



# British military attitudes to nuclear weapons and disarmament

A research report by Nuclear Education Trust and Nuclear Information Service

## Executive Summary

**I**N summer 2014, Nuclear Education Trust (NET) and Nuclear Information Service (NIS) undertook a short research project exploring individual attitudes within the UK military to nuclear weapons and disarmament. The research comprised 35 non-attributable semi-structured interviews conducted between July 2014 – February 2015, 20 of which were with people who had served with the armed forces. The interviews took place before a number of important decisions about the UK's nuclear weapons and defence environment, including a Strategic Defence and Security Review expected in autumn 2015, and the 'Main Gate' decision on Trident submarine replacement, expected in 2016.

While the majority of ex-military interviewees were in favour of the UK's continued possession of nuclear weapons, this view was not unanimous and there was some uncertainty underlying the clear statements of support. For example, many supporters had reservations concerning the cost of nuclear weapons. Moreover, there was a lack of clarity about their role and concern about the level of attention given to nuclear weapons decisions and deployment by senior decision-makers and within the armed forces.

Beyond the immediate research findings, the project showed that it is possible for non-governmental organisations to engage with armed forces staff and the broader military community, and that it is fruitful to do so. The project's short time-scale means that its results are a 'snap-shot' of views of the people interviewed at a given moment in time. There is a wide potential for similar research in the future, to extend the results both by increasing the interview sample size and reviewing relevant literature, and by exploring whether interviewees' attitudes change over time.

The variety of views collected emphasises that consideration of the UK's nuclear weapons is complicated and emotive, and that debate is not helped by the fact that many aspects of the nuclear arsenal are kept hidden. This suggests a need for more openness and better informed debate on the issues, including the UK's defence needs, whether Trident does or does not

meet these needs, and the costs and risks of nuclear weapons. Development of effective policy should seek to recognise, understand and address the full range of relevant concerns. In particular, the next Strategic Defence Review should take a genuinely strategic approach to the UK's security needs, including an assessment of the role of, and need for, the UK's nuclear weapons and the case for disarmament.

## **Overview of findings**

### **1. Should the UK have nuclear weapons and, if so, in what form?**

The majority of interviewees expressed support both for the UK's possession of nuclear weapons and for Trident submarine replacement. A significant minority expressed opposition to the UK's possession of nuclear weapons in general, principally on the basis of its costs and on the implausibility of claims made about its effectiveness. One respondent said he was undecided about the UK's nuclear weapons, emphasising that there is a need for a more open debate. Common among respondents was the view that most people in the military have little interest in Trident or wider aspects of the UK's nuclear weapons. There was also an expectation that when military personnel do have views on these matters, they loosely follow service lines. Navy personnel are seen as being most supportive as their service is responsible for deploying Trident, and Army personnel are seen as least supportive as they have the least to gain from the UK having nuclear weapons, with RAF personnel somewhere between these two positions.

### **2. How were the costs of the UK having nuclear weapons and Trident submarine replacement perceived?**

Interviewees opposed to, or undecided about, the UK having nuclear weapons commented that no circumstances justify the large amounts of money required by them and that this money would be better spent elsewhere. The views of those who supported the UK having nuclear weapons were mixed. Some – but not all – felt that nuclear weapons should receive a high priority within government spending, but there was also a broad view that conventional capabilities should not suffer as a result of the UK maintaining a nuclear capability. However, the implied trade-off between conventional and nuclear weapons was refuted by several interviewees, who felt that any potential savings from a change in nuclear policy would not be spent on conventional forces.

### **3. What role do nuclear weapons play in the UK's national security strategy?**

Most interviewees who supported the UK having nuclear weapons stated that the main role of the UK's nuclear weapons is deterrence. Whilst deterrence was by definition seen to fill a military need in defending the UK through averting aggression, there was not a single view on how deterrence actually works and what it deters. Responses included: the need to deter against future unspecified threats; to deter nuclear blackmail; to deter against nuclear threats;

and the importance of not specifying what Trident is deterring. Interviewees who opposed the UK having nuclear weapons contested all these views, arguing that deterrence is implausible and an empty threat. The view that nuclear deterrence only works between states was common, although several interviewees believed that non-state actors pose the biggest threat to the UK. There were also a number of comments that the idea of deterrence is context-specific and differs according to time and place. Several interviewees also noted that for deterrence to work, it requires tacit agreement about the need to avoid a nuclear exchange and that this view might not be understood by all nuclear armed states involved in confrontation or conflict.

#### **4. Are the UK's nuclear weapons military or political tools?**

Apart from deterrence, there were mixed views on the purposes of Trident, and whether it has more of a political or military role. Some interviewees explicitly made this distinction, arguing that decision-making on Trident is 'political', and that nuclear weapons should be financed from 'political' budgets, i.e. from outside Ministry of Defence budgets. Others mentioned implicitly political functions thought to be filled by Trident, including: building international prestige; being fundamental to the UK's position in NATO and the US-UK 'special relationship'; and enabling the UK to keep up with France. These views were far from universal and were contested by both supporters and opponents of the UK's nuclear weapons. Other comments highlighted the military functions that Trident is seen to fill. These included perceptions that the UK's nuclear weapons can do things that conventional weapons cannot, such as defending the country by deterring a nuclear attack.

#### **5. How was the UK's nuclear weapons decision-making process perceived?**

Some respondents were concerned about the way in which decisions on nuclear weapons and wider defence issues are made. Several interviewees opined that there has been deterioration in the understanding of and interest in nuclear weapons among decision-makers (seen as being a subset of the Cabinet). It was also noted that there has been a loss of industry personnel with broad knowledge of defence, which impacts on the completeness of technical advice available to decision-makers. Some interviewees were worried about aspects of recent national strategic reviews (e.g. the 2010 Strategic Defence and Security Review), noting that such reviews should have been based on a full analysis of strategic defence needs, how these should be met, and full costings.

#### **6. What are the risks associated with nuclear weapons?**

Despite the government's ideological and financial commitment to replace Trident submarines, some respondents reported less commitment to practical arrangements for delivering the nuclear weapons system. There were suggestions that awareness and understanding of nuclear weapons is less than in the past, that there has been a reduction in

relevant training for the military and for decision-makers, and that reduced attention is given to decision-making on this issue at the most senior level. Several interviewees also downplayed concerns about the risks associated with nuclear weapons, including those resulting from accident, inadvertent or deliberate use, stating that there has never been much risk of nuclear war and there is minimal risk of accidental or inadvertent use in the UK because of the high standards of engineering and deployment procedures.

## **7. Is global nuclear disarmament desirable and realistic?**

Many interviewees supported global nuclear disarmament, although one commentator noted that in his experience military personnel tend to be sceptical about this goal. Some supporters of global nuclear disarmament qualified their support, saying that it would be very hard to achieve. Others were even more doubtful, saying that a world without nuclear weapons is an unachievable utopia, whilst a few stated outright they did not agree with it as an aim. A number of interviewees stated that the best way to avoid the risk of nuclear war was to maintain effective deterrence although some acknowledged that strengthening the international non-proliferation regime would also help. Many were proud of the UK's track record in disarmament, identifying both unilateral and multilateral initiatives. Some felt that there was a limit to further UK actions, but others identified additional steps that the UK could and should take.

Download the full report from either the Nuclear Education Trust or Nuclear Information Service website: [www.nucleareducationtrust.org](http://www.nucleareducationtrust.org) [www.nuclearinfo.org](http://www.nuclearinfo.org)



The Nuclear Education Trust is a UK charity that works to advance education by promoting research into disarmament, defence and security, with an emphasis on nuclear weapons.

It funds a widely acclaimed peace education programme with a range of accessible materials for use in schools.



Nuclear Information Service is a not-for-profit, non-governmental information service which works to promote public awareness and foster debate on the risks and costs of the UK's military nuclear programme.