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## The Future of the British Nuclear Deterrent: An Assessment of Decision Factors

*Strategic Insights*, Volume VI, Issue 1 (January 2007)

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### Introduction

One of the stark delineations of power in the international community is between the official nuclear powers and the rest of the world. Although it is officially denied, many believe there is a link between nuclear status and international influence. All five states that have permanent nuclear status under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty are also permanent members of the United Nations' Security Council, charged with preserving the international peace. While several smaller states have given up their nuclear weapons, the world has yet to see a permanent nuclear state renounce its nuclear arsenal.<sup>[1]</sup> Therefore, Britain's forthcoming debate over the future of its nuclear arsenal is of great interest, not only because the United Kingdom is America's closest ally, but because such a decision could have important international ramifications.

The current British nuclear arsenal has an expected service life that extends into the mid-2020s. Despite the fact that the UK doesn't need to decide about the future of its nuclear arsenal until the 2009-10 time period, Prime Minister Blair has promised that Britain would decide the matter in early 2007. In light of this, this research note provides background on the existing UK nuclear system, the likely decision factors weighed by the British government and the positions of the three major political parties on the future of Britain's nuclear deterrent.

Those who are hoping to see the United Kingdom lead the world to disarmament by unilaterally renouncing nuclear weapons are bound to be disappointed. While there is some pressure for disarmament by anti-nuclear activists, such sentiments are not widely held by the British public, let alone the government. The uncertain security environment combined with a preference for the status quo by political leaders will most likely ensure that Britain remains a nuclear power for decades to come.

## History of the British Nuclear Arsenal

“We have got to have this thing over here whatever it costs...we have got to have a bloody Union Jack on top of it”

—*Foreign Minister Ernest Bevin, 1946*

Before addressing contemporary issues, it is helpful to briefly review the history of the British nuclear program. Two consistent themes emerge:

- the important political objectives achieved by Britain’s nuclear weapons. Public claims to the contrary, their role as a tangible symbol of the UK’s continued claim to great power status and the means by which to maintain a close tie to the United States has been so significant that, at times, specific strategic justifications for nuclear weapons have appeared to be a secondary consideration.
- The closed and compartmentalized nature of British nuclear decision-making. With few exceptions, nuclear decisions have been taken by the Prime Minister, in conjunction with a small group of ministers or advisors, while the majority of the Cabinet, let alone Parliament, were often excluded from such debates.

Great Britain’s nuclear program has a long history, beginning in the 1940s when Otto Frisch and Rudolf Peierls of Birmingham University first sent a memorandum to the government *On the Construction of a ‘Super-bomb’; Based on a Nuclear Chain Reaction in Uranium* suggesting the potential for an atomic bomb. As a result of this insight, the UK was actually one of the first governments to identify the potential of and pursue an atomic weapon.<sup>[2]</sup> Interestingly, at this time in the United States, researchers at the National Defense Research Council, which was tasked by President Roosevelt with assessing the feasibility of building an atomic bomb, were arguing that it was impossible.<sup>[3]</sup> Information and decision-making about British nuclear research was tightly controlled by Prime Minister Churchill. Setting a pattern that would characterize future British nuclear decision-making, Churchill relied on an ad-hoc inner circle of decision makers, rather than debate nuclear issues with the full cabinet. Even the Deputy Prime Minister knew little about the program.<sup>[4]</sup>

The British research project, code named TUBE ALLOYS, was initially ahead of the American effort, which began in a disorganized fashion and lacked the urgency of the British. However as the resource and practical constraints on developing an atomic bomb in wartime Britain took their toll, British research began to flounder. Following the Quebec Agreement of August 1943, British researchers joined the Manhattan Project to add their technical expertise to that of the Americans.<sup>[5]</sup> Despite the close wartime cooperation on the atomic bomb, following the end of World War II, the UK soon found itself shut out of further collaboration with the United States by the 1946 McMahon Act which banned American researchers from sharing information on nuclear weapon design with other countries.<sup>[6]</sup>

Some historians have characterized Britain’s initial decision to pursue its own nuclear arsenal as one that was strictly rooted in a desire to gain international political influence and sustain its great power status in the face of imperial decline.<sup>[7]</sup> Such sentiments are encapsulated by Ernest Bevin’s quote that opened this section. Although pretensions to great power status undoubtedly played a role in Britain’s decision to seek nuclear weapons, to cast the entire enterprise as a vanity project overlooks the real security concerns facing the UK in the immediate aftermath of World War II. Britain still had world-wide interests and commitments in their colonial Empire. In the years before the establishment of NATO, there was no guarantee to British policy makers that America would not return to isolationism as it had done after World War I. Some even saw the McMahon act as a sign of how quickly the U.S. could discard its wartime allies. Furthermore, Britain foresaw challenges in the resurgence of Germany in a decade or two as well as the

increasingly hostile Soviet Union. As the most advanced weapons of their day, atomic bombs were seen as a means to cement Britain's worldwide status, re-forge a special relationship with the United States, as well as defend against future threats.[8]

The actual decision to develop an atomic bomb was taken by an ad-hoc committee led by Prime Minister Clement Attlee in early 1947. The full cabinet was not consulted in the matter. In May 1949 the decision was announced to the House of Commons, but neither program cost nor budget details were revealed to the assembled MPs.[9]

By the early 1950s nuclear weapons moved from being a weapon of last resort to the primary tool of British defense under a doctrine of deterrence. After Churchill led the Conservative party back to office in 1951, spending on Britain's conventional military forces slowed and nuclear weapons were increasingly emphasized as the key to British security in a manner similar to the Eisenhower administration's "New Look" defense policy.[10] At this stage, Britain's primary delivery system was a fleet of strategic bombers of the Valiant, Victor and Vulcan classes (collectively known as the V-bombers.)[11]

Britain's successful test of a hydrogen bomb in 1957 provided the necessary impetus to reengage the United States on nuclear cooperation. Based on Britain's demonstration of its indigenous nuclear capability, the next year, Prime Minister Macmillan and President Eisenhower concluded the *Agreement for Co-operation on the Uses of Atomic Energy for Mutual Defense Purposes*. This led to the sharing of warhead designs between the two countries and the decision by the UK to adopt an American design for their large scale production hydrogen bomb.[12]

In the early 1960s the British government committed its nuclear arsenal to NATO for the purposes of defending the Western Alliance. Under such conditions, British weapons were targeted according to NATO plans.[13] During this period, the public justification for Britain's nuclear program underwent change. Whereas in the early days of NATO, British nuclear weapons provided an important component of the alliance's arsenal, by the 1960s the growth in the size of the U.S. arsenal had significantly reduced the importance of the British contribution. As a result, the British defense establishment began to justify its weapons program not in terms of absolute numbers of weapons, but rather as providing a "second center" of decision making. Under this formulation, British weapons contributed to enhanced deterrence in Europe by providing an additional, independent, command authority that the Soviet Union would have to contend with even if it thought that America was unlikely to use nuclear weapons to defend Europe.[14] Interestingly, Britain continued to use this public justification for its arsenal throughout the remainder of the Cold War, despite changes in the strategic environment and corresponding shifts in U.S. nuclear doctrine, raising serious questions about how strategically grounded this justification actually was.[15] Privately, continued ownership of nuclear weapons served several purposes for British leaders:

1. It demonstrated to the U.S. that the UK was willing to shoulder a burden of responsibility in the defense of Europe—ideally leading the U.S. to strengthen its own commitment.
2. It underscored British independence—signifying that the UK was not just a "satellite of America."
3. It raised Britain's standing in Western Europe and prevented France from being the region's only nuclear power.

As Prime Minister Sir Alec Douglas-Home candidly admitted during the 1964 General Election, an independent nuclear force for Britain was "a ticket of admission to the top table." [16]

U.S.-UK nuclear cooperation took a major step forward in the Polaris program. In the wake of the cancellation of the Skybolt air-launched ballistic missile program, the Kennedy administration allowed the UK to buy into the Polaris submarine-launched missile system. Under the agreement,

the British bought the Polaris missiles from the U.S. but manufactured their own nuclear warheads.[17] The missiles and warheads were mounted on the British built Resolution class ballistic missile submarine. As a result, within the UK, nuclear responsibilities shifted from the Royal Air Force and its fleet of ageing V-Bombers to the Royal Navy.

By the late 1970s, the UK's four Polaris submarines had reached the mid-point of their estimated service life. Leading a small informal group of ministers, Labour Prime Minister James Callaghan explored the options for a follow-on system. While keeping Britain's options open, he secured an agreement from President Carter to allow the continuation of UK involvement in U.S. submarine-based programs in the form of the new Trident missile system. The decision to adopt Trident for the UK was announced by the new Conservative Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher in July 1980. In keeping with the compartmentalized nature of British nuclear decision-making, Thatcher's full cabinet was not consulted on the issue until the morning of the announcement.[18] By 1996, the Polaris-based submarine force no longer provided the UK's primary nuclear deterrent, having been replaced by the new Trident system.

## **Current System**

Unlike previous eras when the United Kingdom possessed a variety of nuclear delivery systems, Britain's nuclear status now solely depends on its sea-based strategic nuclear force. The nuclear arsenal of the UK consists of three component parts: the platform, the delivery system, and the warhead.

### ***The Platform***

The British nuclear platform is the Vanguard-class ballistic missile submarine (SSBN). These four submarines were designed and purpose-built in the UK as nuclear-powered ballistic missile carriers.[19] Each submarine has 16 independently controlled missile tubes, which gives the Vanguard-class the ability to carry a maximum of 192 warheads. However, due to self-imposed limits, each submarine carries 48 warheads when on patrol.[20]

### ***The Delivery System***

The Trident II D5 missile is a three-stage solid fuel rocket with a range of 4,000 miles to 7,500 miles depending on the payload. Each missile is capable of carrying up to 12 warheads and has MIRV (multiple independently targetable re-entry vehicle) capability that allows the warheads to engage different targets. The Trident II D5 is manufactured in the U.S. by Lockheed Martin.[21] Under the Trident agreement between the U.S. and the UK, the Royal Navy has access to 70 Trident missiles held in a communal pool at the Strategic Weapons Facility in King's Bay, Georgia.[22]

### ***The Warhead***

The warheads carried on the Trident are designed and built at the Atomic Weapons Establishment facility at Aldermaston.[23] Although details of the design are classified, the British warhead is believed to be based on the U.S. W76 design, a thermonuclear warhead with a yield of around 100 kilotons.[24] Britain currently maintains approximately 160 warheads for deployment on its Trident missiles.

Britain's small nuclear arsenal remains a cornerstone of its security strategy. In addition to the strategic deterrent role that British nuclear weapons played during the Cold War, the 1998 Strategic Defense Review argued that "the credibility of deterrence also depends on retaining an option for a limited strike that would not automatically lead to a full scale nuclear exchange." [25]

This 'sub-strategic' role requires that the Trident force be able to launch a limited number of missiles against an adversary as a means of demonstrating resolve or conveying a political message.<sup>[26]</sup> To fulfill this deterrent role in the post-Cold War environment, Britain retains a single submarine on patrol at all times, but it does not pre-target its Trident missiles.

## The Road to 2020

By the Ministry of Defense's estimates, the current nuclear warhead design employed by the UK has a service life that will extend into the mid-2020s.<sup>[27]</sup> The four SSBNs, which came into service between 1994 and 2001, have an estimated operational service life of 25 years, which also puts their replacement date in the mid to late 2020s.<sup>[28]</sup> Since fourteen years elapsed between the political decision to acquire the current Trident-based SSBN force and the first boat's entry into service, a decision on the future of Britain's nuclear arsenal will have to be made by the end of this decade.<sup>[29]</sup>

Should the UK decide to retain its nuclear arsenal, it is extremely likely that it will retain a submarine-based delivery system. The United Kingdom does not possess enough geographic space to support a survivable land-based missile system. None of the aircraft currently possessed by the Royal Air Force (RAF) has the range or capability to deliver nuclear weapons in a manner that would provide an effective deterrent. Furthermore, the UK is currently involved in a major procurement program with the Joint Strike Fighter and is unlikely to begin a new production/purchase program of a long-range strike platform by 2020. Finally, the vulnerability and detectability of surface ships, in comparison to submarines, and the existence of an extensive submarine support infrastructure in the United Kingdom suggests that the British will retain the SSBN as their nuclear delivery platform.<sup>[30]</sup> Given the history of close cooperation between the U.S. and the UK on nuclear issues, it is possible that synergies could exist between the development of a replacement for the Vanguard-class fleet and the U.S. Navy's new SSBN program which is expected to begin in 2016.<sup>[31]</sup>

## Decision Factors

Several factors will likely impact the decision to retain a nuclear capability. Among them are strategic requirements, treaty obligations, and cost.

### *Strategic Requirements*

British lawmakers and the government will have to determine how nuclear weapons will fit into the UK's future strategic calculation. Disarmament proponents in Britain argue that nuclear weapons are unnecessary because it is:

- Hard to imagine a real world scenario where British nuclear weapons would be used, and
- Even harder to imagine a scenario requiring the use of nuclear weapons that did not also draw in the United States, which could presumably threaten nuclear retaliation on Britain's behalf.<sup>[32]</sup>

More specific criticism focuses on the nature of the immediate threats facing the United Kingdom (international terrorism, failing states, organized crime) and the perceived inability of nuclear deterrence to effectively respond to them.<sup>[33]</sup>

On the other hand, proponents of maintaining a nuclear force argue that uncertainty regarding future threats is exactly the reason that nuclear weapons are required. Unlike conventional forces, which have to be structured for specific missions or theaters of operation, a nuclear deterrent does not require knowing the enemy in advance. While the exact nature of the challenges facing

the United Kingdom in forty years (the expected service life of a follow-on nuclear deterrent) are unknown at this time, the argument goes, a nuclear deterrent is flexible enough to respond to a range of potential aggressors.<sup>[34]</sup> Furthermore, they argue, the nuclear deterrent is not intended as a means of countering all threats to the security of the UK. Instead, it is focused on the extreme cases where the survival of the nation is at stake.

### ***NPT Obligations***

A second factor that will impact the future of Britain's nuclear arsenal are perceptions of the requirements of international commitments, specifically the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). Under article IV of the NPT, all nuclear powers are required "to pursue negotiations in good faith on effective measures relating to the cessation of the nuclear arms race at an early date, and on a treaty on general and complete disarmament under strict and effective international control."

The policy implication of this article is ambiguous. Absolutists argue that article IV prohibits Britain (and other states) from "renewing" their nuclear arsenals. Supporters of this view also argue that by voluntarily giving up its nuclear weapons, the United Kingdom would set a strong example that nuclear weapons are not necessary for either political status or national security. It is furthermore suggested that Britain's disavowal of nuclear weapons would provide an important boost to the NPT, which has come under much strain in the past year. In this line of thinking, by giving up its arsenal, which all nuclear powers under the NPT are theoretically obliged to do at some point, Britain would demonstrate that the treaty does have real meaning.<sup>[35]</sup> Advocating this view, former UN weapons inspector Hans Blix recently condemned the idea of replacing Trident, arguing that such a move makes it more difficult to restrain non-nuclear states, such as Iran, from developing nuclear weapons as they can claim that they are being "cheated" by the nuclear states under the NPT.<sup>[36]</sup>

Alternate interpretations of the requirements under Article IV focus on the lack of a timeframe for the abolition of nuclear weapons and emphasize the massive reductions in arsenal size that have taken place since the 1970s. Furthermore, it is pointed out that none of the other nuclear weapons states have given any indication that they are willing to give up their nuclear arsenals. At the same time, would-be proliferators are acting according to their own security calculations and have been steadily pursuing their goal for many years. Therefore, proponents of keeping a nuclear deterrent capability say that neither group of states is likely to be influenced or persuaded by Britain's unilateral disarmament.<sup>[37]</sup>

### ***Cost***

A third factor impacting Britain's nuclear decision, and perhaps the most important from the British public's standpoint, is the cost of building and maintaining a new system, both in terms of actual outlays and opportunity costs. Since the end of the Cold War the UK defense budget has shrunk in real terms. At the same time, costs for conventional equipment and personnel have increased.<sup>[38]</sup>

At this point, there is no solid information on what a renewal of Britain's nuclear arsenal will cost. While some hostile conjectures have put the total price tag of nuclear renewal at £20 billion, the underlying assumptions behind such calculations are unclear.<sup>[39]</sup> However, an order of magnitude estimation can be extrapolated from the current Trident-based SSBN program. British government estimates put the annual operating cost of the system at 3-4% of the UK defense budget, with total life-cycle costs, including acquisition, of just under £25 billion.<sup>[40]</sup> Based on the costs of developing the original Trident/Vanguard system, a replacement submarine-based platform would be expected to cost £15.2 billion in today's terms. This amount would be spread over a twenty-year development/acquisition period, so annual expenditures would probably

average £.76 billion per year. Given the current demands on British conventional forces, some argue that these resources are better spent on acquiring armored patrol vehicles, expanding airlift capability, buying more Joint Strike Fighters or increasing the number of destroyers or conventional submarines in the Royal Navy.[41]

Objectively, replacing the Trident, at the estimated cost, is within Britain's means, particularly if it continues its close nuclear cooperation with the United States. In terms of cost for nuclear capability as a share of the defense budget, Britain is in a far better position than France where the nuclear force typically requires 10% or more of the defense budget annually.[42] However, much will depend on how the issue is portrayed and debated publicly. Defense spending on a Trident replacement means fewer funds available for conventional forces. Furthermore the British public is increasingly resentful of having to pay high taxes for deteriorating public services. The opportunity costs of replacing the UK nuclear arsenal could be damaging to the renewal argument if opponents succeed in framing the debate as one of guns (nuclear weapons) v. butter (hospitals, schools, roads, etc).

## Nuclear Cooperation

Nuclear cooperation between the United State and the United Kingdom is likely to become part of the public discourse on the future of Britain's nuclear arsenal. The British nuclear deterrent is a tangible example of the special relationship between the United States and the United Kingdom. The close level of cooperation between the two nations that has existed for over four decades on a "core" national security program is unprecedented in U.S. foreign relations.[43] As was discussed previously, since the 1958 *U.S.-UK Agreement on Cooperation on the Use of Atomic Energy for Mutual Defense Purposes*, the two countries have engaged in a wide range of collaboration on training, equipment and material development, as well as information sharing. In 2004, President Bush and Prime Minister Blair signed an agreement extending U.S./UK nuclear cooperation for another ten years.[44] As the UK considers the future of its nuclear arsenal, it will have to decide whether or not continued cooperation with the United States will be a feature of a future program.

Critics of Britain's current nuclear program argue that it is not truly independent because the UK is dependent on U.S. support to maintain important aspects of the arsenal. Others respond that the nuclear warheads themselves are built and maintained in the UK and that the UK doesn't require permission from any other country to launch its nuclear weapons.[45]

Some critics who raise the issue of the (in)dependence of the nuclear arsenal are not objecting to nuclear cooperation per se, rather they seem to dislike the close ties with the United States. Some British analysts have proposed that a replacement for the Trident be based on Anglo-French cooperation. For their part, the French have expressed an interest in some form of European nuclear force. Tony Blair is reported to have had discussions to that effect at the June 2006 UK-France summit.[46]

While the potential for decreased nuclear cooperation between the U.S. and the UK cannot be discounted, particularly in a political environment where a large majority of the British public claims to want their government to pursue a foreign policy that is more independent of America, a future British nuclear arsenal that doesn't involve the United States is unlikely. From a practical standpoint, it is hard to see how the technological, strategic and financial benefits that the UK receives from its partnership with the United States could be achieved in a nuclear partnership with France or a larger EU consortium.[47]



## Political Decision-Making

While a decision on the future of Britain's nuclear arsenal could be put off until the 2009-2010 period, Tony Blair has promised to make a decision by early 2007. The Blair government's recommended course of action was laid out in a 'white paper' issued on December 4th, 2006.<sup>[48]</sup> Arguing that Britain cannot be certain that "a major nuclear threat to our strategic interests will not emerge" in the decades ahead, the government has proposed replacing the existing Vanguard/Trident system with a new generation of ballistic missile submarines carrying Trident missiles that had undergone a life-extension program.<sup>[49]</sup> In a concession to critics, Blair announced that the number of operational nuclear warheads would be cut by 20% to 100 and raised the possibility of only acquiring three new submarines to replace the existing four Vanguard submarines.<sup>[50]</sup>

Following the precedent of British nuclear decision-making, the actual decision to renew Trident appears to have been taken by a small committee that is a subset of the Cabinet. The composition of such a committee is unclear, but in addition to the Prime Minister, the Foreign Secretary, Defense Secretary and Chancellor are all likely members. There have been rumors that some within the cabinet privately oppose the renewal decision—including Hilary Benn, the International Development Secretary, and Peter Hain, the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and Wales -- which adds credence to the idea that only a subset of the cabinet had been involved in the decision.<sup>[51]</sup>

The House of Commons has received a promise that they will have the ability to vote on the recommendation to renew Britain's nuclear arsenal after a three-month period of public consultation. However, Jack Straw, the Leader of the House of Commons, has indicated that this vote, which will take place in February 2007, will be conducted as a "three-line whip."<sup>[52]</sup> This indicates that the matter is highly important to the government. Under such circumstances, MPs are not free to vote their conscience; rather they are expected to vote the party line. Failure to do so is interpreted as a major rebellion against the party and could result in significant disciplinary action such as suspension from the party. In this regard, a parliamentary vote on the future of the British nuclear deterrent is likely to be purely symbolic and will simply validate the existing views of the leaders of the various political parties. As the ruling party, Labour would certainly win a party-line vote on the issue, even in the face of resistance from the opposition parties, which is not likely to happen (see below). Furthermore, with a parliamentary majority of 64 seats, Labour could still win a party-line vote with some defection amongst its own rank-and-file.

The positions of the leadership of the three major political parties are a critical element in the upcoming debate:

### *Labour*

In their 2005 election manifesto, the Labour Party indicated it was "committed to retaining the independent nuclear deterrent." Technically speaking this only commits the Labor Party to retaining the existing Trident/Vanguard system through the current Parliament (May 2010 at the latest).<sup>[53]</sup>

Prime Minister Blair has stated that he favors the replacement of the Trident system to maintain Britain's independent nuclear deterrent.<sup>[54]</sup> There is currently widespread speculation about Blair's likely date of departure from office, with some in the Labour party urging him to go sooner rather than later. Based on the available evidence, it appears that Blair will still be Prime Minister when this decision is made. However, Chancellor Gordon Brown, Blair's "heir presumptive", ignited a row in June when, in a public address, he expressed the necessity of retaining an independent nuclear deterrent. While some have pointed out that Brown's language was no different from that contained in Labour's 2005 manifesto, this was widely interpreted as a signal

that Brown will support the renewal of Britain's nuclear deterrent.<sup>[55]</sup> More recently, however, the Chancellor has vocally endorsed a replacement for Trident.<sup>[56]</sup>

Such views are not necessarily shared throughout the Labour party. Former Labour cabinet minister Claire Short has criticized Brown for his support of Britain's nuclear arsenal and has indicated that she and her like-minded MPs will not support Brown's quest for leadership of the Labour party (and the office of Prime Minister) unless he reverses himself on this issue.<sup>[57]</sup> It is not clear how far these sentiments spread among current Labour MPs. However, it is important to recognize that during the 1980s, successive Labour party leaders were activists with the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND), and that unilateral nuclear disarmament was a popular policy within the party at this time.<sup>[58]</sup> It is possible that these sentiments remain, among both so-called "Old Labour" MPs as well as younger MPs who became involved in the Labour party through their anti-nuclear activism. Among the political base of the Labour Party, nuclear disarmament appears to remain popular. At the June 2006 national conference of Unison, the largest trade union in the UK, the 1,700 delegates voted unanimously to oppose replacing Trident and to decommission the existing system.<sup>[59]</sup>

### **Conservatives**

Speaking in March 2006, Conservative Party shadow Defense Secretary Dr. Liam Fox emphasized that the Conservative Party was committed both to retaining the current nuclear arsenal as well as replacing it when necessary. He also indicated that the Tories favored another submarine-based system.<sup>[60]</sup> In a major policy speech on nuclear proliferation given in July at the International Institute of Strategic Studies, William Hague, the Shadow Foreign Secretary and former Conservative Party leader, reiterated that the Conservative Party is committed to retaining an independent nuclear deterrent and that they saw no evidence that a unilateral disarmament by the UK would lead would-be nuclear proliferators to abandon their programs.<sup>[61]</sup> Having previously avoided comment on the issue, Conservative Party leader David Cameron endorsed the government's proposal to renew Britain's nuclear deterrent once the government announced its decision.<sup>[62]</sup>

### **Liberal-Democrats**

Even the far left Liberal-Democrat 2005 election manifesto supported maintaining the Trident system for the foreseeable future until "real progress can be made for multilateral disarmament." The Lib-Dem Defense Spokesman, Sir Tim Garden, has argued that the United Kingdom has reduced its nuclear forces to the minimum deterrent level and that annual maintenance costs of the Trident system are affordable.<sup>[63]</sup>

As for replacing Trident, the Liberal-Democrat position is unclear. When he was Foreign Affairs Spokesman, Sir Menzies Campbell contended that the decision on a successor to Trident should depend on cost, treaty obligations, the strategic environment, and threat assessment.<sup>[64]</sup> Previously he had argued that "no purpose would be served nor would Britain be made any safer if we were unilaterally to abandon Trident." However, in response to the government's 'white paper' Campbell called for the UK to postpone a decision on Trident replacement until 2014.<sup>[65]</sup>

### **Assessment and Conclusion**

Britain's experience illustrates the staying power of nuclear weapons for a middle country. In an environment where the utility of the nuclear arsenal to respond to immediate security challenges can be debated, the political leadership in the UK is not willing to disarm. In attempting to highlight the lack of a strategic case for nuclear weapons, those opposed to renewing Britain's nuclear arsenal often pose the question, "if we didn't have nuclear weapons at present, would the current environment necessitate or justify their acquisition?" The answer is typically a resounding

“no.” However, this question misses the point: Britain does have nuclear weapons. That is the status quo position. Disarmament proponents have to do more than just question the immediate strategic utility of replacing Trident. They have the burden of proof of demonstrating that British security, political standing and global influence will be enhanced, or at least not harmed, by total disarmament. This is, of course, a very tough case to make and one that, clearly, has not been made to the present government’s satisfaction.

Arguments that nuclear weapons cannot deter terrorists, therefore nuclear weapons serve no purpose, reflect a very myopic view of international politics. A decade ago, pundits and political scientists were debating whether or not war was obsolete.<sup>[66]</sup> Since that time Great Britain has fought in two wars and is currently engaged in protracted peacekeeping/counterinsurgency operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. Terrorism may be the top security challenge of the moment, but there is no guarantee that it will continue to be the case over the next forty years.

Furthermore, an exclusive focus on security issues overlooks the fact that the justification for nuclear weapons, within government circles, has always been about more than just security concerns. Regardless of the immediate strategic utility, the arsenal continues to achieve its two key political objectives:

- solidifying Britain’s international position commensurate with its status as a permanent member of the UN Security Council and
- continuing close security cooperation with the United States.

As long as these political objectives continue to be met by possession of nuclear weapons, successive British governments can be expected to retain a nuclear deterrent, even when the strategic or security arguments for such a move are less clear. One would expect that France, the other nuclear-armed middle power in Europe, would face a similar balancing of political and strategic calculations in looking at the future of their own nuclear arsenal, particularly given the patriotic symbolism that exists around the *force de frappe*.

Another consideration that has not featured prominently in the public debate over Trident replacement, but undoubtedly weighs on the minds of government ministers, is the relative permanence of a decision to disarm. From a practical standpoint, once the Atomic Weapons Establishment facilities at Aldermaston are disbanded, the costs of restarting a nuclear weapons program in the future, including developing the necessary physical infrastructure and skilled workforce, could prove to be prohibitively expensive. A decision to renounce nuclear weapons by a Prime Minister deprives his successors of a tool that British leaders have had at their disposal for over five decades. It is not a decision to be entered into lightly. It is far easier for the Prime Minister and the national security bureaucracy to continue the UK’s nuclear program than it is to end it.

The decision on Trident, in some respects, is a matter of course. The parliamentary debate and vote on the issue will be conducted under procedural rules that enforce the party line and will be more of a validation of the decision to renew the British nuclear arsenal than a true debate on the issue. The leaders of both the government and the primary opposition party (Conservatives) have expressed support for retaining Britain’s nuclear deterrent capability, although one cannot discount some politicians attempting to score political points by instigating controversy. Despite the presence of a vocal nuclear disarmament lobby in the United Kingdom, such sentiments represent a minority of political opinion. The uncertainty of the contemporary security environment and the inability to adequately predict the challenges of the next forty years, combined with a bit of political inertia, will likely ensure that Great Britain remains a nuclear power for the foreseeable future.

## About the Author

Walter Ladwig is pursuing a Ph.D. in Strategic Studies at Merton College, University of Oxford. He received a B.A. from the University of Southern California and an M.P.A. from Princeton University. He has previously served as a consultant to a variety of offices within the Department of Defense. His latest publication is "Security Assistance and Counterinsurgency: The British Experience in Oman, 1964-1975," in Kendall Gott, ed., *Security Assistance: U.S. and International Historical Perspectives* (Leavenworth, KS: CSI Press, 2006).

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## References

1. Most notable is the case of South Africa, which destroyed the six atomic weapons it had developed in 1991. Ukraine, Kazakhstan and Belarus all "inherited" nuclear weapons from the Soviet Union but chose to give up their arsenals. While not believed to have possessed actual nuclear weapons, both Argentina and Brazil did have active research programs which they abandoned in the early 1990s.
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