

BASIC Trident Commission

The Commission has posed three questions to me:

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

The last Labour Defence Secretary, Bob Ainsworth, in his Green Paper and the present Defence Secretary, Liam Fox, in his SDSR have both provided strong arguments in favour of the UK retaining an independent national nuclear deterrent through Trident renewal as the ultimate guarantee of our national security, lines of thinking with which I agree, and will not repeat here. The additional point below that I would wish to emphasise to the Commission addresses the implications of any change in the status of the UK as a NATO nuclear weapons state.

The analysis has to start from where we are as the product of our history and experiences as a nation, not least our leading position in the development of the North Atlantic Alliance. We benefit from the collective security arrangements of the Alliance including a framework of deterrence extended from the United States to its European allies. I observe that many of the nations that joined NATO following the end of the Cold War did so in no small part to obtain the security benefits from NATO's nuclear posture.

The contribution our forces, including our nuclear forces, have made to NATO's deterrent posture and risk and burden sharing has been – and still is – considerable. NATO's nations have recently reaffirmed their belief in the value of the Alliance and reconfirmed the commitment to defend one another against attack as being the bedrock of Euro-Atlantic security. As a result of these collective security arrangements, as the new UK National Security Strategy makes clear, the future risk of the UK becoming engaged in conflict as a result of an armed attack against a NATO country remains very low – for as long of course as NATO's strategic concept remains credible.

That is the favourable position we are in now and should plan to retain: a prior question for the Commission is therefore whether there are in prospect fundamental improvements in international security and the international order that mean that we can with confidence say that the need for collective security for the UK over the next 50 years or so is judged unnecessary. To the contrary, the Commission should in my view be very cautious about making any such prediction. The recent events in the Middle East and the Maghreb have demonstrated how unpredictable the international security environment can turn out to be. A look backwards at history also shows how wrong confident predictions and strategic reviews can be. Looking ahead several decades we should be prepared to be surprised by further unforeseen risks to our security emerging, including through possible developments in weapons proliferation.

Additionally, both risks (and unexpected opportunities) are to be expected over such a long period from breakthroughs in technology. There is in my view no objective justification for seeking major change today in the collective security that our NATO membership provides.

There is then subsidiary analysis to be done on what should be the future long-term NATO posture, including nuclear weapons, taking account too of the recent re-entry of France into the military structure and the part that the UK plays as an Alliance nuclear power. Again, I see no objective change in circumstances in prospect that is likely to reduce the value of the UK contribution. On the contrary, the UK contribution retains its importance in helping to maintain the transatlantic political solidarity that comes from knowing that the US is not being expected to shoulder this burden alone. Ending the UK nuclear contribution would on the contrary be likely to open up new fault lines and stresses in the Euro-Atlantic relationship. A weakening of the perceived commitment of the US – even a fear of a partial closing of the US ‘umbrella’ over Europe - would not only affect our and European security but would be likely to have long term implications for extended deterrence in the Far East and Pacific region. I see no case here for the UK to cease to be a nuclear power.

Your second question could then be reframed in terms of whether the UK contribution to NATO deterrence in the medium to long term needs to be through the deployment of a ballistic missile submarine based system (assuming that if it does then Trident successor is the only practical choice) or whether some other system would suffice. Again, we have to start the analysis from where we are, as the operators of an effective SSBN system. We do not have another nuclear system. My experience in the Ministry of Defence, including as the Deputy Under Secretary of State for Policy and Programmes at the time when the UK abandoned as too expensive its plans to replace its air launched weapon over 15 years ago, is that the costs of constructing, validating and safely and securely operating an effective new nuclear capable delivery system (such as a submarine-launched cruise missile or air launched stand-off missile) – and a new nuclear weapon of suitable design and size for it - would be prohibitive. Cost-escalation would be highly likely as inevitable development issues arose and I would be sceptical of any argument that in the end a new UK nuclear system could be brought into service more cheaply than updating the Trident system.

I would also counsel against any temptation to try to envisage a reduced UK nuclear weapons posture that does not represent a credible, survivable system under robust command and political control. The purpose of nuclear weapons is to deter. Were a future crisis to emerge that brought the nation close to being the subject of armed aggression, then to have a nuclear weapons capability that an adversary might regard as being vulnerable to pre-emption is to increase the risk of aggression and indeed invite such attack. To have a system that required lead time to be able to be deployed (including an SSBN system without CASD) is to invite crisis instability. Those are arguments of strategic principle: given the very long time horizons for thinking about nuclear systems, I do not believe it safe to argue from today’s relatively benign European security environment that there are no circumstances that could in the long term come to generate the

capability and the motive for posing a serious threat to this country or to other Alliance members and thus bring those principles into play. Such dramatic deterioration in the international environment might be characterised as low probability, but the impact on our security would be high, and it is precisely for providing an insurance against some low probability but high impact developments that we look to NATO's collective security, including its nuclear deterrence component.

Finally, on your third question, I observe that the UK is doing a great deal working as part of the P3 to promote global nuclear disarmament, non-proliferation and nuclear security including at the recent NPT Review Conference. An issue for the Commission is whether it is at all likely in the timescale for Trident procurement that we will see a major change in Russian policy towards volunteering major reductions in the very large numbers of tactical nuclear warheads that they (unlike the NATO nuclear powers) retain or changes in the major Chinese modernization and build up of their SSBN and road-mobile ballistic missile capability. I doubt we will see any reduction in the growing dependence upon nuclear weapons of those nations, even more I doubt that any unilateral disarmament moves by the UK would make such changes more likely.

Professor Sir David Omand GCB
Visiting Professor, Department of War Studies, King's College London
May 2011