

ALTERNATIVE WHITE PAPER

Safer Britain, Safer World

The decision not to replace Trident



CAMPAIGN FOR NUCLEAR DISARMAMENT

The decision on whether or not to replace Britain's nuclear weapons system must be taken on the basis of what will most contribute to the security of the British people. A decision not to replace Trident will best meet that requirement. It will strengthen the international disarmament and non-proliferation regime by ensuring Britain's compliance with its international treaty obligations; it will deter nuclear proliferation and de-escalate current tensions leading towards a new nuclear arms race; and it will release significant financial resources to meet a range of public spending priorities. A decision not to replace Trident must be taken in tandem with government initiatives towards its stated goal of multilateral disarmament: backing a World Summit on nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation, and working towards a Nuclear Weapons Convention banning all such weapons.

Currently, Britain's nuclear weapons system comprises almost two hundred nuclear warheads, launched from US Trident missiles, carried on four submarines. Each warhead has around eight times the explosive power of the Hiroshima bomb which killed over 200,000 people.

1. Today's security challenge

It is widely agreed that the main security threat facing Britain today is terrorism carried out by non-state actors. The Defence Committee Inquiry in 2006, looking into the strategic context of Trident Replacement, concluded that: 'The most pressing threat currently facing the UK is that of international terrorism. Witnesses to our inquiry overwhelmingly argued that the strategic nuclear deterrent could serve no useful or practical purpose in countering this kind of threat'¹. In October 2005, Prime Minister Tony Blair had also come to this conclusion, 'I do not think that anyone pretends that the independent nuclear deterrent is a defence against terrorism'².

Nuclear weapons cannot have a role to play in responding to such a threat. Principally, we already know from the terrible attacks in New York and London that possession of nuclear weapons by a nuclear weapon state does not dissuade terrorists. In addition, terrorists could never present any accurately located target for such a weapon of indiscriminate devastation.

2. No current nuclear threat

The Trident system was developed by the US specifically for the Cold War context: to be able to win an actual nuclear war against a hostile, massively armed state. Despite the Cold War coming to an end, with the Soviet Union dissolving in 1991, the UK went ahead with acquiring Trident which was launched in the mid 1990s with the last submarine entering service in 2001.

According to the government's Strategic Defence Review in 1998, 'there is today no military threat to the United Kingdom or Western Europe. Nor do we foresee the re-emergence of such a threat'³. This was reiterated by the recent Defence Committee Inquiry, 'Witnesses to our inquiry did not believe that the UK currently faces a direct or impending military threat from any of the established nuclear weapon states'⁴.

3. Protection from future threats

In September 2005, the then Defence Secretary John Reid suggested that a replacement for Trident would be necessary in case we face a nuclear enemy in the future.⁵ Another former Defence Secretary, Malcolm Rifkind has recently described our nuclear weapons as an insurance policy for the future. But rather than providing insurance against an unspecified future threat, replacing Trident will increase the danger of nuclear proliferation and will contribute to a new nuclear arms race. If the UK envisages at least another 50 years of British security being based on threatening other populations with mass destruction then we encourage other states to do the same and thus paradoxically we increase our security risk rather than decrease it. This position was recently expressed by Kofi Annan, who linked the failure to disarm with the danger of nuclear proliferation, at the 60th anniversary of the UN: 'the more that those states that already have [nuclear weapons] increase their arsenals, or insist that such weapons are essential to their national security, the more other states feel that they too must have them for their security'⁶. The failure of the nuclear weapons states to comply with their obligations under the Non-Proliferation Treaty – taken together with an apparent orientation towards nuclear use by some of these states – has real potential to create a tendency towards proliferation. The logic of the 'deterrent' notion is that all states need nuclear weapons to protect themselves. This point has also been made by Nobel Laureate Professor Sir Joseph Rotblat, 'If some nations – including the most powerful militarily – say that they need nuclear weapons for their security, then such security cannot be denied to other countries which really feel insecure. Proliferation of nuclear weapons is the logical consequence of this nuclear policy.'⁷

The most effective way to insure against future nuclear threats is to work towards nuclear disarmament, rather than pursuing a path which is certain to contribute to proliferation. Britain's future security will be best provided for by pursuing global disarmament initiatives

in tandem with the decision not to replace Trident. Hans Blix's recent suggestion of a World Summit on nuclear disarmament, non-proliferation and terrorist use of weapons of mass destruction, must be pursued by our government. So too must support for the draft Nuclear Weapons Convention currently lodged with the United Nations. Such a Convention would outlaw all nuclear weapons and would provide for full processes of inspection and verification. A number of states have voluntarily given up nuclear weapons since the end of the Cold War, and vast parts of the world have declared themselves as nuclear weapons-free zones, so practical routes to disarmament already exist.

4. Our international legal obligations

Widespread international concerns about the dangers of proliferation and the spiraling nuclear weapons stocks of the nuclear weapon states resulted in the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) coming into force in 1970. The UK was one of the five states that had already acquired nuclear weapons by that stage and those states without nuclear weapons agreed not to acquire them in exchange for those with nuclear weapons agreeing to disarm. The UK does not have the right to possess nuclear weapons under the treaty; instead it is legally bound to disarm:

Article VI of the NPT

‘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, and on a Treaty on general and complete disarmament under strict and effective international control.’

This requirement was strengthened at the 2000 NPT Review Conference, with the addition of the commitment by the nuclear weapons states to ‘an unequivocal undertaking to accomplish the total elimination of their nuclear arsenals.’

In 1996, the International Court of Justice ruled that ‘the threat or use of nuclear weapons would be generally contrary to the rules of international law applicable in armed conflict and in particular the principles and rules of humanitarian law.’⁸

Recent statements that Britain would be prepared to use nuclear weapons in a first strike capacity, even against a non-nuclear weapons

state, are contrary to international law, contribute to global tensions and promote proliferation.

5. The legality of Trident Replacement

Recent legal opinion makes it clear that a replacement of Trident would not be acceptable under the NPT. In 2005, a legal opinion was produced by Rabinder Singh QC and Professor Christine Chinkin on 'The Maintenance and Possible Replacement of the Trident Nuclear Missile System'. In their opinion, the replacement of Trident is likely to constitute a breach of Article VI of the NPT.

Singh and Chinkin further hold the opinion that such a breach would be a material breach of the treaty:

'The linkage between the principles of non-proliferation and the obligation to negotiate towards disarmament shown by the negotiation history...indicate that Article VI is a provision *'essential to the accomplishment of the object or purpose of the treaty.'* The non-nuclear weapon states required commitments from the nuclear weapon states as part of their willingness to accept non-nuclear status under the NPT and failure to comply with article VI thus, in our view, constitutes material breach.'⁹

The final sentence quoted further indicates the significance of compliance with the disarmament requirements of the NPT. For the UK to do otherwise will have a negative impact on the compliance of non-nuclear weapon states with the non-proliferation requirements of the NPT.

6. The cost to British society

Whilst a replacement cannot be fully costed, initial estimates suggest that the replacement of Trident with a similar system would cost in the region of £25 billion. This amount could be much better spent on the improvement of public services, including health provision, the basic state pension, and education. It is estimated that £25 billion is equivalent to 60,000 newly qualified nurses and 60,000 new secondary school teachers for the next ten years. The money could also be spent on meeting conventional defence and security needs, or meeting the challenge of climate change. Recent estimates suggest that when the annual costs of maintaining Trident throughout its life are added, the total bill could add up to £76 billion. Scientific,

engineering and manufacturing skills, currently employed in the nuclear weapons sector need not be lost; they must be redeployed through a government-backed defence diversification programme into decommissioning, secure disposal of nuclear waste, and other comparable skilled employment.

The decision not to replace Trident will help shape the type of world we will face in decades to come. Active support for disarmament and non-proliferation will help prevent a new nuclear arms race and increased proliferation. Choosing to replace Trident will ensure that we will face the nuclear threats in the future that we most wish to avoid. The choice we face today is clear: nuclear disarmament or nuclear proliferation and war. A bold initiative by our government not to replace Trident, together with strong promotion of multilateral initiatives, can help reshape the global security context and ensure a future free from the threat of nuclear annihilation.

Notes

- 1 House of Commons Defence Committee, *The Future of the UK's Strategic Nuclear Deterrent: the Strategic Context*, Eight Report of Session 2005-06, The Stationery Office Limited, paragraph 88.
- 2 House of Commons Debate, 19 October 2005, Column 841.
- 3 Ministry of Defence, *The Strategic Defence Review*, Cm 3999, July 1998, p.17.
- 4 House of Commons Defence Committee, *The Future of the UK's Strategic Nuclear Deterrent: the Strategic Context*, Eight Report of Session 2005-06, The Stationery Office Limited, paragraph 95.
- 5 Patrick Wintour and Martin Kettle, *Britain faces long-term nuclear threat and must plan for it, says Reid*, *The Guardian*, 13 September 2005 at http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk_news/story/0,,1568470,00.html
- 6 Kofi Annan speaking at the UN 60th anniversary event, London, January 2006.
- 7 Joseph Rotblat, *Science and Nuclear Weapons: Where do we go from here?* The Blackaby Papers, no 5, Dec 2004, p.7.
- 8 International Court of Justice, 1996, *Legality of the Threat or Use of Nuclear Weapons*, 105.2.E.
- 9 Peacerights, *The Maintenance and Possible Replacement of the Trident Missile System*, joint opinion, Rabinder Singh QC and Professor Christine Chinkin, 19 December 2005.

Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament

162 Holloway Road, London N7 8DQ

020 7700 2393

enquiries@cnduk.org

www.cnduk.org

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