

The Future of the UK's nuclear deterrent

Liberal Democrats and Conservatives agreed to disagree on Trident replacement in the Coalition Agreement of May 2010, with Conservatives reiterating their commitment to 'like-for like' replacement – a submarine CASD system, requiring 4 submarines – and Liberal Democrats continuing to seek a smaller and cheaper alternative.

When Conference last agreed a full Party policy on Trident replacement in March 2007, it said that we should commit to significantly reducing British nuclear capabilities pending the 2010 Non-Proliferation negotiations. It was our view then that a decision on Trident replacement was premature. At Autumn Conference 2009 we agreed that we should not support a like for like replacement for it.

The 2010 Non-Proliferation Conference has, sadly, made little progress in reducing the spread of nuclear weapons. North Korea is now a nuclear state; Iran is moving towards nuclear weapon capability. Britain, however, like other states, is facing an acute budgetary crisis, with future defence equipment projections somewhere between £10bn and £30bn above budgetary planning assumptions, and with Treasury demands for further cuts in the defence budget. The anticipated capital cost of a Trident replacement system is of the order of £20bn; its lifetime cost has been estimated at around £100bn.. With the Treasury insisting that a new nuclear deterrent must be paid for out of the overall defence budget, rather than separately funded as a sovereign priority, the cost of Trident replacement now has to be weighed against conventional systems – aircraft carriers, helicopters, infantry battalions – within a tightly-constrained budget.

So what exactly is Trident?

The Trident system consists of British-built submarines, carrying US-owned (and UK-leased) missiles, maintained for the UK in Virginia, with British-assembled nuclear warheads. It is independent, in that the British government retains the sovereign right to deploy the submarines – and in the ultimate circumstances of a crisis to fire the missiles – but requires continuing US cooperation to maintain its effectiveness.

The capital costs of the current Trident system were committed during the Cold War. Its US counterpart is intended to continue in service for another 10-20 years before replacement. In 2007, however, the Government voted to replace Trident with a new submarine-based system. The arguments for this included anticipated declining reliability of the Trident submarines, the need to maintain a submarine-building capability in Barrow in Furness as Vickers completed the order for Astute submarines, the uncertainty of potential future threats to the UK over the 30-40 year lifespan of the replacement system, and the importance to the UK's global status of continuing to be a credible nuclear deterrent state, like the other permanent members of the UN Security Council. Liberal Democrats argued then that it was 'premature' to commit large sums to replacement, that the lifetime capability of the current system could be extended through less intensive patrolling, and that the 2010 UN Review Conference on Non-Proliferation offered an opportunity to reduce global dependence on nuclear weapons.

The defence planning scenario for conventional capability on which the current Security and Defence Strategic Review (SDSR) is based assumes that a significant threat to the UK from other states does not currently exist, and that such a direct threat will not re-emerge in the future without an extended period of ‘strategic warning’ – of deteriorating relations. The assumptions on which the UK nuclear deterrent rest, however, remain those of the Cold War: that a direct threat from another state to the UK might materialise suddenly, and that ‘continuous at-sea deterrence’ (CASD) is vital to protect the UK’s security from attack.

Options for the future

Economies could be made if the CASD requirement were abandoned (3 submarines), or if a smaller number of missiles were carried on dual-purpose submarines. More radical alternatives would include delayed replacement, extending the life of the current system through reduced patrols, a minimal deterrent carried on cruise missiles, some form of cooperation with the French in maintaining minimal patrols, a non-deployed nuclear capability, or most radically a declaration that the UK would not renew its nuclear deterrent.

Questions to consider

1. What are the most serious security threats facing the UK in the 21st Century? How high a priority is nuclear capability in responding to them?
2. How vital is a nuclear deterrent to the UK’s international status? Would our permanent seat on the UN Security Council, for example, be at risk if we reduced or abandoned our independent deterrent capability? Would a delay – or cancellation – in replacement be seen as an acceptance that Britain was no longer a ‘serious’ power?
3. Is Trident really independent? What are the costs and benefits of the UK’s dependence on the USA for the long-term maintenance of our nuclear weapons system?
4. Would a more modest system be credible and viable – and worth the expenditure?
5. What are the opportunity costs of like-for-like Trident replacement?
6. Should we abandon Trident entirely?