

SHOULD TRIDENT BE REPLACED?

The Prime Minister has stated that the Government must decide whether or not to renew or renovate the British "Nuclear deterrent" in the present Parliament. At present our nuclear armament consists of 4 nuclear submarines each capable of carrying 16 American Trident missiles. Each missile can be armed with up to 4 independently-targeted warheads. Each warhead is about six times more powerful than those that destroyed Hiroshima and Nagasaki 60 years ago, and could devastate 15-30 square kilometres.

The maintenance of the Trident capability costs about £1.5 billion per year. Its replacement would cost an additional sum many times that.

It is possible that a decision will be made without open debate, as has happened previously with decisions on nuclear matters.

Arguments against continuing a UK nuclear weapons capacity. Moral, legal and social reasons.

1. Nuclear weapons are immoral.

History has shown that war is usually pragmatically inadvisable and at most only a short-term way of solving conflicts. Many see war as also immoral. The use of nuclear weapons in war is certainly immoral. Invoking the criteria of the St. Thomas Aquinas Just War concept, it involves damage out of all proportion to the advantage gained, and does not discriminate between combatants and civilians. The nuclear bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki (not to mention the conventional weapons used against German, Japanese and British cities) produced primarily civilian casualties. Nuclear weapons are not only indiscriminate in killing living individuals, but also generations as yet unborn.

2. Nuclear weapons are illegal.

In 1966 the International Court of Justice stated that the use or threat to use nuclear weapons would be contrary to international law. The members did not reach agreement as to whether their use would be justified in the extreme case of when the survival of the state was at stake. A minority view that their use is illegal in all circumstances is gaining acceptance.

3. The renewal of our nuclear weapons would be in direct contravention to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.

In a statement issued from the Review Conference on this Treaty in 2000, the five original nuclear weapon states gave an "unequivocal undertaking.... to accomplish the total elimination of their arsenal leading to nuclear disarmament..." However, the continuing possession of nuclear weapons by the original nuclear weapon states has encouraged other countries not to sign the Treaty and even to acquire nuclear weapons themselves, thus leading to increased nuclear proliferation and another nuclear arms race. The UK's possession of nuclear weapons provides tacit support for the nuclear policies of the USA.

Conversely, the UK setting the example of discarding its weapons would encourage others to do likewise and lead the way to a non-nuclear world.

4. Misuse of the financial resources involved.

The UK has spent £50 billion on its nuclear deterrent to date. It has been calculated that this would buy 500 UK city hospitals, provide drinking water and sanitation for the entire developing world, or clear all the world's landmines.

Arguments against continuing a UK nuclear weapons capability.

Pragmatic reasons.

1. A nuclear posture could give rise to fatal misunderstandings.

So long as the UK possesses nuclear weapons, any nation facing a nuclear attack may suspect the UK and retaliate against it. This would not happen if we were known to have discontinued Trident.

2. Britain's vulnerability to nuclear attack.

The UK has a very high population density and a complex infrastructure on which its civilization depends. If we discarded our nuclear weapons we would be less likely to be subject to nuclear attack, as there is an international understanding that nuclear weapons will not be used against non-nuclear states.

3. Nuclear weapons are useless against terrorists.

Although they provide no protection against terrorists, they do constitute possible targets for terrorist attacks.

4. Vulnerability to Anti-Ballistic Missile systems.

If the USA is successful in developing such a system, other nations may follow suit. Depending on the effectiveness of such systems, UK nuclear weapons would become ineffective.

5. There are better alternatives for ensuring our security.

Very few countries have chosen to possess nuclear weapons, and some have decided to abandon them (South Africa, Libya, and probably others). Alternatives include supporting the role of the United Nations and International Law, the techniques of conflict resolution, and stronger conventional forces.

Arguments for continuing a UK nuclear weapon capacity.

1. Strategic defence of the UK by deterrence of a nuclear-capable adversary.

Whether or not deterrence was effective in the Cold War, the situation has now changed. Russia is extremely unlikely to quarrel specifically with the UK, knowing that NATO would come to its aid. The probability of attack from any other nuclear weapons state is similarly remote: attack by one of the states that has recently acquired nuclear weapons would mean it was risking the total retaliatory destruction of that state. Thus deterrence is no longer an acceptable justification for retaining a nuclear capability.

2. Use during war.

The UK could, independently of NATO, use its nuclear weapons to defeat or threaten a less well-armed adversary. This has not happened in any of the wars in which the UK has been involved since 1945. It would require a decision that would override moral and legal scruples, and risk ostracism by other nations. Public opinion would be strongly against it.

3. It provides a multiplicity of decision centres within NATO.

The UK provides only 2.5% of the NATO nuclear capability, and a situation in which the UK would use its nuclear weapons alone is inconceivable. Thus it can have little influence on NATO decisions on the use of nuclear weapons.

4. A counter to nuclear blackmail.

A nuclear weapon state could threaten the UK and force major concessions without fear of nuclear reprisals. But there is currently no state that would

plausibly act in this way, and the NATO agreement is sufficient to ensure that the predictable consequences for any state that did would not be acceptable to it.

5. Nuclear weapons are an insurance policy in an uncertain world.

This view is not shared by those states that have discarded their nuclear weapons, or by the great majority of states that do not possess them.

6. Nuclear capability gives us a place on the Security Council etc.

Membership of the Security Council is not determined in this way, and the UK's nuclear capability has not so far given it a place in key disarmament negotiations, nor did it enable the UK to influence Pentagon thinking on Iraq.

7. A bargaining counter in multilateral disarmament negotiations.

It has not been used in this way so far. Conversely, our example in discarding nuclear weapons could provide an example to others.

Conclusion

Thus there are strong pragmatic, moral, legal, and social arguments against the UK retaining a nuclear weapon capability, and the arguments in favour of doing so are at best weak. Furthermore, the arguments for the possession of nuclear weapons by the UK would apply to any state, and would lead logically to the conclusion that every state should have them. Do we want a world governed by mutual threat, rather than one governed by moral and legal considerations? Are we going to base our world on a culture of peace or a culture of violence?

(These notes were abstracted by Robert Hinde from an article by Christopher Watson, written on behalf of the British Pugwash Group).