



THE UN'S ROLE IN STEMMING NUCLEAR PROLIFERATION

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THE UN'S NUCLEAR REGIME: THE NPT UNDER STRAIN

On 9 October 2006, North Korea carried out its first successful nuclear weapon test. The test constituted a blow to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), the centrepiece of the international community's attempts to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons, which is already under severe strain. Responding to Pyongyang's test, Dr Mohamed ElBaradei, the head of the UN's nuclear watchdog, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), warned that up to 30 more countries may develop atomic weapons if the proliferation of nuclear technology is not stopped.

The NPT aims to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons, regulate access to technology associated with the development of nuclear weapons and to achieve eventual global nuclear disarmament. However, confidence in the regime has eroded. Some of the reasons for this are:

- Uncertainty in the global security environment
- The first withdrawal of a state party: North Korea in 2003
- Growing strain on the treaty's verification and enforcement procedures
- The failure to reach agreement in 2005 at the NPT Review Conference and the UN World Summit on ways to move closer towards achieving the NPT's objectives
- States bypassing the multilateral framework of the NPT to pursue nuclear objectives by bilateral or unilateral means

WHAT ROLE FOR THE UK?

As one of the few states that possess nuclear weapons, the UK government has a key role to play in rebuilding international confidence in the NPT and enhancing compliance among nuclear-weapon and non-nuclear-weapon states alike. Its ability to effect constructive change at the international level will be coloured by its decisions and actions at home. The government has announced that it will make a determination during this parliament about whether or not to renew its own nuclear capability. Since this decision has implications for the UK's obligations under the NPT, the government's future leverage within the international nuclear regime is arguably tied to the future of its nuclear deterrent.

The government has committed to a full public debate before any decision is taken about 'Trident', as the current nuclear-weapon system is called. However, it has so far failed to create an environment in which a meaningful and informed debate can be expected to take place. To facilitate debate the UK government should:

- Issue a Green Paper outlining the options for consideration
- Consider delaying the decision to replace Trident by extending the life of the existing system. In addition to allowing a meaningful debate to take place, a delay could have at least two other advantages: 1) it would bolster the UK's credibility in any initiative to reinvigorate the nuclear regime; and 2) it would maximise military flexibility, allowing the UK both to remain in step with the US (on whose technological development cycles the UK is somewhat dependent) and to retain adaptability in a changeable security environment.

THE FACTS ABOUT TRIDENT

- It cost £12.5 billion to build in 1996, and costs around £280 million per year to maintain.
- Estimated costs of replacing Trident range from £5 billion for the missiles alone, and up to £20-30 billion for missiles, submarines and research facilities.

- In contrast, it is estimated that, by 2007-08, the UK's annual international development expenditure will be under £6.5 billion.
- Trident is due to be replaced between 2020 and 2025 and experts anticipate a lead-time of up to 14 years to develop new weaponry.

ASK YOUR MP

- **What are the implications for the UK's obligations under Article VI of the NPT if the decision is made to renew its nuclear-weapons system?**
- **Would the UK's NPT obligations be met if the capability of a successor system to Trident was reduced in scale and salience?**
- **What threats does the UK face to which nuclear weapons offer a credible response?**
- **Can the retention of nuclear weapons be justified on the basis that other countries retain them or might acquire them?**
- **How much would Trident's replacement cost, and has the government considered that the money could be more effectively allocated to other defence and/or social priorities?**
- **Has the government undertaken a review of its nuclear deterrence policy to reflect the fact that the UK currently faces no first-strike threat?**
- **When is the UK government going to begin a meaningful public debate over the future of the UK's nuclear deterrent, as it has promised?**
- **Why does a decision about Trident need to be taken so quickly, when the Defence Committee has itself stated that the ultimate decision can wait until 2014?**
- **Has the government considered extending the life expectancy of the Trident submarines? If not, why not?**
- **Have you signed EDM 1113, calling for the government to publish a consultation paper setting out the issues, including threat assessments, estimated costs and all nuclear and non-nuclear options, as a basis for the public debate?**
- **Have you signed EDM 2703, noting regret that the government has so far failed to facilitate a debate on Trident's replacement, and calling on the government urgently to facilitate this debate and ensure that such a debate informs the decision on the replacement of Trident?**

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