: Dispelling the myths?' **Defence Studies Journal**, Vol.1, No.3, Autumn 2001, pp.113-121; Andrew Dorman, 'John Nott and the Royal Navy: the 1981 defence review revisited', **Contemporary British History**, vol.15, no.2, Summer 2001, pp.98-120.

[12] 'The Future of the United Kingdom's Nuclear Deterrent: Defence White Paper 2006', Cm 6994, (London: TSO, 2006), p.10.

[13] Ibid, pp.35-9.