

UK Trident replacement: too important to rush into

A premature commitment to replace Trident could harm UK and global security

In 2003 UN weapons inspectors said they needed just a few more months. Yet Parliament endorsed military action based on a false prospectus urging undue haste.

Now we are told that a decision on Trident replacement must be taken in March 2007. But the evidence suggests otherwise.

Don't get fooled again.

Parliament must hold the executive to account and ask the right questions.

Avoid undue haste to allow time for:

- a proper cost-benefit assessment based on a new Strategic Defence Review... this time one that considers the future of our strategic nuclear forces.
- the Government to mount a new multilateral disarmament initiative in advance of the 2010 NPT Review Conference
- a proper and informed public and parliamentary debate of ALL the options

“Military planning allows for some of the WMD to be ready within 45 minutes of an order to use them.”

- Iraq's Weapons of Mass Destruction - The assessment of the British Government, 24 September 2002

“We have concluded that, if we are to maintain unbroken deterrent capability at the end of the life of the Vanguard-class submarines, we need to take the decisions now...”

- The Future of the United Kingdom's Nuclear Deterrent, Government White Paper, December 2006



Don't Rush: Premature commitments to replace Trident could harm UK and global security
Trident Briefing Number 1, December 2006, British American Security Information Council

Summary

In a White Paper published on 4 December 2006 the Government decided to maintain the current Trident based nuclear deterrent by procuring a new class of submarines. There are four reasons for believing that this decision is premature and can be delayed for a further 8-10 years.

1) Longer life

expectancy: the life expectancy of the current submarines is much longer than stated, as a result of operational changes since the end of the Cold War.

2) Dropping

Continuous-at-sea Deterrence (CASD): a modest change in posture appropriate to today's security environment could extend the life considerably.

3) Reduced lead-

times: a less ambitious project, to simply modify Vanguard rather than create a new class of submarine, would reduce lead-times considerably.

4) Point of no return:

modest investment in R&D now could put off an irreversible decision for some years.

There are significant military, strategic, procurement and diplomatic benefits to holding off a decision for another parliament. Given these advantages, the onus was on the Government to justify such an early decision. The White Paper fails to do this.

Life Expectancy

The first component of Britain's Trident system to reach the end of its life will be the Vanguard-class submarines. The 1998 SDR and 2003 White Papers referred to a life expectancy of 30 years, as did ministerial statements prior to 2006. In its evidence to the Defence Committee in January 2006 MoD reduced this for the first time to a more conservative base life expectancy of 25 years, with the possibility of a further 5 year extension. The White Paper measures this 25 years from the point of launch rather than commission. This brings forward the time for decision some 7 years from that assumed by analysts previously, and by the MoD's DLO Nuclear Cluster responsible for managing the strategic deterrent as late as August 2006.

Q1. Why was the life expectancy of the Vanguard submarine reduced by five years?

Operational changes introduced with the 1998 Strategic Defence Review (SDR) suggest a longer life-expectancy than 25-30 years. While the SDR retained a policy of Continuous-at-sea Deterrence (CASD), it also announced reduced readiness: the UK "will have only one submarine on patrol at a time". This significantly reduced the number of at-sea hours for each submarine, in turn significantly reducing the stresses on both hull and reactor and thus increasing the life expectancy.

It requires three boats to ensure that one is out at any one time (one on patrol, one in dock in preparation and one in refit). Four boats give added security in case of catastrophic damage or exceptionally poor performance and therefore give added life expectancy to the system as a whole.

The US have extended the life-expectancy of the Ohio-class submarine from 30 to 44 years. The White Paper says that the Ohio class life extension cannot be replicated in the UK because such an option was not built into the original design, manufacture, refit and maintenance of Vanguard.

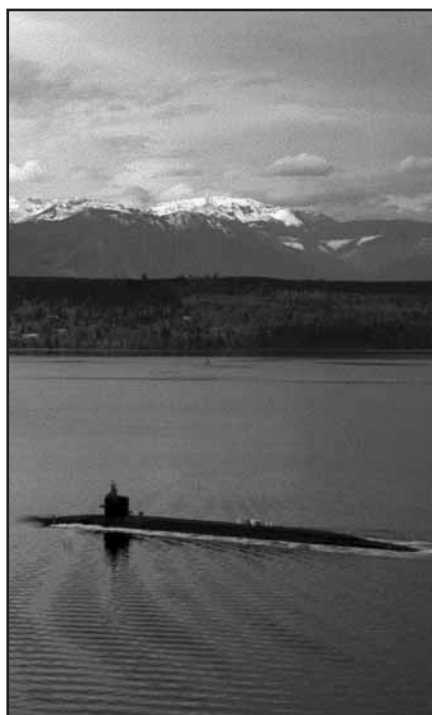
Q2. Why were the Vanguard-class submarines apparently built to lower standards than the US Ohio-class submarines?

Q3. Why is the same shipyard in line to receive the follow-on contract when it failed to produce a cost effective solution last time?

"A delay would allow the MoD to maintain greater flexibility in future choices without commitment"

- BASIC Evidence to the Defence Committee, Ev 119, June 2006.





“If ever there has been a case of ‘marry in haste, repent at leisure’ it is surely this.”

- Michael Ancram MP, former Shadow Defence Secretary, 3 October 2006, speaking on the “stitched-up decision to replace Trident”

“In the light of the reduced threat we currently face, an alternative possibility would be to retain a deterrent, but not continuously at sea.”

- Defence Committee Report, ‘The Future of the UK’s Strategic Nuclear Deterrent’, June 2006

Dropping CASD

The 2003 Defence White Paper stated that the UK faces no major conventional threat today or in the near future. The Defence Committee proposed the possibility of dropping CASD. Nine years ago the SDR had rejected dropping CASD on the grounds that any emergency launch of Vanguard could dangerously escalate tensions. The White Paper also argues that CASD is necessary to reduce vulnerability and assure the credibility of the deterrent. But such concerns are irrelevant to the main reasons given for replacing Trident — in particular the insurance against possible future risk. Dropping CASD would show British commitment to the further dealerting necessary to promote global non-proliferation, while maintaining a flexible deterrent if that is deemed appropriate. It would also dramatically increase the life expectancy of the current system, both by reducing stresses on the submarines, and by providing for even greater surplus capacity in the system.

Q4. Is a continuous-at-sea-deterrent necessary at a time when even the Prime Minister agrees there is no major nuclear threat to our strategic interests?

Halving the lead-time

The option of building new Vanguard-class submarines appears not to have been considered in the White Paper. Instead it proposes a whole new class of submarines that “might take around 17 years” to design, manufacture and commission. This estimate “reflects the judgment of industry”. The industry judgment in question is that of BAE Systems, the only possible domestic supplier for Trident replacement.

The lead-time for the Vanguard-class submarines was 14 years from decision to launch. This required major new designs from scratch to create a submarine that bore little resemblance to the previous Polaris-class boats. It may take two years to design minor upgrades to the Vanguard-class, and around five years to construct each submarine. The appropriate lead-time could therefore be up to eight rather than 17 years.

BAE Systems is under investigation by the Serious Fraud Office; it is also responsible for the MoD’s six most delayed major weapons procurement projects (a cumulative 25-year delay) and the five highest overspends (worth nearly £3bn).

Q5. Why should a minimum deterrent require a new class of submarine, and why should this take 17 years to design and build?

Q6. How much faith should MPs and the Government put in the judgment of BAE Systems’ estimated lead-time for new submarines?

Q7. Could a replacement submarine be purchased off-the-shelf from the Americans at a lower cost and with a much reduced lead-time?

The point of no return

Since the bulk of the investment is loaded into the last stages of any replacement programme, namely in construction, modest investment in the preferred option need not require an irreversible commitment. The June 2006 Defence Select Committee report accepted this point, stating that a binding decision on the final option and any serious investment would not be needed until 2014.

Q8. Could a decision be made to invest in R&D while holding off on a ‘main gate’ decision until the next parliament, in order to gain the benefits outlined elsewhere in this paper?

Advantages to delay

There are a number of crucial military, strategic, economic and political advantages to delaying the decision to replace Trident:

- **Maintaining maximum flexibility of response makes military sense.** A future decision would mean we would be closer to the possible threats for which the system is designed, and have a better idea of the technology available.
- **An early replacement would throw us out of sync with the Americans.** As the White Paper acknowledges, a Trident follow-on system would have to be compatible both with the (upgraded) Trident II D5 missiles and any (as yet undetermined) US follow-on missile. Relying upon an exchange of letters with Washington in 2007 as suggested in the White Paper would be courageous, so far in advance of any US decision on a follow-on missile.
- **An early replacement would further undermine UK non-proliferation efforts.** The non-proliferation regime is under significant strain partly as a result of the perceived failure of the nuclear weapons states to live up to their disarmament commitments under Article VI of the NPT. While the UK Government has reduced warhead numbers and readiness, the pressure it can place on Iran and North Korea is weakened while it clings to the utility of its own nuclear deterrence. A decision to replace Trident shows a lack of confidence in the NPT, while expecting others to abide by its rules.
- **Delay would allow the UK to initiate a new multilateral nuclear disarmament initiative.** One of the key reasons given by some to retain (and replace) the UK nuclear deterrent is to enter international nuclear disarmament negotiations from a position of strength. A new initiative could be the central plank of Britain's effort to secure progress at the 2010 NPT Review Conference prior to any commitment to replace Trident.
- **Delay would ease pressure on the public purse.** Public spending plans in the run up to the 2007 Comprehensive Spending Review are under severe pressure. The defence procurement budget is already unlikely to be sufficient to meet existing spending plans for 2011-2020.
- **Delay would allow an informed and proper public and parliamentary debate.** Discussion over this decision has until now been stifled by an information blackout within Whitehall, and the widespread prejudice and political hyper-sensitivity surrounding the issue. The current process, while an improvement on the past, is grossly inadequate for a decision of this magnitude.

Industrial considerations

Industry representatives are keen to see a new project follow on after Astute, warning that lengthy gaps could lead to a loss of key expertise. However, exaggerated warnings of 'catastrophe' from any delays should not over-ride military, strategic, democratic and diplomatic considerations over the replacement of Trident.



Forthcoming Trident briefings:

- Costs of replacement
- 21st Century British deterrence
- The ultimate insurance policy?
- Is non-replacement irreversible?
- Possible benefits to non-replacement
- Can we leave France as the only nuclear-weapon state in Europe?
- Safety concerns to deployment



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Outstanding Questions

Given the advantages to delaying the decision it is crucial that MPs seek answers to the following questions not covered by the White Paper:

1. Why was the life expectancy of the Vanguard submarine reduced by five years?
2. Why were the Vanguard-class submarines apparently built to lower standards than the US Ohio-class submarines?
3. Why is the same shipyard in line to receive the follow-on contract when it failed to produce a cost effective solution last time?
4. Is a continuous-at-sea-deterrent necessary at a time when even the Prime Minister agrees there is no major nuclear threat to our strategic interests?
5. Why should a minimum deterrent require a new class of submarine, and why should this take 17 years to design and build?
6. How much faith should MPs and the Government put in the judgment of BAE Systems' estimated lead-time for new submarines?
7. Could a replacement submarine be purchased off-the-shelf from the Americans at a lower cost and with a much reduced lead-time?
8. Could a decision be made to invest in R&D while holding off on a 'main gate' decision until the next parliament, in order to gain the benefits outlined elsewhere in this paper?