SND 63

Memorandum submitted by Andrew Dorman

In publishing 'Delivering Security in a Changing World: Defence White Paper' in 2003[1] Geoff Hoon, the then Secretary of State for Defence, confirmed that the decision surrounding the replacement of Trident would have to be addressed in the next parliament. In the meantime a contract to update and maintain the relevant infrastructure at the Atomic Weapons Establishment at Aldermaston was approved.[2]

Outside the official domain Professor Michael Clarke published a piece in *International Affairs*[3] in which he outlined the likely issues before policy-makers. More provocatively Michael Portillo, the last Conservative Defence Secretary, queried the continuing relevance of the nuclear deterrent in a piece published in *The Sunday Times*. [4] Apart from these relatively little has emerged about the current state of British nuclear thinking and there has been virtually no wider debate.

Once the debate begins there is a danger that it will solely focus on the traditional argument about the morality of nuclear weapons and whether the possession and potential use of such weapons is legal. Some of those who have spoken in favour of retention of such a system have spoken of replacing the existing Trident system with a similar deluxe version again based on submarines. Whilst the costs of such a system are not known, figures between £20-40bn have been quoted. This is not an insignificant sum and this paper argues that in reviewing the issue of replacing the existing Trident force the impact on defence, wider government and the country also needs to be considered. Such a decision is not cost neutral, a price will have to be pad elsewhere. Put another way, as the defence debate has moved towards aiming towards effects based operations and effects based warfare what effect does the United Kingdom want to achieve and where does a nuclear capability fit in. In other words are there now better alternatives to achieving the foreign policy aims of the United Kingdom? And will the cost associated with acquiring such a system have such an adverse impact in terms of our other capabilities that it is worth changing the parameters that currently surround the deterrent?

The original thinking behind the creation and maintenance of the British deterrent was twofold. Firstly, it was seen as the only way to counter-balance the threat posed by the Soviet Union. Indeed, when in 1980 the decision was taken to replace the previous strategic nuclear system the rationale used to acquire the Trident system was based on the need to satisfy the 'Moscow Criteria'[5] - the ability to threatened

to inflict sufficient damage on Moscow and a number of other Soviet cities at any time of the day, 365 days of the year, and thus deter the Soviet Union from any act of aggression against the United Kingdom. This was the main reason for the then government rejecting the idea of the then SDP who argued in favour of a force of SSNs equipped with nuclear armed cruise missiles. Such a force would have had to be distinct from the existing SSN force to remain constantly available and there were fears that improvements in Soviet air defences might make such a capability redundant.

Critics who argued that the United Kingdom could rely on extended deterrence provided by the United States and did not need its own deterrent were countered with the argument that the United Kingdom provided a second centre of decision-making and thus complicated Soviet decision-making in this area.

Now the Soviet Union is no more and whilst Russia retains a significant nuclear arsenal few envisage its use against the United Kingdom. Moreover, even Russia's conventional capability no longer threatens Britain's interests as those of the Soviet Union once did. In fact the more likely threat comes through trans-national crime and the use of energy supplies as a bargaining tool.

The requirement therefore to maintain the 'Moscow Criteria' has gone in the short to medium term and this partially explains why those who favour the replacement of the existing Trident force with a similar unnamed system have also suggested that such a force could also be equipped to carry Tomahawk cruise missiles and even special forces to provide additional value for money. The danger of this route is that the different roles might not be conducive. For example, in the Special Forces role how close inshore would we be prepared to let a ballistic missile submarine go? To what degree would we be prepared to run risks of it being detected to support this role?

In place of the Soviet Union the two principal threats to the United Kingdom have been identified as the rise of international terrorism, represented by the likes of al Qaeda, and the acquisition by so-called 'Rogue States', to use American parlance, of weapons of mass destruction.[6]

Both these scenarios present problems for those in Britain committed to the retention of a nuclear capability. The likes of al Qaeda are unlikely to be deterred by a nuclear deterrent. For a start the frequent absence of a geographical base means that such a deterrent has nothing to be targeted at. Moreover, the relative indiscriminate nature of the current deterrent means even if such a target were to appear the use of nuclear as opposed to conventional

munitions would seem unlikely. Moreover, it is hard to imagine a situation where a British government opts to use nuclear weapons and an American administration does not. If a nuclear weapons were to be used then a smaller more precise system - so called 'mini-nukes' would be far more relevant.

The Rogue States argument appears to have greater salience and has therefore received greater support. Whilst the United Kingdom has not named any particular states the traditional argument goes that such a state might threaten to use a weapon of mass destruction against Britain or its forces. Britain therefore needs to be able to deter such a regime and that it is therefore sensible to continue to maintain a nuclear capability. Again the idea of dependence on the United States is again rejected and the assumption is made that whilst the regime may be rogue it does accept the concept of deterrence and thus act in a rational manner. If this argument is accepted the need for a Trident type system is also questionable. These 'Rogue States' will at best threaten our large urban conurbations via relatively crude devices. They will not be looking to or have the capability to conduct pre-emptive first strikes against our nuclear capabilities. In other words the requirements to have an assured second strike by the United Kingdom are fair less than they previously were. This means levels of alert and dispersal procedures can actually be scaled down and alternative platforms to submarines could be considered.

If the requirement is only to have the capacity to reconstitute the 'Moscow Criteria' in the long term whilst retaining a capability to deal with rogue state' then there are a range of cheaper alternatives. For example, arming cruise missiles with nuclear warheads would provide a far cheaper solution and allow for the retention of key nuclear skills. Platforms for such weapons could include submarines, surface ships or indeed aircraft. Here it is worth noting that the RAF has recently accepted the Storm Shadow missile into service in the conventional role. Such a force would not necessarily have to be retained on constant patrol but could, in the long term, be developed into such a role if the international situation deteriorated. More far-reaching would be to maintain a virtual nuclear arsenal similar to the Japanese capability. There have been a number of estimates ranging from 6-24 months about how long it would take Japan to build a nuclear capability if it so wished. Japan has a civil nuclear programme and advanced rocket technology. Likewise the United Kingdom would retain its design teams and invest in maintain the capacity to build and reconstitute its nuclear force but not actually have one day to day. This would clearly be quite radical; it would also send a significant diplomatic signal to those contemplating acquiring their own system.

This leads onto the second reason why the Attlee Government decided to develop a nuclear capability in the late 1940s. At the time such weapons also brought with them a degree of prestige. Nuclear weapons represented cutting edge technology and, as 1948 Defence White Paper stated 'the United Kingdom, as a member of the British Commonwealth and a Great Power, must be prepared at all times to fulfil her responsibility not only to the United Nations but also to herself.'[7] Indeed the Iranian argument about its 'civil' programme follows similar lines of argument. The irony for the United Kingdom is that this argument still remains at the heart of the deterrent debate. Although the technology is now very dated, there is a clear disconnect in government policy. On the one hand it wants to discourage proliferation of nuclear weaponry to further states and on the other is not prepared to relinquish its own capability. When pushed and off the record policy-makers and indeed by implication some ministers indicate that ultimately nationalism and the traditional rivalry with France that prevents the relinquishing of such a capability. Put another way whilst France retains such a capability so must the United Kingdom and it must also be a Rolls Royce one at that.

Such arguments not only commits successive British government to the maintenance of the relevant nuclear infrastructure but it also means that the defence budget over the next decade or so will consequently have less resources available for the conventional side of defence. The reality for Britain's defence planners is that financial resources are finite and any investment in a replacement for the Trident force will mean that there will be fewer resources available for other conventional capabilities which may actually be pertinent for dealing with these threats. In other words, does a Trident replacement provide more political effect for its investment than other elements such as additional infantry battalions, new aircraft carriers or more combat aircraft? For many within defence today it is this resource issue that is beginning to raise queries about the utility of the nuclear deterrent and not the moral argument.

Yet few within government seem prepared to openly challenge the existing orthodoxy. Today the world has changed fundamentally and it would seem appropriate to really debate what role such a deterrent plays. Within the increasingly diminishing defence field there is comparatively little thought given to the nuclear issue as attention has focused on other areas. In Ministry of Defence the issue of corporate memory is growing as an issue as military and civil service fast-streamers compete to see who can move jobs more often. As a result, the nuclear submariners tend to dominate nuclear thinking and institutionally they are the least likely to suggest change.

Within the Labour government memories of the wilderness years of the 1980s remain strong. Unilateralism is a scar that remains sore within the party and no Labour leader is likely to want to open that wound. It would seem that only with a cross-party consensus could such a change be made and that does not look favourable at present.

Outside government CND stick to their moral opposition to nuclear weapons and remain marginalised. Within the wider academic arena the defence community has shrunk with the end of the Cold War. In a sense as the debate became less and less relevant those engaged in it slowly vanished.

It therefore looks as though we will blindly head towards replacing the existing Trident system with a similar model, if the Americans will sell us one without really considering why we are doing so.

In a department of state that regularly refers to the need to engage in effects based operations we may well be wise to consider what effect we are seeking to achieve and at what price. Does the retention of such a capability confirm greatness or merely reflect a desire to dwell in the past?

8 March 2006

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[1] 'Delivering Security in a Changing World: Defence White Paper', *Cm.6,041-I*, (London: TSO, 2003), p.9.

[2] Geoff Hoon, House of Commons Parliamentary Debates, Statement on 'Delivering Security in a Changing World: Future Capabilities', 21 July 2004, col.348.

[3] Michael Clarke, 'Does my bomb look big in this? Britain's nuclear choices after Trident', *International Affairs*, vol.80, no.1, January 2004, pp.49.62.

[4] Michael Portillo, 'Does Britain need nuclear missiles? No. Scrap them', *Sunday Times*, 19 June 2005.

[5] John Baylis, 'British Nuclear Doctrine: the 'Moscow Criteria' and the Polaris Improvement Programme' *Contemporary British History*, vol.19, no.1, Spring 2005, pp.53-65.

[6] 'Delivering Security in a Changing World: Defence White Paper', *Cm.6,041-I*, (London: TSO, 2003), p.4.

[7] 'Statement Relating to Defence, 1948,' *Cm 7,327*, (London: HMSO, 1948), reprinted in *Brassey's Naval Annual*,

edited by Rear Admiral H.G. Thursfield, (London: William Clowes and Sons Ltd., 1948), p.528.