Medact Briefing

Should the UK replace Trident?

The UK currently has a fleet of four nuclear-armed ‘Vanguard Class’ nuclear-powered submarines, built by Vickers at Barrow-in-Furness. Each submarine has a 16-tube missile compartment, the design of which is based on the 24-tube system used by the US Navy's Ohio Class Trident submarines.

Although each Vanguard sub can carry 192 warheads, the boats deploy with no more than 96, possibly significantly fewer. All submarines have 132 crew and are armed with torpedoes as well as the Trident D5 nuclear missiles. These have a range of about 4,000 nautical miles, and are of the ‘re-entry’ type (which means among other things they have to resist the heating effects of re-entering the atmosphere). Each missile has up to eight thermonuclear warheads capable of an explosion many times more powerful than the atomic weapons used on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. They are based on US design but manufactured at Aldermaston.

Total acquisition costs were £12.57 billion at 1996-97 prices, and the annual cost of the programme is in the order of £200 million p.a. over 30 years in service.

Even though the last ship, *Vengeance*, was commissioned only in 1999, there are practical and political pressures on the UK government to consider whether the system (ship, missile and warhead) should be replaced in about 2024. Obsolescence may arise in all three components, not least because of the computerised electronics which control them, the need for regular (nuclear) re-fuelling, and to update the navigational systems on the missiles. Because of the very long lead-time in development, the UK government has said that it will take the decision whether or not to replace Trident during the life of the current UK Parliament.

At the Seventh Review Conference of the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT), held at the UN in New York in May 2005, the head of the UK delegation, John Freeman, stated *‘We re-affirm our unequivocal undertaking to accomplish the total elimination of nuclear arsenals leading to nuclear disarmament …. We continue to believe that all reductions in nuclear weapons levels, whether achieved unilaterally, bilaterally or multilaterally, are a valuable contribution to the final goal of global nuclear disarmament’*

He went on to list the various reductions in the UK nuclear forces since the Sixth Review Conference in 2000. However, the UK Trident programme was completed during Labour’s ‘watch’, and the indications are that, like the Conservative and the Liberal Democratic parties, the government is favourably inclined to a replacement programme. His statements are also to be seen in the light of a deeply disappointing Review Conference during which the US made similar claims of reducing their nuclear arsenal while at the same time blocking any real progress in global nuclear disarmament.

Key points on the replacement of Trident

Article VI of the NPT reads: ‘*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.’*

The UK government has stated that it does not intend to use the Trident weapons as 'first strike'; but the US equivalents are certainly capable of being used in this way. The UK cites the 'invisibility' of the submarines as an argument in favour of their deployment. This would still, however, be heavily dependent on US guidance systems, casting considerable doubt on the true independence of the UK Trident system.

Current arguments used to support replacement of the Trident system include:

- Britain's nuclear weapons will never be used but are necessary for political reasons
- The strategic defence of Britain by deterrence of a nuclear capable adversary
- A counter to blackmail
- Ensuring the UK continues to have a place on the UN Security Council
- A bargaining counter in multilateral disarmament agreements

Arguments against replacing the Trident system include:

- The devastating consequences of using such a nuclear weapon
- Arguments for the possession of nuclear weapons could apply to any state and lead logically to the conclusion that every state should have them - a conclusion that many states are now drawing.
- Replacement of the Trident system would signal to the non-nuclear weapons states that the commitments of the nuclear weapons states to the NPT are a political subterfuge.
- Replacement would cause the international web of commitments to the NPT to unravel, with a consequent high risk of fissile material falling into the hands of non-state actors such as terrorists.
- Trident can have no effect in the 'War on Terror', enhanced since '7/7'.
- The £15 billion cost of replacing the Trident system (at a conservative estimate) is an exorbitant amount to spend on a weapon which is not intended to be used.
- Such resources would be better used for conflict prevention and investment in health in the UK and developing countries.

In the words of Douglas Roche of the Middle Powers Initiative, in the briefing paper 'Deadly Deadlock' of June 2005 (www.middlepowers.org): '*If, in accordance with the unequivocal undertaking, and with the fundamental illegitimacy and illegality of threat or use of nuclear weapons, Britain should decide not to replace the Trident system,* ***it would earn a special place in history*** *as the first of the original declared NPT nuclear weapon states to renounce its arsenal.'* (bold type added)

Because of the security implications and massive costs involved, it is vital that the decision whether or not to replace the Trident system is democratically taken, allowing for acknowledged public input and proper debate and decision in Parliament.

It is the duty of our leaders to act with forethought and statesmanship and lead the world from the insanity of mutual threat towards a collective and verified trust.

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