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The US embassy cables



US embassy cables: UK civil servants reassure US that Trident will be replaced, whatever Brown may say

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SUBJECT: (SBU) DOUBTS -- AND REASSURANCES -- ABOUT REPLACING BRITAIN'S TRIDENT NUCLEAR DETERRENT

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Richard LeBaron for reasons 1.4 (b and d)

1. (C) Summary. The Prime Minister's office released a statement July 17 affirming that "there has been no change in the Government's position on Trident. The policy remains as set out in the 2006 White Paper, and there has been no change to the timetable." This statement was a reaction to media reports that HMG planned to defer the decision, scheduled for September 2009, to commission design plans for four new submarines to replace Britain's existing Vanguard fleet, the submarine platform for Britain's Trident nuclear deterrent. Recent polling indicates that a majority of British voters oppose replacing the Trident system. Although HMG and Conservative Party leaders support replacing Britain's Trident nuclear deterrent, the challenge for the next government will not be whether or not to replace the UK's Trident nuclear weapons system -- but how to do so in light of severe fiscal constraints. End Summary.

To Replace or Not to Replace

2. (SBU/NF) British media reported July 17 that HMG had decided to defer the decision scheduled for September 2009 to commission design plans for four new submarines to replace Britain's existing Vanguard fleet, the submarine platform for Britain's Trident nuclear deterrent. Media cited an unnamed British official as stating July 16 that no new money would be spent, nor would decisions be made regarding Trident renewal, until after the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) Review Conference, which will conclude in May 2010. Press reports quoted the official as stating that "because of the review conference...we will delay decisions that involve spending significant sums of money until 2010." Media analysts noted that this timeline effectively meant that no decision would be made on Trident renewal until after the next British general election, which must occur no later than June 3, 2010. The official reportedly said that "all our deterrent is now up for grabs but in the context of a multilateral negotiation," since the goals of a nuclear free world should be seen as an "aspiration." (Note: The UK Trident system consists of 160 operational nuclear warheads carried by Trident II (D5) ballistic missiles aboard four Vanguard-class nuclear powered ballistic missile submarines. The warheads and submarines are British built, but with substantial American design assistance. End Note.)

3. (SBU) Shortly after the press reports surfaced, the Prime Minister's Office issued a clarification as follows: "There has been no change in the Government's position on Trident. The policy remains as set out in the 2006 White Paper, and there has been no change to the timetable." A Ministry of Defence spokesperson also insisted that Britain's policy was unchanged. Liberal Democrat leader Nick Clegg attacked government "chaos and confusion" over renewing Trident. Clegg called on PM Brown to "climb down" and admit that the missile system was not justified given equipment shortages for British troops serving in Afghanistan.

4. (C/NF) *Judith Gough (protect), Deputy Head of the Security Policy Group at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) told Poloff July 21 that the unnamed official who had briefed the press was Simon McDonald, the Cabinet Office Head of Foreign and Defence Policy. She said that press reports about HMG plans to defer Trident replacement design work "came as news" to FCO and MOD officers charged with following Trident. She noted the PM's office's clarification and stressed that HMG remained committed to Trident and "there has been no change to the timetable."* Notwithstanding the clarification, Gough added that there might still be a decision to "push aside" tough fiscal decisions, such as Trident, until next year -- and even after the general election. (Note: The estimated cost of Trident over the next decade is 20 billion pounds. End Note.) *Diana Venn (protect), an officer in the Cabinet Office's Foreign and*

Defence Policy Secretariat, told Poloff July 23 that there had been a "slight misunderstanding" when McDonald briefed the press. She stressed that "Trident is not on the table...we won't disarm unilaterally."

Weak Public Support

5. (SBU) According to an ICM poll published in the center-left "The Guardian" newspaper July 13, 54 percent of British voters would "prefer to abandon nuclear weapons rather than put money into a new generation of Trident warheads." The poll found that 42 percent back renewal. However, another recent ICM poll showed that a majority of respondents wanted to extend the life of the existing system rather than spend money to replace it. In a July 2006 poll, 51 percent of respondents backed renewal, while 39 percent opposed it.

Comment

6. (C/NF) Senior MOD officials have privately reassured us that HMG remains committed to the Trident program -- and we deem it highly improbable that PM Brown will want to be remembered as the Prime Minister who abandoned Britain's independent nuclear deterrent. Indeed, it was a Labour government (under Tony Blair) that in December 2006 issued a White Paper formally opening the process to replace the UK's Trident nuclear weapons system and thereby enable the UK to retain nuclear weapons well into the middle of the century. The Conservative Party's leadership is committed to Trident, a point that Shadow Foreign Secretary William Hague made in an April interview when he pledged his party to upgrading the Trident deterrent. The challenge for the next government will not be whether to renew Trident -- but how to do so in the context of severe fiscal constraints. Indeed, in a major foreign policy speech earlier this month, Hague acknowledged that "extreme pressures on our own defence budget obviously necessitate a strategic defence review, which an incoming Conservative government will certainly undertake." End Comment.

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