



CASD

Options for Trident patrolling

Summary

The Parliamentary vote on 18th July will include a commitment to continuous patrolling (CASD). But a credible nuclear deterrent does not require CASD when there is no live strategic threat to the UK (the official current position). Taking submarines off continuous patrol now would be safe and could:

- be reversible in times of crisis;
- result in substantial savings;
- relieve some pressures on the submarine service; and
- signal Britain's commitment to minimum deterrence and step-by-step multilateral disarmament.

It is often said that CASD is necessary for crisis stability, but crises involving the threat of nuclear release do not emerge overnight. Future commanders and Prime Ministers could retain the flexibility to deploy nuclear submarines early on in a crisis, and thus send a signal of serious intent. The Government is investing in a new generation of Trident submarines because of uncertainty over future strategic threats from Russia to Britain and our European allies, not in response to any live threat today or a bolt-from-the-blue nuclear strike to the UK.

Options

Deterrence involves risk with no black and white guarantees. Yet an inflexible commitment to CASD is often sold as an essential symbol of credible deterrence. This is grossly oversimplistic and misleads the debate. References to a part-time deterrent demean the intelligence and close off any further possibilities for steps down the nuclear ladder.

A flexible nuclear deterrent posture could adjust patrolling frequency to fit the government's assessment of the security circumstances facing the UK. Two alternatives involving Trident were outlined in the Trident Commission final document.

Section from BASIC Trident Commission Final Report, July 2014

Near-CASD

The UK could adopt a posture involving a continuation of day-to-day continuous patrolling, but at a lower confidence level in times of no strategic threat (unplanned random breaks in patrol, or patrolling combined with training). In other words, there could be occasions when the UK might not have a submarine out at sea when there are no crises on the horizon, but retained a high confidence of being able to launch a boat at very short notice.

This would allow the navy to take a higher risk in running the current submarines longer into the future (pushing all the replacement costs off to the right and thereby reducing the current value of the capital costs), to widen the drumbeat of production for the new SSBNs (from two to perhaps three years), to reduce the readiness of submarines in port preparing to relieve patrolling boats (both current and future systems) and thereby to reduce operating costs and possibly crew numbers. It would also be possible to maintain such a posture with three rather than four boats, according to the Trident Alternatives Review saving between £1.5bn (net present value) and £4bn (in cash terms) in capital costs. This policy could end up giving average savings of the order of £200m a year over the operational life of the system when compared to current plans.

Maintaining a continuous patrolling capacity

An alternative would be to introduce a policy of maintaining an SSBN fleet with the capability of ramping up to a continuous patrolling posture for a limited period during temporary crises, but otherwise being out on patrol on occasion for purposes of training and exercises, with or without nuclear weapons. This might require two or three boats, depending upon the level of certainty required to maintain capacity for continuous patrolling over limited periods, and is the policy position agreed by the Liberal Democrats in their Autumn Conference of September 2013.

Savings in annual running costs could be realised from reduced crews and from contingency protection forces. It might also be possible for warheads to be deployed rarely for the purposes of testing confidence in the firing chain, enabling further reductions in the number and costs of warheads, as well as a reduced requirement for new missiles in the mid-2030s. This could yield savings of several hundred million pounds a year over current plans, possibly well over £500m and up to £1bn.

Savings

Brexit brings huge affordability issues for MoD, the result of likely cuts in departmental budgets and a weak pound (Prof Trevor Taylor, RUSI, 6 July). US State Department estimates the UK annually imports \$12bn of defence equipment. Firming up on a commitment to a particular patrolling posture may be premature and could present a major threat to other essential MoD capabilities. In addition to those potential operational savings of up to £1bn outlined above, dropping CASD would:

- reduce wear and tear and therefore lengthen the expected life of the Vanguards; and
- reduce the pressure on the transition period between fleets as the Vanguards could be run for longer if there were a more relaxed requirement for their patrol availability.

It could even enable the navy to mothball two submarines and operate the other two to the end of their lives. Having two available for patrols would enable the UK to reinstitute continuous patrolling for a significant crisis period if necessary, well over a year. This strategy would extend the expected life of the existing fleet by at least a decade, taking it to the early 2040s, taking the pressure off the current timetable for submarine construction, and saving the capital programme on average around £1.5bn a year over the next 15 years.

Crisis stability

If the UK slides into a strategic crisis that could involve nuclear threats, a Prime Minister would have the option of deploying a Trident submarine at short notice early on. The principal argument for CASD is based not so much on the idea of a bolt from the blue, but rather that such a deployment would represent a dangerous escalation of the crisis, and thus the PM could be self-deterred from such deployment. This seems a weak point, balanced by two considerations:

- If patrolling was irregular, the deployment of a submarine early in a crisis would not need to be announced with fanfare (though certainly an adversary would know), and could be treated as just another patrol or a minor, a justifiable precaution according to protocol.
- In any case, deploying a submarine could be used as a desirable signal of serious intent.

International responsibilities

NATO

UK Trident is deemed an important contribution to NATO's overall nuclear posture (this is a condition of US technical cooperation). But NATO nuclear posture does not require the UK to have a separate, national CASD arrangement. Indeed, with three NATO members operating separate continuous patrolling there seems to be unnecessary duplication. Justifications specifically for *national* CASD (that we can't or should not depend upon the US) suggest a lack of faith in NATO's collective capabilities and resolve. CASD also exerts an ever-increasing proportional burden on the UK's defence budget, crowding out other capabilities that may be more valuable to collective Alliance capabilities.

“If we were able to have sufficient confidence in the health of the Alliance moving forward into the future, it would be possible to have fewer Alliance submarines out on constant patrol to maintain an Alliance-wide CASD, were that deemed to be necessary for a credible nuclear deterrent.” *Trident Commission Final Report, July 2014, p.26*

NPT

The UK also has responsibilities as an NPT-recognised nuclear weapon state to engage in disarmament. More importantly, UK security is critically dependent upon strong global governance and stable international security arrangements, and these are currently under severe strain as a result of the failures of nuclear weapon states to progress disarmament.

Moving away from an inflexible CASD posture would:

- help fulfil our responsibility to reduce the readiness of our arsenal;
- demonstrate UK commitment to a genuine MINIMUM deterrence;
- introduce a flexibility to the posture responsive to the threat environment;
- enable the UK to offer greater genuine flexibility in future disarmament talks; and
- contribute towards a strategic environment conducive to disarmament without putting UK security at risk.

The submarine service

A CASD deployment places a heavy burden on the submarine service that has been experiencing significant challenges in recruitment and retention. Relaxing CASD would assist in relieving this pressure. It could also contribute to ensuring appropriate readiness, as a high military capability requires frequent training and a high operational tempo of deployment generally undermines it. SSBN patrols are exercises in patience but much of the essential training can be more appropriately conducted ashore in simulators. The message to crew that justifies their roles - that a patrolling submarine could determine the fate of UK security in a crisis - applies whether or not CASD is maintained in peacetime.

Conclusion

CASD has been picked up and turned into a symbol or red-line for credible nuclear deterrence, when in fact there are other options that would present significant savings, offer greater flexibility and assist in demonstrating serious UK intent to live up to its international obligations.

Paul Ingram, 13th July