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## Replacing Trident is against both our national interests and our international obligations

Robin Cook *Guardian Article* Friday July 29, 2005

Down at Aldermaston they are spending hundreds of millions of pounds of your money on a refit of the production line for nuclear warheads. We are assured this does not mean that any decision has been made to replace the Trident nuclear system. Dear me no, the investment is merely intended to keep open our options.

If we want to exercise the option of producing more weapons, we are told we must make up our minds in this parliament. This is not because Trident is in imminent danger of going out of service. The British submarines can keep on diving and surfacing for another two decades. The problem is that it will take that long to order, build and commission another expensive fleet to replace them.

This is an excellent opportunity for Tony Blair to prove that he is a real moderniser. It is a fixed pole of his political pitch that he represents a clean break from old Labour. It was the Wilson government of the 60s that built, launched and named the Polaris fleet. It was Jim Callaghan who first struck the Trident deal with President Carter, eccentrically in a beach hut on Guadeloupe. There could not be a more convincing way for Tony Blair to break from the past and to demonstrate that he is a true moderniser than by making the case that nuclear weapons now have no relevance to Britain's defences in the modern world.

The justification for both Polaris and Trident was that we faced in the Soviet Union a great, hostile bear bristling with nuclear claws. The missiles were put on submarines precisely because the ocean bed was the only place they could hide from Russian firepower. But those are calculations from a long-vanished era. The Soviet Union has disintegrated, its satellites are our allies in the European Union, and the west is now sinking large funds into helping Russia to defuse and dismantle the warheads that we once feared.

No other credible nuclear threat has stepped forward to replace the Soviet Union as a rationale for the British nuclear weapons system. To be sure, two or three other nations have emerged with a crude nuclear capability, but none of them has developed the capacity or the motivation to attack Britain.

It is not easy to see what practical return Britain ever got out of the extravagant sums we invested in our nuclear systems. None of our wars was ever won by them and none of the enemies we fought was deterred by them. General Galtieri was not deterred from seizing the Falklands, although Britain possessed the nuclear bomb and Argentina did not. But the collapse of the cold war has removed even the theoretical justification for our possessing strategic nuclear weapons.

However, the spirit of the cold war lives on in the minds of those who cannot let go of fear and who need an enemy to buttress their own identity. Hence the vacuum left by the cold war has been filled by George Bush's global war on terror. It is tragically true that terrorism, partly as a result, is now a worse threat than ever before.

But nuclear weapons are hopelessly irrelevant to that terrorist threat. The elegant theories of deterrence all appear beside the point in the face of a suicide bomber who actively courts martyrdom. And if we ever were deluded enough to wreak our revenge by unleashing a latter-day Hiroshima on a Muslim city, we would incite fanatical terrorism against ourselves for a generation.



Investment in a new strategic nuclear system would be worse than an irrelevance. It would be an extravagant diversion of resources from priorities more relevant to combating terrorism. Trident cost us more than £12.5bn - roughly half the whole defence budget for a year. Even if its successor did not have a higher price tag, it could not be bought without cutting back on the conventional capacity of our armed forces. It will be more difficult this time to find the funds for a new nuclear weapons system without those cuts being painful, because the defence budget as a percentage of GDP is now much less than the level that accommodated the Polaris and Trident programmes.

Our army is already shedding both troops and tanks. Yet Britain's most valuable role in global stability is the professional, experienced contribution of our soldiers to peacekeeping missions, which earns us much more goodwill round the world than our nuclear submarines prowling the seas. The world would be less stable and Britain would be less secure if we were to trade in even more of those army units for son-of-Trident. It is not just peaceniks who would oppose such a choice. I suspect a clear majority of the officer corps would vote against diverting the defence budget into another generation of nuclear weapons.

It is not as if the large sums that would be required to keep us in the nuclear game would buy us an independent weapon. Dan Plesch documents in an impressive forthcoming report that all levels of the Trident system depend on US cooperation. The missiles are not even owned by us, but are leased from the Pentagon in an arrangement that Denis Healey once dubbed as "rent-a-rocket". Renewing our collaboration with the US on nuclear weapons will deepen the bonds between Downing Street and the White House, at the very time when the rest of the nation longs for a more independent stance.

It is therefore against Britain's national interests to replace Trident. It is also against our international obligations, notably the commitment in the non-proliferation treaty to proceed in good faith to nuclear disarmament.

To be fair, New Labour has so far had a decent record on progress towards this objective. In the past decade Labour has scrapped Britain's other nuclear weapons, signed up to the test ban treaty and reduced the alert status of our submarines by several days. But these positive steps will be reversed if we now charge off in the opposite direction by ordering a brand-new nuclear system.

There is a chasm too wide for logic to leap, between arguing that Britain must maintain nuclear weapons to guarantee its security, and lecturing Iran et al that the safety of the world would be compromised if they behaved in the same way.

Despite the current anxieties over proliferation, more nations have given up nuclear weapons over the past generation than have developed them. Brazil and Argentina negotiated a treaty to terminate their rival nuclear programmes. Ukraine and other former Soviet states renounced the nuclear capacity they inherited. South Africa, post-apartheid, abandoned its nuclear programme and dismantled its weapon capacity.

None of those countries regards itself as any less secure than before. Nor need we, if our leadership can find the courage to let Trident be the end of Britain's futile and costly obsession with nuclear-weapon status.

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