

## Developments at Aldermaston

In July 2005 John Reid announced a three-year investment of over £1 billion for the Atomic Weapons Establishment (AWE) at Aldermaston for the construction of a new supercomputer, hydrodynamics explosives facility and higher-powered laser. AWE is currently engaged in a recruitment drive.

The Government has stated that these facilities are needed to ensure the safety and reliability of existing warheads and also to build the capability to design new warheads, should they be required.

## Options under consideration

Submarines, if new ones were required, would probably be built in a British shipyard, but may require US assistance. The warheads would be produced at Aldermaston, entailing close collaboration with the US nuclear laboratories. The missiles would almost certainly be acquired from the United States again.

Ongoing US research and development programmes will determine much of Ministry of Defence thinking. The US Navy has authorised programmes to provide upgraded Trident D5 missiles that will extend their service until 2042. If the US goes ahead with current plans, the first new replacement submarine would be commissioned in 2030. The UK could try to fit in with this replacement programme by extending the life of its Trident submarines, including the nuclear reactors that power them.

There is also talk of accommodating vertical-launch cruise missiles instead of, or as well as, ballistic missiles. Though generally discounted, consideration is also being given to air- or ground-launched means of nuclear weapon delivery.

Any of these options would necessitate decisions about changing or redesigning Britain's existing nuclear warhead.

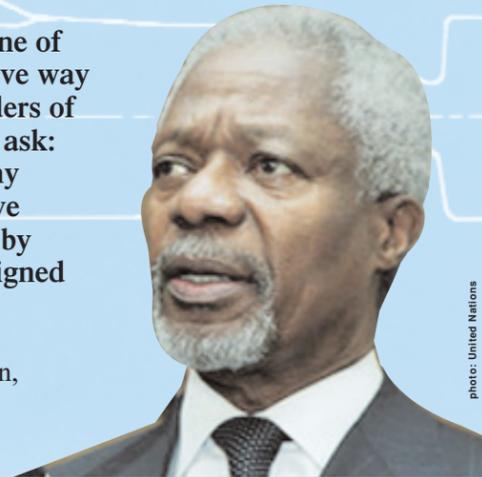
## The option of non-replacement

There has not been a comprehensive national review of nuclear weapons policy since the end of the Cold War (though both the Conservative and Labour governments made reductions in numbers of weapons and their operational status). The nature of the threat posed by nuclear weapons has changed. Their spread around the world increases the possibility of their deliberate, accidental or terrorist use.

This has led such diverse thinkers as Michael Portillo and the late Robin Cook to say that as well as options concerning how to replace Trident, the option of not replacing it at all ought to be seriously considered by the Government. Such a decision, if accompanied by a more purposeful disarmament policy, could give Britain the moral and legal authority to combat and reverse nuclear proliferation more effectively and thereby enhance our long-term security.

“...a nuclear catastrophe in one of our great cities... As shock gave way to anger and despair, the leaders of every nation... would have to ask: How did it come to this? Is my conscience clear? Could I have done more to reduce the risk by strengthening the regime designed to do so?”

UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan,  
May 2, 2005.



‘Beyond Trident’ is a joint initiative involving:  
**Acronym Institute for Disarmament Diplomacy**  
[www.acronym.org.uk](http://www.acronym.org.uk)  
**British American Security Information Council**  
[www.basicint.org](http://www.basicint.org)  
**Oxford Research Group**  
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Visit our web sites to see frequent updates on UK nuclear weapons policy and international security and nonproliferation. Also check the web sites of Foreign Office ([www.fco.gov.uk](http://www.fco.gov.uk)) and Ministry of Defence ([www.mod.uk](http://www.mod.uk)).

Request free copies of this leaflet for inclusion with letters to politicians, officials and journalists and to circulate to interested groups and individuals.

Personally engage your elected representatives at all levels of government in the debate about the future of Britain's nuclear weapons policy.

# BEYOND TRIDENT

## Debating Britain's nuclear future

‘Beyond Trident’ is a joint initiative to promote debate on Britain's future security, with particular emphasis on the forthcoming decision about replacing Trident.

## Background to the debate

Britain's current nuclear weapon system is designed to be operational well into the 2020s. It consists of four Vanguard class nuclear-powered submarines, 58 leased US Trident D5 missiles and a stockpile of about 200 warheads. The Government has stated that decisions on Trident's replacement are likely to be taken in this Parliament.

In the past major commitments and even irrevocable steps to nuclear weapons programmes have been taken without parliamentary scrutiny. Defence Secretary John Reid's declared commitment to a national debate now is welcome. But how will it be conducted?

The 'Beyond Trident' strategy is to move the debate beyond outdated and polarised positions on nuclear weapons policy and locate it in the context of Britain's current and future security needs, and our global security and international legal obligations. In particular, a key objective is to ensure the process is open, informed and accountable.

**In view of Britain's changed security environment since the Cold War, it is necessary for the government to undertake a comprehensive strategic security and defence review. This review should be foreign policy led and assess UK security objectives, priorities, policy and planning and explain whether nuclear weapons could address the challenges and be compatible with our international obligations.**

### The debate so far... ...before the election

In a parliamentary answer on 30 June 2004, former Defence Secretary, Geoff Hoon, said that concept studies - costing £560,000 - on options for platforms (such as submarines) to carry the Trident missile in the longer term were conducted between May 2002 and May 2003. They remain secret, but if published now could inform debate.

In November 2004 the First Sea Lord, Admiral Sir Alan West, told the House of Commons Defence Committee:

*"People have got to start talking about [replacing the current deterrent] in the next Parliament... there has got to be a decision made, an absolutely political decision: do we want to keep nuclear weapons?"*

## Key questions for debate

- ✓ What are the threats to Britain to which nuclear weapons offer a credible response?
- ✓ In what ways do British nuclear weapons enhance or weaken UK security and influence?
- ✓ How much would the different replacement options cost, and what are the opportunity costs vis-à-vis other defence or social priorities?
- ✓ What are the implications of the decision for Britain's international and legal obligations with regard to nuclear non-proliferation?
- ✓ Could there be advantages in delaying the decision?



### ...during the election

The 2005 Labour Election Manifesto indicated that the Party was "committed to retaining the independent nuclear deterrent". During a pre-election BBC interview, Tony Blair stated:

*"... in principle, I believe it's important to retain our own independent deterrent...[however] any decision hasn't yet been taken".*

At the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) Review Conference and on the day of the General Election, the UK reaffirmed its "unequivocal undertaking to accomplish the total elimination of nuclear arsenals".

### ...after the election

The new Defence Secretary, John Reid MP, confirmed in May 2005 that no decision had been taken "on any replacement... in principle or otherwise". He added that "the Government will listen to honourable Members on both sides of the House before taking the decision that we are elected to make". It was unclear whether there would be a Parliamentary vote.

## Is a decision required in this Parliament?

On 1 November 2005 John Reid made clear that the manifesto commitment to retain the UK minimum nuclear deterrent applied to the current Trident system rather than any future system, and that while it was desirable that a decision be taken in this parliament, it was not absolutely essential.

The government appears to assume that a new system requires a 15-year lead-time, as did the original Trident programme. This would necessitate a decision by 2009 to allow a new system to be commissioned by 2024. However, if - through operational or technical modifications - the life of the existing submarines could be extended, this decision could be taken several years later. This would also be the case if the new system were closely related to the existing one, since the procurement process could then be accelerated.

Delaying the decision would give a chance to progress non-proliferation, allow time for a more extensive public debate and assessment of the developing security situation, and consequently increase the prospects of a more informed and appropriate decision being reached.

## The Mutual Defence Agreement

The UK is dependent on the US for its nuclear weapon system. UK-US nuclear weapons collaboration over all three aspects of a nuclear weapon - warhead, delivery system and platform - is conducted under the Mutual Defence Agreement (MDA). This permits the transfer between the two countries of:

- technical information and scientific endeavour;
- nuclear warhead components, fissile material and tritium;
- missiles (Britain leases its ballistic missiles from the US); and
- submarine design specifications, nuclear propulsion plants and highly enriched uranium (HEU) to fuel them.

The MDA was renewed in 2004 for a further ten years.

