

Nuclear Deterrence: a tried and tested defence strategy or an elaborate belief system masquerading as scientific theory?

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BASIC Notes: Occasional papers on international security policy, 20
July 2006



British American Security
Information Council

Tony Blair has turned a potential six-year opportunity to discuss whether or not to replace the Trident nuclear weapon system into a six-month rubber-stamping exercise glazed with a veneer of parliamentary accountability without a hint of the promised open debate. Some legacy, says Nigel Chamberlain

Nothing more rapidly closes down the opportunity for a debate on the future of UK nuclear weapons policy than the introductory phrase “should we renew the nuclear deterrent”? Assumptions that underpin the question are rarely challenged. Subsequent commentary either accepts the assumptions unquestioningly or struggles to suggest an alternative viewpoint while seemingly avoiding engagement in the debate as presented. Instead, what follows is invariably superficial, uninformative, confrontational and unsatisfactory.

The Government has frequently promised but studiously avoided a debate on replacing the Trident nuclear weapons system. Meanwhile, the time for that decision to be made has been compressed and accelerated from potentially six years to no more than six months, including the summer parliamentary recess. No government case has been made for what clearly amounts to the indefinite retention of nuclear weapons since the initial announcement in December 2003 that a decision would be needed in the next Parliament. That projected date of not later than May 2010 has been brought forward to the end of this year, without explanation or justification.

Downing Street and the Ministry of Defence appear content to let the exchanges of the 1980s be replayed in order to marginalise opposition while galvanising support for perceived realism. A combination of august former civil servants, seemingly objective academics and a largely acquiescent media is preparing the ground for a truncated parliamentary exchange on a predetermined outcome. The current and expectant Prime Ministers will respectively declare it only ‘sensible’ and ‘prudent’ for the UK to retain its ‘independent nuclear deterrent’. Then Tony Blair can proclaim, “Debate had, job done, no problem” and hand over the leadership to the safe hands of Gordon Brown.

For almost 50 years the US-UK Mutual Defence Agreement (MDA) has permitted extensive transatlantic nuclear weapons collaboration, everything short of transporting a complete nuclear warhead. Although a 10-year extension of the MDA was officially endorsed in ‘an exchange of notes’ between governments in December 2004, what passed for government notification of intent to proceed was quietly slipped out just before the end of the parliamentary session in July that year. For almost a year, every attempt to utilise established parliamentary procedure to encourage executive accountability was met with a bureaucratic stonewall.

Current activities conducted under the cloak of the MDA at the nuclear weapons laboratories in the United States and the United Kingdom give every indication of ‘business as usual’. Detailed preparation for replacing Trident has been under active consideration behind the closed doors of Whitehall and the perimeter fence at Aldermaston. Their conclusions will eventually be presented to Parliament as nothing more than a reasonable continuation of what went before. This is a tried and tested means of sustaining and managing the business of staying in the nuclear club.

Industry and trade unions have also been hard at work with what was described by former Defence Secretary Geoff Hoon as “one of the most effective defence lobbies I have come across”. Rand Europe, ‘Independent advisors to the UK Ministry of Defence’ has also done its bit to promote and secure the Barrow-in-Furness shipyard as ‘a world class centre of submarine excellence’.

So, before we are presented with a statement that the existing Trident programme will be continued and in due course renewed or replaced, those who argue for retention should be obliged to make the case in detail. Mere repetition of “nuclear deterrence has prevented war for over 50 years and it will be an effective insurance policy for the unstable and unpredictable world we live in” will not suffice.

We need to examine the claim that nuclear weapons prevented a conflagration with the Soviet Union. If there is no convincing evidence, then supporters should be required to say, "We believe that nuclear weapons did prevent a Soviet attack on Europe and we believe they will deter an attack from nuclear weapon or rogue states or terrorist groups in the future." Thus what has been presented as a statement of fact becomes a statement of opinion.

We need to know how close to a nuclear exchange, and on how many occasions, nuclear war-fighting strategy brought us to the brink of war, whether by design (having to be seen to be willing to carry through with the threat of use) or by accident (miscalculation, error, mishandling). And this must be considered in light of both NATO's and the UK's willingness to use nuclear weapons pre-emptively against non-nuclear opponents. Does the 'only to be used in the last resort' claim stand up to scrutiny?

For the threat of retaliation to be credible, Ministers must openly say that they would be prepared to agree to the actual use of nuclear weapons and that they are aware of the grave consequences. They would also need to recognise that the order to fire is an admission that nuclear deterrence has failed. They must be prepared to commit substantial and open-ended financial support to maintain the weapons factories, unmarked warhead convoys on the roads, the missile supply and technology transfer from the United States and waste storage facilities in the UK. Then they must say that they are prepared to go to the United Nations and declare that the nuclear disarmament commitments that their predecessors signed up to would have to be set aside until worldwide political stability could be guaranteed.

Finally, an explanation must be forthcoming as to why it is necessary and acceptable for the UK and a handful of other states to say their possession of nuclear weapons is legitimate while the possession of the same in the hands of others is unnecessary and illegitimate. Exactly what is so special about our little nation that we somehow feel more secure and important by demanding we be treated as a special case? What exactly would be different if the UK had a non-nuclear defence policy?

Defence Secretary Des Browne appears to be the only Minister to have come close to accepting that the Government must make the case for Trident replacement when he said, "We need to marshal the facts, we need to marshal the issues, we need to marshal the arguments and the options. It is the responsibility of Government ministers to make decisions, then those decisions, of course, can be subject to parliamentary debate. But we need to make recommendations to put forward to Parliament." Since making these comments, he has given a clear indication of his support for the retention of nuclear weapons and reiterated that the decision will be made in advance of any parliamentary debate. So what exactly constitutes an 'open debate' and why bother giving MPs an opportunity to voice their opinions when the outcome is predetermined?

It is time to take a little look under the national security blanket cloaking the MoD building in Whitehall and put the question, "Is nuclear deterrence a tried and tested defence strategy or an elaborate belief system masquerading as scientific theory?"