

**Submission of written evidence to the BASIC Trident Commission**  
**by Conservative Way Forward**

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

Yes. The first responsibility of government is the security of its citizens. The United Kingdom's nuclear deterrent guards against the most dangerous threat which British citizens could face. The UK's nuclear deterrent is the last line of defence against a nuclear attack. It provides a deterrent effect which no other military capability could match. The Trident nuclear deterrent system is the UK's ultimate insurance policy.

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. North Korea has tested a nuclear weapon. Iran is seeking to develop a nuclear weapon. In addition, the future threats which the UK may face cannot be predicted. In fact, few threats or conflicts are ever accurately predicted.

To give up the UK's nuclear weapons would 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.

The UK's nuclear deterrent is not only relevant to the UK. The British nuclear deterrent also contributes to the security and defence of NATO, as recognised in the NATO Strategic Concept.<sup>i</sup> The UK giving up its nuclear capability would damage its role as a leading member of NATO and as the primary ally of the United States. It would also make the UK dependent on the US (and to a lesser extent France) for its nuclear security, at a time when the US is urging NATO allies not to abdicate their responsibilities and leave the US to bear an ever-increasing share of the burden for Transatlantic security.<sup>ii</sup>

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.

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,<sup>iii</sup> as well as costing thousands of jobs in the UK.<sup>iv</sup>

The defence cuts 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. The UK needs an independent nuclear deterrent and strong conventional forces, not a false choice between the two. The Trident programme

amounts to just 5-6% of the defence budget over its lifetime. <sup>v</sup> For what it offers, the British 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, it provides continuous coverage, its location is secret and it could be fired against any target. Any potential aggressor would know this. As there is always at least one submarine at sea, it 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. Any potential aggressor would know this. For such a capability, the Trident system represents excellent value for money.

Trident is also 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 by the UK. While the missiles themselves come from the United States, the US could not prevent the UK from firing them. Trident is a sovereign British capability.

This independence is crucial. Any suggestion of sharing a nuclear deterrent with France or with the European Union must be rejected. Attempting to share a deterrent would create numerous problems and uncertainty 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.

None of the supposed alternatives to Trident offer any improvement in capability. Instead they are problematic.

Any alternative which ended the principle of keeping the deterrent continuously at sea would 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 also means 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. Deploying the submarine at a time of crisis or danger could also be seen as an escalation of military tensions and make an attack on the UK more likely.

Land-based ballistic missiles would also be vulnerable to a pre-emptive attack by an aggressor. After a successful attack 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.

Nor would submarine-based cruise missiles represent a viable alternative. While Trident ballistic missiles travel at hypersonic speeds and have a range of 7500 miles, a cruise missile only has a range of 1500 miles and travels at a speed of 500 miles per hour – meaning it could be shot down by enemy fighter aircraft or missiles. <sup>vi</sup> In addition to this, a UK nuclear warhead would not fit on a cruise missile, meaning that an entirely new warhead would have to be designed. <sup>vii</sup>

An air-launched missile carried by plane would also be vulnerable to being shot down and would require the development of a new aircraft, new missile and new warhead.<sup>viii</sup> Missiles carried on a surface ship would also be easy for an enemy to detect and highly vulnerable to a pre-emptive strike.

In addition to all of these problems, any new system, far from saving money, would incur new costs in development and testing. Trident, by contrast, is a tried and tested successful system.

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 justification for abandoning Trident in favour of one of these other systems. They are not viable alternatives at all. For this reason, the argument put forward by the Liberal Democrats and others that there are cheaper alternatives to Trident must be seen as a distraction aimed primarily at undermining public confidence in Trident. The argument that the UK should effectively downgrade its deterrent by pursuing one of these inferior alternatives must be seen as a prelude to the UK giving up its nuclear deterrent altogether.

It should be remembered that the renewal of the Trident system was approved overwhelmingly by the House of Commons, by 409 votes to 161, in 2007. A clear commitment to the renewal of Trident was also part of the Conservative Party's 2010 manifesto<sup>ix</sup> as well as that of the Labour Party. The renewal of Trident is also part of the Coalition Programme for Government,<sup>x</sup> a commitment which was restated in the Strategic Defence and Security Review.<sup>xi</sup> In accordance with this commitment, The 'Initial Gate' decision to go ahead with the renewal of Trident has been made and announced in Parliament in 2011.<sup>xii</sup> The decision to renew Trident therefore has overwhelming political and democratic legitimacy.

Trident represents the best option for the UK and there is no reason 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.

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 disarmament elsewhere or 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.

The suggestion that the UK should or could reduce the number of Trident submarines from four to three, as suggested under the last Labour Government,<sup>xiii</sup> is impractical and should be rejected. Four submarines are needed if continuous at-sea

deterrence is to be maintained.<sup>xiv</sup> Such a gesture would achieve nothing other than to undermine the effectiveness and credibility of the UK's nuclear defences.

To counter nuclear proliferation and promote nuclear security, it is right that the UK maintains 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 weak target for nuclear blackmail.

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.

## Conservative Way Forward 6<sup>th</sup> April 2012

*Conservative Way Forward is a not-for-profit organisation which aims to build upon the achievements of the Conservative Party under Margaret Thatcher's leadership, and to adapt the principles of her era in government to modern concerns and challenges. One of our main campaigns in recent years has been for strong defence and well funded Armed Forces for the UK.*

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<sup>i</sup> 'Strategic Concept for the Defence and Security of the Members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization', 19th November 2010, [http://www.nato.int/strategic-concept/pdf/Strat\\_Concept\\_web\\_en.pdf](http://www.nato.int/strategic-concept/pdf/Strat_Concept_web_en.pdf)

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

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

<sup>iv</sup> 'Trident, jobs - and the UK economy', CND, September 2010, <http://www.cnduk.org/about/item/download/6>

<sup>v</sup> '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](http://www.mod.uk/nr/rdonlyres/ac00dd79-76d6-4fe3-91a1-6a56b03c092f/0/defencewhitepaper2006_cm6994.pdf)

<sup>vi</sup> '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/>

<sup>vii</sup> 'In defence of Trident', Dr Lee Willett, Defence Management, 7th May 2010, [http://www.defencemanagement.com/feature\\_story.asp?id=14133](http://www.defencemanagement.com/feature_story.asp?id=14133)

<sup>viii</sup> '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](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/election_2010/parties_and_issues/8636879.stm)

<sup>ix</sup> 'Invitation to join the Government of Britain: The Conservative Manifesto 2010', April 2010, [http://media.conservatives.s3.amazonaws.com/manifesto/cpmanifesto2010\\_lowres.pdf](http://media.conservatives.s3.amazonaws.com/manifesto/cpmanifesto2010_lowres.pdf)

<sup>x</sup> 'Coalition Programme for Government', May 2010, [http://www.direct.gov.uk/prod\\_consum\\_dg/groups/dg\\_digitalassets/@dg/@en/documents/digitalasset/dg\\_187876.pdf](http://www.direct.gov.uk/prod_consum_dg/groups/dg_digitalassets/@dg/@en/documents/digitalasset/dg_187876.pdf)

<sup>xi</sup> 'Strategic Defence and Security Review', October 2010, [http://www.direct.gov.uk/prod\\_consum\\_dg/groups/dg\\_digitalassets/@dg/@en/documents/digitalasset/dg\\_191634.pdf](http://www.direct.gov.uk/prod_consum_dg/groups/dg_digitalassets/@dg/@en/documents/digitalasset/dg_191634.pdf)

<sup>xii</sup> 'The United Kingdom's Future Nuclear Deterrent: The Submarine Initial Gate Parliamentary Report', Ministry of Defence, May 2011, [http://www.mod.uk/nr/rdonlyres/7f9f5815-c67b-47b1-b5c4-168e8ab50dc3/0/submarine\\_initial\\_gate.pdf](http://www.mod.uk/nr/rdonlyres/7f9f5815-c67b-47b1-b5c4-168e8ab50dc3/0/submarine_initial_gate.pdf)

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

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