GREENPEACE Briefing

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The Special Relationship

UK Trident Programme, the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, and US/UK nuclear co-operation

In April 1980, the UK government announced its intention to buy the Trident I (C4) missile system from the United States for a new generation of missile launching submarines which would replace Polaris. However, in March 1982, following a US decision to move to the Trident II (D5) missile, the UK government followed suit, opting for the larger, more expensive D5 version.

HMS Vanguard

First of a class of four UK Trident missile submarines, HMS Vanguard was conceived at the height of the Cold War, using the most sophisticated and expensive nuclear weapon technology ever developed.

Due to be deployed on its first operational patrol in December 1994, Vanguard will enter service at a time when the world is concerned about a different nuclear threat – proliferation.

Trident, Vanguard and the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT)

Entering into force in 1970 and due for review in 1995, the stated aim of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty is to stop the spread of nuclear weapons by preventing the spread of nuclear weapons technology between nations, and by committing countries already in possession of nuclear weapons to disarmament.

The UK Trident submarine-launched nuclear missile programme, aided and abetted by the US, clearly undermines the objectives of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.

Trident and UK dependence on US technology

Article I of the NPT states:
'Each nuclear-weapon State party to the treaty undertakes not to transfer to any recipient whatsoever nuclear weapons or other nuclear explosive devices or control over such weapons or explosive devices directly, or indirectly...'

Although, the US has not directly provided the UK with a complete nuclear warhead, the UK strategic nuclear arsenal is almost entirely dependent on US technology and support.

Trident is a US missile system. The UK will not manufacture or purchase its own Trident missiles, but will 'lease' missiles from the US missile pool. Some 30 per cent of Trident's initial procurement costs are being spent in the US.

The US will also supply:

* highly enriched uranium for the Vanguard class of submarine nuclear reactors.

* storage, assembly and servicing of the missiles. Trident will rely solely on US facilities at Kings Bay, Georgia, for preparation for entry into service of missiles, and for refurbishment during each major submarine refit.

* assistance with the warheads design and testing. US nuclear weapons scientists and their UK counterparts in the Aldermaston weapons laboratory have worked closely on the development of a warhead for the UK Trident missile system.[1] The US has tested the UK Trident warhead in a number of nuclear tests at the Nevada test site.

* the supply of all sixteen missile tubes for HMS Vanguard and the supply of components and technical assistance to aid in the installation of the missile tubes in the other three submarines.

* targeting, communication and guidance of missiles. The navigation and guidance system of both the submarine and missile will be complemented by the use of US navigation satellites.

In maintaining this co-operation which is crucial to the UK nuclear program, the US and UK have chosen to interpret Article I to mean the transfer of complete nuclear warheads only.

However, there can be little doubt that the US has provided information, technology, and support which has directly and indirectly assisted the production and deployment of UK nuclear warheads.

Trident and UK disregard NPT Arms Reduction Commitment

The UK government when signing the NPT took upon itself the obligation to take measures to end the nuclear arms race. Article VI of the NPT states:

'Each of the Parties to the Treaty undertakes to pursue negotiations in good faith on effective measures relating to cessation of the nuclear arms race at an early date and to nuclear disarmament...'

For the 25 year duration of the NPT the UK government has not participated in any nuclear arms reduction negotiations. Vanguard, armed with Trident missiles, represents a massive increase in nuclear capability. It will carry a maximum of 96 warheads per submarine, compared to the maximum of 32 warheads carried on the Polaris submarine it will replace. Each missile will have twice the range and will be able to hit far more targets with much greater accuracy and explosive yield than Polaris.

So great is the nuclear escalation from Polaris to Trident, that US State Department analysts remarked that the UK Trident could complicate arms talks with the former Soviet Union because:

'With Polaris, the British can hurt the Soviet Union badly; with Trident, they potentially will be able to wipe it out as a functioning society. Thus Trident multiplies the third-country problem in US-USSR arms talks...' [2]

At next year's NPT review conference nuclear weapons states, like the UK, will need to demonstrate they are serious about curbing their own nuclear programmes and are working seriously towards nuclear disarmament, if they wish other non-nuclear weapons states to forgo a nuclear capability.

With Vanguard due to complete its first patrol just before the 1995 review conference starts, the UK and US will have a hard time justifying their apparent failure to abide by the obligations made under the NPT.

Trident and US/UK nuclear co-operation

The transfer of information and materials from the US to the UK has taken place under a number of agreements which are at odds with the goals of the NPT. These agreements include the 1958 US/UK Mutual Defense Agreement and the Trident Sales Agreement.

The 1958 US/UK Mutual Defense Agreement covers the uses of atomic energy for defence purposes and embraces the exchange of information and the transfer by sale of materials, equipment and components. The Agreement is due for amendment this year and may be amended to extend nuclear co-operation to the year 2000 or beyond.

The Trident Sales Agreement enables the UK to purchase missiles and other equipment from the US on approximately the same terms as they are acquired by the US government, providing significant advantages to the UK.

The UK would have been unable to deploy weapons systems like Polaris and Trident without extensive US assistance. Ministry of Defence officials in the UK 'consider that these exchanges are essential in order to implement the United Kingdom's nuclear weapons policy...' [3]

The US and UK have used their strict interpretation of Article I of the NPT to say such cooperation and transfers do not violate the NPT. Yet, it is precisely this sort of arrangement which Article I of the NPT attempts to prohibit because it is detrimental to non-proliferation efforts. At next year's NPT review conference, that will decide its future, some countries may be tempted to ask if there is one rule for some (the US and UK) but another for the majority.

Trident – the true cost

The UK government's official cost of the Trident nuclear missile programme is just over eleven and a half billion pounds – an artificially low figure which does not take into account the billions of pounds of costs to run facilities essential to the programme.

Taking into account Trident's hidden costs such as:

* essential production facilities at the Aldermaston Atomic Weapons Establishment;

* the building of essential onshore facilities at the Trident submarine base on the Clyde;

* running and maintaining the Trident fleet for the next 30 years;

* decommissioning the submarines and their reactors at the end of their lives;

the true cost of Trident over its 30-year lifetime comes to more than 30 billion pounds.

Endnotes

1. The director of Aldermaston Atomic Weapons Establishment gave an outline of the importance of the US/UK discussions on warhead design to the House of Commons Defence Select Committee:

'... we already have had a considerable amount of interface with the US weapon laboratories in connection with that particular warhead [Trident] to an extent where we can judge what is that warhead, how does it work, what is our capacity to make such a warhead, how does it compare with our own capabilities and our own technologies and I believe therefore that we are in a very good position, probably as good a position as we could ever be in such a circumstance to make what appears to be the right judgement for developing and manufacturing the most cost effective warhead for Trident based upon the combined view of our capabilities and designs.' [extracted from HC 36 of Session 1980-81, p.3]

2. US State Department, Bureau of Intelligence and Research, Assessments and Research Report 1125-AR, 'US-UK Relationships Enter A New Era,' released under the US Freedom of Information Act

3. Memorandum by the Comptroller and Auditor General to the House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts, 29 October 1990, p.25, para 2.2

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