

**BASIC Trident Commission**  
**Submission of written evidence**

**1 - Should the UK remain a nuclear weapon state?**

**1. The threat of a nuclear attack remains**

Despite the US president Barack Obama's speech on a world free of nuclear weapons and the new START treaty between the United States and Russia, the international context is not benign or stable.

North Korea has tested a nuclear bomb. Iran is developing nuclear weapons. China is deploying two new intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) systems, and is developing a new submarine-launched ICBM system. China continues to increase its stockpile of nuclear warheads. Russia is also deploying a new ICBM system and is contemplating building a second type. Russia is also building a new strategic ballistic missile submarine, and is developing a hypersonic nuclear-armed cruise missile to be carried by a new attack submarine.

There is therefore little or no prospect of a nuclear-free world in the foreseeable future, and little evidence that the rest of the world is moving in that direction. The nuclear threat which the UK's nuclear weapons are designed to deter therefore remains. Unilateral disarmament would leave the UK open to nuclear blackmail and attack.

**2. Nuclear weapons are the UK's ultimate deterrent**

The UK's nuclear weapons are the ultimate deterrent against attack. They have a deterrent effect which no other kind of weapon could replace. While the kind of threat which Trident would deter may seem unlikely at this time, it is not possible to determine what threats may emerge or which risks might develop in the future. To give up the UK's nuclear weapons capability would be to make an assumption that future threats are predictable, which they are not.

**3. The nuclear deterrent remains relevant to new threats**

The UK in the 21<sup>st</sup> century faces new and varying threats to its security, including those from international terrorism, biological and chemical weapons and cyber warfare. The UK's nuclear weapons remain relevant to these new threats, giving the ultimate deterrent against rogue states which may sponsor terrorism or support attacks on the UK by proxy. Whatever progress is made in multilateral disarmament negotiations, these other threats from rogue states and non-state actors are likely to remain for the foreseeable future. The nuclear deterrent underpins all deterrence against known and unknown threats. It therefore needs to be supported by a credible range of conventional capabilities, and itself gives the ultimate support to the UK's conventional military deterrence.

**4. The UK's nuclear deterrent contributes towards the collective security of NATO**

The UK's nuclear deterrent contributes towards the collective security of NATO. This is recognised in the NATO Strategic Concept, which states: "the independent strategic nuclear forces of the United Kingdom and France, which have a deterrent role of their own, contribute to the overall deterrence and security of the Allies."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Strategic Concept For the Defence and Security of The Members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation*, Adopted by Heads of State and Government in Lisbon, 19 Nov 2010, <http://www.nato.int/lisbon2010/strategic-concept-2010-eng.pdf>

For the UK to give up its deterrent would therefore weaken the collective security of NATO, leaving this dependent on the United States and France. This would damage the UK's standing as a leading member of NATO and as an ally of the US. This would also damage the Transatlantic relationship by reducing Europe's contribution to the burden of nuclear security.

#### **5. Unilateral disarmament would reduce UK influence and credibility**

The UK is one of the five recognised nuclear weapon states who are the permanent members of the UN Security Council. Unilateral nuclear disarmament would reduce the UK's influence and credibility, which could lead to pressure on the UK to give up its permanent Security Council seat. There is no evidence that the UK giving up its nuclear weapons would have any positive impact on global nuclear proliferation. The disarmament which the UK and other powers have already carried out has done nothing to discourage proliferation among those states which desire nuclear weapons capability. On the contrary, unilateral disarmament would ensure that the UK has no influence or leverage over international nuclear disarmament by removing the UK from future disarmament negotiations.

#### **6. Nuclear disarmament is not a cost-free option**

As well as the risks to UK security and the damage to UK influence outlined above, disarmament is not financially cost-free. Decommissioning all of the UK's nuclear weapons would cost billions of pounds.<sup>2</sup> Disarmament should not therefore be seen as an easy saving or a way of freeing up money for other areas of the UK defence budget. On the contrary, by shifting the burden of deterring an attack from the nuclear deterrent to the UK's conventional forces, such a move could create additional pressures on defence expenditure.

**The UK should therefore remain a nuclear weapons state. The threat of a nuclear attack has not disappeared and is unlikely to do so. Future threats are not predictable so as to justify abandoning the UK's nuclear deterrent. To do this would not only leave the UK vulnerable to nuclear blackmail but would weaken the collective security of NATO and reduce the UK's international influence. It would therefore be an abdication of the UK's responsibilities as a NATO ally and as one of the five recognised nuclear weapon states and permanent UN Security Council members.**

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

#### **7. Trident is genuinely independent**

Trident is operationally independent. The warheads are British. The system does not rely on US or other navigation satellites. The targeting is performed by the UK. Authority to deploy rests with the Prime Minister. Any alternative system that was not completely independent and controlled by the UK at all times would not be able to provide the same level of assurance as decision-making and responsibility could become confused and controversial, particularly at a time of crisis.

#### **8. Trident provides continuous at-sea deterrence (CASD)**

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<sup>2</sup> *Savings from scrapping Trident would be negligible*, Severin Carrell, *The Guardian*, 30 April 2010, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/blog/2010/apr/30/savings-scrapping-trident-negligible-snp>

Trident provides continuous at-sea nuclear deterrence (CASD). It can be used at any time against any target in the world, and is therefore always ready to respond against any threat. Its location is unknown. It therefore cannot be pre-empted or neutralised by a potential aggressor. It does not require to be deployed at a time of international tension or crisis, so it is non-escalatory. The technology is well-established and tried and tested. Maintenance and renewal of the Trident-based CASD complies with the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT).

#### **9. Alternative systems offer little benefit**

Any alternative nuclear weapon system would require additional development and testing costs, and would be likely to involve a longer development process than the straightforward replacement of the existing Trident system. There is no evidence that a different weapon system could offer any improved capability compared to Trident. There is therefore little or no benefit in deciding to replace Trident with a different system.

#### **10. Ending the principle of continuous at-sea deterrence would leave the UK more vulnerable**

Any alternative weapon system which ended the principle of CASD would leave the UK more vulnerable. It would reduce the deterrent effect, by opening up the possibility that there was not always a deterrent ready to be used at any time and against any target. The UK would not therefore be ever-ready to respond to an attack. A submarine-based deterrent which did not maintain a submarine continuously at sea could create potential 'windows of opportunity' for attack in the eyes of an aggressor. Enemy intelligence services would calculate when a UK submarine was deployed or not, and monitor movements in and out of UK bases accordingly. If a nuclear deterrent submarine was deployed at a time of heightened tension or crisis, this could create panic at home and escalate any situation internationally. It could also be seen as a direct threat or a provocation by an enemy. In such a situation, such a submarine could be vulnerable to attack as it leaves its UK base. It could encourage a potential aggressor to launch a pre-emptive attack on the UK to disable our deterrent. Ending CASD would also indicate that the UK no longer regarded deterrence as a strategic priority.

#### **11. Other missile systems would be less effective**

Other alternatives to Trident also pose problems. Land-based ballistic missiles would be vulnerable to attack and pre-emption, as well as creating additional domestic security risks and costs. Cruise missiles do not have the range of ICBMs, reducing the UK's ability to respond. Cruise missiles are subsonic. They are therefore not credible first strike deterrents. A cruise missile is also more vulnerable to being shot down, further reducing its deterrent effect. We would require many more cruise missiles and nuclear warheads to mount a credible deterrent. The UK nuclear warhead is also the wrong size to be fitted to a cruise missile, making such an alternative impractical.

It is not practical or cost effective for the UK to pursue the development of a Submarine Launched Nuclear Cruise Missile (SLNCM). Our present T-LAM submarine fleet could not carry such a missile. Hulls would have to be enlarged or replaced in order to do so. It would not be desirable for such submarines to carry both conventional T-LAM and SLNCM, since conventional operations would reveal the location of the deterrent, making it vulnerable to attack and revealing the limitations of its target area. SLNCM would in any case involve the development of an entirely new nuclear weapons system, which would be a breach of NPT. Scrapping current plans for replacing the present Trident submarines in favour of SLNCM would be likely to increase rather than to reduce costs. There are no credible cost estimates of such a project. Nor would it be possible for project timelines to be achieved which could dovetail with the retirement of the existing Trident submarines and missiles. There would also be new and unquantifiable technological risks with such a project.

**Trident is therefore the most practical and least problematic option for the UK. Other options would be costly, problematic and inadequate. Trident is the only system available to the UK which provides continuous at-sea deterrence and is ever ready to be used against any target. Other weapon systems would not be able to guarantee this and would be vulnerable to pre-emption. There is no indication that any alternative can offer any better capability than Trident. If BASIC is to recommend an alternative to Trident, it must comprehensively address all the risks, costs and technical challenges as well as preparing a strategic doctrine which reflects the lesser capabilities of such an alternative.**

**12. Trident must therefore be renewed in full and without delay.**

The Vanguard submarines which currently carry Trident missiles will need to be retired in the late 2020s. Because of the time needed to build replacement submarines, the Main Gate decision to replace them will need to be made in 2015. Any further delay risks leaving a gap in coverage. This further reduces the credibility of any alternative weapons system as an option. The Secretary of State for Defence has stated that for CASD to be maintained, four submarines are needed.<sup>3</sup> The UK needs four so that at any given time there will always be at least one at sea, while one is in port undergoing maintenance and refitting work, one is moving to and from operations and one is kept spare in case of problems. Any reduction to that number would put that principle at risk. The Trident fleet must therefore not be reduced in size, but replaced in full.

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

**13. The UK has made significant moves towards disarmament**

The UK has consistently reduced the size of its nuclear weapons stockpile. The UK already has a smaller nuclear arsenal than the other four recognised nuclear powers. The UK's 'moral authority' in comparison to other nuclear powers is therefore not in question. It must be noted that these reductions have not inspired disarmament elsewhere nor dissuaded other countries from seeking to acquire nuclear weapons. Further reductions would also therefore be unlikely to have any positive impact. However, they could reduce the effectiveness of the UK's deterrent, as noted above.

**14. Unilateral disarmament will do nothing to further non-proliferation and global disarmament**

Unilateral disarmament is unlikely to have any positive impact. Other countries will retain their nuclear arsenals and would be unlikely to change their strategic judgments as a result of any UK disarmament. Similarly, countries seeking to develop nuclear weapons are highly unlikely to be inspired by the UK's example or to judge that they no longer need to develop weapons. Instead, to unilaterally disarm would be to give up all UK influence on future global disarmament negotiations, as the UK will have nothing to put on the table and no leverage. Future negotiations would simply be left to the four remaining official nuclear powers, with no UK voice present. Unilateral disarmament would reduce the UK's defences against countries developing nuclear weapons and could therefore create the perception that the UK is a soft target.

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<sup>3</sup> *Trident nuclear fleet cuts ruled out by Liam Fox*, BBC News, 23 February 2011, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-12504517>

There is no sign that France would follow a UK lead to disarm. This would leave France as the only nuclear power in Europe and would alter the balance of power in Europe and within the EU. Other allies, including the US, would cease to look to the UK as their principal European ally, but to France. While France and the UK share many strategic interests, UK and French strategic interests are not the same, so the UK would be unwise to depend upon France deploying her strategic deterrent on behalf of the UK in all scenarios. For the same reason, it is impractical to talk of a European or EU strategic nuclear deterrent. Any such proposal would depend upon a bilateral or multilateral command and control system. It is impossible to conceive of any such system which would enjoy public confidence or consent in each participating country.

However, were France then to follow the UK lead and disarm, the whole of Europe would be left without a nuclear deterrent. Without nuclear weapons in Europe, it is likely that the US would regard threats to European security as less serious than at present, because the consequences would be non-nuclear. The US would become a less effective guarantor of European security, leaving Europe more vulnerable to external attack and internal instability.

#### **15. Non-proliferation requires a robust stance towards countries which are developing nuclear weapons**

Non-proliferation requires a tough, consistent and robust stance towards countries such as North Korea and Iran which are developing nuclear weapons. The existence of UK nuclear weapons cannot be used as an excuse or justification for the actions of these countries. Linking non-proliferation to disarmament will only create confusion, distraction and delay, enabling further proliferation. Disarmament would undermine rather than help counter-proliferation by weakening the deterrence against aspiring new nuclear powers. Disarmament would embolden such states by indicating to them that their course of action poses less of a risk and by opening up to them the possibility that if they are successful they will be in a stronger position than the current nuclear powers. This would create the opportunity for such states to be in a position to use nuclear blackmail and establish themselves in a dominant position if they succeed.

**Global nuclear disarmament is a slow and uncertain process. A nuclear-free world is highly unlikely because nuclear weapons cannot be uninvented. No matter what progress is made in global disarmament, the risk remains that new weapons will be developed elsewhere. This makes disarmament more risky. 'Global zero' is therefore a highly unlikely prospect. For the UK to be able to make any contribution towards global disarmament and non-proliferation, it needs to maintain an independent and credible nuclear deterrent. The full replacement of Trident is the best way to do this, and therefore the only credible option for UK nuclear weapons policy.**

**Bernard Jenkin MP  
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