

## **BASIC Commission – Future of UK Nuclear Weapons Policy**

The BASIC Commission has invited answers to the following questions:

- Should the UK remain a nuclear weapon state?
- If it should, is Trident renewal the only or best option that the UK can and should pursue?
- What more can and should the UK do to more effectively promote global nuclear disarmament, non- proliferation and nuclear security?

### **Should the UK remain a nuclear weapon state?**

The arguments for UK to remain a nuclear weapon state, laid out in the 2006 White Paper and reinforced by the Secretaries of State for Defence of the last and present governments, remain sound. Indeed, the behaviour of Russia in the past 18 months in terms of her nuclear posturing, and the demonstration of the unpredictability of world affairs evidenced in the ‘Arab Spring’, gives further weight to the policy – endorsed so comprehensively in the House of Commons in 2007 – that now is not the time to be abandoning our nuclear weapon capability.

The Libyan crisis is a particular case in point: the prospect of a benign outcome in governance terms is far from certain in that country which, until relatively recently, harboured nuclear weapon ambitions – and was close to realising them. It must be a reasonable assumption that these could be resuscitated by a regime not disposed to be friendly.

Furthermore, the argument sometimes paraded that UK disarming unilaterally would hasten other nuclear weapon states down the disarmament route cannot be taken seriously, given that this country’s significant reductions in nuclear weapon capability have elicited absolutely no positive response in either disarmament or proliferation by any nuclear weapon states, or numbers of states bent on becoming so capable. In fact, quite the opposite.

There is also no sensible analysis of what the UK would lose by unilaterally disarming in terms of shedding the current second centre of nuclear decision-making and the impact this would have on such a strategically important aspect of nuclear theology; and in terms of the country's influence within NATO, UN, bilaterally with US, and within Europe - especially vis-à-vis France. Some may consider this inconsequential, but as long as UK Prime Ministers continue to want this country to remain a strong player on the world stage – and there is no sign of this not being the case - then unilateral disarmament would significantly undermine such aspirations.

There is a view that UK should not remain a nuclear weapon state because the current economic situation renders such a role unaffordable, either for the country at large or, specifically, for the Defence budget. Such a view needs to recognise that decommissioning the nuclear program would incur significant cost and not render savings for many years; and that once decommissioning was underway, resurrection of the programme would be impossible in the short to medium term and extraordinarily expensive if, indeed, realistically feasible at all - the human and technical knowledge base of nuclear weapon capability/operations would not be easily be restored once relinquished. Furthermore, in terms of the Defence budget, it is naive to assume that the Treasury would allow Defence to benefit from the costs saved in not having a Trident successor. In all, the imperative of maintaining a nuclear capability should transcend the current financial crisis – but it should of course be delivered as cost effectively as possible. The SDSR Trident Value for Money Review has done this and saved more than £3 billion from the successor programme.

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

The UK's nuclear weapon deterrent should provide a credible, secure and fail-safe second strike capability. This can only be provided by a submarine launched weapon – and the facts supporting this assertion are well documented.

Guaranteeing as far as possible the warhead's probability of arrival on target must entail the use of a ballistic missile, because of its higher reliability and comparative invulnerability to air defence systems vis-à-vis a cruise missile (CM). And, unlike a cruise missile, a ballistic missile also offers global reach.

Thus Trident renewal has to be the only option for UK to pursue. Furthermore, such a programme would entail significantly less risk than the UK unilaterally having to research, develop and bring into service a nuclear CM capability and its associated infrastructure – especially since the Non-Proliferation Treaty would preclude US assistance with CM nuclear warhead technology; and the US is retiring its own capability in this area, with no funding for a replacement. Also, the timescales for a cruise missile project, even if feasible, would be unacceptable; and the costs, which would have to include a re-designed Astute-class submarine and which would not enjoy such value for money benefits as using the US Trident/D5 missile, likely to be far greater than renewal of the present system.

Finally, the Trident system allows a critical component of a credible, secure and fail-safe system - short notice and undisputable availability - to be delivered. That is to say, engineering and people components deployed at a high level of readiness, with probability of successful launch assured. This is achievable through continuous at sea deterrence (CASD), and has been proven through 41 years of uninterrupted service by the Polaris and Trident deterrent force. A policy to interrupt CASD will render the system non-credible as availability cannot be undisputed, since there cannot be absolute certainty that assured success will not suffer from interference/disruption through such factors as malign pre-emption, political unwillingness to order deployment, relatively low crew preparedness and motivation, and poor reliability of engineering systems not kept continuously in tune.

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

The UK has already shown a clear lead with nuclear disarmament for years now: reduction to a single platform, single missile and single warhead design for its deterrent system, and cuts to the number of warheads - the most recent as announced in the SDSR (total stockpile reduction from 225 to 180 and operationally available from 160 to no more than 120). A nuclear test explosion has not been conducted since 1991, and we ratified the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty in 1998. The UK has also taken great strides with transparency - for example, not only with regard to our fissile material holdings and a historical record of our defence holdings of both Plutonium and Highly Enriched Uranium, but now in terms of the total stockpile of UK nuclear warheads and the number of warheads carried on our SSBNs. It is time for others to show equal commitment.

The US and Russia need to be given the encouragement to continue with the excellent efforts and results that have been made towards disarmament, most recently with the New START Treaty. This must be a main effort on the international stage. But a difficult yet key issue for the US and Russia to tackle is the short range/sub-strategic nuclear weapons that both nations hold in Europe. Russia needs to open the doors on this element of their nuclear arsenal so progress can be made.

The NATO-initiated Defence and Deterrence Review, which may look broader than just nuclear weapon holdings, might provide part of a solution to the issue of Russian short range nuclear weapons. This deserves UK encouragement.

UK efforts to encourage the Non-Aligned Nations (NAM) to put sustained effort into bringing the D3 nations (Pakistan, India and Israel) fully into the nuclear community could also bring results. Without these nations being on the inside of the tent, progress on a broad range of disarmament or non-proliferation issues will be much harder and slower to achieve.

UK should retain focus on Iran and North Korea and persuade all countries that they have a role to play in this area, not just the P3.

The UK has taken some recent steps with regards to more international collaboration in the field of verification of nuclear disarmament without the danger of proliferation of technology or expertise. There is room for other nations to be encouraged to step forward to help overcome all the technical (and other) challenges.

**Admiral the Lord Boyce KG GCB OBE DL**

**House of Lords**

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