



Notes from TLG-BASIC Roundtable on Trident Renewal

12 October 2010, 09.15am - 12.30pm

C'ttee Room 3a, Committee Corridor, House of Lords

Introduction:

This meeting took place on a non-attributed comment (Chatham House Rules) basis. The notes below capture the substance and tone of discussion but comments are not attributed to particular participants. The summary presented here does not validate any one set of arguments over another, but merely presents a synthesis of the main points made. The meeting took place over two sessions, the first on the theme: Current UK Policy and Its implications, and the second, on Alternative Ways Forward for the UK. The content of each session understandably overlapped with discussion in the other so the notes are presented here in a thematic, rather than session specific form.

Sessions were Chaired by: Lord Browne of Ladyton, Convenor, TLG; and Dr. Ian Kearns, Research Director, BASIC .

Opening Comments were received from:

- Sir Malcolm Rifkind, MP
- Professor Malcolm Chalmers, RUSI
- Dr. Rebecca Johnson, Acronym Institute
- Baroness Williams of Crosby
- Dr. Lee Willet, RUSI
- Dr. Nick Ritchie, University of Bradford
- Commodore Tim Hare

There was then an open discussion.

Main Themes of Discussion:

Rationale for Maintaining Deterrent Based on Trident: An important theme of discussion was the current rationale for the UK maintaining nuclear weapons. Several participants acknowledged that there are very good arguments against Trident but also strong arguments in favour. Among arguments in favour, the following were highlighted:

- The UK is a global power by nature of its history and its current (global) standing. Trident is a contributor (for some) to national standing and prestige;
- The UK has a tradition of supporting multilateral (not unilateral) disarmament, this position has generally been the majority position in UK political life for a long period, and maintaining Trident until disarmament talks make it unnecessary is therefore consistent with that longstanding position;
- The UK has already done more than most other nuclear powers to engage in and promote nuclear disarmament;
- Russia remains a nuclear super power. It is difficult to predict today where that country will be in future. Aside from Russia, we also have other nuclear capable powers emerging and we simply can't predict what is going to happen in the next 30-40 years
- Not renewing Trident might weaken the special relationship with the US.
- There is no guarantee that the US is going to maintain its nuclear umbrella in 30 -40 years time. If the US guarantee was withdrawn and the UK and France had given up their nuclear weapons systems, neither power would be in a position to deter an attack on Europe.
- Pursuing alternatives at this point, such as a Cruise Missile option, would throw away all that has been spent so far, and would be a very expensive option. Scaling down Trident itself wouldn't really save that much money and Cruise Missiles would, in the view of some participants, lack the range of Trident missiles and not be as reliable, accurate, fast and stealthy as the existing or currently planned system.
- Scrapping Trident would make it difficult to maintain the skills and industrial base required to reconstitute the deterrent should that ever become necessary in future.
- Any UK decision not to renew Trident would have very little influence on other states.
- The constant questioning of the intention to renew the deterrent creates uncertainty, which in turn, for some, undermines its overall credibility.

Questions About the Strategic Case for Like for Like Renewal: Others disputed the strategic case for like for like renewal of Trident, even if they felt the UK needed a minimum, independent and credible deterrent. A number of searching questions were asked in relation to the scale and reach of any UK deterrent. These included:

- Does the nuclear deterrent require full global reach?
- Does it need to be on continuous alert?
- Does it require a minimum of around 48 warheads of 100 kilotons each?

- Is a dedicated single use platform and delivery vehicles (the submarines and ballistic missiles) the only effective way to approach it? Dual use submarines might provide a more flexible military capability.
- Does the system need to be aligned to a US weapons system?

Questions were also asked about whether the country is ready to sustain the opportunity cost on Conventional forces.

It was argued by several participants that only if we can answer yes to all of these questions does it then become obvious that the answer is like-for-like replacement of Trident.

Debate on Current UK Nuclear Posture: Some argued that the UK needed to be firm in maintaining a commitment to Continuous at Sea Deterrence (CASD). Among the reasons given were concerns that:

- Putting a Trident submarine to sea in the context of a crisis situation could be destabilising, making conflict more not less likely.
- If there were periods when the UK had no nuclear armed submarine at sea, it would be much easier for any future adversary to locate and knock out the UK subs while they were still in their base at Faslane.
- Abandoning CASD would have negative impacts on the level of operational expertise among submarine crew members.

However, even among supporters of Trident, there was also acknowledgement by some that (CASD) should be looked at again and that definitions of 'minimum' could and should also be re-examined. Several arguments were made in relation to these points:

- Only three countries in the world practice CASD (US, UK and France) and they are all in NATO. Some asked how can we explain that to the rest of the world, while at the same time arguing that we do not perceive any real risk of surprise nuclear attack in current circumstances?
- Claims that the UK would be exposed to a bolt from the blue attack while its submarines were not at sea are based on a misreading of the timelines involved. Surprise attacks do not come out of the strategic blue. The international situation would worsen over a timeline of years, perhaps decades, enabling the UK to reconstitute a CASD capability if a strategic threat were to re-emerge.
- Claims that deploying a submarine would be destabilising in a crisis are also overblown. Deploying could even be an advantage (signals go both ways) and it might be that deploying a sub at sea might instead send the right message of willingness and resolve to act if necessary. A first strike is so unlikely in any case because of the certainty required in the mind of the aggressor that such a strike would not meet with a nuclear response.
- On operational expertise and morale: some argued that simulators are getting better and better – and training is better on them as crews can be taken to extremes. In any case, at sea training and patrols would still happen without CASD. Reducing to one crew a boat could mean that crews get as much time out to sea as currently. At a time of gathering crisis when priorities and

minds would be acutely focused, it would also not take more than 6 months to re-train the vast majority of people to nuclear missions if that were necessary.

- There were potential financial benefits to be enjoyed by dropping CASD and adopting a policy of irregular patrolling instead. The current boats' life expectancy would extend dramatically without significant investment; we would reduce the procurement requirement when renewal did happen.
- Those arguing in favour of the status quo need to answer the question of when it is appropriate to drop CASD if not now, because it is simply not credible to consider a move from CASD to no capability in one swift move – it will always require a ladder of disarmament, and dropping CASD at some point is essential to that – now seems as good a time as any.
- The definition of 'minimum' has moved about historically and for no clearly apparent reason. It should therefore be looked at again given current strategic circumstances, with a view to exploring further reductions in missile and warhead numbers.

The UK Renewal Debate in International Context: The discussion also focused on the place of UK Trident renewal in the wider international debate. Several participants questioned the argument that a UK decision not to renew Trident would have little international impact.

- It was noted by one in particular that the UK had already, in recent months, lost some of the positive reputation it had acquired on disarmament in the last few years. That reputation had been won through both its level of political engagement and its support for scientific work on disarmament verification, but there had now been a loss of momentum.
- Some argued that nonetheless, there is a growing interest in the UK debate with diplomats of several overseas countries perceiving it to be ridiculous that the UK would go through the whole process of renewing Trident in the current strategic scenario and economic climate. There was a risk of negative impact with renewal being seen internationally as : *'Small country holding on to an old weapons system'*.
- It was also argued that much would depend on how the UK justified any decision not to renew Trident. If non-renewal was done simply for budgetary reasons, this might send the wrong message: it would be seen simply as 'we cannot afford it'.
- Similarly, it was argued that fine-tuning UK declaratory policy, and reducing warhead numbers wouldn't reduce the perceived value of nuclear weapons outside the UK. Changes in this area would only be seen as cost cutting.
- On the other hand, several participants in the discussion felt that if the UK chose not to renew for the right reason and said so, namely that non-renewal was part of a UK desire to have a positive impact on the international disarmament agenda, then influence would follow and there would be a positive impact on the UK's international reputation. The effect would also be to provide leadership on disarmament and, far from undermining the special relationship with the U.S., to align the UK more effectively with President Obama's Prague speech objectives. This was said to be the view even of some in the Pentagon.

- Some further argued that if the UK did not renew, there might then be a chance for a new debate in France.
- On the other hand, it was argued that Russia and the US would probably like it if the UK renewed its deterrent because this would help to justify their own nuclear weapons expenditure and stockpiles.

Budgetary Issues Related to Trident Renewal: The issue of cost has always been important in decisions on UK Trident renewal and this figured in the debate. There was speculation on a possible reduction in the core MoD budget of 10%. There was acknowledgement that this is a significantly different budget from the one the government expected to have when the decision to renew Trident was taken and significant trade-offs are therefore going to be required.

The main ways to save money in the short term were discussed and these centered principally on delaying renewal. However, it was also noted that delay would have risks. For example:

- The industrial implications of delay were raised by one participant, who argued that it could interrupt the UK's supply chain capabilities and relevant skills base to the extent that we could not guarantee our security in 2030-2040, in an environment that we cannot predict now but which may turn out to be hostile.
- Some argued that the risks to CASD would increase year by year if decisions were delayed, as the existing submarines get older and may need more time out of service. Some participants felt that delay should only be considered if there was also a simultaneous discussion to reduce the attachment to strict CASD, without necessarily abandoning the policy altogether.
- Others argued that tax payers may also suffer if delay brought higher costs. This was disputed by those who felt delay would present significant savings, both now but also in overall costs over time, even if the same system were purchased.

Possibilities of Nuclear Cooperation with France: Participants noted that cooperation on nuclear matters with France had been the subject of recent media speculation.

The point was made by several contributors that this idea is not new: It has been around for a very long time. What has changed now however, is that;

- France is being reintegrated in NATO structures (though not the Nuclear Planning Group) and;
- Both France and the UK are facing public spending pressure.

There was widespread agreement that it made sense to look into the option of cooperation.

Some felt that while cooperation might work, there were important national sensitivities to be taken into account and diplomatic and political obstacles could be worse even than technical, system integration ones.

In particular, the following issues were raised:

- France and the UK have different understandings of the meaning of a minimum and independent deterrent;
- The French nuclear modernization process is ahead of the UK's;

- France has a more robust declaratory policy than the UK;
- On extended deterrence in NATO- France is not part of the Nuclear Planning Group but UK nuclear forces are (partially) committed to NATO. Would this mean such cooperation had to happen more in the context of EU defence than NATO structures?
- What would the US reaction be? We should expect that the US would require sensitive information (related to nuclear reactors and warhead designs) to remain sacrosanct and this could place specific barriers on the nature of the Anglo-French cooperation that could take place.
- Would France be willing to retaliate in case of an attack on the UK?
- Would cooperation involve joint patrols and how would these work in practice? Would we have French personnel on UK subs?

Some argued more generally that French-British cooperation is attractive in principal but not all that practical and that it is doable only so long as it does not cross the US-UK relationship. The US will require absolute assurances in key areas. Sharing support facilities may be possible. Sharing operations is much more difficult.

The Need for More, and Different Public Debate: Finally, several participants felt it would be good to have a wider public debate on Trident without reducing the issue to simplistic party political point scoring and searches for political vulnerabilities.

The debate was felt to be a live one within both the Labour and Liberal Democrat parties which might present political opportunities for more public discussion, but only if the debate could reach for higher ground on the challenges we face.

Many agreed, for example, on the importance of not straying into the old debate around unilateralism on the one hand or pursuing full like for like renewal of Trident on the other. The argument was made that we are in a new context. The UK is not under any conceivable threat from nuclear attack, but many, including strong supporters of deterrence, fear growing proliferation risks in relation to both states and terrorist groups and worry that maintaining the stability of the global nuclear order is becoming increasingly difficult. There is a real fear of a loss of control and of nuclear use somewhere in the world, with catastrophic consequences. The new public debate therefore needed to articulate that the world had moved on, was becoming more dangerous, and that multilateral nuclear disarmament was the safe, not soft option. The focus needed to be on how multilateral nuclear disarmament talks might best be advanced.

The meeting concluded with commitments from both the TLG and BASIC to continue to promote just such a debate in the months ahead.