

THE CASE AGAINST TRIDENT REPLACEMENT

Realism versus illusion

This submission to Labour's Defence Policy Review addresses the question of Trident's future. Will the renewal of Britain's nuclear capability aid us in protecting Britain's security and pursuing the values that guide our foreign and defence policy?

OVERVIEW

The ethical case against nuclear weapons is clear and powerful. They are capable of inflicting indiscriminate destruction on a mass scale, killing millions of people and rendering large areas of the world uninhabitable. The practical case against Trident is equally strong. Britain's nuclear weapons system is unfit for purpose, and should not be renewed. It does not protect our country from the major threats facing us in the 21st century – most pressing among which are cyber-attacks and terrorism.

The blast and radiation from the single atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima in 1945 killed around 240,000 people. Britain's nuclear weapons system includes an estimated 225 warheads. Each of these has an explosive yield eight times greater than the bomb dropped on Hiroshima.¹

The possession of such weapons is of questionable value in helping achieve a more peaceful, more just and more secure world. Upgrading Britain's nuclear weapons programme would conflict with many of Labour's core foreign policy and defence values, reaffirmed in the 2015 manifesto, in particular support for international peacekeeping and peacebuilding. Trident renewal would send the wrong message around the world. It would encourage others to acquire or upgrade nuclear weapons and, arguably, put the UK in breach of the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.

Given the scale of destruction nuclear weapons are capable of, few advocates are prepared to defend their use. Instead, the nuclear weapons lobby relies heavily on deterrence – an unprovable assertion that nuclear weapons need never be used because their possession alone is sufficient to deter attackers. 'Deterrence' is an outdated concept from an era in which two nuclear-armed military blocs dominated international relations. Even then, it failed to account for the circumstances in which conflicts arose and developed, or their unintended consequences.

Indeed, Trident is frequently referred to as a 'deterrent', avoiding any mentioning of its actual function as a strategic and sub-strategic nuclear weapons programme. We strongly object to this euphemism. Many have already pointed out, including former Defence Secretary Geoff Hoon, that nuclear weapons cannot 'deter' unless there is a willingness to use them.

Trident is increasingly irrelevant in conditions where the most likely security risk come in the form of terrorism and cyber-attack. Replacing Trident would consume a substantial proportion of the UK's military budget over many years, in conditions where our armed forces are both overstretched and under-resourced. Not replacing it would release resources which could be redirected towards some of these areas.

Additionally, upgrading Britain's nuclear weapons programme would divert a substantial amount of government spending away from wealth-producing projects in other areas such as house building or road and rail improvements. Infrastructural improvement like these would help grow the British

¹ Britain's warheads each have a 100 kiloton yield according to a number of sources, including Robert S Norris and Hans M Kristensen, 'The British nuclear stockpile, 1953-2013', *Nuclear notebook*, Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, Vol 69 (4), pp 69-75, Sage, 2013.

economy and generate government resources for improving health, education and other areas of social need.

The weight of evidence and argument points to the conclusion that Trident should not be renewed.

WOULD TRIDENT RENEWAL KEEP BRITAIN SAFE?

The likelihood of a nuclear attack

The most recent official assessment of the threats facing Britain was published last November. The *National Security Risk Assessment 2015* ranked nuclear attack as a Tier 2 threat to Britain, the same as the previous assessment in 2010. Nuclear attack does not figure among the short term dangers this country faces, and is considered to be only a remote threat in the longer term.

The *NSRA 2015* highlights seven areas of risk:

- terrorism
- cyber-attacks
- instability in Middle East and elsewhere
- public health pandemics
- natural disasters
- the activities of transnational criminal organisations and terrorist groups, such as people trafficking, and
- the use of weapons of mass destruction

Trident would play no role in preventing or off-setting any of the first six of these dangers – all of them considered immediate and present. In the case of the seventh, longer term threat, the *NSRA* deemed chemical or biological attacks against the British mainland or UK military forces abroad to be the more likely risks.

Trident as a security risk

The UK Ministry of Defence and others are already considering scenarios in which Trident itself becoming a security risk – as a target for terrorists or cyber strikes.² Security specialists are discussing situations such as a cyber-attack which could put Trident out of operation, or the development of underwater drones capable of detecting our ‘silent’ submarines.

A report by a US Department of Defence task force, *Resilient Military Systems and the Advanced Cyber Threat*, describes cyber threats to critical IT systems as ‘serious’ and ‘insidious’. Weapon systems protection, it states, has not kept pace with the cyber tactics and capabilities. Former Defence Secretary Lord Des Browne has highlighted this, warning that Britain cannot be confident its defence systems would be able to survive such an attack.

The accidental deployment of nuclear weapons is also a risk, as is the possibility of military activity inadvertently involving nuclear materials or accidents at nuclear facilities – as the 30th anniversary commemorations of the Chernobyl disaster remind us. There is a substantial and well-documented record of accidental nuclear events occurring around the world.

Twenty-one nuclear incidents in Britain alone are recorded between 1950-2000, each serious enough to merit a rating on the IAEA’s International Nuclear and Radiological Event Scale. Nuclear incidents in the UK include:

² See for example *Strategic Trends Programme Future Operating Environment 2035*, First Edition 30 November 2014, published by the UK Ministry of Defence.

- a bomber aircraft which crashed into a nuclear storage facility at RAF Lakenheath in 1956;
- a fire at Windscale (now Sellafield) which burned for three days in 1957; and
- a radioactive leak at the THORP reprocessing plant, also part of Sellafield, which went undetected for 9 months in 2004.

Trident: 'deterrent' or target?

The pro-Trident lobby claims that the possession of nuclear weapons is sufficient to dissuade predatory powers such as Russia or rogue states such as North Korea from engaging Britain or its allies in a military confrontation. But as former Secretary of State for Defence Geoff Hoon and others have argued, nuclear weapons would not be a deterrent if there was no willingness to use them.

In the build up to the Iraq war, in March 2002 Hoon told the Commons Defence Select Committee that the UK was prepared to use nuclear weapons against Iraq, saying: 'They can be absolutely confident that in the right conditions we would willing to use our nuclear weapons.'³ He reiterated this on TV in February 2003: 'We have always made it clear that we would reserve the right to use nuclear weapons in conditions of extreme self defence.'⁴

However, the threat of using nuclear weapons did not prevent the Iraq government from military engagement with Nato – a nuclear armed military alliance – despite the evident inequality between the two. Neither has the possession of nuclear weapons prevented terrorists from attacking perceived opponents including Britain and other nuclear capable western states.

No sober assessment of current tensions indicates that Russia today prefers military confrontation as a means of settling its perceived differences with Nato allies. Indeed, experience clearly leads to the view that the conduct of international relations in tense situations is considerably more complex than nuclear deterrence scenarios might suggest.

In the case of less powerful states such as the People's Democratic Republic of Korea, the desire to possess nuclear weapons is better understood as an 'insurance policy' – the belief that they are less likely to be attacked if they are nuclear capable. This was conceded by UK Foreign Secretary Phillip Hammond, himself a former Defence Secretary, when asked to comment on a recent DPRK missile launch. North Korea seems to think having a nuclear weapon keeps them safe when, in fact, the opposite is true: nuclear weapons make them a target, he said. We would add that the same applies to Britain and Trident.

WOULD TRIDENT RENEWAL REINFORCE DEFENCE AND FOREIGN POLICY VALUES?

Trident contributes to proliferation

The nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty is a welcome recognition of the dangers that the spread of nuclear weapons and fissionable material bring. Sadly though, the Treaty provides only minimal protection from those dangers. Since it came into force in 1970, progress has been limited, and more states now possess nuclear weapons. The 2015 manifesto recognised this, pledging a Labour government would 'actively work to increase momentum on global multilateral disarmament efforts and negotiations, and look at further reductions in global stockpiles and the numbers of weapons'.

The total number of nuclear warheads reached a global peak of 60,000 at the end of the 1980s, according to Federation of American Scientists estimates, after which all nuclear states took steps to reduce their stockpiles. Sipri, the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute estimates nine

³ Defence Select Committee, 19 March 2002.

⁴ *Breakfast with Frost*, Sunday 2 February, 2003.

nuclear states (US, UK, Russia, China, France, India, Pakistan, Israel and North Korea) possessed approximately 15,850 nuclear warheads at the start of 2015; and 1,838 tonnes of fissile material (necessary to sustain an explosive reaction) was in existence. Almost one in four of these nuclear warheads were deployed with operational forces; of which around 1800 are in a state of high alert.

The more states that possess or seek to develop nuclear weapons, the greater the dangers of deliberate or accidental nuclear conflagration. But this is not the only way in which proliferation takes place. Measures taken by the nuclear states themselves to maintain their military superiority by improving delivery systems and updating nuclear war-fighting capabilities also constitute proliferation.

Trident replacement would fall into this latter category. It would be in direct conflict with Labour's goal of increasing momentum towards global multilateral disarmament.

Trident replacement breaches the NPT

Britain has ratified the NPT suggesting, in principle at least, that all UK governments are committed to measures leading towards global nuclear disarmament. Trident replacement would be a step in the opposite direction.

Two legal opinions have suggested that upgrading Trident would put Britain in breach of the NPT. In 2005, Rabinder Singh QC of Matric Chambers (London) and Professor Christine Chinkin of the LSE produced a joint legal opinion, *The Maintenance and Possible Replacement of the Trident Nuclear Missile System*.⁵ They concluded that:

- the use of Trident would breach customary international law, in particular because it would infringe the 'intransgressible' requirement that a distinction must be drawn between combatants and non-combatants;
- the replacement of Trident is likely to constitute a breach of article VI of NPT; and
- this would be a material breach of that treaty.

Likewise, in 2006 Philippe Sands QC gave a legal opinion, *The United Kingdom's Nuclear Deterrent: current and future issues of legality*, which considered the legality of renewing, replacing or upgrading the Trident system and the compatibility of the use of Trident with international humanitarian law. He concluded that the renewal, replacement, upgrading and sub-strategic use of Trident would be inconsistent with Article VI of the NPT, the UN Charter and international humanitarian law.⁶

Is Trident necessary for Britain's status in the world?

In establishment circles, nuclear weapons have been viewed as a means of maintaining the UK's international status and leverage. Britain's place as a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council predates its nuclear weapons status by years. Indeed, Britain would be a better and more capable member of the UN – both practically and morally – without nuclear weapons.

The perception of status as a reflection of the ability to coerce sits ill with Labour's commitment to working collectively with others to resolve global challenges through diplomacy and negotiation. Witness Labour's 2015 manifesto statement: 'A Labour Government would not propose the use of military force without judging whether reasonable diplomatic efforts have been exhausted, the action is proportionate and in partnership with allies, whether there is a clear legal basis, and if there is a clear plan, not just for winning the war but also for building a lasting peace.'

⁵ The full text of the legal opinion is available from the Acronym Institute at www.acronym.org.uk

⁶ The full text of the Sands opinion is available at <http://www.greenpeace.org.uk/MultimediaFiles/Live/FullReport/8072.pdf>

Within the UN, Britain's soft power counts for more than its nuclear weapons – that is, the resources the UK is prepared to make available in terms of diplomacy, emergency and development aid, and above all, peacekeeping. We make a substantial financial contribution to UN peacekeeping. We could do even more to confront the most pressing threats to world security if some of the funds released by not renewing Trident were redirected here. In particular, Britain could provide more in terms of heavy equipment, airlift capacity and training for UN peacekeepers.

Trident's questionable independence

Further doubt is cast on the status argument for Trident replacement by the knowledge that Britain's nuclear weapons are not independent. The UK relies on American technology in the following ways:

- Britain leases Trident missiles from the US;
- British submarines must regularly visit the US for maintenance and missile replacement;
- British warheads are a copy of US warheads, and some components are bought directly from the US;
- even though Trident submarines are built in Britain, many components are bought from the US; and
- Trident is supported on US systems which provide information such as weather and navigational data used in targeting nuclear weapons.

It is hard to conceive of a situation in which the UK would use its nuclear weapons if the US opposed us doing so.

Britain's access to American nuclear know-how has bred tacit and unacknowledged obligations to support US military and foreign policy goals, some of which conflict with Labour's commitment to diplomatic and negotiated solutions to conflict.

Economic implications of Trident replacement

The cost of nuclear weapons is not of itself a sufficient basis for deciding whether or not Trident replacement should go ahead. However, it would be one of the government's most expensive projects at a time of economic austerity, which adds to the urgency of reconsidering Labour's attitude.

Nuclear weapons account for around five or six percent of the UK's military budget. Upgrading Trident would tie up a significant proportion of MoD funds over many years, at a time when our armed forces are both overstretched and under-resourced. Trident replacement and the associated lifetime costs are estimated at £167 billion on current government figures.

Some of the resources released by not replacing Trident could be reallocated to underfunded aspects of Britain's security, including cyber-security, and redirected into other areas of foreign policy such as peacekeeping and peacebuilding. They would also permit a Labour government to honour its pledge to do more for service personnel who risk their lives for their country, and ensure that veterans are properly cared for.

Not replacing Trident would have an important impact on the wider economy, of course. Since the first UK nuclear weapons were built in the 1950s, billions of pounds have been invested in an industrial network necessary to maintain them. Vast amounts of public money have been spent on nuclear research, development and production – a huge on-going capital investment programme by the British state. The UK economy as a whole could benefit from a decision not to replace Trident, which would release government resources for wealth-generating projects like house building or improvements to road and rail networks, for example. This would help grow our economy and provide enduring benefits for the majority Britain's citizens.

Skilled workers are essential to a prosperous economy. We recognise that the decision not to replace Trident would have to be accompanied by a strategic plan to ensure a just transition for communities whose livelihoods are based in the nuclear sector, and that government funds would have to be allocated for this purpose. We welcome the Labour leader's commitment to a defence diversification agency to ensure that engineering and scientific skills are not lost.

IN CONCLUSION

Trident is a billion-pound anachronism – an ethically problematic and ineffective security tool. The decision not to replace Trident would be a hard-headed and realistic step towards a more effective security policy and an important contribution by Britain to a safer, more peaceful world.

Our experiences of the past six months, speaking to constituency and branch parties and affiliated organisation suggests that the majority of Labour Party members agree that Trident should not be renewed; it should be decommissioned.

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