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Select Committee on Defence Written Evidence

Memorandum from Michael Codner (RUSI)

1. BEGINNING THE REPLACEMENT PROCESS

Expenditure on "replacing Trident" has already begun in the sense that maintaining and refurbishing existing capability for research, development and test at Aldermaston was announced in the summer of 2005. The refurbishment is to do ostensibly with maintaining the safety of existing warheads rather than designing new ones. This expenditure is necessary regardless of any decision over the future of the UK's nuclear deterrent. But the issues are related. We do not need to speculate about the usefulness of modernised facilities in this research establishment for developing future nuclear capability, although clearly investment in AWE would be needed and dwindling expertise sustained and expanded if the choices over a new system included development of warheads in Britain. The matter is one of sustaining an independent nuclear capability in the short and medium term in the face of expenditure markedly above running costs. If the decision was to be taken in this Parliament to dispense with nuclear capability when the Vanguard-class submarines were withdrawn, this raises the question as to whether any additional expenditure in the meantime to maintain existing capability would be worthwhile and whether Trident should not be scrapped earlier.

2. THE PROBLEM WITH ANNOUNCING FUTURE ABOLITION

The problem the Prime Minister and his successors would face by announcing a future termination of the capability is of compromising Britain's current nuclear policy. The UK would be perceived internationally, and in particular by those who need to be deterred, as having concluded that there is a dwindling need for a deterrent. Of course, in the meantime the UK would still have the capability to respond to a nuclear attack, or indeed launch a first strike if circumstances demanded. Her deterrent posture would not actually be weakened in theory. But other reasons for maintaining the deterrent would be compromised, for instance national status and influence as a major power and member of the UN Security Council and, in particular, any influence over US policy that nuclear capability might bring. And the Government would face a huge problem of internal politics. If a national nuclear deterrent is not essential for security in the uncertain future, is it truly necessary now? If it is not, running costs alone might be justifiable for a "nice-to-have status" thing, but not any additional expenditure. There are overwhelming priorities for funding in health and education, not to mention conventional military capability.

What decisions and when?

3. So what is the decision that needs to be taken in this Parliament? Working back from a replacement date for the first of the Vanguard-class of about 2024, [12]the MoD would need to make decisions in the next 19 or so years about a new platform, whether sea or air or some land-based arrangement. There will need to be a weapon system, whether refurbished Trident or some other newly-developed system, and of course a warhead. The platform programme appears to be the critical path, and it is possible to sketch out some notional timelines.

4. Using the language of Smart Acquisition, the MoD would need to commit to a development and manufacture phase for a replacement platform at least eight years beforehand, judging by the timelines for equivalent large projects. And one must consider that the technical and project risk for such a programme needs to be extremely low. The Trident came into service most unusually for major defence programmes on time and within budget, and the Government would want to achieve the same predictability. Main Gate, when this decision needs to be taken, would be in the 2015 timeframe. An Initial Gate decision to embark on an Assessment Phase of a very small and specific number of options would need to be some five years before this that is, in about the 2010 timeframe. So the MoD needs to decide fairly soon whether to embark on a Concept Phase, during which the specific options to be addressed during Assessment can be derived.

5. Now the major procurement investment decision would be made at Main Gate. This is likely to be at least 85% of the total procurement cost. The bulk of the remaining likely maximum of 15% of expenditure will be committed at Initial Gate. So the actual commitment of new money to be made in this Parliament would be only a few per cent of the total still quite a lot of money, but this would not be the sort of decision that would need a major redirection of Government spending to finance. The main decisions must be made in investing in continued nuclear capability, as one surmises, in about 2010, and particularly 2015, when shed-loads would be required.

6. One might conclude, therefore, that in all probability the Government will indeed fund a Concept Phase without necessarily having to make any commitment to Assessment and Development/Manufacture phases, a

relatively easy decision to make, and one that would both politically and diplomatically reinforce current policy over which there is broad consensus across the main political parties.

7. When actually to decide? A decision by 2007 would keep any public debate clear of the next General Election in say 2008. The first big decision, however, would be made midway through the next Parliament involving an Initial Gate commitment of spending that could be into billions of pounds over five years. And continuing the fantasy of a rigid four-year cycle, the really big decision would be towards the end of the subsequent Parliament, when contracts would be placed for development and manufacture. A government could therefore say "yes" to replacement until 2015 at the latest committing, say, £3 billion in Concept and Assessment Phase funding as necessary to support ongoing deterrent policy. This is of course in addition to the running costs of the Trident Programme and AWE Aldermaston. It could then say "do" in 2015 saving, say, a further £17 billion in Development and Manufacture.

8. NOTIONAL LATEST DECISION DATES

	<i>Concept Phase</i>	<i>Initial Gate</i>	<i>Main Gate</i>	<i>In Service</i>
With submarine life extension	2007	2010	2015	2024
Without life extension	2003	2006	2010	2019

This crude analysis accepts that the stages of Smart Acquisition will be adopted. And by this analysis it would seem that a decision to extend the life of the hulls and power plants of some of the Vanguard Class submarines has already been taken. However there has been a recent example of a major platform project in which the definitive milestone of Main Gate as been subdivided—namely the Future Carrier. It is possible that staged Concept, Assessment, and Development and Manufacture phases would be adopted for replacing the nuclear deterrent. This would have the effects of:

— Spreading commitment of funds over a longer period allowing Government to delay the ultimate decision to commit to the bulk of manufacture funding;—

Reducing the profile of each investment decision to an incremental process in which there would be few occasions when the nuclear deterrent issue would break through the media's threshold of interest. Indeed we could be well into a Concept Phase or indeed a phased Assessment Phase with no definitive Initial Gate.⁹ NOT FOR "WARFIGHTING"?

If we assume, therefore, a qualified "yes" in 2007 to continued long-term nuclear capability, what events might jeopardise subsequent "yeses" in 2010 and 2015? To answer this question fully, one must first establish what a British nuclear deterrent capability is actually for in the understanding of the Government. We are not likely to have a clear exposition in this Parliament. Nor is it probably necessary politically given the political consensus and the lack of interest in the majority of the electorate. The MoD claims that the nuclear capability is not for warfighting—not a very meaningful notion. If they were ever to be used—and deterrence hinges on that possibility—that *would* be warfighting. What the MoD means is that there are no scenarios short of nuclear doomsday in which nuclear weapons would have a role in an operational plan. The "not for warfighting" line is possibly rather directed at the Treasury in making the case for funding outside the defence budget. This issue is of great importance to the MoD and the Navy in particular. If funding of a replacement is not drawn from central government funds but comes as a whole or in part from a Defence budget of similar proportions to today, large parts of the Equipment plan in the next decade will be unaffordable and the UK's conventional military posture will demand review.

10. SUB-STRATEGIC DETERRENCE

And what, therefore, of "sub-strategic deterrence", the concept launched in the early 1990s when the "tactical" 600-pound bomb was being withdrawn but never actually revoked in subsequent policy papers? "Sub-strategic" is another notion rather difficult to define, except insofar as it excludes the need for tactical capability. Any deployment or use of a long-range missile-fired nuclear weapon is strategic with a capital "S". "Sub-strategic" in this context means carrying fewer than the full complement of missiles in a submarine, and announcing that this is the case inviting the possibility that a small number of missiles might be used in circumstances short of doomsday. The perceptual uncertainties created by this concept could be said to reinforce deterrence against the sporadic use, say, by a rogue state with a small number of unsophisticated nuclear weapons or indeed conceivably of non-nuclear weapons of mass destruction. In any event, there is a paradox here between "sub-strategic" and "not for warfighting" that needs to be resolved.

11. EFFICACY AGAINST LIKELY THREATS

There are of course other hugely difficult issues relating to the nature and effectiveness of deterrence in an uncertain future. Terrorists with transcendental aims, and indeed rogue governments with their backs to the wall, will not use empirical risk assessment and cost-benefit rationales to constrain their use of nuclear weapons. So where is the deterrence against the most likely nuclear threats?¹² **DIRECT OR INDIRECT SECURITY**

Ultimately, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion mentioned earlier that nuclear capability for the UK has more to do with international status and influence than with direct security. The proposition that retention of the deterrent seems to support is that the UK has influence indirectly over its wider security environment because it retains a nuclear deterrent—albeit arguably only a token—which supports its status as a Permanent Member of the Security Council and, most importantly, might modify US behaviour in this and other respects. This issue of national status and influence is much wider of course than the nuclear deterrent. Arguably it underpins the UK's "expeditionary" military strategy and explains why as a relatively safe island power in the Eastern Atlantic the UK commits more of its GDP to defence than most European countries.

The US Relationship

13. In this context, the long-term relationship with the US is of paramount importance both in addressing the issue of need for a national capability and in the options for a replacement. There is a paradox here, too. If the UK's security relationship with the US, and indeed that of Europe, were to weaken, there could be a greater need for an independent deterrent because US extended deterrence would be unreliable. But UK-US collaboration and access to technology would be prejudiced. If the relationship were to strengthen, affordable collaborative solutions may be available. But why would we need an independent deterrent except to reinforce international status and influence? This debate is one in which it is almost impossible for a British Prime Minister to engage in publicly even though in the wider context it is at the heart of the United Kingdom's security and defence policies. It would not be a problem for a Frenchman.

14. And will the US want the UK to retain a nuclear deterrent in the longer term? The scale of UK's nuclear capability is not significant. The uncertainties that having more than one nuclear challenge may create in the perceptions of a nuclear opponent may have been highly relevant in the Cold War in reinforcing deterrence and supporting US' extended deterrence to Europe, but are arguably not relevant in the present context. The situation might be greatly simplified from a US perspective if there was no junior partner whose perspective is only significant if it is different. **INTERVENTION OF EVENTS**

15. The best a Labour, or any other Government for that matter, can hope for is for the debate to proceed *sotto voce* "as it has since the 1987 General Election" and for none of these issues of substance to be raised to a high political level. And they stand a good chance of being successful if the decisions are taken in the three incremental steps described earlier. What are the events, therefore, that could scupper a replaced or refurbished nuclear deterrent? A breakout of international nuclear disarmament and success of the non-proliferation regimes is most unlikely. Similarly, it is unlikely that missile defence could achieve sufficient guarantees of protection against a large-scale nuclear attack to make deterrence irrelevant. A few more likely scenarios are:— A major national economic crisis before 2010 or 2015, making replacement options unaffordable.— Significant military failures abroad causing a collapse in confidence in the electorate in the value of the UK's expeditionary military strategy, and military capability generally, in enhancing world status and influence. Defence expenditure of all kinds beyond direct homeland defence might then be considered purposeless and wasteful.

— A series of asymmetric attacks on the UK using terrorism could similarly persuade the electorate that any security capability beyond homeland security was purposeless or indeed provocative.

— Proportional representation was introduced following General Elections with hung Parliaments. It is possible that different, more equivocal security policies could emerge from coalition governments and that other priorities could absorb the necessary funds.

13 March 2006

¹² This date is the latest possible to allow a continuous deterrent assuming that there is extension of life of the hull and power generation of some of the Vanguard Class. Back

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Prepared 30 June 2006