



Evidence submission to the BASIC Trident Commission by Peter Cannon

The Necessity of Nuclear Deterrence

by
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1. Should the UK remain a nuclear weapon state?

Yes. The first responsibility of the British government is to protect its citizens. The United Kingdom's nuclear weapons guard against the most dangerous threat which British citizens could face; that of a nuclear attack. The UK's nuclear deterrent is the last line of defence against such an attack. The UK's submarine-based Trident system is a system which it would be almost impossible for an enemy power to eliminate before an attack, and would consequently be able to respond in kind to any nuclear strike against the UK. It is therefore designed not as a 'first strike' capability with which to attack another country but as a guaranteed 'second strike' capability with which the UK would always be able to respond to any nuclear assault. It provides a deterrent effect which no other military capability could match. The Trident nuclear deterrent system is the UK's ultimate insurance policy.

Those who argue that Trident will 'never be used' miss the point. It is not designed as an offensive weapon but as a defensive deterrent. It is constantly being used to deter any potential nuclear attack. It has been used successfully for decades to protect the UK from the threat of nuclear assault and to help keep the peace by deterring any potential aggressor. The very fact that the UK possesses a nuclear deterrent makes it less likely that the UK will face a nuclear threat developing to the point where the UK would have to consider deploying nuclear weapons. The UK giving up its nuclear deterrent would make the development of an imminent nuclear threat against the UK more plausible. In such a situation, the UK might need a nuclear capability to respond to the threat but would no longer have it. Maintaining the nuclear deterrent ensures that the UK does not find itself in a situation where it would need to fire its nuclear weapons.

Contrary to the assertions of those who dismiss Trident as a 'Cold War' system, the threat of a nuclear attack did not disappear with the collapse of the Soviet Union. Numerous countries retain nuclear weapons, not all of which are friendly.

While much attention has been given to US president Barack Obama's declared desire for a 'world free of nuclear weapons', [\[i\]](#) there is little or no evidence that the world is moving in this direction. If anything, nuclear proliferation is increasing rather than decreasing the variety of nuclear threats which the UK could face.

Other nuclear powers are not giving up their nuclear weapons:

Russia plans to spend at least \$70 billion on improvements to strategic nuclear land, sea and air delivery systems by 2020. It is planning to introduce a new class of intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), each capable of carrying 10 warheads, by 2018. Deployment of a long-range nuclear stealth bomber is also expected by 2025.

China is introducing a new road-mobile ICBM with multiple warheads and is constructing up to five new nuclear powered ballistic missile submarines (SSBNs), capable of launching 36-60 sea-launched ballistic missiles and providing continuous at-sea deterrence.

Pakistan is extending the range of its ballistic missiles with development of a nuclear capable ballistic missile with a range of over 2,000km. It is also developing two nuclear capable cruise missiles, ground launched and air-launched, and has increased its nuclear stockpile in recent years. It is believed to be developing smaller, lighter warheads and moving beyond its first generation of uranium-based weapons to pursue plutonium-based weapons. [\[ii\]](#)

In addition, North Korea has conducted underground tests of nuclear weapons in 2006 and 2009 and is now a nuclear weapon state. Iran is seeking to develop nuclear weapons and to become a nuclear weapon state. [\[iii\]](#)

In such a situation, with potentially hostile powers such as China and Russia maintaining and improving their nuclear weapons capabilities, with countries facing internal threats to their stability such as Pakistan maintaining nuclear weapons, and with new nuclear threats emerging in North Korea and potentially Iran, there is no justification for the UK to give up its nuclear deterrent. It would be reckless and foolhardy for any British government to do so, as this would place the UK in a position of vulnerability and weakness by removing the UK's nuclear defences in the face of hostile regimes which possess nuclear weapons.

It must be emphasised that in addition to existing and imminent threats, it is impossible to predict what future nuclear threats may emerge and what dangers the UK could face in decades to come. Few threats and fewer conflicts are ever accurately predicted.

From 1919 to 1932, successive British governments followed the principle of the 'ten year rule' in defence expenditure, based on the assumption that 'the British Empire will not be engaged in any great war during the next ten years and that no Expeditionary Force will be required'. Even when this rule was abandoned, the government stated "...this must not be taken to justify an expanding expenditure by the Defence Services without regard to the

very serious financial and economic situation". In 1939, the UK faced the Second World War.

More recently, in the year before the Falklands War, the Government decided to sell the aircraft carrier HMS Invincible to Australia and withdraw the ice patrol ship HMS Endurance from the South Atlantic on the grounds that the expense of operating them could no longer be justified and that supporting NATO in the North Atlantic and Europe must be the UK's priority. These decisions had to be hurriedly reversed when Argentina invaded the Falkland Islands in 1982.

To give up the UK's nuclear deterrent on the grounds that it was no longer necessary or relevant would be to risk making the same mistake: failing to address the possibility of threats which we cannot foresee and giving the impression to potentially hostile powers that the UK is to become a weaker adversary that it no longer serious about its own defence. To give up the UK's nuclear weapons would therefore be to take a huge gamble on the future in an uncertain and dangerous world, where nuclear proliferation continues. Nuclear weapons cannot be un-invented and are most unlikely to be abolished. In such a world, to abandon the UK's nuclear defences would be a gross dereliction of duty by any government.

While some argue that the UK's nuclear deterrent will not protect the UK against nuclear terrorism (such as a 'dirty bomb' attack) by non-state actors, this does not in any way negate the effect which it has in deterring any nuclear attack by another state. In addition, the possession of a nuclear deterrent will be more effective than the absence of a deterrent in deterring any rogue state or dictatorship which may be tempted to host or support terrorist organisations which would attempt a nuclear terrorist attack against the UK. While a nuclear deterrent self-evidently does not offer a guarantee against terrorism, it does remain relevant in protecting the UK against nuclear terrorism.

It must also be remembered that the UK's nuclear deterrent is not only relevant to the UK. The British nuclear deterrent contributes to the security and defence of NATO, a fact which is recognised in the NATO Strategic Concept. [\[iv\]](#) The UK giving up its nuclear deterrent would therefore be an abdication of its responsibilities as a leading NATO member, and would leave the nuclear defence of NATO entirely in the hands of the United States and France. This would damage the UK's role as a leading member of NATO and as the primary ally of the United States. Such a move would be another example of Western European powers downgrading their own defence capabilities and leave the US to bear an ever-increasing share of the burden for Transatlantic security and the defence of Europe, at a time when the US is urging NATO allies not to do this. [\[v\]](#) It would also make the UK itself permanently dependent on the US (and to a lesser extent France) for its nuclear security, leaving its nuclear security in the hands of other nations rather than its own hands. It should be noted that the US supports the UK maintaining its own independent nuclear deterrent. [\[vi\]](#)

The UK's nuclear weapons are not a threat to world peace which need to be decommissioned. Instead they help to maintain peace by defending the UK and our NATO allies. The UK is a long-established liberal democracy and a net contributor to international

order, delivering as part of its alliance relationships a public good in the form of international security, the benefits of which to the UK far outweigh the cost. The UK's unique role as an exporter of security is an immense political and strategic advantage. Its role as the main European military power gives the UK primary relevance in international affairs, serving to reinforce our political objectives on the global stage whilst at the same time delivering our self-interested defence objective of securing the realm. Disarmament by the UK would not make the world any safer. On the contrary, it would tilt the balance in favour of less benign and less democratic powers.

The UK is also one of the five officially recognised nuclear states who make up the five permanent members of the UN Security Council. There is no indication that any of the other members are seriously considering giving up their nuclear weapons. The UK unilaterally giving up its nuclear weapons would be to unilaterally give up influence and downgrade its international role, possibly leading to pressure on the UK to give up its permanent seat on the UN Security Council.

It would be wrong to think that giving up the UK's nuclear weapons is a way to make easy savings which could be re-invested into conventional defence capabilities. Nuclear disarmament would in itself be likely to incur costs of billions of pounds. [\[vii\]](#)

The cuts in UK defence capabilities set out in the Strategic Defence and Security Review are not a justification for permanently giving up one of the UK's most important defence capabilities in attempt to plug the gap. The UK needs to maintain an independent nuclear deterrent and to rebuild strong conventional military forces, not to attempt to make a false choice between the two. Conventional and nuclear forces should be seen as complementary, not mutually exclusive, and the UK should maintain a full spectrum of capabilities rather than trading off important capabilities against each other. For all the discussion of its projected costs, it should be borne in mind that according to the Ministry of Defence, the Trident programme amounts to just 5-6% of the defence budget over its lifetime. [\[viii\]](#)

For the important and potent capability which it offers, the UK's nuclear deterrent is good value for money.

2. If it should, is Trident renewal the only or best option that the UK can and should pursue?

Yes. The Trident system of submarine-based ballistic missiles offers continuous-at-sea deterrence. It is always ready to be deployed, it provides continuous coverage, its location is secret and its ballistic missiles could be fired against any target. The submarines carry multiple missiles which each have multiple nuclear warheads. Any potential aggressor would be fully aware of this. As there is always at least one submarine at sea, the Trident system is not dependent on security in the UK homeland in order for it to be fired, so it could not be neutralised by any attack on the UK. In a worst-case scenario, the Trident base at Faslane could be destroyed, as could military and political targets throughout the UK, and the submarine/s would be unaffected and would still be able to respond in full. Any

potential aggressor would know this. For such a capability, the Trident system represents excellent value for money.

Trident is also, contrary to the claims of some critics, a genuinely independent system. Authority to fire the missiles rests with the Prime Minister and does not depend on the approval or support of any other nation. The warheads and submarines are British and targeting and maintenance are performed solely by the UK. While the missiles themselves come from the United States, the US could not prevent the UK from firing them. In the unlikely worst case scenario of the US withdrawing cooperation in supplying missiles, this would take years to have any effect, by which time the UK would be able to develop its own missiles. Trident is a fully sovereign British capability.

This independence of the deterrent is crucial for the UK. This is a capability which is too important to be shared with any other nation and which must be maintained by the UK as a sovereign capability. Any proposal for sharing a nuclear deterrent with France, as suggested by defence minister Nick Harvey MP, [\[ix\]](#) must be rejected. Attempting to share a deterrent would create numerous problems and uncertainties around command and control and would leave the UK permanently dependent on the goodwill and political stability of another state. This is utterly unacceptable in the case of a capability as important as the nuclear deterrent, which the British government must remain fully in control of.

None of the supposed alternatives to Trident which have been suggested offer any improvement in capability. Instead they are all problematic.

Any alternative which ended the principle of continuous at-sea deterrence, as suggested by Sir Menzies Campbell MP and others, [\[x\]](#) would be a downgrading rather than an improvement to the UK's deterrent capability. Such a change would of course break the advantage of continuous coverage, meaning that there would be certain times at which the UK would have maximum protection and certain times where it would not. It would also mean a potential aggressor could attempt to attack a deterrent submarine when it is in or leaving port, leaving the UK vulnerable to a pre-emptive strike – something which continuous at-sea deterrence guards against. Deploying the submarine at a time of crisis or danger could also be seen as a dramatic escalation of military tensions, which could make the government less willing to do it and which, if it was done, could make an attack on the UK more likely.

Land-based ballistic missiles would also be vulnerable to a pre-emptive attack by an aggressor. While the location of Trident submarines is secret, an enemy state would easily know the location of land bases. After a successful attack against the UK's land missile sites by an enemy, the UK would be unable to respond with nuclear weapons. Land-based missile sites would also create their own domestic security risks as a potential target for terrorists.

An air-launched missile carried by aeroplane would also be vulnerable to being shot down and would require the development of a new aircraft, new missile and new warhead. [\[xi\]](#) Missiles carried on a surface ship would also be easy for an enemy to detect and highly vulnerable to a pre-emptive strike.

Nor would submarine-based cruise missiles represent a viable alternative. Trident ballistic missiles carry multiple warheads and travel faster than the speed of sound and above the earth's atmosphere, making them almost impossible for any enemy to neutralise once fired. They also have a range of 7500 miles, meaning that a submarine does not have to be near its target to fire the missiles. By contrast, a cruise missile (such as the nuclear-capable US Tomahawk) only has a range of 1500 miles, can only carry one warhead and travels at a speed of 500 miles per hour within the earth's atmosphere – meaning it would be vulnerable to being shot down by enemy fighter aircraft or missiles. [\[xii\]](#) This would put the UK at a disadvantage compared to other nuclear states and substantially reduce the deterrent effect. In addition to this, the current UK nuclear warhead would not fit on a cruise missile, meaning that an entirely new warhead would have to be designed. [\[xiii\]](#)

In addition to all of these problems, any new system would necessarily incur new costs in development and testing. Trident, by contrast, is a tried and tested successful system. Changing the UK's nuclear deterrent system would therefore be highly unlikely to save money.

Another suggested alternative, proposed by the think tank Centre Forum, is for the UK to become a 'nuclear threshold state' with the UK's nuclear weapons decommissioned but with the UK retaining the technological capability to regenerate a nuclear weapon within twelve to eighteen months. [\[xiv\]](#) Twelve to eighteen months is hardly quick enough to respond to an imminent nuclear threat. It could be problematic and dangerous for a future British government, at a time moment of international crisis and a heightened threat to the UK, to escalate that crisis by re-building its nuclear weapons. In such a situation, an enemy power could target the UK's nuclear facilities before allowing the UK to build a weapon to defend itself. The UK would of course not have a nuclear deterrent ready to stop such an aggressor. One of the key features of Trident is that it is ever-ready and would be almost impossible to pre-empt in this way, and any potential aggressor knows that. The 'nuclear threshold' alternative is therefore utterly impractical and highly dangerous, and not a genuine alternative to Trident at all. Such a status for the UK would be unworthy of the UK's position as a leading and a responsible military power.

None of the suggested 'alternatives' to Trident offer an improved capability. On the contrary, they all have serious flaws and would weaken the credibility of the UK's nuclear deterrent. For that reason, there is no strategic or military justification for abandoning Trident in favour of one of these other systems. They are not viable alternatives at all. The UK's nuclear deterrent is too important to be undermined or for gambles to be taken with these inferior and flawed alternatives. If the UK is to maintain a credible nuclear deterrent, the current deterrent must be replaced in full on a like-for-like basis.

In this regard, the suggestion that the UK should or could reduce the number of Trident submarines from four to three, as was once suggested by Gordon Brown MP, [\[xv\]](#) is impractical and should be rejected. Four submarines are needed if continuous at-sea deterrence is to be guaranteed. [\[xvi\]](#) A reduction to three submarines would put continuous at-sea deterrence at risk by removing any spare capacity if a submarine had a fault. Such a gesture would achieve nothing other than to undermine the effectiveness and credibility of the UK's nuclear defences.

Trident clearly represents the best option for the UK and there is no justification for its renewal to be delayed, postponed or reconsidered.

3. What more can and should the UK do to more effectively promote global nuclear disarmament, non-proliferation and nuclear security?

Unilateral nuclear disarmament would immediately remove any influence the UK would have on global multilateral disarmament talks. A multilateral effort towards disarmament would almost certainly only be adhered to by responsible national governments, and certainly not by terrorist movements.

The UK has already done more than its fair share of disarmament. The UK has consistently reduced the size of its nuclear weapons stockpile and has the smallest nuclear arsenal of the five recognised nuclear powers. This has not inspired further acts of disarmament elsewhere. Nor has it dissuaded any countries from seeking to develop nuclear weapons of their own. Similarly, it is highly unlikely that any further acts of disarmament by the UK would inspire disarmament elsewhere. Nor would disarmament by the UK, a stable liberal democracy, make the world any safer.

The most productive thing which the UK could do to counter nuclear proliferation and promote nuclear security is to maintain a robust and uncompromising stance towards countries which are seeking to develop nuclear weapons in defiance of their international obligations, such as Iran. Such states would not be inspired by the UK's example were the UK to disarm, nor would they conclude that nuclear weapons of their own would be any less desirable. Instead, they would only be emboldened by British nuclear disarmament and see the UK as a potential soft target for nuclear blackmail and intimidation.

The reality is that 'global zero' and a 'nuclear-free world' is a highly unlikely prospect as nuclear weapons cannot be un-invented and new nuclear weapons can always be developed. The UK therefore cannot afford to take risks with its own security for the sake of political gestures. Ending or downgrading the UK's nuclear deterrent would harm, not help, non-proliferation and nuclear security.

[i] Remarks by President Barack Obama, Prague, 5th April 2009, http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Remarks-By-President-Barack-Obama-In-Prague-As-Delivered

[ii] Dr Ian Kearns, 'Beyond the United Kingdom: Trends in the Other Nuclear Armed States', BASIC, 30th October 2011, <http://www.basicint.org/sites/default/files/commission-briefing1.pdf>

[iii] Davis Lewin, 'Game Changer: The IAEA's Report on Iran's Nuclear Activity', November 2011, <http://www.henryjacksonsociety.org/cms/harriercollectionitems/IAEAREPORT.pdf>

[iv] 'Strategic Concept for the Defence and Security of the Members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization', NATO, 19th November 2010, http://www.nato.int/strategic-concept/pdf/Strat_Concept_web_en.pdf

[v] 'Europe's tight fist at Nato irks America', Gavin Hewitt, BBC News, 10th June 2011, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-13729751>

[vi] Daniel Dombey, 'Fox reassures on US defence ties', Financial Times, 23rd September 2010, <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/c7fd2ea6-c758-11df-aeb1-00144feab49a.html>

[vii] Severin Carrell, 'Savings from scrapping Trident would be negligible', The Guardian, 30th April 2010, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/blog/2010/apr/30/savings-scrapping-trident-negligible-snp>

[viii] 'The Future of the United Kingdom's Nuclear Deterrent', Ministry of Defence, December 2006, http://www.mod.uk/nr/rdonlyres/ac00dd79-76d6-4fe3-91a1-6a56b03c092f/0/defencewhitepaper2006_cm6994.pdf

[ix] Patrick Wintour and Allegra Stratton, 'UK and France should build nuclear deterrent together, says minister', The Guardian, 1st April 2011, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/apr/01/uk-france-build-nuclear-deterrent>

[x] Menzies Campbell, 'Think again before Trident is all at sea', Financial Times, 16th September 2010, <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/71bb28f0-c1c6-11df-9d90-00144feab49a.html>

[xi] 'Trident: Is there a cheap alternative?', Caroline Wyatt, BBC News, http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/election_2010/parties_and_issues/8636879.stm

[xii] 'Debating the Deterrent: Why the Cruise Missile Option Does Not Add Up', Dr Lee Willett, RUSI, 13th July 2010, <http://www.rusi.org/analysis/commentary/ref:C4C4EBAB3454FD/>

[xiii] 'In defence of Trident', Dr Lee Willett, Defence Management, 7th May 2010, http://www.defencemanagement.com/feature_story.asp?id=14133

[xiv] Toby Fenwick, 'Dropping the bomb: a post Trident future', Centre Forum, March 2012, <http://www.centreforum.org/index.php/mainpublications/316-dropping-the-bomb>

[xv] 'Brown move to cut UK nuclear subs', BBC News, 23rd September 2009, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/8270092.stm>

[xvi] 'Trident nuclear fleet cuts ruled out by Liam Fox', BBC News, 23rd February 2011, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-12504517>