

THE **Real** Alternative

What the government's
Trident Alternatives Review
isn't telling you

Post-nuclear security for the 21st century



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Summary

- The question of whether or not to replace the Trident nuclear weapon system is of great security and economic importance. Therefore, ahead of the parliamentary vote in 2016, the full range of options must be explored.
- The decision must be taken on the basis of what will most contribute to the security of the British people, with a clear understanding of the security challenges of the 21st century.
- Omission of the 'non-replacement' option – the scrapping of Trident and the cancelling of its replacement – from both the Strategic Defence and Security Review (2010) and the Trident Alternatives Review (2013) is an 'abdication of responsibility' by the British Government.
- Non-replacement is a credible option, which offers serious strategic and economic benefits, including:
 - improved national security – through budgetary flexibility in the Ministry of Defence and a more effective response to emerging security challenges in the 21st century
 - improved global security – through a strengthening of the non-proliferation regime, deterring of nuclear proliferation and de-escalation of international tensions
 - vast economic savings – of more than £100 billion over the lifetime of a successor nuclear weapons system, releasing resources for effective security spending, as well as a range of public spending priorities
 - adherence to legal obligations including responsibilities as a signatory to the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT)
 - moral and diplomatic leadership in global multilateral disarmament initiatives such as a global nuclear abolition treaty and the UN's proposed Weapons of Mass Destruction-Free Zone in the Middle East

Introduction

AS Britain moves towards the 2016 decision-point on whether or not to replace the Trident nuclear weapons system, it is absolutely vital that the option of non-replacement is fully explored. Taking a ‘yes’ decision will mean Britain remains a nuclear-armed state - at huge public expense – for at least another half century. Such a decision would have huge consequences, in terms of our economy, our security, our legal obligations and our moral responsibility. To ensure that the 2016 decision best meets Britain’s needs, parliamentarians must be presented with the full range of information available.

To review the future of our nuclear weapons system without considering non-replacement is an abdication of responsibility by government, whose chief role is to ensure the security of the British people. The failure of the Trident Alternatives Review to include the non-nuclear option – the option of scrapping Trident and cancelling its replacement – renders it inadequate to address the security challenges that Britain – and the world – faces in the twenty-first century.

The decision on whether or not to replace Britain’s nuclear weapons system must be taken on the basis of what will most contribute to the security of the British people. A decision not to replace Trident will best meet that requirement. It will strengthen the international disarmament and non-proliferation regime by ensuring Britain’s compliance with its international treaty obligations; it will deter nuclear proliferation and de-escalate current global and regional tensions; and it will release significant financial resources to meet a range of public spending priorities, including meeting the new security challenges of the twenty-first century. A decision not to replace Trident must be taken in tandem with government initiatives towards its stated goal of multilateral disarmament: backing a global nuclear abolition treaty, actively working towards a Middle East WMD-Free Zone and supporting the work of the International Red Cross and others on the humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons use.

Why we don’t need it: for our security

Britain’s greatest current security threat is generally accepted to be terrorism, perpetrated by non-state actors. It is widely agreed that nuclear weapons are no use against such threats, and this point was certainly made by the Prime Minister who oversaw the pro-Trident replacement White Paper in 2006, Tony Blair, who stated in October 2005: ‘I do not think that anyone pretends that the independent nuclear deterrent is a defence against terrorism.’¹ However, Blair also made it clear that he believed that Britain should maintain its ‘independent nuclear deterrent’. Subsequent reading of Tony Blair’s autobiography indicates that the former Prime Minister was more equivocal about the case for Trident than he publicly stated, but that he was ultimately convinced by the status that he felt nuclear weapons endowed. Others such as Dr John Reid, on opening the public debate on the matter in September 2005, appeared to suggest that Britain needed to replace Trident in case we face a nuclear enemy in the future. In fact these two positions remain the chief arguments articulated in favour of Trident and its replacement – that without them our global standing would be downgraded and that we need them ‘just in case’. Such thinking

seems much at odds with the more realistic and forward-looking analysis and assessment of the current government's National Security Strategy (NSS), published in autumn 2010. Whilst identify a range of twenty-first century threats, including climate change, pandemics, organised crime and cyber warfare – as well as terrorism – the NSS downgrades the risk of state on state nuclear warfare to a tier two threat. At the same time, the government's Strategic Defence and Security Review did not question the continued validity of the Cold War nuclear weapons system Trident and the enormous level of spending on it. The opportunity cost of such spending, which had by that time been assigned to the Ministry of Defence budget, was noted by many, from the military and beyond.

Nuclear weapons have been described as 'the United Kingdom's ultimate insurance policy in this age of uncertainty'.² This is an odd turn of phrase given that insurance policies are designed to pay out after an undesirable event has taken place – not to prevent them from happening. In this case, the nuclear 'insurance policy' would actually put Britain at greater risk. Replacing Trident could act as a driver for the proliferation of nuclear weapons. In the words of Kofi Annan, former Secretary-General of the United Nations, 'the more that those states that already have [nuclear weapons] increase their arsenals, or insist that such weapons are essential to their national security, the more other states feel that they too must have them for their security.'³

Although pro-Trident elements within the government assert that there would be no lasting gains if the UK were to abandon its nuclear weapons programme, international experts disagree with this view. Dr Hans Blix, former United Nations weapons inspector and Chair of the WMD Commission, recently said that the UK should abandon Trident altogether and that this would be a 'big gain' towards disarmament, pointing out that 'Japan and Germany seem respected ... even without nuclear weapons'.⁴

In the eyes of some, Trident replacement serves to undermine and delegitimise the international non-proliferation regime. Ken Booth, Professor of International Politics at the University of Wales, Aberystwyth, has asked the pertinent question: 'If the present British government announces that it will retain nuclear weapons until about 2050, and if this contributes to the erosion of the norms so far sustaining the NPT (and history shows the fragility of international regimes when key states ignore their obligations) then what might British security look like, even if it possesses nuclear weapons, in a world of 20-plus nuclear powers?'⁵

Those who defend Britain's possession of nuclear weapons often refer to future unknown threats posed by the potential re-emergence of superpower nuclear rivals in decades to come – perhaps global competitors such as China, or nuclear-armed 'rogue states'. In 2006, the U.S. Department of Defense's Quadrennial Defence Review Report observed that China was the one of the major and emerging powers that has 'the greatest potential to compete militarily with the United States and field disruptive technologies that could over time offset traditional U.S. military advantages absent U.S. counter strategies'.⁶ China remains a rapidly growing economy despite some slowing of growth during the ongoing global economic crisis. For this reason, the rise of China remains a primary strategic concern of

Washington. The cases of Iran and North Korea and their actual or potential nuclear proliferation are also of significance, not least because they are regularly used in arguments favouring the retention of nuclear weapons. Both countries were included in the United States' 'Axis of Evil' and in the light of the US-led war on Iraq (the third country in the so-called Axis) not surprisingly had concerns for the security of their countries. The response of North Korea was a very clear indication of how proliferation can be provoked: it withdrew from the NPT, saying that it had a deterrent need to develop nuclear weapons. Whether or not Iran has intentions to develop nuclear weapons is unknown. It may be that it wishes to maintain a deliberate ambiguity about its capacities, also for deterrent purposes. Certainly there are many observers who take the view that Iran might well note the double standards of the West with regard to nuclear weapons and note that although Iraq was accused of having nuclear weapons, in fact it did not and was subsequently attacked. Certainly it is the case that our decision about Trident will help shape the future that we face. Remaining nuclear armed for at least another half century and by example encouraging other states to take the nuclear road, will ensure that we face those very threats in decades to come that we least want to see.

Why we shouldn't have it: the humanitarian consequences

Under international law, the use, or threat of use, of nuclear weapons, is illegal under virtually all conceivable circumstances. In 1996, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) ruled that 'the threat or use of nuclear weapons would be generally contrary to the rules of international law applicable in armed conflict, and in particular the principles and rules of humanitarian law.'⁷ The ICJ went on to state that 'the radiation released by a nuclear explosion would affect health, agriculture, natural resources and demography over a very wide area.'⁸

This concern over the humanitarian impact of the use of nuclear weapons is shared by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), which has identified further humanitarian consequences, including widespread famine and the destruction of medical facilities and personnel. The ICRC stated in a 2011 report: 'The use of even a limited number of nuclear weapons would affect the environment for many years and render agriculture impossible in vast areas, most likely causing mass starvation and disruption of global food distribution.'⁹ The report goes on to cite the 'likely destruction of health infrastructure and widespread death and injury of health-care professionals in areas affected [which] would increase human suffering exponentially.'¹⁰

Indeed, such ramifications of a nuclear explosion were acknowledged as a core issue at the NPT Review Conference in 2010, with the outcome document expressing 'deep concern at the catastrophic humanitarian consequences of any use of nuclear weapons'.¹¹ This led to the convening of an intergovernmental conference in Oslo in March 2013 to examine the 'immediate humanitarian impact of a nuclear detonation' and 'the possible wider developmental, economic and environmental consequences'.¹² It is disappointing to say the least that the UK government failed to attend this conference.

Why we shouldn't have it: the cost

The cost of replacing and running Trident will be well in excess of £100 billion. Press reports trailing publication of the Trident Alternatives Review suggest that scaling down the size of the Trident fleet, possibly to two submarines, and moving away from a posture of continuous at-sea nuclear patrols could result in capital savings of up to £5 billion and revenue savings of close to £1 billion annually in crew and maintenance costs.¹³ These figures are consistent with other published information about the costs of the replacement programme. However, they represent limited savings within the budget for 'like-for-like' replacement proposed in the 2006 White Paper (capital costs of £15–20 billion at 2006-7 prices and in-service costs of around 5–6% of the defence budget).

Within military and political circles, concerns about the costs of replacing Trident centre on the large proportion of the defence equipment budget that the programme will consume. The Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) estimates that spending on Trident replacement will reach a peak of around 30 per cent of the defence equipment budget by 2021/22 or 2022/23, when the first submarine begins production, and is likely to remain close to this level until 2028.¹⁴

Not surprisingly, military sources have questioned whether this money would be better spent on meeting more pressing and relevant needs which the armed forces have. Field Marshal Lord Bramall, General Lord Ramsbotham, General Sir Hugh Beach, and Major General Patrick Cordingley – four former senior military commanders – have written in *The Times* that 'replacing Trident will be one of the most expensive weapons programmes this country has seen. Going ahead will clearly have long-term consequences for the military and the defence equipment budget that need to be carefully examined'. They pointed out that 'this decision will have a direct impact on our overstretched Armed Forces, and that 'it may well be that money spent on new nuclear weapons will be money that is not available to support our frontline troops, or for crucial counterterrorism work; money not available for buying helicopters, armoured vehicles, frigates or even for paying for more manpower'.¹⁵ Former Prime Minister Sir John Major has taken a similar line, asking: 'What is the opportunity cost of Trident in the loss of conventional capability? In what circumstances, and upon whom, is Trident likely to be used? These are uncomfortable questions, but they must be answered before billions are committed'.¹⁶

Britain's overseas military allies are also said to share similar concerns about the impact that the UK's nuclear weapons programme is expected to have on conventional forces and our ability to contribute to joint missions. The *New York Times* recently claimed that American officials are quietly urging Britain to drop its nuclear weapons, quoting an unnamed senior American official as saying: 'Either they can be a nuclear power and nothing else or a real military partner'.¹⁷

Why we shouldn't have it: meeting our legal obligations

The United Kingdom has binding legal obligations in international law requiring it to take steps towards the eventual elimination of its nuclear weapons. These obligations have been accepted by successive governments, both Labour and Conservative.

The UK is a depositary state for the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (Non-Proliferation Treaty – NPT),¹⁸ giving it a duty to ensure that the Treaty is properly executed. Under Article VI of the Treaty nuclear weapon states have an obligation ‘to pursue negotiations in good faith on effective measures relating to cessation of the nuclear arms race at an early date and to nuclear disarmament, and on a treaty on general and complete disarmament under strict and effective international control’.

The Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty¹⁹ (CTBT) was signed in 1996 but has yet to come into force, although it has been ratified by, and is thus binding on, the United Kingdom. The Treaty bans all nuclear explosions globally whether for military or for peaceful purposes. The Preamble to the Treaty recognises the importance of ‘constraining the development and qualitative improvement of nuclear weapons and ending the development of advanced types of nuclear weapons’ – raising questions as to whether the development of a new warhead – as has been suggested by the Ministry of Defence (MoD) – would be lawful.

In 2000 the UK, along with other nuclear-weapon-states, gave ‘an unequivocal undertaking to accomplish the total elimination of their nuclear arsenals’ in the ‘13 practical steps’ adopted at the NPT Review Conference that year.²⁰ The obligations of the nuclear-weapon-states to take steps towards disarmament were reaffirmed in the Final Document and Action Plan agreed at the 2010 Review Conference of the Non-Proliferation Treaty.²¹

Expert legal opinion indicates that replacing Trident would not be acceptable under the NPT. In a legal opinion commissioned in 2005 by Peacerights, Rabinder Singh QC and Professor Christine Chinkin concluded that replacement of Trident is likely to constitute a breach of Article VI of the NPT, saying: ‘It is difficult to see how unilateral (or bilateral) action that pre-empts any possibility of an outcome of disarmament can be defined as pursuing negotiations in good faith and bring them to a conclusion and is, in our view, thereby in violation of the NPT, article VI obligation’.²²

Why we shouldn't have it: safety risks

The consequences for the UK of remaining a nuclear-weapon-state will be neither neutral nor benign if a serious accident involving nuclear weapons takes place in the UK. Accidents can and do happen: production of plutonium for the nuclear weapons programme resulted in the UK's worst nuclear accident, the Windscale fire in 1957,²³ and there have been a number of documented accidents which have resulted in the dispersal of radioactive material or breakup of US nuclear weapons.²⁴

Some of the more significant ‘near miss’ incidents which have been reported as occurring in the UK's military nuclear programme over recent years include:

- Grounding of the Trident submarine HMS Victorious on the Skelmorlie Bank in the Clyde Estuary on 29 November 2000.²⁵
- Serious flooding at the Atomic Weapons Establishment (AWE) at Burghfield on 20 July 2007 which caused damage valued at £5 million and resulted in the plant being out of action for 9 months.²⁶
- A series of leakages of radioactive coolant from the Clyde submarine base at Faslane in 2004, 2007 and 2008, said to be sufficiently serious for the Scottish Environmental Protection Agency to warn that it would consider closing the base down if it had the legal powers to do so.²⁷
- A collision between the Royal Navy's Trident submarine HMS Vanguard and French nuclear armed submarine MN Le Triomphant whilst submerged at sea on the night of 3-4 February 2009, which required each vessel to return to port for repairs.²⁸
- A fire in an explosives processing area at AWE Aldermaston on 3 August 2010 which left one worker injured and required the precautionary evacuation of nearby homes.²⁹
- Discovery of corrosion in the structure of one of the main nuclear processing buildings at AWE Aldermaston, resulting in closure of the building and a year-long remediation programme.³⁰

Conclusion

BRITAIN currently faces no nuclear threat, and no other security threat that can be resolved through the possession or use of nuclear weapons. Possession of nuclear weapons does not deter terrorist attacks and the continued possession of them, in spite of NPT obligations, is more likely to lead to nuclear proliferation than to counter it. The current selective approach of the US and Britain towards nuclear weapons proliferation and treaty compliance – condoning and even encouraging states like Israel and India in their illegal possession – and attacking Iraq on unfounded suspicion of possession of weapons of mass destruction, can only turn countries away from NPT compliance. The orientation during the past decade towards illegal pre-emptive war by both the US and Britain contributes to an increase in global tension and instability and can lead countries to think they need their own nuclear ‘deterrent’.

As new economic powers emerge, so there is the possibility that they may choose to develop large nuclear arsenals, capable of threatening or destroying other states. They are more likely to do so under political or military pressure from other nuclear-armed states, in response to a perceived threat to their own security. It is by no means a foregone conclusion that any emerging economic power would wish to invest large sums of money in arms, which could be profitably invested in other economic sectors, or in advancing the well-being of their populations.

A significant move to generate multilateral negotiations on disarmament, building on the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) and advancing President Obama's orientation towards nuclear disarmament, could begin to resolve both the current danger of proliferation and global instability, which has been exacerbated by the recent policies of

Britain and the US, and the possible longer term threat of the rise of a nuclear-armed superpower enemy. We have seen in the past how courageous initiatives can lead to substantial disarmament, and the international situation cries out for another such initiative which could help put the world firmly on the path to global abolition. A decision by Britain not to replace Trident would be such a move. It would help to restore confidence in the possibility of NPT compliance and would demonstrate that relations between nations, and resolution of their security concerns, can be built within the framework of international law.

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- ⁷ International Court of Justice, 1996, Legality of the Threat or Use of Nuclear Weapons, 105.2.E:
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<http://www.icrc.org/eng/war-and-law/weapons/nuclear-weapons/index.jsp>
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- ¹¹ Final Document, Vol. 1, 2010 Review Conference of the Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons: <http://www.un.org/en/conf/npt/2010/>
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