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The UK Trident Vote Explained

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The Headlines

- On March 14, after a six-hour debate in the House of Commons, MPs voted 409 to 161 to replace Britain's submarine-based nuclear 'deterrent'.
- 87 Labour MPs (the governing party) voted against renewal, as did a majority of Scottish MPs, reflecting greater opposition 'north of the border' where the Trident fleet is based and serviced.
- A move to defer "an early decision on renewal" (a position backed by BASIC) was defeated by 423 to 167 votes; 95 Labour MPs, the Liberal Democrats and nationalist parties (in Scotland and Wales) supported this amendment.
- The scale of the 'rebellion' was larger than anticipated (given the imposition of a three-line whip¹) with almost half of all Labour MPs either voting against or abstaining. This forced the Government to rely on the support of the Conservative opposition to win the votes – as it had done in 2003, when 139 Labour MPs opposed the vote to go to war in Iraq).
- Former home secretary, Charles Clarke, and former Conservative shadow defence and foreign minister, Michael Ancram, joined the revolt, as did 16 former ministers, including four junior ministers who resigned in advance of the vote.
- It was the first time MPs had been given the chance to vote on whether Britain should remain a nuclear power.
- The vote will, in theory, keep Britain in the nuclear club well beyond Hiroshima's centenary in 2045.
- However, in a last-ditch attempt to head off dissenters, Prime Minister Tony Blair, Foreign Secretary Margaret Beckett, and Defence Secretary Des Browne, in a series of public statements and private letters to Labour MPs, sought to downplay the significance of the vote by suggesting that:
 - a) Parliament was simply being asked to sanction two years' work on the design and concept phase of the new system;
 - b) the final 'main gate' decision on signing the expensive construction contracts could be revisited by Parliament in 2012-2014; and
 - c) the renewal program could be cancelled "should there be a fundamental change for the better in the strategic environment".

Analysis

The vote in the House of Commons on March 14 commits Britain to build, in principle, a new generation of nuclear-armed submarines, as set out in the December 2006 Defence White Paper². In practice, however, this will not be the end of the matter. A future parliament will face the choice of whether to build and deploy those submarines, as well as two other crucial decisions: whether three submarines will be sufficient (currently there are four) and whether it will be necessary to develop a new warhead.

Responding to a question during Prime Minister's questions (prior to the Trident debate), Blair stated that "... it is always open to us to come back and look at these issues.when we get to the gateway stage-between 2012 and 2014-when we let the main contracts for design and construction, it will always be open to Parliament to take a decision". Similarly, opening the Government's debate on Trident renewal for Labour, Foreign Secretary Margaret Beckett insisted that the decision was not irreversible:

Today's decision does not mean that we are committing ourselves irreversibly to maintaining a nuclear deterrent for the next 50 years, no matter what others do and no matter what happens in the rest of the world. That would be absurd, unnecessary and, indeed, incompatible with the nuclear proliferation treaty.

The Foreign Secretary also confirmed that the issue would return to Parliament in future:

We are not making any decision about the warheads in this Parliament, so the matter will inevitably come before a subsequent Parliament... Further decisions will in any case be needed on the precise design of the submarines, on whether we need four or three, on whether to renew or replace the warhead, and on whether to participate in any American programme to develop a successor to the D5 missile. It will fall to future Governments and Parliaments to discuss the most appropriate form of scrutiny for those decisions. As I have said, this Government will ensure that there are regular reports to Parliament as the programme proceeds, and we will give the Select Committee our full co-operation as it maintains its regular scrutiny of these issues.

The large scale rebellion in the House of Commons also reflects a wider shift in the UK debate. In addition to the usual polarised positioning, there were significant debates within the media and, to a lesser extent within parliament and among the public, on substantive issues, such as the true cost of replacing Trident, the timing of the decision, and the impact on proliferation and deterrence policy. These concerns were shared by the House of Commons Defence Committee³, which asked Ministers to explain what they meant by a "minimum deterrent" and "what the concept of deterrence means in today's strategic environment". It questioned whether the government's promise to cut Britain's nuclear stockpile by 20% had any "operational significance" given that a new generation of missile submarines would carry the same number of warheads as their predecessors. Critical editorial comments appeared in many leading British newspapers, including *The Daily Mail*, *The Observer*, *The Financial Times*, *The Independent*, *London Evening Standard* and *The Guardian*.

The timing of the decision proved particularly divisive, especially following powerful evidence to the Defence Committee from US scientists and BASIC demonstrating that it would be possible to defer this decision some years without impacting upon Britain's ability to field a nuclear deterrent.

However, there is no disguising the fact that Parliament has approved replacement in principle. This represents a major failure on at least three levels: a failure of British politics; a missed opportunity to reassess Britain's place in the world in the 21st Century after the debacle in Iraq; and a missed opportunity to breathe new life into the moribund international non-proliferation architecture. Britain's international standing and national security is considerably weakened as a result of this highly premature decision.

A Failure of Politics

The decision to replace Trident now is a momentous failure of British parliamentary politics. The Labour and Conservative front benches have joined forces to push through prematurely a policy that is uncoded, failed to give adequate consideration to all the available options and rooted in the Cold War and outdated notions of national prestige. It is a decision that is driven largely by domestic political timetables and party political agendas rather than any operational necessity. On the one hand, the Labour Party leadership has been keen to underwrite the Prime Minister's legacy and burnish his successor's security credentials. On the other hand, the Conservative leadership, despite paying lip service to new thinking on the environment and much else,

provided knee-jerk 'support' for the Government position, with at least one eye on exploiting Labour's historic divisions over nuclear weapons. Will this decision turn out to be as misplaced as their support for the war in Iraq? Only time will tell, but the vote is likely to further widen the gap between politicians and the public.

Indeed, it is a particular failure of English politics, where the level of debate is more superficial and often tied to notions of national prestige (and self-esteem among the Westminster political elites) that are not necessarily shared throughout this union state. In Scotland, for example, the decision is likely to further alienate hearts and minds, since opposition to nuclear weapons is more deep-seated. And if the nationalists succeed in making Trident a key issue in the Scottish elections on May 3, and then win their promised referendum for independence, rather ironically, Trident could help bring about the destruction of the very nation-state that it exists to defend.⁴

A Failure to Reassess Britain's Place in the World

In a speech in January Tony Blair set out the case for why Britain needs to be able to continue to project "hard power". He argued that it was necessary both to defeat the terrorist threat and to maintain an international lead on "soft power" issues, such as climate change, Africa and diplomacy. Long-term increases in defence spending on weapon systems, like Trident, the Eurofighter and the Type 45 destroyer, were also necessary, he said, to provide the capabilities to project such "hard power". He also disparaged the view that Britain might otherwise be forced to pull back into a more limited peacekeeping role, a change that would prove "catastrophic" for Britain's world power.

These are all highly contentious observations and ought to have been central to the debate about Trident replacement. In contrast, for example, the 2006 Foreign Office White Paper outlines the security priorities for Britain. These include global terrorism and counter-proliferation, organized crime, conflict prevention, energy and climate security, sustainable development and poverty reduction, and managing migration. These have no relationship at all with Trident or its replacement. Britain is already Europe's biggest spender on defence, and fourth in the world. Yet still our army cannot cope. British troops in Afghanistan and Iraq are under equipped because the MoD is still buying ships to fight the Germans, planes to fight the Russians and nuclear weapons as an insurance against an uncertain future. It makes no sense to make a decision on Trident outside of a strategic review of Britain's role in the world.

Undermining the Non-Proliferation Regime

Most damaging of all, however, is the impact of the decision on Britain's commitments under, and standing within, the nuclear non-proliferation treaty (NPT). The Foreign Secretary Margaret Beckett attempted to set the government's decision to renew Trident in the context of a commitment to "take further steps towards meeting our disarmament responsibilities under article VI of the non-proliferation treaty", stating that the UK remained committed to the thirteen steps agreed in the 2000 NPT Programme of Action. She also said that the 20% reduction in Britain's nuclear stockpile announced in the White Paper would be made by the end of this year, not held off until the new Trident submarines were in place. But the government has so far refused to release the legal advice it has received on renewal and Britain's ambassador to the NPT discussions in May this year will find it hard to talk his way around the cynicism that this decision will engender.

Very few of the MPs who intervened in the debate were prepared to acknowledge that the future of Britain's nuclear deterrent is a tipping point with profound implications for global security and non-proliferation efforts. Many who spoke in favour of renewal put up the usual straw man that a unilateral decision to disarm would have no impact on Tehran and Pyongyang. But it is as fatuous to claim that a British commitment to a new generation of nuclear weapons will have no impact on nuclear proliferation as it is to claim that a decision to disarm would in itself convince others to disarm. What is clear is that parliament has further undermined confidence in non-proliferation by showing no faith in the very architecture for restraint that it expects the majority world of over 180 nuclear weapon-free states to abide by.

Conclusion

Britain sits in one of the most secure regions of the world, faces no current military threats from other states and benefits from the collective security of the EU, NATO and UN. Conventional deterrence is provided through a military alliance that collectively accounts for about 70% of global military spending. Independent expert evidence suggested that, at a minimum, the decision to renew the British nuclear fleet could have been deferred until after the next NPT Review Conference in 2010, providing time for the UK Government to help kick-start a new global initiative to build a framework for a world free of the nuclear threat. There will be an opportunity to re-visit many of these issues in the lead up to the next General Election and during the next parliament, but a huge window of opportunity for Britain to lead the world into a more positive future has been squandered by narrow party political and outdated national security interests.

Further reading

BASIC Green Paper on Trident replacement:

<http://www.basicint.org/nuclear/beyondtrident/greenpaper.pdf>

BASIC Briefing on timing: <http://www.basicint.org/pubs/SB060725.pdf>

BASIC briefing on non-proliferation implications:

<http://www.basicint.org/nuclear/beyondtrident/briefing02.pdf>

BASIC Briefing on opportunity costs:

<http://www.basicint.org/nuclear/beyondtrident/briefing03.pdf>.

BASIC Research Report, *Oceans of Work*, arguing for resources to be diverted away from nuclear submarine manufacture to a 'national needs' program of civil R&D and manufacture, including major investment in off-shore renewable energy:

<http://www.basicint.org/nuclear/beyondtrident/oceans.pdf>

Additional background documents, parliamentary statements, comment and media articles can be found on BASIC's website at: <http://www.basicint.org/nuclear/beyondtrident/index.htm>.

Endnotes

¹ A three-line whip is a written notice, underlined three times to indicate its importance, to politicians belonging to a particular party that they must attend a vote in parliament and vote in the way in which they are instructed. Both Labour and Conservative parties applied a three-line whip on the Trident vote.

² Ministry of Defence; Foreign and Commonwealth Office, *The Future of the United Kingdom's Nuclear Deterrent*, CM 6994, December 2006 http://www.mod.uk/NR/rdonlyres/AC00DD79-76D6-4FE3-91A1-6A56B03C092F/0/DefenceWhitePaper2006_Cm6994.pdf

³ Defence Committee, Ninth Report of Session 2006-07, *The Future of the UK's Strategic Nuclear Deterrent: the White Paper*, HC 225-I, 7 March 2007 <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200607/cmselect/cmdfence/225/225i.pdf>

⁴ This is no idle fancy. See, for example, William Walker, 'Scotland could go nuclear over the retention of Trident', *Financial Times*, 9 March 2007.