

Long live Trident?

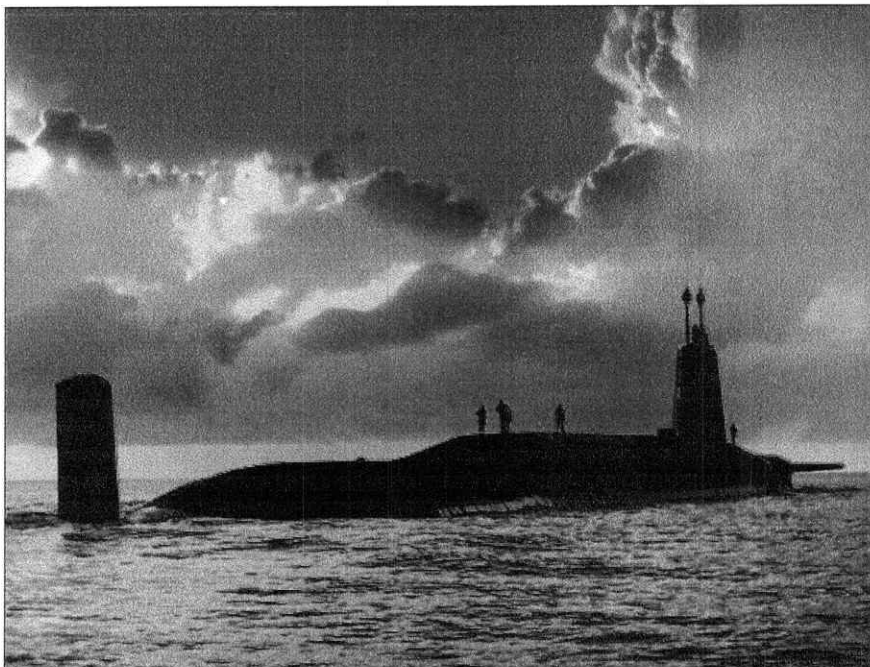
Nuclear weapons are back on the political agenda in Britain after the government said it will decide during the current parliament what to do with its Trident missiles. **Malcolm Chalmers** explores the possible options and says that refurbishment of Trident is the most likely outcome

Britain's foreign and security policy has often generated bitter public controversy, most recently demonstrated by the opposition to the invasion of Iraq in 2003 – a decision that continued to reverberate in this year's general election. Recent events, however, have done much to repair this damage. The French and Dutch rejection of the European constitution removed the need for a divisive referendum in the UK. Tony Blair's decision to put Africa and climate change at the centre of the G8 summit has proved a remarkable success, with concrete progress on both issues. Both the Olympic-bid triumph and the terrorist outrages in London served, in very different ways, to unite rather than divide the nation.

Yet there is a looming cloud on the horizon, which could resuscitate old divisions in Britain and stir dormant political passions. After more than a decade in which the issue vanished from public discourse, the argument on the purpose and roles of the country's nuclear force is being rejoined. John Reid, the defence minister, has confirmed that decisions on the future of Britain's Trident nuclear force will need to be taken in the lifetime of this parliament – in other words by 2010 at the latest. Media interest in the subject is also growing, and think-tanks are busy with new studies.

As the debate is joined, Labour leaders are likely to suffer bad memories. Twice in the last half-century, massive public campaigns led by the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) have persuaded the party to adopt a policy of unilateral nuclear disarmament, only to reverse the position subsequently. The decision of Neil Kinnock (himself a life-long supporter of nuclear disarmament) to abandon unilateralism after his 1987 election defeat is widely seen as a milestone in the journey towards New Labour's current dominance of the political landscape – killing off an issue that had, it was believed, fatally undermined the party's electoral credibility.

The Labour government that came to power in 1997 did make some important concessions to the critics. It ratified the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, despite the US's own decision not to do so. It scrapped the capacity of the Royal Air Force (RAF) to drop nuclear bombs. It also limited the number of deployed Trident warheads to no more than 48 in each submarine – well below the system's maximum capacity – and reduced the total number of "operationally



Nuclear options – rather than replacing or scrapping Britain's Vanguard-class submarines, which carry the country's Trident missiles, an alternative could be to refurbish the vessels.

available" weapons to fewer than 200. Indeed, Britain now has the smallest arsenal of the recognized nuclear powers (see box on p18) – enabling the government to claim that it has no more than a "minimum deterrent".

These measures, together with the low profile of Trident in a post-Cold War world, helped to diminish political interest in Britain's nuclear force. The four Vanguard-class submarines that carry the Trident missiles came into service, more or less on schedule, between 1994 and 2001. Each submarine has the capacity to carry up to 16 Trident D5 missiles, each of which is currently believed to carry between one and four warheads.

Each warhead can be independently targeted, with remarkable accuracy, up to distances of 12 000 km. They can reportedly deliver up to 100 kt in destructive power (the Hiroshima bomb was 12 kt), and are maintained by the Atomic Weapons Establishment in Aldermaston. The missiles are built by the US and maintained at the Kings Bay depot in Georgia, with the UK paying for access to a total of 58 missiles. One submarine is normally being refitted at any one time, and the Royal Navy is committed to ensuring that at least one of the remaining three vessels is permanently on patrol, ready to launch a nuclear attack at short notice.

Centre stage

So why are new nuclear weapons back on the agenda in Britain, given that it is only four years since Trident itself was first deployed? The reason is that although the Vanguard-class submarines will not have to retire before 2024–2030, work on a like-for-like replacement of the existing vessels may have to begin in the next three or four years, given the glacial pace at which British companies build submarines. To remain on schedule, development work would have to start by 2010–2015, with the vessels being constructed in the five years after that.

Lest this schedule seem over-generous, look at the delays involved in the (technically simpler) Astute class of nuclear-powered hunter-killer submarines. The initial design tender was issued in 1991 and the first steel for HMS *Astute* was not cut until 1999. A series of problems involving prime contractor BAE Systems has meant that the first boat is not due to be operational until 2009 – some 18 years after the initial design tender.

But could it be possible to avoid building new submarines at all, given the potential for delay and for escalating costs? In the light of the political and safety problems involved in building new nuclear bases, it seems improbable that the government will want

either a ground-based missile (the US cruise missiles at Greenham Common do not provide a happy precedent) or a return to an RAF-controlled nuclear bomber (similar to the V-bomber force of the 1950s and 1960s). Both options might also have to involve provision for dispersing forces to alternative locations in times of crisis to reduce their vulnerability to surprise attack. Yet such a visible change in alert status would be very difficult for the government to carry out, since it might be seen as undermining efforts at peaceful crisis resolution. More credible is the possible deployment of a smaller number of Trident missiles on some modified version of the new Astute-class submarines. This option would be both less expensive and less risky than an entirely new class, and would also allow significant operational economies.

The debate also raises the question of whether Britain needs nuclear weapons at all. The country is safer from invasion than at any time in its history. At the same time, nuclear weapons are of no use in deterring the real threats that Britain is facing today. Far from being deterred by nuclear weapons, terrorists would be delighted to provoke a Trident retaliation, fully aware of the global opprobrium that this would bring on Britain. Even a nuclear attack on the UK by an identifiable "rogue" state could not justify a British nuclear response in which the main victims would be thousands of innocent civilians. Regime change using conventional forces would be a more appropriate, and moral, response.

An alternative option

A more radical solution would be to abandon the effort to maintain a quick-response nuclear force altogether. There is, after all, no plausible near-term scenario in which Britain requires a nuclear deterrent. How can the UK credibly argue that countries in more dangerous regions – such as Iran – must be prevented from building nuclear arsenals if it is simultaneously spending billions renewing its own force? A British initiative in isolation would not transform the security calculations of leaders in Iran or North Korea, but it could inject some new impetus into international arms control.

Under such a scenario, Britain would retain the knowledge needed to build nuclear weapons – and perhaps also a stockpile of nuclear-warhead components. It could therefore rebuild a small nuclear force relatively quickly if this were felt necessary. It would take much longer to rebuild Trident's formidable capabilities – 200 warheads that can be used against distant targets with immediate effect and high accuracy. But such a sophisticated capability, born out of the *Dr Strangelove* calculations of the Cold War arms race, may be much more than is needed for "minimum deterrence" today.

Yet the most credible scenario is to expect



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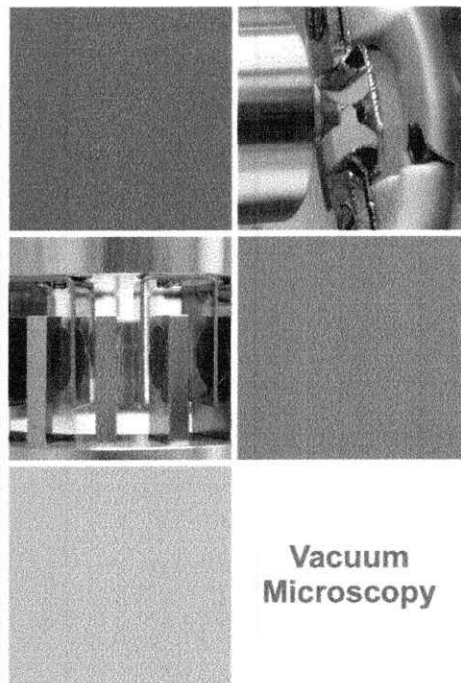
"more of the same". A full replacement of Vanguard by new vessels will be risky and expensive, and more radical "minimum deterrent" options may be viewed as politically unacceptable. Extending the service life of the existing submarines, however, would allow the UK to bring its own procurement cycle more in line with that of the US, with which it shares the Trident D5 missile system. The US is currently planning to retire its last D5 missiles from service in around 2040, around the same time as the US's Ohio-class submarines are due to retire.

So if the UK were to build new submarines in 2025–2030, it could not guarantee that its Trident missiles – which must return to Kings Bay periodically to enter the US maintenance cycle – would be available after 2040. In contrast, extending the lifetime of existing Vanguard-class submarines for a further 10 years would allow the cycles to converge, and may give the UK the option of buying into future US replacement systems.

The political attractions of extending the vessels' service lives are considerable. Historically, public protest against nuclear weapons has been strongest when the government has acquired new systems. If the government decides to order a full replacement for Trident, such protests could be repeated. It may be harder to mobilize opposition if it proves feasible to refurbish existing vessels, particularly given that the focus will be on maintaining safety levels rather than improving operational capability.



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