The Future of British Nuclear Weapons: Who Decides?

Oxford Research Group Consultation

Charney Manor, near Oxford, UK, December 8-10, 2004

Report of Proceedings

"Decisions on whether to replace Trident are not needed this Parliament but are likely to be required in the next one."

Geoff Hoon, Secretary of State for Defence, *Delivering Security in a Changing World Defence White Paper*, paragraph 3.11, December 2003

"Concept studies on options for platforms to carry the Trident missile in the longer term... began in May 2002 and finished in May 2003."

Geoff Hoon, Secretary of State for Defence, *Hansard*, column 356W, June 30, 2004

"A decision on replacing the Vanguard SSBNs is expected in the next two or three years, Admiral Alan West, First Sea Lord, told a Royal United Services Institute conference on maritime power in early May."

A. Chuter, *U.K. Debates Trident Sub Replacement*, DefenseNews, May 31, 2004

The in-depth dialogue that took place at an off-the-record consultation during December 2004 on the future of British nuclear weapons resulted in a rich exchange of different perceptions, positions, hopes, fears, and predictions. These have been consolidated and ordered below for future reference. This report does not represent a consensus of views other than where stated. The points raised do not represent all sides of the wider debate, only those raised and discussed during the consultation. This report was compiled by Oxford Research Group (ORG) and is based on ORG staff recordings and interpretations. The discussions were under Chatham House rules and so individual participants are not identified and remarks are not attributed.

1. Some questions posed the consultation

A number of questions were raised, not all of which were addressed

- **Does a decision need making in the next parliament?**
- **How will it be made and how can it be influenced?**
- **What is the appropriate process for making the decision and what does accountability mean in this context?**
- **What nuances in perception and position are there in government, the armed services, the Ministry of defence, Foreign Office, opinions of allies, Parliament and political parties?**
- **Does the UK need nuclear weapons now and for the foreseeable future and, if so, why?**
- **What does Britain want the international security environment to look like in 50 years and is long-term possession of nuclear weapons consistent with that aim?**
- **How does the UK decision fit in to the future of nuclear weapons on a global scale?**
- **Would the predicted benefits justify the probable cost?**
- **Do policy-makers believe in the risk of the re-emergence of an expansionist major military power against which British nuclear weapons would be a credible deterrent?**

2. Some key themes that emerged

- **Future uncertainty in international relations was seen as the primary rationale for retaining nuclear forces, rather than specific threats.**
- **The utility and validity of the theory of nuclear deterrence and nuclear war fighting in the contemporary security environment was questioned.**
- **Tensions were exposed between on the one hand a consensus that nuclear weapons would not be developed today if the UK did not already possess them, and on the other, the resistance to relinquishing the UK nuclear capability.**
- **It was argued throughout the consultation that the logic of deterrence dictates that every state should possess nuclear weapons for its own security. This was not reconciled with non-proliferation objectives.**
- **Any reassessment of Britain's nuclear forces needs to be done in the context of global security as a whole and not in isolation.**
- **Any discussion of nuclear weapons must keep the horrific destructiveness of these weapons at the forefront of the debate.**
- **Any decision will not be necessarily clear-cut at this stage and a parliamentary debate of some sort will take place.**

3. Rationale for retaining nuclear weapons

A number of arguments were made for retaining British nuclear weapons:

- **There was consensus that UK nuclear weapons are 'political weapons' not military weapons in the conventional sense, although they are the ultimate symbol of military power.**
- **It was argued by many that there is no contemporary military rationale for UK nuclear weapons, especially in the 'war on terrorism'. Nuclear weapons cannot deter terrorists.**
- **Many argued that if the UK did not have nuclear weapons now, there would be no contemporary political or military demand for acquiring.**
- **The utility of nuclear weapons and the concept of nuclear deterrence in relation to conventional warfare were debated. It was argued by some that nuclear weapons do little or nothing to prevent conventional regional war between countries. Others argued that nuclear weapons could induce stability into volatile relationships, pointing to the relationship between India and Pakistan as an example.**
- **The nature and rationale of the 'sub-strategic' role for Trident stated by MoD was also questioned.**

It was argued that the rationale for retaining nuclear weapons in the future rested on uncertainty and the continued validity of the theory of nuclear deterrence:

- **It was argued that the primary rationale for retaining nuclear weapons revolves around uncertainty over a 20-40 year timeframe: "history is full of surprises".**
- **It was argued that the 'Realist' perspective remains the position adopted by the majority of analysts and policy-makers involved in international politics. The Realist school has a conservative approach to state security and future threats, of which military threats are the most important, and advocates a strong defence to guard against uncertain future developments.**
- **It was argued by some that nuclear weapons are seen to have prevented war between the world's major powers and have therefore had a positive effect on global security.**
- **It was further argued that nuclear weapons may continue to serve this function by deterring future major war, although they serve little or no purpose in fighting regional**

wars and the blurring of the nuclear/conventional line implicit in the development of low-yield and earth penetrating nuclear weapons is dangerous.

- **It was argued that some future threats to global security are already clear: they will come from environmental degradation, poverty, pandemic disease such as aids and climate change. In contrast it is much less certain that there will be an aggressive military power that may need deterring with nuclear weapons deployed by the UK. Others argued that, whilst this may be true, it is no reason to abandon nuclear weapons as a means of challenging a future aggressive military threat.**
- **In this context it was argued that future planning is difficult because organisational processes and short planning cycles in government hinder long-term planning.**
- **It was also argued by some that human nature never changes and so there will always be a need for powerful deterrents. Other argued that but human circumstances have developed over the past 50 years since nuclear doctrine first originated, therefore it may be unwise to judge the next 50 years based on the previous 50.**

Finally it was argued that nuclear weapons allow Europe to consolidate and spread its democratic ideals form a position of strength:

- **It was argued by some that the provision of European security should remain in the hands of Europeans and it was questioned whether Europe should be nuclear weapons-free and leave global nuclear policy primarily to the US, Russia and China.**
- **It was further argued that European democratic ideals and progressive politics could only be sustained in the world if Europe can speak on and expand these principles from a position of strength, which in today's world requires nuclear weapons.**

4. Making the decision

A number of issues and arguments were put forward that will affect the decision:

- **It was argued by some that the decision on Trident would not be a *tabula rasa* decision. It will be made based on current capabilities and the industrial and intellectual investment made in UK nuclear weapons since the 1950s. Others argued that any decision would be wholly political in nature.**
- **It was argued that the decision on Trident is likely to be pragmatic, gradual and not clear-cut,**
- **It was argued that the decision will not be driven by MoD, who will put the decision before the Government as one of retaining or relinquishing a nuclear capability.**
- **The timing of the decision is uncertain. It was argued by some that a decision might not be needed in the next parliament.**
- **Work on nuclear submarines, such as a Vanguard submarine life extension programme, is needed to maintain the ability to build nuclear powered submarines and retain skills in nuclear submarine engineering in the UK. A key question is whether the UK stays in the nuclear powered submarine business.**
- **The UK decision is likely to be heavily influenced by development in the US Trident programme: Trident (or a variant thereof) will be the mainstay of US nuclear weapon force deployments for the foreseeable future and the US has refurbishment programmes for the missiles to ensure against aging and obsolescence.**

A number of issues were raised concerning the range of options available to the government:

- **At this stage, specific replacement options are speculative: there are too many technological and political unknowns.**
- **Only a decision on the submarine (Vanguard SSBN) will be required in the next parliament due to reactor degradation and hull integrity questions. A service life**

extension programme (SLEP) could extend the lifetime of the hull/reactor such that a decision on replacement is not needed in the next parliament.

- **The only decision in the next parliament could therefore be to initiate a SLEP, which is arguably a decision concerned with maintaining the existing capability rather than a political decision to replace the system altogether.**
- **It was argued that one replacement option might involve deploying a nuclear tipped submarine-launched cruise missile capability aboard smaller nuclear powered attack submarines. There was debate as to how expensive this may be, whether such a move would be destabilising, and whether nuclear testing would be required.**
- **Problems associated with having a dual capable nuclear/conventional delivery system (such as fighter planes or cruise missiles) were raised: if such platforms were activated a target country would not know whether a nuclear or conventional attack was imminent, risking unnecessary escalation through misunderstanding.**
- **It was argued by some that the 'holy grail' of UK deterrence is maintaining a continuous at sea deterrence with one submarine of four on patrol at any time. There would be significant resistance to any change to this.**

5. The impact of the decision

It was recognised that the decision to replace, renew or abandon Britain's nuclear weapon system would impact in a number of ways. The following points were highlighted:

- **It was argued by some that the decision to relinquish a nuclear capability would for all intents and purposes be irreversible and there would be no time to re-establish a nuclear capability in the event of a rise in global military threats.**
- **A decision to relinquish a nuclear capability would impact on NATO defence policy, the US-UK political-military relationship, and other European countries' security.**
- **A decision to relinquish a nuclear capability would impact on France by challenging the French rationale for retaining its nuclear capability (shares policy/doctrine with the UK) and leaving France as the sole European nuclear weapons state.**
- **A UK statement that its nuclear weapons would be phased out when Trident reaches end of its lifetime could have positive effect on NPT regime.**
- **It was argued that a decision to relinquish a nuclear capability could have little or no impact on the process of global nuclear disarmament and nuclear non-proliferation.**
- **It was argued by some that belief in nuclear deterrence promotes proliferation of nuclear weapons, and therefore a decision to relinquish nuclear weapons would assist non-proliferation.**
- **It was further argued that a decision to relinquish a nuclear capability could:**
    - **Have significant effect on New Agenda Coalition proposals;**
    - **Help moves towards a law-governed global security environment;**
    - **De-link nuclear weapons with great power status;**
    - **Empower anti-nuclear groups in other countries;**
    - **Distance Britain from US security policies that are viewed negatively; and**
    - **Help provide a positive image of Britain in the world.**

The financial implications for MoD of the decision are difficult to assess because of:

- **The interconnectedness of defence programmes;**
- **Any savings from relinquishing Trident would probably be used by the Treasury to serve the political prerogatives of the day, which may not be defence;**
- **A number of defence activities attendant on Trident, such as the SSN fleet, personnel and infrastructure costs, constitute hidden costs and serve multiple functions;**

- **A Trident renewal/replacement programme would probably be financed from the existing navy budget, rather than from new funding; and**
- **It is unclear what the decommissioning costs of Trident will be and how these affect the lifetime costs of the Trident nuclear system.**

It was also stated throughout the consultation in different contexts that any decision on Britain's nuclear forces needs to be taken in the context of global security as a whole.

- **Some argued that many governments consider the US and its allies' military and economic power a significant threat to their security now. The future of UK nuclear weapons should be considered in this context.**
- **Some argued that the building of trust is more important than the possession of weapons. Threats do not change behaviour as favourably as dialogue and interaction;**
- **It was argued that the government should look at opportunity costs for accomplishing the deterrence mission with other means with much discussion about non-military peace-building, confidence building, conflict resolution programmes to improve international security.**
- **Many of these questions came back to our understanding of the state system and whether states are capable of sustaining action beyond self-interest in an unstable world, and whether some state systems are better than others.**
- **It was also argued that the Trident decision would be best taken in the context of a broader review of UK security and defence policy involving the MOD, FCO and DfID.**

6. Legality and accountability

Three points were raised that affect accountability:

- **The difficulty of fostering debate when (a) information is hard to get from the Ministry of Defence and (b) Select Committees won't engage on the issue.**
- **The problem of terminology that can affect communication and debate, for example use of the word 'comprehensive' in the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty had several interpretations.**
- **The argument that politicians won't engage until they really have to, and that may not be until after a decision has effectively been made.**

A number of points were raised on the legality of nuclear weapons, primarily on the controversial nature of legal judgements on nuclear weapons use, threat of use and deployment:

- **It was argued that the use, threat of use and deployment of Trident is controversial under international law (under the UN Charter Articles 2(4) and 51, International Humanitarian Law/Law of Armed Conflict, International Court of Justice Advisory Opinion in 1996[1] and NPT) in terms of necessity, discrimination, self-defence and proportionality, with some arguing that it is illegal.**
- **Given the inherent destructive qualities of nuclear weapons, there was considerable dispute over whether use (and therefore threat of use) of nuclear weapons is compatible with these laws under any realistic scenarios, even when state survival is at stake.**

The relationship between deterrence and legality was also raised. In particular, it was argued that a contradiction exists between the requirement within deterrence doctrine for ambiguity over the

[1] Part of the opinion stated that "the threat or use of nuclear weapons would generally be contrary to the rules of international law applicable in armed conflict, and in particular the principles and rules of humanitarian law". However, the opinion is considered by many to be ambiguous. It does not present an unambiguous defence of the position for retaining nuclear weapons or the position for nuclear disarmament.

conditions of nuclear use, and the requirement of international law for clearly delineated circumstances to determine the legality of the possession, threat and use of nuclear weapons.

It was pointed out that international law concerning nuclear weapons is open to interpretation, and that there are strong dissenting arguments. A number of comments were made on the perceived limits of international law in dealing with nuclear weapons: international law may not be equipped to cope with a political/moral/strategic issue of this type.

7. Ethical dimensions

This discussion revolved around the Just War tradition and the relationship between morality and legality.

- **There was no consensus as to whether nuclear weapons were justifiable within the Just War tradition.**
- **Some argued that Just War theory perpetuates war.**
- **It was difficult to have a clear moral conviction of the role, if any, of nuclear weapons and the stability or instability they bring in contemporary international relations;**
- **It was argued that Governments should acknowledge the persistent and intergenerational effects of nuclear weapons during decision-making.**
- **It was argued that the relationship between legality and morality does not always coincide, and that the relationship between legitimacy and morality is often as, if not more, salient. Nevertheless, doubts were expressed about whether nuclear weapons use could ever be discriminate and proportionate.**
- **It was argued that deterrence could be viewed as a moral imperative – something that ought to be maintained to prevent some outcomes and contain some threats.**

Two difficult moral questions were raised:

- **Is there an ethical distinction between killing 100,000 people with many conventional weapons and killing of 100,000 people with one nuclear weapon?**
- **What is the difference between the UK threatening terror in the form of nuclear weapons and a terrorist threatening destruction with a nuclear device, both in the name of protecting their interests?**

8. Influencing the decision

It was argued that influencing the decision at the executive level would be very difficult. This could create a sense of pessimism and make civil society reluctant to engage. Nevertheless, it was argued that NGOs, the media, parliament, and academics could play a positive role.

NGOs have tremendous knowledge and can work for transparency and accountability; they bring new perspectives, break down secrecy, and facilitate informed debate in Parliament, government and the media. Collaborative projects will be needed to maximise impact and reduce detrimental competition between NGOs.

Academics can broaden the debate to bring in ethics, history, economics and psychology. Academic researchers could analytically examine the emotions, psychology and assumptions informing the debate on both sides without losing the holistic nature of the debate. It was also argued that academics could narrow the debate by providing a sophisticated defence of nuclear deterrence.

It was argued that MPs and Lords need to be informed and that a number of methods are available through parliament to hold the government to account including Early Day Motions,

parliamentary questions, select committee debate, and full formal parliamentary debate. It was argued by some that the latter could be difficult to generate due to resistance in parliament and government. It was also argued that all three main political parties, as well as nationalist parties in Scotland and Wales, will need to be involved in any parliamentary action. It was acknowledged that the All Party Group on Global Security and Non-Proliferation should play a key role in this debate.

In the media the broadsheet press will be the most likely source of debate and relationships need to be built with individual journalists to push the issue. However, for real impact the issue needs to be made televisual which in turn will require creativity. It was also argued that the impact of electronic media should not be underestimated.

Finally, it was argued by some that there might be some scope for middle ground. The decision need not be combative but could move towards the next phase of reductions rather than abolition. Ideas include reducing the number of warheads, submarines or de-mating warheads from missiles. Any decision will be contested and considered controversial by different constituencies.

In this context the nature of debate is crucial and it was argued that it must move away from polarised positions towards an analysis of how human needs may be met. It was argued that the frozen confrontation between the government and anti-nuclear campaigners that characterised the 1980s made dialogue extremely difficult, and everything needs to be done to ensure that an engaged and nuanced dialogue can unfold around forthcoming decisions.

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