

Evidence submitted by the Admiral Lord West

Should the UK remain a nuclear weapon state?

Yes.

There are real dangers of an extremely chaotic and highly dangerous world developing over the next decades, not least within the context of possibly irreversible climate change and ever increasing competition for resources of all kinds among a rapidly expanding world population. Important too are the implications of the changing geo-strategic situation of new powers, notably China, India and, increasingly, countries like Iran, Brazil and South Africa.

Of course, there are many other trans-national issues – including changing demographic patterns, imbalances in wealth, disease and the aggressive international growth in terrorism, WMD, drugs and criminalised activity – which also have considerable potential to affect both the international system and our national security and interests. With these issues comes the potential for big shocks in an increasingly interconnected world to overturn or radically modify existing assumptions about partners, vital interests and safeguards. The Arab Spring is a manifestation of this unpredictability.. As we have seen over the past 15 years or so, even well established alliances and partnerships have looked decidedly discretionary when the pressure has come on from either internal or external sources.

Recent events have shown that the late twentieth century consensus that rested on the perception that the international system benefited both US and global interests seems to be breaking down. We cannot therefore be sure how much longer the US will be willing, or able, to bear the burdens of being the protector of last resort for

the 'free world' and, as the intervenors of last resort, remain the ultimate guarantor of a rules-based international system. Nor can we assume that the idea of a multilateral, rules-based world for diplomacy and economics will necessarily survive the population and resource pressures of the early decades of the 21st century.

In these circumstances, it may well be that a considerable geo-strategic advantage will lie with those countries or political entities that, while engaging in globalised activity, could retain a marked unitary direction and purpose. Such advantages might also accrue from substantial national identity and coherence, significant demographic and age profile predominance, the potential to generate military force based on masses of people, the capacity to wage war on an industrial scale and from self-sufficiency in resources and the means of human subsistence. Today, one might include for example the United States, China, Russia, India, Iran and Pakistan amongst such states and all of whom could readily combine the possession of nuclear weapons with formidable, technologically enabled conventional forces to support their international or regional ambitions. In addition, Russia and Iran will be, for the foreseeable future, particularly rich and self-sufficient in indigenous and exportable natural resources and, at a time when coal may be making a respectable come-back, China may benefit significantly from its huge reserves. It may be that aspiring regimes will be prepared to take risks and go to the brink – both with rivals and in the international arena – in order to get their way. In particular, we should note the potential for confrontation and aggressive competition among or between the currently identified rising powers, especially if continued growth and access to resources threatens internal instability or economic failure.

In terms of strategic hardware, it seems reasonable to assume that yet more countries will continue to seek nuclear technology, both as a source of energy and for political/military purposes. It is also feasible that smaller weaponised devices may make their reappearance, especially among those nations aspiring to possess nuclear options, and it has not escaped the notice of some potential opponents that the possession- and the threat of their use – of nuclear weapons may offer insurance against intervention and expeditionary operations.

Of course, it may well be that collaborative structures and cooperative processes will allow constructive international engagement on many, if not all, of the issues that I have mentioned. However, our human record, in circumstances of intense competition across all dimensions, has not been good and I believe that it might be imprudent to be lulled into a false sense of security. Indeed, our historic experience indicates that the transition from a US-dominated world to a more multi-lateral world could be distinctly uneven and contain some unpleasant surprises. Keeping our armour bright, particularly those elements which provide assurance of our ultimate survival, may prevent, contain or mitigate the consequences of a uniquely threatening combination of global and strategic risks, particularly in relation of unquantifiable, unforeseen shocks, the imbalance of population and resources and the actions of opportunistic, possibly desperate regimes.

To put it simply, I view these considerations and conclusions as compelling reasons why in this unpredictable and potentially extremely chaotic and dangerous world, the UK must not elect to forego its independent nuclear deterrent.

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

Maintaining the present Trident ballistic missile system which necessitates the replacement of the SSBN's is the best option assuming the UK is to remain a nuclear weapon state.

Having looked at other options in detail it is quite clear that none of them are as cheap or practical as their supporters claim. Indeed I fear that a number of those suggesting other options understand this and the fact that the minimalist options effectively means there would be no real nuclear weapon capability at all—they are closet unilateralists.

For example looking at the Cruise missile option----

No appropriate missile exists—it would have to be developed, tested and decisions made on range, numbers of weapons etc. A new warhead would have to be developed. Even allowing for the “triumph of optimism” the costs would be huge. We have not developed such a missile before.

Test firings and measurement of performance would have to be done routinely—the costs of ranges, recording and associated assets would all have to be carried by our exchequer (presently covered by the US)

There is a measurable failure rate of cruise missile and crashed missiles have been recovered by the enemy—we would need to think through the implications.

Cruise missiles can be and have been shot down—we would need to fire a number of weapons at a given target to guarantee success.

How many missiles would each Astute carry? There are implications here as it would be a growth in our stockpile of weapons ready to fire. Would all deployed

submarines carry them? In either case how would this impact on submarine deployments? (Antarctic nuclear exclusion and FI's protection requirement!

Assuming the warhead would be mated with the missile what are the implication for the weapon storage space, maintenance, visits etc?

How would an enemy know that a submarine launched cruise missile was not a nuclear variant-would he wait to find out?

Other options have similar and other flaws which I would be happy to talk about.

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

We have led the world in this endeavour but I cannot say that our significant reductions have had any discernable impact particularly on those states we would hope to discourage from owning or expanding their arsenal of nuclear weapons. We should put more effort into publicising what we have done and how it compares with other nations and push for greater transparency over true numbers of warheads held. We should make no further reductions until we see a large shift in this direction by others whilst encouraging the US to lead in this area of negotiation.