



Future of the British Nuclear Deterrent: A Progress Report

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In December 2006 the Government published a white paper entitled *The Future of the United Kingdom's Nuclear Deterrent*, which set out the Government's principal recommendations for replacing the UK's nuclear deterrent beyond the 2020s. A debate and vote in the House of Commons on the general principle of whether the UK should retain a strategic nuclear deterrent beyond the life of the current system was subsequently held on 14 March 2007, during which the Government motion was approved by 409 to 161 votes.

The intention of this note is to provide a brief update on the status of the programme, the decisions that have yet to be taken and the wider debate on the feasibility of replacing the UK's nuclear deterrent in the current economic and political climate.

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1 Background

The Government published its White Paper on replacing the UK's strategic nuclear deterrent in December 2006. That paper concluded that renewing the UK's minimum nuclear deterrent would be fully consistent with its international obligations, mainly under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT); that retaining a submarine-based system would provide the most effective deterrent; that the UK would participate in the current US service-life extension programme for the Trident II D5 missile which will be deployed aboard the new submarines until the early 2040s and that the outright procurement costs of a successor system would be in the region of £15-20bn (2006-07 prices). In-service through-life costs were expected to be approximately 5-6% of the overall defence budget. Going forward the White Paper also noted that:

- A decision on the refurbishment or replacement of the warhead would be required in the next Parliament.
- A decision on the number of submarine platforms to be procured would be taken once more detailed information on their design becomes available.
- A contract for the submarines would be placed between 2012 and 2014. A decision on whether the submarines would be manufactured in the UK would be taken in the lead up to this contract placement.
- A decision on participating in any US programme to develop a successor to the Trident II D5 missile system is unlikely to be necessary until the 2020s.

A debate and vote in the House of Commons on the general principle of whether the UK should retain a strategic nuclear deterrent beyond the life of the current system was subsequently held on 14 March 2007.¹ That debate was on the government motion:

That this House supports the Government's decisions, as set out in the White Paper The Future of the United Kingdom's Nuclear Deterrent (Cm 6994), to take the steps necessary to maintain the UK's minimum strategic nuclear deterrent beyond the life of the existing system and to take further steps towards meeting the UK's disarmament responsibilities under Article VI of the Non-Proliferation Treaty.

That motion was approved by 409 to 161 votes.

Since the debate in March 2007 there has been no further debate on the replacement of the nuclear deterrent, or any of its associated issues, on the Floor of the House.

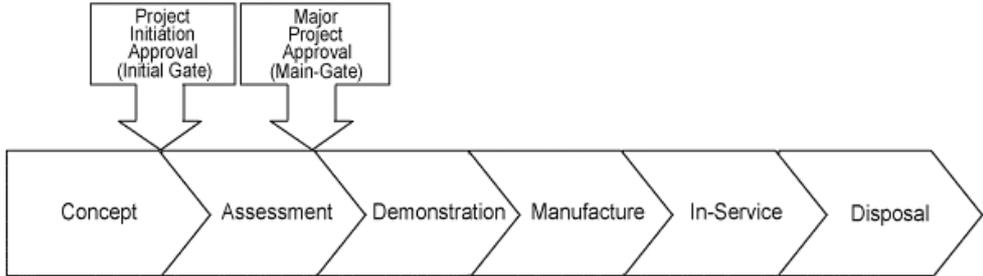
The following Library material provides further background on the issues relating to the replacement of the UK's nuclear deterrent:

- Standard Note SN/IA/5024, *Recent Developments at the Atomic Weapons Establishment*, March 2009
- Standard Note SN/IA/4199, *In Brief: The Trident White Paper*
- Research Paper RP06/53, *The Future of the British Nuclear Deterrent*, 3 November 2006
- Standard Note SN/IA/491, *Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons*

A suggested reading list is also available in Library Standard Note SN/IA/4207.

2 Procurement Status

The procurement of defence equipment in the UK is conducted, in the majority of cases, according to the following generic CADMID cycle:



The Initial Gate review assesses the feasibility of the programme going forward. Approval by the MOD's internal Investment Approvals Board is required at this point before funds can be released for the assessment phase. Approval at Initial Gate does not, however, commit the MOD to approval later on in the programme at Main Gate, which is the point when the main investment decision on a programme is taken.

¹ A copy of that debate is available in Hansard: <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200607/cmhansrd/cm070314/debtext/70314-0004.htm#07031475000005>

The Trident successor programme is still in the early stages of the procurement cycle. Following the vote in the House in March 2007 work on the concept phase of the programme began and is expected to conclude at the end of September 2009 ahead of an Initial Gate submission to the MOD's Investment Approvals Board. As part of that work the MOD opened a Future Submarine Integrated Project Team (IPT) office at Barrow in Furness in October 2007 to work in collaboration with the MOD's IPT office at Defence Equipment and Support in Abbey Wood. In conjunction with the MOD, BAE Systems, Babcock Marine and Rolls Royce have been undertaking work on developing the principal design parameters for the new class of submarine. As part of that work the Prime Minister announced in March 2009 that the next generation of submarine would carry only 12 missile tubes, compared to the 16 missile tubes aboard the current Vanguard-class.²

The IPT is also examining potential solutions for the manning, training and infrastructure of the future nuclear deterrent; while in August 2008 the MOD awarded an enabling contract to QinetiQ and a number of other partners including BMT, Jacobs and Frazer Nash, to provide independent support, resource and assurance for the concept phase of the programme. That contract will also run until the end of September 2009. Deloitte has also been commissioned to provide ongoing independent validation of the cost model and of the cost inputs and assumptions that underpin that model, which are to be incorporated into the Initial Gate business case.

Other work is also focused on gathering information in relation to the potential refurbishment or replacement of the UK's nuclear warhead. A decision is expected to be required at some point during the life of the next Parliament. In answer to a Parliamentary Question on 8 July 2009 the Secretary of State for Defence commented:

The UK's existing nuclear warhead design is likely to last into the 2020s, although we do not yet have sufficient information to judge precisely how long we can retain it in service. We are currently undertaking detailed studies to assess this and potential options for replacement should that be necessary. It is too soon to estimate the precise timing and the potential costs of any options beyond the £2-3 billion estimate, at 2006-07 prices, given in the 2006 Defence White Paper.³

The MOD has also indicated, on several occasions, that due to the challenging timescale for delivering this programme, the design and construction phases of the programme will overlap.

2.1 NAO Report into the UK's Future Nuclear Deterrent Capability

In November 2008 the National Audit Office conducted a preliminary inquiry into the MOD's programme for maintaining the UK nuclear deterrent beyond the life of the current Trident system. Recognising the inherent difficulties in delivering complex defence projects,⁴ the focus of the NAO inquiry was on the major risks to delivery and the actions that the MOD is taking to mitigate those potential risks.

As part of its main findings the NAO concluded that:

² Each Trident II D5 missile is capable of carrying 12 warheads, therefore making the Vanguard-class technically capable of carrying 192 warheads per vessel. Under limits imposed by the 1998 Strategic Defence Review, however, each submarine carries a maximum of 48 warheads while on patrol.

³ HC Deb 8 July 2009, c791W

⁴ The NAO produces the *Major Projects Report* each year which examines the cost and timings of the top 20 post Main Gate programmes and the top 10 pre-Main Gate programmes. These are available online at: http://www.nao.org.uk/publications/0809/mod_major_projects_report_2008.aspx

- There is a challenging timetable to meet if continuous-at-sea-deterrence is to be maintained. The critical path for provision of a future deterrent capability is the delivery of the nuclear-powered submarine platform in time to meet an in-service date of 2024. But there are also possible time constraints from other areas of the programme. There is currently little scope for incorporating time contingency on the overall programme to deal with slippage in any of these areas.
- The technical complexity and the involvement of a wide range of partners, including other government departments and the United States, makes developing the design specification for the future submarine a challenging task.
- Our work has identified challenges which need to be addressed in the short term, such as the overall coordination of the programme. The Department is developing work schedules, progress monitoring and risk management arrangements, but these are not mature yet.
- The Department is improving the White Paper cost estimates but they are not yet sufficiently robust to support the future deterrent programme throughout its planned life. There remain a number of major areas of uncertainty in the budget, including the provision for contingency, inflation and Value Added Tax. Budgetary control arrangements are still being developed and there are some areas of potential risk which need to be addressed.
- The 2005 Defence Industrial Strategy sets out the Government's intention that Royal Navy submarines will be built in the United Kingdom. Suppliers to the submarine industry constitute a highly specialised industrial sector with a number of monopoly suppliers. There are difficulties inherent in providing the right incentives for monopoly suppliers to deliver to time and budget. Currently there is no single document which sets out convincing evidence of how the Department intends to assure value for money from its suppliers throughout the life of the programme. The Department is aware of this and will include criteria for assessing value for money in the procurement strategy it has under preparation.
- Both the Department and its industrial suppliers have identified skills shortages and are considering how to address them. These shortages relate to submarine building expertise within the industrial supply chain and financial, commercial, programme management and nuclear-related expertise within the Department.

On the basis of these findings and as an overall conclusion, the NAO stated:

The programme...is at an early stage. It is therefore not surprising that some critical arrangements and decisions required to deliver the future deterrent are still being developed [...] The Department has, however, made good progress in establishing programme management arrangements, coordinating all aspects of the future deterrent capability and engaging industry and other government departments. The risks identified in this report will need to be managed carefully if value for money is to be achieved over the life of this programme.⁵

Among its recommendations for addressing these issues, the NAO specifically suggested that "Critical to the successful maintenance of continuous at sea deterrence is establishing

⁵ National Audit Office, *The United Kingdom's Future Nuclear Deterrent Capability*, HC 1115, Session 2007-08

with greater certainty how far the life of the current Vanguard class of submarines can be safely extended".⁶

A copy of the NAO report is available online at:

http://www.nao.org.uk/publications/0708/nuclear_deterrent_capability.aspx

In its response to the subsequent Public Accounts Committee report which also highlighted many of these issues, the Government made the following comments:

- The department is on course to have a robust (and independently assured) cost model to support Initial Gate in Autumn 2009 [...] In accordance with the Department's approvals process, the Initial Gate business case will state how VAT, inflation and contingency will be handled [...] the actual tax treatment cannot be determined until nearer the time the contracts are placed and the precise manner in which we will procure the programme elements has been determined [...]

Uncertainty and risk will be incorporated into cost estimates in the usual way. The Department will, via the Future Deterrent Management Board, maintain oversight of costs across the programme and take action where required to control costs, for example by making design trade-offs where necessary.

- The Department has committed to providing an annual cost report to Parliament, which will contain a cost comparison between the programme and the initial estimates contained in the White Paper [...] The first report will be presented to Parliament by the end of the year [2009].
- Overlapping design and production phases is not something which is unique to the future submarine programme – it is a characteristic of most complex engineering programmes in defence or elsewhere. Whilst non-overlapping programmes reduce certain risks by requiring that designs are fully mature before manufacture commences, longer timescales also increase the risk of obsolescence. Modern engineering design and manufacture tools and programme management methods enable the risk of overlapping project phases to be effectively managed.⁷

3 Initial Gate Review and the Debate on Parliamentary Scrutiny

Recent reports suggested that any investment decision at Initial Gate could be delayed until after the 'nuclear summit' in the US in spring 2010 (see section 6 below) and potentially even after the next general election,⁸ given that the Prime Minister had indicated that cuts to the UK's nuclear arsenal could be made as part of any collective agreement.

A number of commentators have also called for an Initial Gate decision to be delayed in order to allow for a Parliamentary debate on the issue; while others have argued that the Initial Gate decision should be subject to a vote in the House of Commons. This latter point

⁶ National Audit Office, *The United Kingdom's Future Nuclear Deterrent Capability*, HC 1115, Session 2007-08, p.7

⁷ *Treasury Minutes on the Fourth to the Sixth, the Eighth to the Eleventh and the Thirteenth to the Sixteenth Reports from the Committee of Public Accounts 2008-2009*, Cm 7622, May 2009

⁸ See "Doubts raised over nuclear deterrent in Britain", *The Times*, 17 July 2009 and "Brown shows sense on trident plans", *The Financial Times*, 20 July 2009

has been regarded as particularly pertinent following a Guardian/ICM poll in July 2009 which indicated that 54% of all voters would prefer to abandon the UK nuclear deterrent than put money into a next generation nuclear capability; while only 42% backed renewal.⁹ In a similar poll in 2006 51% of respondents backed the renewal of trident, while 39% opposed it.¹⁰

Whether the Initial Gate review of the Trident successor programme could be delayed, however, without impacting on the tight timeframe for introducing the new capability and retaining a continuous at sea deterrence, is open to question. In its report the National Audit Office stated that in order to meet a challenging timetable “the Initial Gate decision to enter the Assessment phase and place a full design contract for the submarine must be taken by September 2009”.¹¹ The NAO report went on to state that:

During 2008 the concept phase slipped by six weeks. However, the timetable has been rearranged and the Department is confident that the concept phase can still be delivered on time. While this may be possible any further delays will put significant pressure on the concept phase timetable.¹²

Indeed in response to media speculation that a decision could be delayed until after an election, the MOD issued the following statement:

Various national newspapers have reported that the future of Britain’s nuclear deterrent, Trident, is in doubt because it is claimed that decisions over its replacement could be delayed until after the general election. There has been no change in the Government’s position on Trident. The policy remains as set out in the 2006 White paper, and there has been no change to the timetable.¹³

3.1 A Parliamentary Vote?

In both the *Government Response to the Defence Select Committee report on the Trident White Paper* in May 2007 (HC 551, Session 2006-07) and during the debate in the House on 14 March 2007, the Government indicated that, although there are a number of decisions to be taken in the future, the appropriate form of scrutiny at such times would be determined by any future Government and Parliament. As such, the Government has neither committed itself to, nor ruled out, the possibility of a future vote on this issue.

During the debate on 14 March 2007, the then Foreign Secretary, Margaret Beckett, commented:

Some Members have sought assurances on whether this is only a provisional decision, dependent on further decisions down the line. Today’s decision does not mean that we are committing ourselves irreversibly to maintaining a nuclear deterrent for the next 50 years, no matter what others do and no matter what happens in the rest of the world. That would be absurd, unnecessary and, indeed, incompatible with the nuclear proliferation treaty. Nevertheless, the strategic case for maintaining the deterrent has been made, and has been laid out perhaps more fully than ever before. It is for the House to decide whether or not it supports that decision of principle. We must make a clear decision that confirms to the British people and the rest of the world that we are not abandoning our deterrent.

⁹ http://www.icmresearch.co.uk/pdfs/2009_july_guardian_poll.pdf

¹⁰ “Most voters want to scrap nuclear weapons – ISM poll”, *The Guardian*, 14 July 2009

¹¹ National Audit Office, *The United Kingdom’s Future Nuclear Deterrent Capability*, HC 1115, Session 2007-08, p.12

¹² National Audit Office, *The United Kingdom’s Future Nuclear Deterrent Capability*, HC 1115, Session 2007-08, p.18

¹³ MOD, *Defence in the Media*, 17 July 2009

Of course, if there were a fundamental change for the better in the strategic environment—in particular, massive significant progress on non-proliferation and disarmament—it would obviously be right for future Governments to look at the issue again, and inevitably they would. As I have said, further decisions will in any case be needed on the precise design of the submarines, on whether we need four or three, on whether to renew or replace the warhead, and on whether to participate in any American programme to develop a successor to the D5 missile. It will fall to future Governments and Parliaments to discuss the most appropriate form of scrutiny for those decisions. As I have said, this Government will ensure that there are regular reports to Parliament as the programme proceeds, and we will give the Select Committee our full co-operation as it maintains its regular scrutiny of these issues.¹⁴

Given the nature of the MOD procurement process and the commercial confidentiality that is associated with the award of procurement contracts it is debatable as to whether there would be any vote on the exact choice of system. In the early 1980s when decisions were being taken on the current nuclear deterrent there was no subsequent vote in the House (following the initial vote on 3 March 1981)¹⁵ on the placing of contracts for the specific platform chosen. Following a major change of policy in 1982 when the Government announced its intention to procure a different variant of the Trident system,¹⁶ there was, however, a debate and subsequent vote in the House.¹⁷

What both the then Prime Minister, Tony Blair, and the then Secretary of State for Defence, Des Browne, did suggest was the possibility of Parliament re-visiting this issue around the placing of main contracts (Main Gate) which is expected to occur within the 2012-2014 timeframe. The Prime Minister commented:

However, let me try to explain why I think we have still got to take this decision today. It is absolutely right that this Parliament cannot bind the decisions of a future Parliament and it is always open to us to come back and look at these issues. He is right to suggest that when we get to the gateway stage—between 2012 and 2014—when we let the main contracts for design and construction, it will always be open to Parliament to take a decision. However, I believe that the reason why we have to take the decision today is that if we do not start the process now, we will not be in the position in 2012 or 2014 to continue with the nuclear deterrent should we wish to do so.

The real dilemma is that we decided rightly or wrongly—but I think rightly—that we should seek parliamentary approval even for the design and concept stage. When we came to the previous Trident nuclear submarine, it was only at a later stage that parliamentary approval was sought. That was much criticised at the time, so we decided that we should seek parliamentary approval at the very beginning of this process. Of course, it is a statement of fact that the gateway takes place at a later stage and in a later Parliament but if we want to spend at least the more limited sum of money now on the concept and design stage, we have to take a decision now.¹⁸

The Secretary of State also stated:

Our position was set out earlier today by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister when he said, “It is absolutely right that this Parliament cannot bind the decisions of a future Parliament and it is always open to us to come back and look at these issues...when

¹⁴ HC Deb 14 March 2007, c309-310

¹⁵ Division No.89, 3 March 1981

¹⁶ The decision was taken to procure the Trident II D5 instead of the Trident I C4 missile.

¹⁷ HC Deb 29 March 1982, c21 onwards.

¹⁸ HC Deb 14 March 2007, c284

we get to the gateway stage—between 2012 and 2014—when we let the main contracts...it will always be open to Parliament to take a decision.” This happened when the previous generation of submarines was built, and it would be surprising if it did not happen again. However, the precise details of how future Parliaments should approach this issue is something that they must decide.

As the Prime Minister went on to say, the fundamental point is that we need to take a decision now to start the process, and we have deliberately chosen to bring this decision to Parliament at the right time at the start rather than proceeding in secret and then presenting it later as a foregone conclusion. The hon. Member for North Devon is absolutely right when he says that we are asking the House not just to keep our options open but to take the big decision—the decision in principle.¹⁹

In December 2008 the then Secretary of State for Defence, John Hutton, reiterated:

Mr. Hutton [*holding answer 10 December 2008*]: As we have said before, it is our expectation that decisions will be taken on the Initial Gate for the programme to develop a new class of submarine to replace the current Vanguard class in autumn 2009. It is not normal for Parliament to be involved in Initial Gate decisions for procurement projects. Main Gate for this programme is still several years away. As we have also said before, we propose to update Parliament on progress after Initial Gate.²⁰

However, there are a number of organisations which have continued to argue that there should be further votes in Parliament at the key stages along the acquisition cycle, and primarily at Initial Gate. On its website CND commented:

In July 2007, [then] Defence Secretary Des Browne, stated that a report on the progress of the new submarines would be made after the 'Initial Gate' point of the project (end of the 'concept phase') in 2009. We are working to ensure that there will be a proper public and parliamentary debate and vote, at this 'Initial Gate' stage of the process.²¹

Dr Nick Ritchie of the Department of Peace Studies at the University of Bradford also published a paper in December 2007 which argued that the government had only sought approval for the initial concept phase work of the programme and that further votes should also therefore be held. A copy of his paper is available at:

<http://www.brad.ac.uk/acad/bdrc/nuclear/trident/briefing1.html>

In its June 2009 report on *Global Security: Non-Proliferation* the Foreign Affairs Select Committee argued:

In its response to this report, the Government should update us on the progress of the timetable for renewal of the trident submarines. We recommend that the Government should not take any decision at the Initial Gate stage until Parliament has had the chance to scrutinise the matter in a debate.²²

¹⁹ HC Deb 14 March 2007, c397

²⁰ HC Deb 10 December 2008, c341-2W

²¹ <http://www.cnduk.org/index.php/campaigns/trident/no-to-trident.html>

²² Foreign Affairs Select Committee, *Global Security: Non-Proliferation*, HC 222, Session 2008-09

That report went on to state:

We further recommend that the Government should specify whether there are circumstances under which the UK would be prepared to suspend the Trident renewal programme.²³

The IPPR's Commission on National Security headed by Lord Ashdown and Lord Robertson, also recommended in its final report in June 2009 that "before any further decision of substance is taken on this matter, Parliament must have a further opportunity to vote".²⁴

In answer to a Parliamentary Question on 13 July 2009, however, the Secretary of State for Defence, Bob Ainsworth, commented:

9. Danny Alexander (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (LD): When he expects the initial gate decision on the planned replacement of the Trident nuclear deterrent to be made; and if he will make a statement. [285629]

The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr. Bob Ainsworth): We currently expect to consider initial gate later this year.

Danny Alexander: I am grateful to the Secretary of State for that answer. However, given that a number of people, including retired military officers, former Defence Secretaries and academics, are now saying that Trident is both irrelevant and unaffordable, will the Secretary of State defer the initial gate process and the hundreds of millions of pounds that it would commit us to spending until a further, full debate in this place that takes into account the new financial and strategic circumstances?

Mr. Ainsworth: Initial gate does not entail the commitments that the hon. Gentleman talks about, and the answer is no.²⁵

In its response to the Foreign Affairs Committee report, published in August 2009, the Government reiterated:

The Government's decision to renew Trident is fully consistent with all our international obligations and with our strong support for multilateral nuclear disarmament. We are working hard with others to create the conditions which would allow complete and verifiable nuclear disarmament and a world free from nuclear weapons. And, as the Prime Minister stated on 17 March, as soon as it becomes useful for the UK's nuclear arsenal to be included in broader multilateral negotiations, Britain stands ready to participate and to act. But a decision now not to renew Trident would pre-empt this multilateral negotiation by committing a future government to unilateral disarmament at the end of the current submarine fleet's lifespan, regardless of the strategic circumstances at the time [...]

Our current plan remains to consider an approvals case in the autumn. We will of course continue to review the most appropriate time to consider this case. Initial Gate is about evaluating the relative technical and engineering merits of potential submarine designs and selecting one broad submarine design to allow for detailed design work to be carried out. Because of the technical rather than policy nature of the decisions required at Initial Gate, Parliament does not get involved in the Department's procurement process at this stage, although we do propose to update Parliament on progress after Initial Gate. The main investment decision point for this programme, and

²³ *ibid*

²⁴ IPPR Commission on National Security in the 21st Century, *Shared Responsibilities: A National Security Strategy for the UK*, 30 June 2009

²⁵ HC Deb 13 July 2009, c13

the point at which we would issue the main construction contracts to industry, will not be reached until around 2024.²⁶

4 Budget Issues

In its 2006 White Paper the government indicated that the potential outright procurement costs (in 2006-07) prices for the replacement of the Trident system and its associated infrastructure would be in the region of £15-20bn (£11-14bn for a class of four submarines, £2-3bn for support infrastructure and £2-3bn for the replacement of the warhead should that prove necessary). The years of maximum expenditure are expected to be principally 2012-2027. In addition, in-service costs for the deterrent between 2020 and 2050, including the cost of maintaining the AWE infrastructure, are expected to be broadly the same as at present i.e. 5-6% of the defence budget.

In addition to these acquisition and in-service costs, the MOD has also estimated that there will be some “preparatory and enabling” costs associated with extending the existing deterrent and developing future systems. Those costs have been estimated at £2bn in 2006-07 prices and include elements of the Nuclear Warhead Capability Sustainment programme, the Vanguard Life Optimisation Programme which will be required to extend the life of the current submarine fleet, and the Trident II D5 life extension programme at a cost of £250m.

Thus far the MOD’s Investment Approvals Board has approved a budget for the concept phase work of £309.5m, £130.5m of which was earmarked for work on the platform and £179m for the propulsion plant. The breakdown of those costs between 2006-07 and 2009-10 was set out in the NAO’s report into the replacement of Trident:

BOX 5					
Approved and actual expenditure to date for the concept phase					
£ million	2006-07	2007-08	2008-09	2009-10	Total
Platform					
Approval	7.3	26.6	57.6	39.0	130.5
Expenditure	7.3	16.0	16.4 ¹	-	-
Propulsion Plant					
Approval	9.7	24.6	80.3	64.4	179.0
Expenditure	9.7	22.9	10.0 ¹	-	-

NOTE
1 Sums accrued up to the end of June 2008.

As the NAO has noted “the Department is planning to announce more accurate cost estimates to Parliament at the end of the concept phase in autumn 2009”.²⁷ As outlined

²⁶ Foreign Affairs Committee, *Global Security: Non-Proliferation, Response of the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs*, Cm 7692, session 2008-09

²⁷ National Audit Office, *The United Kingdom’s Future Nuclear Deterrent Capability*, HC 1115, Session 2007-08, p.26

above, the NAO has also identified major areas of uncertainty with respect to the costs of the programme, including the as of yet unidentified impact on the project of defence inflation and VAT. The NAO report also highlights exchange rates between the US dollar and sterling as a potential problem given the plan to source a range of components from the United States; along with fluctuations in the cost of materials.

5 Multilateral Nuclear Disarmament and the 2010 NPT Review Conference

In the last year the issue of multilateral nuclear disarmament has moved back up the international agenda. The principal focus of that agenda has been the ongoing negotiations between the US and Russia on a successor treaty to the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START), which is due to expire in December 2009, and on preparatory work for the next five-yearly review conference of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) which will be held in May 2010. At the G8 summit in July 2009 President Obama also proposed holding disarmament talks in Washington in March 2010 as a precursor to the NPT review conference.

More broadly there has also been new international support for the vision of a nuclear weapons-free world. In January 2008, a cross-party group of senior US statesmen not previously associated with anti-nuclear positions - former Secretaries of State Henry Kissinger and George Shultz, former Secretary of Defense Bill Perry and former Senator Sam Nunn - launched an initiative to this end.²⁸ Former UK Foreign and Defence Secretaries Lords Hurd, Owen and Robertson and Sir Malcolm Rifkind have aligned themselves with the initiative,²⁹ as have the German statesmen Helmut Schmidt, Richard von Weizsäcker, Egon Bahr and Hans-Dietrich Genscher.³⁰ A separate campaign for 'Global Zero: a World Without Nuclear Weapons', launched in December 2008, has also secured heavyweight support, from figures including ex-heads of state, prime ministers, foreign ministers and national security advisers, including, from the UK, former Foreign Secretaries Margaret Beckett, Sir Malcolm Rifkind and Lords Hurd and Owen.³¹

5.1 Negotiations on a Successor to START

While still in office, ex-Presidents Bush and Putin committed themselves to the negotiation of a "legally binding post-START arrangement",³² although talks only got underway after a change of administration in both countries. At their first meeting in London in April 2009, Presidents Obama and Medvedev announced that they were opening negotiations on "new and verifiable reductions" in their strategic offensive nuclear arsenals, beginning with a "new, legally-binding treaty" to replace START I.³³ Those talks got underway in May 2009. At their summit in Moscow in early July, Presidents Obama and Medvedev announced that they had signed a "joint understanding" to reduce their numbers of nuclear warheads to between 1,500 and 1,675 each. The US currently has 2,200 operational warheads, according to the

²⁸ "A World Free of Nuclear Weapons", *Wall Street Journal*, 4 January 2007; "Toward a Nuclear-free World", *Wall Street Journal*, 15 January 2008

²⁹ "Start worrying and learn to ditch the bomb", *The Times*, 30 June 2008

³⁰ "Toward a nuclear-free world: a German view", *International Herald Tribune*, 9 January 2009

³¹ Further information is available at: www.globalzero.org

³² "US-Russia Strategic Framework Declaration", Sochi, 6 April 2008

³³ "Joint Statement by President Dmitry Medvedev of the Russian Federation and President Barack Obama of the United States of America", 1 April 2009, via www.whitehouse.gov

Bulletin of Atomic Scientists, and Russia has 2,790. President Obama said that a final treaty to confirm the cuts would be signed by the two Heads of State by the end of 2009, when the 1991 START Treaty is due to expire. The two sides also pledged to reduce long-range ballistic missiles to between 500 and 1,100 each. The new limits would be achieved within seven years of the treaty coming into force. The new treaty will have a verification regime which draws on its START I predecessor.

US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton is due to visit Moscow in early September 2009 as the treaty nears completion. The Foreign Office said in August 2009 that the US-Russia talks were “progressing well and [were] on track to reach agreement before the current treaty expires.”³⁴ In a speech on 17 August 2009, Rose Gottemoeller, Assistant Secretary in the US State Department, said that “a great deal of work still needs to be completed to fill in the details.”³⁵

On the surface, the cuts in warhead numbers announced by Obama and Medvedev appear significant. However, they are less dramatic when compared to the commitments already made by the two sides in the 2002 SORT Treaty signed by the former Presidents George Bush and Vladimir Putin. SORT required the US and Russia to cut their nuclear arsenals to between 2,200 and 1,700 by 2012, potentially just 25 more than the new agreement.³⁶ Daryl Kimball, executive director of the Arms Control Association, agreed that the planned cuts are “modest” but that the US-Russian agreement is “vitally important” because it maintains “a system for verification and regulation of the world’s two largest arsenals”.³⁷

5.2 2010 NPT Review Conference

NPT review conferences are held every five years. The 2005 conference was largely considered among experts to have been a failure as it was unable to agree a substantive final document. In contrast, expectations for the 2010 conference are high as the NPT regime is seen to be facing serious challenges; while political conditions for progress on some NPT-related issues are seen to have improved, mainly because of the change of government in the US.

Since April 2009 the Obama administration has increasingly demonstrated its support for the multilateral disarmament agenda, not only through negotiations on a successor to START, but also by confirming that the US government would pursue ratification of the Comprehensive Nuclear Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT), and support the negotiation of a verified Fissile Material Cut-Off Treaty (FMCT).³⁸ The CTBT and FMCT were both measures to which NPT Member States committed themselves at the 1995 and 2000 NPT review conferences. An international conference on facilitating the entry into force of the CTBT will be held on 24-25 September 2009 at the UN in New York. In May 2009, the UN Conference on Disarmament also adopted a Programme of Work, for the first time in over 12 years. That Programme includes the negotiation of a FMCT which is expected to get underway at the UN in January 2010.

³⁴ FCO, *Fourth Report from the Foreign Affairs Committee Session 2008-09, Global Security: Non-Proliferation, Response of the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs*, Cm 7692, August 2009, p 10

³⁵ “Arms Control and International Security: The Long Road From Prague”, 17 August 2009

³⁶ The transcript of Obama and Medvedev’s press conference is available at:
http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Press-Conference-by-President-Obama-and-President-Medvedev-of-Russia/

³⁷ “U.S. and Russia to Reduce Arsenals”, *Washington Post*, 7 July 2009

³⁸ “Remarks by President Barack Obama, Hradcany Square, Prague”, 5 April 2009, via www.whitehouse.gov

Ahead of the NPT review conference, in May 2009 the NPT members agreed an agenda and rules of procedure for the conference, for the first time in 15 years. At the G8 summit in July 2009 Leaders also issued a statement on non-proliferation which identified universalisation and reinforcement of the non-proliferation regime as an urgent priority.³⁹ Among other things the G8 leaders reiterated their full commitment to the objectives and obligations of the three pillars of the NPT: non-proliferation, peaceful uses of nuclear energy and disarmament, and set out the intention to work together to strengthen the treaty and set realistic and achievable goals in each of those pillars. At that meeting President Obama proposed holding disarmament talks in Washington in March 2010 as a precursor to the NPT review conference. Around 30 states are expected to be invited, including the UK.

In its report on *Global Security: Non-Proliferation*, published in June 2009, the Foreign Affairs Committee reviewed the current state of the NPT regime and issues for the 2010 review conference.⁴⁰ In its August response to that report, the FCO identified “a significant change in the tone of the debate since the last review conference, not least due to the UK’s forward-leaning advocacy of a world free from nuclear weapons.”⁴¹ That advocacy has been firmly set out in two documents published by the Government in the last few months. In February 2009, the FCO published a policy information paper in support of this objective, entitled “Lifting the Nuclear Shadow: Creating the Conditions for Abolishing Nuclear Weapons”; followed in July 2009 by the Cabinet Office document *The Road to 2010*. That paper set out the Government’s agenda for international action on the three NPT pillars in the run-up to the review conference and beyond. The Government also argued that strengthened action on nuclear security should be added to the NPT regime as a ‘fourth pillar’, and that attention should also be devoted to the international governance of the non-proliferation regime, in the form of reform of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).⁴²

Ahead of the NPT review conference the UK will now pursue a number of measures including the hosting of a conference of the recognised nuclear weapon states in September 2009 in order to discuss confidence building measures required to enable further disarmament; promote the EU’s Action Plan on disarmament; take forward as a matter of urgency negotiations on a Fissile Material Cut-Off Treaty; and continue to pursue the entry into force of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty.

In its June 2009 Report, the FAC concluded that “The Government is correct to identify the 2010 Review Conference as critical for the future of [the international nuclear non-proliferation] regime”.⁴³ It also concluded that:

without decisive movement by the five recognised nuclear weapons states as a whole on nuclear disarmament measures, there is a risk that the 2010 Review Conference will fail [...] We [...] commend the Government on its public recognition of the link between nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation. We conclude that the

³⁹ A copy of the G8 statement on non-proliferation is available online at:

http://www.g8italia2009.it/static/G8_Allegato/2_LAquila_Statent_on_Non_proliferation.pdf

⁴⁰ Foreign Affairs Committee, Fourth Report of Session 2008-09, *Global Security: Non-Proliferation*, HC 222, Chapter 3

⁴¹ FCO, *Fourth Report from the Foreign Affairs Committee Session 2008-09, Global Security: Non-Proliferation, Response of the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs*, Cm 7692, August 2009, p 9

⁴² Cabinet Office, *The Road to 2010: Addressing the nuclear question in the twenty first century*, July 2009

⁴³ Foreign Affairs Committee, Fourth Report of Session 2008-09, *Global Security: Non-Proliferation*, HC 222, para 57

Government is correct to identify a vital need to reinvigorate multilateral nuclear disarmament, ideally before and certainly at the 2010 NPT Review Conference.⁴⁴

5.3 Trident and Multilateral Nuclear Disarmament

The Government has argued – most recently in *The Road to 2010* - that the decision to renew Trident is fully compatible with the UK's NPT obligations, because failing to renew the system would effectively set the UK on the path to unilateral nuclear disarmament, which is not required by the Treaty.⁴⁵ However, in its written evidence to the FAC in October 2008, the FCO said that “counter-proliferation efforts risk being undermined if other states perceive, rightly or wrongly, that the nuclear weapons states are not delivering on their side of the bargain and actively pursuing nuclear disarmament.”⁴⁶ In that evidence the FCO went on to state that “when it will be useful to include [the UK's nuclear weapons] in any negotiations to reduce warhead numbers, we will willingly do so.”⁴⁷

The Prime Minister has since reiterated this position, in a major speech on nuclear issues in March 2009,⁴⁸ and in remarks at the G8 summit in July.⁴⁹ In his March speech, the Prime Minister said that “If it is possible to reduce the number of UK warheads further, consistent with our national deterrence requirements and with the progress of multilateral discussions, Britain will be ready to do so.” In *The Road to 2010*, the Government said:

once the strategic conditions are established that allow the US and Russia to make substantial reductions beyond those being currently negotiated of their warhead stockpiles, we believe that it is likely to be appropriate for the UK to consider the size of its own stockpile of operationally available warheads.⁵⁰

In its August 2009 response to the FAC Report, the FCO said that it would “be necessary to continue the Trident renewal programme unless and until a decision can be made that the strategic conditions are now right for the UK to relinquish its nuclear deterrent.”⁵¹ However, the government has made clear that any move toward further disarmament would have to be part of a collective initiative and has ruled out the possibility of unilateral disarmament on the part of the UK. Indeed giving evidence to the FAC in February 2009, the then FCO Minister Bill Rammell seemed to suggest that a multilateral nuclear disarmament process would have to involve all the nuclear weapons states, not only the five nuclear members of the NPT, before the UK would put its nuclear arms on the table.⁵²

⁴⁴ Foreign Affairs Committee, Fourth Report of Session 2008-09, *Global Security: Non-Proliferation*, HC 222, para 57

⁴⁵ Cabinet Office, *The Road to 2010: Addressing the nuclear question in the twenty first century*, July 2009, para 5.38

⁴⁶ Foreign Affairs Committee, Fourth Report of Session 2008-09, *Global Security: Non-Proliferation*, HC 222, Ev 171

⁴⁷ Foreign Affairs Committee, Fourth Report of Session 2008-09, *Global Security: Non-Proliferation*, HC 222, Ev 181

⁴⁸ Speech on nuclear energy and proliferation, 17 March 2009, <http://www.number10.gov.uk/Page18631>

⁴⁹ “Trident may be part of price for deal on nuclear disarmament”, *The Times*, 10 July 2009

⁵⁰ Cabinet Office, *The Road to 2010: Addressing the nuclear question in the twenty first century*, July 2009, para 5.40

⁵¹ FCO, *Fourth Report from the Foreign Affairs Committee Session 2008-09, Global Security: Non-Proliferation, Response of the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs*, Cm 7692, August 2009, p 13

⁵² Foreign Affairs Committee, Fourth Report of Session 2008-09, *Global Security: Non-Proliferation*, HC 222, Qq 282-283

6 The Debate on Renewal

It is within the context of moves toward multilateral disarmament and pressures on the UK's defence budget that the renewal of the UK's strategic nuclear deterrent is now primarily taking place.

Critics have long argued that the funds required for a Trident replacement would be better spent on improving the UK's conventional forces and gaining new capabilities for counter-terrorist operations; while its advocates have argued that the price is comparatively small when compared with the strategic risks involved in renouncing the UK nuclear deterrent. Given the prevailing economic and political climate, the criticisms of lack of adequate equipment for British forces in Afghanistan and the shortfalls in the defence procurement budget for the foreseeable future,⁵³ that debate on whether a Trident successor is affordable, and indeed necessary, has once again risen to the fore.

In a letter to *The Times* in January 2009 a number of retired senior military officers, including the former Chief of the Defence Staff, Field Marshal Lord Bramall, suggested that the replacement of Trident would be a waste of money in the current strategic climate and that those funds would be much better spent funding the UK's conventional forces. That letter stated:

Nuclear weapons have shown themselves to be completely useless as a deterrent to the threats and scale of violence we currently, or are likely to, face - particularly international terrorism; and the more you analyse them the more unusable they appear.

The much cited "seat at the top table" no longer has the resonance it once did. Political clout derives much more from economic strength. Even major-player status in the international military scene is more likely to find expression through effective, strategically mobile conventional forces, capable of taking out pinpoint targets, than through the possession of unusable nuclear weapons. Our independent deterrent has become virtually irrelevant except in the context of domestic politics. Rather than perpetuating Trident, the case is much stronger for funding our Armed Forces with what they need to meet the commitments actually laid upon them. In the present economic climate it may well prove impossible to afford both.⁵⁴

Hugh Beach, writing in the February 2009 edition of *RUSI Journal*, also argued that the Government's commitment to maintain the nuclear deterrent without impacting on the conventional needs of the armed forces is "over the longer term... clearly undeliverable". He goes on to note that "in no other area of military provision is the justification of a general insurance against the unforeseen accepted".⁵⁵

Dr Nick Ritchie of the University of Bradford in his latest report *Trident: Stepping Down the Nuclear Ladder* also suggests that given the current economic climate, the potential for reducing the costs should be a major motivation for the Government to consider, at the very least, pursuing other options that would involve reducing both the size and operational status of the UK nuclear deterrent as opposed to either replacement on a like-for-like basis or complete unilateral disarmament. He notes:

⁵³ This debate is examined in more detail in Library Research Paper [RP08/57, British Defence Policy since 1997](#), 27 June 2008

⁵⁴ "UK does not need a nuclear deterrent: Letters to the Editor", *The Times*, 16 January 2009

⁵⁵ Hugh Beach, "Trident: white elephant or black hole?", *RUSI Journal*, February 2009

there is a genuine opportunity for the government to demonstrate international leadership with its own nuclear arsenal without recourse to unilateral nuclear disarmament that remains politically unacceptable at the present time. This includes opportunities to reduce the procurement and operational costs of the Trident replacement programme at a time of serious and growing pressure on the defence budget, to develop robust nuclear disarmament verification measures of international significance, and to reinforce the renewed global momentum towards a world free of nuclear weapons.

He goes on to argue:

The UK has entered a period of deep recession. The government's budget delivered in April 2009 suggested that the national debt will increase substantially over the next five years with little prospect of any major increase in public spending for the next two parliaments.

The UK defence budget is already under severe pressure. It cannot afford all of the large military projects currently in the pipeline or in the planning stages [...] The additional financial pressure from the current economic downturn also comes at a time when there is substantial concern that the government is underfunding operational missions leaving UK troops deployed abroad with insufficient and ineffective materiel and support [...]

Something will have to give and the economic, political and military wisdom of pursuing a like-for-like Trident replacement will face increasing scrutiny.⁵⁶

Indeed, Malcolm Chalmers, writing in the *RUSI Journal* in April 2009 suggested that moving away from a continuous-at-sea-deterrence status could be one option for easing the financial strain of this programme. He argued:

On current cost estimates, peak levels of spending on new missile submarines will reach around £1 billion per annum from 2015, and remain at that level for around a decade. During a period when the total defence budget is likely to be under greatly increased pressure, significant additional resources will have to be diverted into this single project.

Were the commitment to CASD to be loosened, however, the Vanguard replacement timescale might be significantly lengthened. The MOD is already planning some life extension work on the new submarines to allow the first new boat to enter service in 2024. Further studies are under way to assess the implications of extending this deadline further [...] a delay of a further five or so years before production begins could be very welcome in the MOD's current straitened financial circumstances.⁵⁷

He also goes on to note that "such a delay could have the further advantage of reducing the extent of the mismatch between the submarine replacement programmes of the UK and the US".⁵⁸

Dr Ritchie concluded that "the drive to replace trident appears to have more to do with the political and defence establishment's perception of Britain and its role and identity in the world than any immediate or projected security needs or strategic imperatives".⁵⁹ He goes on

⁵⁶ Dr Nick Ritchie, *Trident: Stepping down the Nuclear Ladder*, University of Bradford, May 2009

⁵⁷ Malcolm Chalmers, "Britain's new nuclear debate", *RUSI Journal*, April 2009

⁵⁸ *ibid*

⁵⁹ Dr Nick Ritchie, "Trident: still the wrong weapon at the wrong time for the wrong reasons", *Disarmament Diplomacy*, spring 2009

to argue that “for security, economic and non-proliferation reasons, rethinking the decision to proceed with Trident replacement is now necessary. To clear away the contradictions may well entail a reconceptualization of national political identity and what it means for Britain to exert leadership in the world”.⁶⁰

Yet, advocates of maintaining the UK’s strategic nuclear deterrent have continued to argue that the UK must retain the ultimate security guarantee in an increasingly uncertain world. As former Secretary of State for Defence, John Hutton, recently stated “we should never forget that the first business of Government is national security. Everything else is secondary”.⁶¹

This is a longstanding view that has been consistently held by Dr Julian Lewis, a Shadow Minister for Defence. Writing in the February 2009 edition of *RUSI Journal*, Dr Lewis argued:

Future military threats and conflicts will be no more predictable than those which engulfed us throughout the twentieth century. This is the overriding justification for preserving armed forces in peacetime as a national insurance policy. No-one knows which enemies might confront us during the next thirty to fifty years, but it is highly probable that at least some of them will be armed with weapons of mass destruction [...]

Strategic nuclear deterrence is largely irrelevant to the current counter-insurgency campaigns which are stretching the British army to the limit; we are fighting wars on a peacetime defence budget. As a result some senior Army officers are suggesting that we must choose between fighting what is called *the war* of the present, rather than insuring against the possibility of a *war* of a different kind in the indefinite future.

This choice is unacceptable, and the underlying message – that the era of high intensity state-on-state warfare is gone for good – is a dangerous fallacy. Every right thinking individual hopes that such warfare will never return; but to rely on this in the face of past experience would be foolhardy in the extreme.⁶²

Sash Tusa, writing in *The Times* in June 2009 has also commented:

Trident and its successor are as much about national power and Britain’s position in the world as about military effect. The five permanent members of the UN Security Council achieved their positions by being the victors of the Second World War. But now they retain those seats only thanks to their possession of credible nuclear deterrents [...] Anyone who does not think the seat valuable should be open enough intellectually to assess the diplomatic value of a Security Council veto [...] Cancel trident’s replacement and we join the second rank of European countries, on a par with Italy or Spain economically and militarily 9to say nothing of abandoning our obligations under the Non-proliferation treaty to protect European countries that lack such weapons) [...]

The next government, of whatever hue, will find out all too quickly that there are no easy cuts left in defence. Any decision is likely to have implications not just for jobs but also for Britain’s industrial and military capability. Cut the trident replacement, and Britain’s entire submarine manufacturing capability would be almost fatally undermined, making any future submarine programme unaffordable.

⁶⁰ *ibid*

⁶¹ John Hutton, “As long as others have nuclear weapons that can be aimed at us, we must never give up the ultimate deterrent”, *The Mail on Sunday*, 5 July 2009

⁶² Julian Lewis, “Soldiers against the bomb?”, *RUSI Journal*, February 2009

This is not an industry like civil nuclear power, where we might be able to look to an overseas supplier to fill a gap caused by a short-sighted costs-driven decision to delay or abandon a programme.⁶³

A report published in June 2009 by the Institute for Public Policy Research's *Commission on National Security in the 21st Century*, which was chaired by Lord Ashdown and former NATO Secretary General, Lord Robertson,⁶⁴ has also supported the view that a minimum credible deterrent should be maintained, but raised the question of whether other, more cost effective, options should be considered. The Commission also called for the issue to be considered within the wider context of a Strategic Review of Security. That report stated:

Trident

The Commission believes firmly in the need to pursue a world free of nuclear weapons and in the need for the UK to play an active role in bringing that about. In the meantime, and in relation to Trident, the Commission recommends:

Recommendation 17: The future of Britain's independent nuclear deterrent should be considered as an integral part of the recommended Strategic Review of Security. This should consider:

- Whether, as the Commission believes is the case, a minimum UK deterrent is still needed
- The best and most cost-effective way to provide it, including consideration of whether we should replace the Trident system, as is currently planned, seek to extend the life of the current system further or decide that some other system for providing Britain's deterrent in a nuclear armed world would be better suited to the strategic circumstances in which we then find ourselves
- The opportunity costs of maintaining our deterrent, in all its possible forms, for other sectors of the UK defence and security budget. This must take into account the costs that would be involved in decommissioning Trident and its facilities.

Recommendation 18: In order to maintain the option of refreshing the current system as part of the Strategic Review of Security, the UK should continue with the crucial ongoing preparatory work on the concept, design and assessment phases of the Trident refresh.

Recommendation 19: To provide maximum additional flexibility in our position, the UK should also now recommence detailed exploratory work on the costs and viability of a further run-on, beyond 2024, of the existing Vanguard submarine hulls, so that the Strategic Review of Security, should it conclude that Trident is the appropriate way to go, can also consider this option if desired.⁶⁵

John Hutton, in his piece for *The Mail on Sunday*, contested the view that a minimum deterrent could be maintained in a more cost effective manner, however. He stated:

Britain must retain the ability if necessary to defend itself by all of the military means at its disposal. Weakness only attracts greater dangers. It does not make threats go away. They are there whether we like it or not, whether we choose to acknowledge it or thrust our heads in the sand.

⁶³ "Without trident, the second division awaits", *The Times*, 22 June 2009

⁶⁴ A list of the other members of the Commission is available at: <http://www.ippr.org/security/?id=3106>

⁶⁵ IPPR Commission on National Security in the 21st Century, *Shared Responsibilities: A National Security Strategy for the UK*, 30 June 2009

To defend ourselves against these very different threats we need firstly to understand that our independent nuclear deterrent remains an absolutely essential pillar on which everything else depends [...] So it is right that we should now be taking the necessary steps to replace our current Vanguard submarines [...] No other delivery system – such as bombers or land-based missiles – could ever provide an equivalent level of deterrence. Our nuclear submarines are undetectable and cannot be taken out by a pre-emptive strike. That is why they provide the best form of nuclear deterrence available to us.

It is why we should not listen to those who suggest that there is a better, cheaper form of deterrence available to us. There isn't.⁶⁶

He went on to comment:

It is nonsense to say that we cannot afford trident any longer. If belts have to be tightened – and they do – this should not be done at the expense of national security. Replacing trident will cost the equivalent of 0.1 per cent of our GDP over the lifetime of the programme. It is a price well worth paying [...]

Who can predict what the world will look like in 50 years' time, because that is what you have to be able to do if you advocate unilateral nuclear disarmament [...] predicting the future nature of armed conflict is a perilous business. No one has a good track record. That is why the best possible policy for Britain is 'safety first'.⁶⁷

As a compromise position, the idea of extending the life of the current trident system while a more fundamental review of security could be undertaken has also been supported by the Chair of the Pugwash Group. In response to the retired generals' letter to *The Times* in January 2009 John Finney argued:

The £20 billion allocated to Trident renewal may not be a large sum in terms of overall defence expenditure, but there has never been a time when financial considerations were more crucial, and reports on better civilian, as well as military, projects for which the money could be better spent appear regularly in the media.

Moreover, in technical arguments presented to the Defence Select Committee at the time of the 2007 parliamentary debate on Trident renewal, acknowledged world experts convincingly demonstrated that the lifetime of the current system could – with further financial benefit – be extended [...]

Were we to postpone a decision on renewal, we would not only save money, but also create a space in which to assess fundamentally how the UK can best respond to the threats of today's world rather than of yesterday's.⁶⁸

Whether the extension of the current system would achieve significant cost savings is, however, open to question. Major upgrade programmes have historically proven to be costly and subject to serious delays due to the complexity of the platforms involved. The Nimrod MR4A upgrade programme for example is currently £789 million over budget and a little over seven and a half years late.⁶⁹

⁶⁶ John Hutton, "As long as others have nuclear weapons that can be aimed at us, we must never give up the ultimate deterrent", *The Mail on Sunday*, 5 July 2009

⁶⁷ *ibid*

⁶⁸ "Sabre rattling and a British nuclear deterrent: letters to the Editor", *The Times*, 20 January 2009

⁶⁹ National Audit Office, *Major Projects Report 2008*, HC64-II, Session 2008-09

In response to recent media speculation over the future of Trident the MOD reiterated its position thus:

The nuclear deterrent will not be funded at the expense of the conventional capabilities required by our armed forces. We are not in the business of choosing between protecting Britain against nuclear threats, or terrorism, or global warming. We must protect the country from all threats. It is the duty of the Government to protect the country in an uncertain world. Our nuclear deterrent has helped to ensure our security, and that of our allies, for 50 years. But we should not let our guard down against a future nuclear threat in such an uncertain world. The UK would only consider using nuclear weapons in self defence, including the defence of our NATO allies, and even then only in extreme circumstances. We remain fully committed to its goal of a safer world in which there is no place for any nuclear weapons, and continue to work hard internationally to achieve that goal. However, the Government believes it should take the decisions necessary to ensure our national security, and in the current security environment that includes retention of a minimum nuclear deterrent.⁷⁰

6.1 Position of the Main Political Parties

An article in *The Guardian* in May 2009 suggested that the Conservative Party was in the process of re-assessing its position on the replacement of the strategic nuclear deterrent given the current state of the defence budget and the overarching financial crisis. That article quoted the Conservative leader David Cameron as stating at a press conference that:

We are in a very similar position to the government. We support things that are in the forward defence programme because we think there is good justification for all of them. But that doesn't mean in these difficult circumstances that you don't have to look – just as you're looking across government – look at all these things. But when you are reviewing spending you have to review all spending.⁷¹

That article went on to suggest that the shadow Cabinet was, however, divided over the issue with the Shadow Chancellor, George Osborne, arguing against the full Trident replacement in a bid to save money; while Shadow Foreign Secretary, William Hague, and the Shadow Defence Secretary, Liam Fox have suggested that the Conservative party should “honour the government's commitment to the project”. The Conservative Party have announced that it will conduct a major strategic defence review should it win the next general election and the future of the Trident replacement programme will undoubtedly form part of that assessment.

The Liberal Democrats have also called for the plans for an outright replacement of trident to be shelved. Despite previously adopting a non-committal stance on the proposals to replace the nuclear deterrent, the Liberal Democrat Leader, Nick Clegg, stated in June 2009 that “given that we need to ask ourselves big questions about what are priorities are, we have arrived at the view that a like-for-like Trident replacement is not the right thing to do”.⁷² This position was reiterated in the Liberal Democrat policy paper *A Fresh Start for Britain* which was published in July 2009. That document specifically identified the Trident replacement as one of the key areas of public spending where long term savings could be made.⁷³ As an alternative the Lib Dem leader has advocated the possibility of equipping the new Astute-class submarines with nuclear-armed cruise missiles or that the UK could retain a stockpile

⁷⁰ MOD Statement, 16 January 2009

⁷¹ “Tories cast doubt on £21bn Trident nuclear missile upgrade” *The Times*, 1 May 2009

⁷² “We won't replace trident because world has moved on says Clegg”, *The Guardian*, 17 June 2009

⁷³ <http://freshstart.nickclegg.com/spending/index.html>

of fissile material that could be turned into a nuclear missile capability within six to 24 months.⁷⁴

In contrast the Scottish National Party has continued to argue that the replacement of the UK's strategic nuclear deterrent is morally, economically and politically unacceptable. Defence Spokesman for the SNP, Angus Robertson, commented at the beginning of August 2009 that:

Speculation that the UK government is wasting billions of pounds on projects it cannot afford totally reignites the debate on trident renewal. In just a few weeks Gordon brown is set to sign-off £2bn worth of design work on these weapons of mass destruction.

People struggle to understand, at a time when budgets are tight across the armed forces and Scotland faces a £500 million budget cut from London, why the UK government is ploughing billions of pounds into a new generation of unwanted and unnecessary nuclear weapons.

Any way you look at it – on moral, economic or political grounds – renewal of this nuclear system is untenable.⁷⁵

An Early Day Motion tabled by SNP Leader Alex Salmond in July 2009 has subsequently called for any further decisions on the Trident replacement programme to be suspended pending the outcome of the Government's strategic defence review. EDM 1840 states:

That this House believes that investment in frontline public services must come before spending on weapons of mass destruction; welcomes the agreement on nuclear disarmament between the United States and Russia; notes the Government's intention to bring forward a Strategic Defence Review early in the next parliament; and further believes that any further commitments on the renewal of the Trident missile system should be suspended pending the outcome of that review.⁷⁶

⁷⁴ "We won't replace trident because world has moved on says Clegg", *The Guardian*, 17 June 2009. Both of these suggestions are also examined in greater detail in Library Research Paper RP06/53, *The Future of the British Nuclear Deterrent*, November 2006

⁷⁵ <http://www.snp.org/node/15554>

⁷⁶ EDM 1840, Session 2008-09. As of 1 September 2009 that EDM had 32 signatures.