

THE NPT AND THE UK'S NUCLEAR STRATEGY

The question of Trident



The United Kingdom, as a permanent member of the UN Security Council and a nuclear-weapon state, has a particular responsibility to contribute to the maintenance of global peace and security. The issue of whether to replace 'Trident', the UK's current nuclear-weapon system, must be assessed in the context of the UK's global responsibilities and, in particular, its obligations under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). How a decision on Trident's replacement relates to the UK's obligations under the NPT is by no means clear-cut and has been the subject of considerable legal and political debate.

The Trident debate

The government has announced that it will make a decision during the current parliament whether or not to replace Trident. Although the decision can legally be made by the Cabinet, the government has promised that a full public debate, and a parliamentary vote, will take place before any decision is taken.

There are four options:

- replace Trident with a weapon system of equal or greater capability
- replace Trident with a weapon system of lesser capability
- do not replace the current weapon system and commit to unilateral disarmament
- delay the decision

Issues under consideration

The government announced on 24 November 2006 that the parliamentary vote would be held early in 2007. The vote will be informed by a government white paper to be published in December 2006, and will take place after a three-month consultation period. The following issues should be among those debated:

Legal obligations: The legal implications of the eventual decision relate primarily to the UK's commitments under the NPT, Article VI of which requires all states parties 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". It is argued by some that replacing Trident would constitute a violation of the UK's legal obligations under Article VI. Others maintain that the UK has taken steps towards disarmament, including foregoing all nuclear weapons, apart from Trident, since 1997, and mandating that only one submarine, with its missiles de-targeted, be on patrol at any one time.

Ethical considerations: Nuclear weapons have always posed serious moral and ethical considerations related to the concept of 'just war'. Many believe that the threat to use nuclear weapons is itself morally wrong as the implication is that a state is willing to murder innocent civilians on a large scale. Others argue that tactical 'battlefield weapons' may justifiably serve as a deterrent and, if used, could discriminate between combatants and civilians.

Political and strategic implications: Divergent views exist about the link between the UK's nuclear-weapon capability and its political and strategic influence in world affairs. Some argue that the UK's nuclear capacity is an important source of influence and that it may be useful as new types of threats emerge in a generation from now. Others believe that the link between nuclear weapons and power is spurious and that, by relying on its deterrent as a tool of influence and a source of security, the UK is erroneously legitimating the possession of nuclear weapons. Many observers also argue that deterrence is an anachronism of the Cold War

international system, that nuclear weapons cannot meet contemporary security threats, and that their retention may in fact exacerbate tensions with rival states. Another common question in this particular aspect of the debate is what impact the decision to replace or abandon the UK's nuclear-weapon system would have on global disarmament: some argue that unilaterally disarming would allow the UK to play a credible leadership role in multilateral disarmament negotiations, while others maintain that the UK's ultimate position will have a negligible impact on the behaviour of other states.

Opportunity costs: The current Trident system cost £12.5 billion in 1996, and continues to cost around £280 million per year to maintain. The estimated costs of replacing Trident range from £5 billion for the missiles alone, 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. Those opposed to replacing Trident argue that the resources involved could be better spent elsewhere, most notably on reinforcing the UK's overstretched and under-resourced ground troops, improving intelligence capabilities to address new threats such as terrorist networks, or increasing expenditure for non-military purposes such as health and education.

Timing of the decision: Trident is due to expire between 2020 and 2025 and experts anticipate that a period of up to 14 years is necessary to develop new weaponry. However, some experts argue that the decision could be delayed by extending the life of the existing system. It has also been argued that the government is unnecessarily rushing through the decision and that there are benefits to postponing it. The purported advantages of this course of action would be:

- to allow more time for a thorough and meaningful debate to take place;
- to bolster the UK's credibility in any initiative to reinvigorate the international nuclear regime; and
- to 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 government has so far committed itself only to retaining the current weapon system for the length of its current term in office. However, both Tony Blair and Gordon Brown have expressed that they favour its replacement, and the government's forthcoming white paper is expected to reflect this. The next three months present a potentially valuable opportunity for the country to discuss the key issues. It is vital that the government ensures that a full and informed debate is held before a decision is taken.

Facts about Trident

- The UK has four Vanguard class submarines; each carries 16 Trident II D-5 missiles.
- The missiles can carry 12 warheads, with a maximum of 48 warheads per submarine.
- The Trident system comprises around 200 operational warheads.
- Each warhead has a potential explosive power of 100 kilotons, seven times that of the bomb that killed an estimated 140,000 people at Hiroshima.
- The UK owns the warheads, but leases 58 missiles from the US government.

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