

## Introduction

### The need for a decision

The Defence White Paper in December 2003 reported that, while a decision on whether to replace Trident would not be needed in the lifetime of the current parliament, it was expected during the next parliament. This was repeated in subsequent statements. On the eve of the 2005 General Election the Independent reported that the decision to replace Trident had already been taken. In June 2005 the New Statesman said the matter was already a done deal - the decision had been taken to replace Trident, all that remained was to choose which system should be adopted.<sup>1</sup> In its election manifesto the Labour Party said they were committed to retaining the independent nuclear deterrent. It is not correct to deduce from this that the replacement decision has already been made. The statement in the manifesto was a repeat of the established position, not the result of any major review. The Defence Minister, John Reid, said in July 2005 that he had not yet begun to consider the issue. In September 2005 he was reported as opening the debate on the issue.<sup>2</sup>

Some commentators have argued that there is no need for the decision to be made in the life of this parliament. Lord Gardner, Liberal Democrat defence spokesperson, has said that there is still substantial life left in the Trident system and that the issue will not need to be tackled before 2010.<sup>3</sup> The timescale may be determined by the expected life of Trident submarines. The official hull life of each vessel is 25 years and the first submarine, HMS Vanguard, will reach this in 2019. The warheads will need to be either refurbished or replaced from around 2017.<sup>4</sup> A new submarine or an alternative system would require a long lead-time. A review is likely before 2010.

### The decision making process

Resolution class submarines had an initial life expectancy of 20 years. In 1977, eleven years before the end of this planned life, a sub-group was set up to consider a replacement for Polaris. At the time it was anticipated that the life of the system could probably be extended. The sub-group, consisting of the Prime Minister, Chancellor, Foreign Minister and Defence Secretary, established two working groups of officials: one, led by the Foreign Office, looked at military and international implications, the other, led by the MoD, looked at alternative systems. Two studies were presented to ministers in November 1978. It was agreed that a decision should be taken before the end of 1980 and that the replacement was likely to be a submarine-based system.<sup>5</sup> Jim Callaghan raised the issue with President Carter in January 1979. His successor, Mrs Thatcher, set up Cabinet subcommittee MISC 7 and reached agreement with President Regan in 1980. The Defence Select Committee examined the future of strategic nuclear weapons after this decision had been made. The initial proposal, to acquire Trident C4, was revised in 1982 and the D5 system was procured. The first Trident submarine entered service in December 1994.

Opening a conference on the Future of Strategic Deterrence for the UK, in July 2005, Rear Admiral Richard Cobbolt, Director of the Royal United Services Institute, said, "momentous decisions of this kind should not be made behind closed doors."<sup>6</sup> The issue is significant not only in defence terms, but also because of its financial, diplomatic and moral implications. There should be break from past practice, a meaningful process of consultation and proper Parliamentary scrutiny.

In order to address the fundamental issue of what British nuclear weapons are for, it is important that the review looks beyond the question of whether to extend the life of Trident or replace it with some alternative. It must fully consider the non-nuclear alternative.

<sup>1</sup> Robert Fox, Trident: the done deal, New Statesman, 13 June 2005

<sup>2</sup> Patrick Wintour & Martin Kettle, Britain faces long-term nuclear threat and must plan for it, says Reid, Guardian 13 September 2005

<sup>3</sup> The future of the UK strategic deterrent, RUSI conference, 6 July 2005.

<sup>4</sup> The warheads are being refurbished from 2005. The plan is probably for 12 years service before and after this. Annex I. The 25 year contract for AWE (2000-2025) "covers the expected life of the Trident system", AWE annual report 2002.

<sup>5</sup> Lawrence Freedman, Britain and Nuclear Weapons, Macmillan, 1980, p 52f

<sup>6</sup> RUSI deterrent conference. John Reid has said that it will not be possible to avoid a debate.

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