

TRIDENT AND BRITISH IDENTITY

LETTING GO OF NUCLEAR WEAPONS

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BRADFORD DISARMAMENT RESEARCH CENTRE SEPTEMBER 2008

DEPARTMENT OF PEACE STUDIES : UNIVERSITY OF BRADFORD

About this briefing

This briefing paper is the third in a series to be published during 2007 and 2008 as part of the Bradford Disarmament Research Centre's programme on *Nuclear-Armed Britain: A Critical Examination of Trident Modernisation, Implications and Accountability*.

The first briefing, *Trident: The Deal Isn't Done – Serious Questions Remain Unanswered*, is available to download at www.brad.ac.uk/acad/bdrc/nuclear/trident/briefing1.html

The second briefing, *Trident: What is it For? – Challenging the Relevance of British Nuclear Weapons*, is available to download at www.brad.ac.uk/acad/bdrc/nuclear/trident/briefing2.html.

The programme has been generously funded by the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust. To find out more please visit www.brad.ac.uk/acad/bdrc/nuclear/trident/trident.html.

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Acknowledgments

The author would like to thank the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust, Paul Rogers, Malcolm Dando and Simon Whitby for their support and others who have reviewed this text and provided detailed and valuable comments, in particular Nicholas Wheeler. The views expressed in this report are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Department of Peace Studies or the University of Bradford.

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Trident and British Identity

Letting go of Nuclear Weapons

Summary

In December 2006 the Government presented its case for replacing Britain's Trident nuclear weapon system and effectively retaining nuclear weapons well into the 2050s. The decision to replace Trident, endorsed by Parliament in March 2007, has been informed by a host of political issues that form a complex picture. One of the most important but least examined is the impact of political identity – specifically the role of British nuclear weapons in the political-defence establishment's conception of Britain's identity and its role in the world. This briefing paper examines the key dimensions of British identity that made the Trident replacement decision possible. It argues that:

- ◆ Examining collective identity is crucial because identities define interests, including a national interest in deploying nuclear weapons.
- ◆ Nuclear weapons underpin Britain's core self-identity as a major 'pivotal' power with a special responsibility for the upkeep of the current international order and a duty to intervene with military force in conflicts that threaten international peace and stability.
- ◆ The historical association between major powerdom and possession of nuclear weapons remains strong. Britain *is* a nuclear weapon state: this is an important part of its identity and it makes thinking about being a *non*-nuclear weapon state very difficult.
- ◆ Being the closest ally of the United States is intrinsic to the defence and wider political establishment's identity. Possession of nuclear weapons is perceived to be part of what enables Britain to maintain political and military credibility in Washington, gain access to the highest levels of policy-making to support the 'special relationship', and keep America engaged in the world.
- ◆ Britain's regional self-identity is that of a responsible and leading defender of Europe. This identity cannot conceive of leaving 'irresponsible' France as Europe's sole nuclear weapon state or accepting a position of military inferiority to Paris.
- ◆ New Labour's identity requires it to be strong on defence, including supporting Trident and Britain's status as a nuclear weapon state.

The whole discourse on Britain's identity and its possession of nuclear weapons is underpinned by powerful ideas about masculinity in international politics in which nuclear weapons are associated with ideas of virility, strength, autonomy and rationality. These place an almost invisible straitjacket on what is considered appropriate and inappropriate behaviour. The result is that nuclear weapons are framed as an essential component of the state as 'protector' of the nation and its citizens through a seemingly indispensable nuclear arsenal. Nuclear disarmament, on the other hand, means weakness, irrationality, subordination and emasculation.

The idea of relinquishing nuclear weapons challenges these core identities. For Britain to become a non-nuclear weapon state will require the acceptance and institutionalisation by the policy elite of a non-nuclear British identity that does not undermine the fundamental tenets of these core identities. Such a shift is inherently possible, not least because of the absence of consensus or widespread interest in British nuclear weapons within the electorate.

Dr. Nick Ritchie

September 2008

1. Introduction

Why did Tony Blair and the British defence establishment decide to begin the process of replacing the Trident nuclear weapon system and retain nuclear weapons well into the 2050s?

The decision to replace Trident has been informed by a host of political issues that form a complex picture. An essential part of the picture is the issue of political identity, specifically the role of British nuclear weapons in the political-defence establishment's conception of identity and its role in the world. Only by examining the role of identity can we fully understand how a decision to replace Trident was possible and explain why it was taken.

Mainstream explanations of the decision to replace Trident focus on the logic of nuclear deterrence and the purported need to retain nuclear weapons in response to the existence of other WMD arsenals around the world. These accounts cannot adequately explain the government's assumptions and assertions about British nuclear weapons. They cannot engage with the role identity plays in policy-making because the dimensions of this identity that matter are politically sensitive and difficult to incorporate into the 'rational' cost-benefit analysis of nuclear threats, nuclear deterrence, and nuclear delivery platforms presented publicly by the government, as the first paper in this series argues.¹

Only by examining the role of identity can we fully understand how a decision to replace Trident was possible and explain why it was taken

Four dimensions of the political-defence establishment's identity are central to this explanation, two primary and two secondary. The two primary components are *the dominant identity of Britain as a responsible, interventionist and 'pivotal' world power* and *Britain as America's primary political and military ally*. These two aspects of Britain's international identity have been propounded by the New Labour government since 1997 under the leadership of both Tony Blair and Gordon Brown. These twin aspects of Britain's identity are often described as 'internationalist' and 'Atlanticist' dimensions of foreign policy. They rest on a fundamental assertion by the British political establishment that the UK should play a major role in global affairs, that it is important for global order and stability that it does so and that it requires a strong military for the task.² Furthermore, Britain's identity as an interventionist major power and number one ally of the United States is perceived to generate a national interest in possessing nuclear weapons. At the same time Britain's possession of nuclear weapons since the 1950s supports and facilitates the continuation of these aspects of British identity.

The two secondary dimensions are *Britain as a reliable defender of Europe* and *New Labour identity of being strong on defence*. Underpinning the whole discourse on British identity and nuclear weapons is a powerful masculine image associated with nuclear weapons that must also be addressed to maximise our understanding of the decision to replace Trident. This research paper examines the role of identity in national security politics, the impact of these dimensions of identity on the decision to begin the process of replacing Trident, and the obstacles they present to Britain divesting itself of nuclear weapons.

2. Identity and national security

Mainstream ‘realist’ accounts of international security focus on the balance of military power between states and define security in largely military terms. According to this model it is in the rational national interest of every state to try and maximise their military and political power if they want to survive and prosper.³ Contemporary political theory now argues that we must also focus on the powerful collective identities of policy-making elites in order to fully understand and explain the complex world of international politics. Collective identities are essentially social constructions based on relatively stable sets of expectations, values and images of ourselves and the images we hold of other states and peoples that become institutionalised and accepted as ‘normal’.⁴ They are not static and everlasting but are continually *reproduced* as governments interact with each other, their domestic constituencies, and non-state actors and as policy statements are made and actions undertaken. Canadian politician and historian Michael Ignatieff sums this up in saying: “National identity is not fixed or stable: it is a continuing exercise in the fabrication of illusion and the elaboration of convenient fables about who ‘we’ are”.⁵

Collective identities also, crucially, play a large role in determining what constitutes ‘national interests’ and ‘rational’ policy choices. At a fundamental level a government or policy elite cannot know what it wants and therefore what its interests are until it defines its identity in terms of its relationship to others.⁶ The British government cannot generate a national interest in continuing to deploy strategic nuclear weapons until it defines itself as a major ‘pivotal’ power, number one ally of the United States and, at a fundamental level, as a ‘nuclear weapon state’. National interests can therefore be defined as objectives that must be fulfilled and actions that must be undertaken in a given situation to reproduce a core identity. Michael McGwire observes that “the role a state chooses (or settles for) [i.e. the dominant collective identity within the policy elite] ultimately defines both the national interests that need protecting or promoting (the basis of foreign policy) and the parameters of its security concerns (the basis of defence policy)”.⁹

These collective identities also provide a framework for understanding the world and a roadmap for government policy that motivates governments to behave in particular ways.⁷ They can determine how external changes and events are interpreted, what information is considered relevant, how interests, threats and desired outcomes are defined and what constitutes an appropriate policy response.⁸ As a result government policies are not dictated by ‘rational’ cost-benefit calculations but by a sense of what is ‘appropriate’ according to the dominant collective national identity of the policy-making elite and the definition of national interest that follows.¹⁰ The particular conception of national identity embedded within the policy-making elite therefore constrains the definition of national interests and restricts what is deemed appropriate or inappropriate in relation to those interests. The power to define national identity and what constitutes ‘normal’ understandings, meanings and practices in pursuit of the national interest is crucial. Equally important is the power to institutionalise a particular identity into political power structures to ensure its lasting effect.¹¹

A full understanding of the decision to replace Trident therefore requires a critical examination of how particular understandings, practices and events have been constructed according to a particular identity such that certain policy outcomes are considered feasible and appropriate whilst others are dismissed.¹² As Professor Tim Dunne argues, “to understand how it can be in our interest to retain a nuclear deterrent capability...one needs to understand how a particular account of identity makes such calculations possible”.¹³

3. Britain as a responsible, interventionist, 'pivotal' major power

Possession of nuclear weapons has been an important part of Britain's identity in international politics since the late 1940s. Throughout the Cold War this 'centred on Britain's self-identity as a major world power, America's primary political and military ally and as a vital part of the Western bulwark against the Soviet ideological and conventional and nuclear military threat. The Soviet threat has since been consigned to history and no major strategic nuclear threat has emerged to take its place. But Britain's identity as a major power remains firm and the historical association between major powerdom and possession of nuclear weaponry remains equally strong. As Mark Smith argues, underneath the many 'rational' justifications for British possession of nuclear weapons lies "a deeper sense that Britain ought to possess nuclear weapons as part of the currency of being a major power".¹⁴ Since the mid-1990s Tony Blair and later Gordon Brown have reproduced this identity within a New Labour framework and renewed the long-standing association between Britain's identity as a major power and its possession of nuclear weapons. In doing so it has re-framed Britain as a responsible nuclear power deploying solely defensive and therefore benign nuclear arms.¹⁵

The historical association between major powerdom and possession of nuclear weaponry remains strong

New Labour's narrative of Britain's international identity claims that the combination of Britain's history, power, influence and values mean it has a *responsibility* to uphold international peace and security. Britain can and should play a crucial role not as a global power anymore, but as a 'pivotal' power at the centre of world events.¹⁶ This is what Britain is and what Britain does: a country "at the centre of events, not a spectator"¹⁷ and historically "in the thick of it, but never irrelevant".¹⁸ This contemporary pivotal position lies in virtue of Britain's role in the EU, G8, UN Security Council, NATO, and the Commonwealth; its alliance with America; its global interests based on the free flow of trade, foreign investment and natural resources; its armed forces; and its strong links with major powers such as India, Japan, Russia and China.¹⁹

The narrative also argues that the growing interdependence of states and global security challenges requires a collective international response to threats and crises through active engagement and intervention in conflicts around the world.²⁰ Blair argued it was in the "enlightened self-interest" of governments to act together because "our self interest and our mutual interest are today inextricably woven together. That is the politics of globalisation".²¹ It means "we are all internationalists now...we cannot turn our backs on conflicts and the violation of human rights within other countries if we still want to be secure".²² Furthermore, collective international responses had to be based on a universal set of values of liberty, democracy and justice that coincide with those at the heart of the Blair/Brown New Labour vision.²³ Security in an interdependent world can only be achieved through active defence and promotion of these values.²⁴ As Blair insisted in 2006: "if we want to secure our way of life, there is no alternative but to fight for it. That means standing up for our values, not just in our own country but the world over. We need to construct a global alliance for these global values; and act through it".²⁵

The combination of Britain's innate responsibility for international security and the interdependence of security challenges translate into an enduring British obligation, willingness and capability to actively intervene in international conflicts to protect civilian populations, defend the values underpinning 'international community', and enhance national and global security.²⁶ The narrative is framed in such a way that the only alternative identity is an isolationist Britain and "a doctrine of benign inactivity" that will only bring insecurity.²⁷

It is for these reasons that Britain must remain a country that is prepared to use military force to intervene in the world. In fact being a country that does ‘hard’ power as well as ‘soft’ power is intrinsic to Britain’s identity.²⁸ Blair took great pride in asserting that New Labour “has combined, almost uniquely, ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ power”, in particular for defeating the regimes of Slobodan Milosevic in Serbia, the Taleban in Afghanistan, the Revolutionary United Front rebel army in Sierra Leone, and Saddam Hussein in Iraq.²⁹

Use of military force is therefore legitimised through the narrative of universal values. If security in an interdependent world derives from defending and promoting these values then “sometimes force is necessary to get the space for those values to be applied”.³⁰ This is the Labour government’s stated purpose for military intervention, particularly in Afghanistan and Iraq: to “hold the ring to stop politics being completely derailed” and “to buy time for politics to act”, according to defence secretary Des Browne.³¹ It is therefore essential that Britain develop and maintain military expeditionary forces of *global* reach in order to discharge its international responsibilities. MOD’s 2004 White Paper *Delivering Security in a Changing World* stated that priority “must be given to meeting a wider range of expeditionary tasks at greater range from the United Kingdom” in and around Europe, North Africa and the Gulf and beyond with “a clear focus on projecting force, further afield and even more quickly than had previously been the case”.³²

This, then, is what Britain does, this is what Britain is, this is the political-defence establishment’s powerful collective identity: Britain is a ‘force for good’, a responsible ‘pivotal’ power that has a duty to tackle international security threats in defence of shared values in the name of ‘international community’ using expeditionary military forces of global reach for the being purpose of creating space for the political settlement of conflicts around the world. This is presented as a morally legitimate, just, rational and enlightened pursuit of national self-interest and it represents a distinct New Labour foreign policy closely associated with Blair’s personal moral conviction that Britain can and should be just such a ‘force for good’.³³

This conviction came to the fore in Blair’s commitment to intervene in Kosovo in 1999 and the response to 9/11.³⁴ The ensuing ‘war on terrorism’, for example, was framed as a broad conflict not just about security but about values and modernity, “a clash about civilisation...the age-old battle between progress and reaction.”³⁵ The lesson of 9/11 for the Labour leadership was that Britain must be prepared to “actively manage the international security environment” and intervene more quickly in conflicts abroad and before they affect Britain at home.³⁶ “To think sooner and act quicker in defence of [its] values – progressive pre-emption if you will” in Blair’s words.³⁷ The war in Iraq was also framed as part of this “titanic struggle” and “a battle utterly decisive in whether the values we believe in, triumph or fail”.³⁸

Blair defined this approach as “hard headed pragmatism”.³⁹ This became a “hard-headed internationalism” under Prime Minister Gordon Brown in 2007 who continued the narrative of responsibility, interdependence, shared values, international community and military intervention.⁴⁰

Nuclear weapons and intervention

Nuclear weapons have been integrated into New Labour’s reproduction of Britain’s identity as a major, ‘pivotal’ power resulting in a reaffirmation and renewal of the association between major powerdom and possession of nuclear weapons. This association now dictates that Britain requires nuclear weapons to underpin its expeditionary, interventionist foreign and defence policy that defines its international identity. This is regularly articulated in arguments that Britain requires some form of ‘insurance’ against a military intervention getting ugly to the point that the prospect of a major confrontation involving the use weapons of mass destruction against British forces, allies or territory

becomes a real possibility. Nuclear weapons are seen to provide that ‘insurance’.⁴¹ Professor Colin Gray, for example, maintains that “If we are going to be in the expeditionary force business...I think it is important that behind the British elements of the forces (which may be substantial in some cases) that there should be British weapons of mass destruction”.⁴²

Blair made this point in 2006 in justifying the decision to begin replacing the current Trident system. He argued that Britain must remain at the forefront the global war on terrorism and what he defined as “the global struggle in which we are engaged today between moderation and extremism”. In doing so Britain must have nuclear weapons to ensure “that our capacity to act would not be constrained by nuclear blackmail by others” and that unpleasant regimes armed with WMD cannot “threaten our national security, or deter us and the international community from taking the action required to maintain regional and global security”.⁴³

Possession of nuclear weapons therefore reaffirms and in part constitutes the collectively held identity of Britain as an interventionist, pivotal world power. It gives the political-defence establishment an important degree of confidence to intervene militarily in the name of and in order to reproduce that core identity. Sir Michael

Quinlan, for example, argues that “we are still among the countries which have both the capability and the will to take on difficult missions around the world, as we are seeing in one or two uncomfortable places now, nuclear weapons have a certain relevance to that”.⁴⁴

This powerful collective identity (Britain as a pivotal power and defender of the international community) and its logic of appropriate behaviour (value/interest-driven military and political intervention with expeditionary armed forces) are therefore seen to generate a ‘national interest’ in the continued deployment of strategic nuclear weapons. In essence if we want to be ‘Britain’ according to this collective identity we must have nuclear weapons both as a representation of our major power identity and as a means of enabling Britain to act in the world according to this identity. A decision to become a non-nuclear weapon state and not replace Trident would challenge this identity and, according to this narrative, would be firmly associated with a rethink of Britain’s role in the world and more importantly a downgrading of Britain’s ‘rank’ in the international hierarchy of states.⁴⁵ Colin Gray, for example, insists that “the diplomatic cost to Britain of abandoning her nuclear weapons”, he argues, “would be very considerable and the case for Britain maintaining her position would become very much more difficult”.⁴⁶ Britain therefore *is* a nuclear weapon state both in fact and in identity. This narrative conversely suggests that to be a non-nuclear weapon state is to be not Britain.

This argument must be differentiated from traditional ‘status’ arguments in which Britain must have nuclear weapons because they buy a seat at the top table of international politics. Britain is at the ‘top table’ in many different areas of international politics irrespective of its possession of nuclear weapons. What is being referred to here is the part nuclear weapons play in constituting a powerful and enduring *self-identity* that defines what Britain is and how it should act and in facilitating an interventionist foreign and defence policy driven by that identity.

Nuclear weapons have been integrated into New Labour’s reproduction of Britain’s identity as a major, ‘pivotal’ power

4. British identity and the ‘special relationship’

A vital part of Britain’s identity as a pivotal interventionist power is its ‘special relationship’ with the United States that was constructed during the Second World War and institutionalised as the Cold War unfolded. The alliance with Washington is considered essential to British security and New Labour’s number one foreign policy principle is to “remain the closest ally of the US, and as allies influence them to continue broadening their agenda”.⁴⁷ The Foreign Office’s 2003 Strategy White Paper, *UK International Priorities*, for example, maintained that the relationship with America is a “vital asset...essential to achieving many of our objectives, especially in ensuring our security”.⁴⁸ Blair put it more succinctly in 2006, declaring “We need America. That is a fact”.⁴⁹ But the ‘special relationship’ with America goes much deeper than a purely functional security relationship.

Being viewed as a major and responsible power and the closest ally of the US is intrinsic to the defence and wider political establishment’s enduring post-war identity.⁵⁰ In fact Britain’s ‘Atlanticist’ identity is so strong as to appear natural.⁵¹ Mark Smith describes it as “a state of political mind as well as a policy; the state of mind produces policy preferences, rather than the other way around”.⁵² The ‘special relationship’ identity therefore produces particular kinds of national interest and policy outcomes and generates certain kinds of behaviour appropriate to that relationship.⁵³

Britain’s ‘special relationship’ identity has several core components, the first of which is the role of a bridge between the US and Europe. Blair regularly argued that this was Britain’s “unique” role in the world and for him this aspect of British identity was “clear and sharp. Europe and America together. Britain in the thick of it. The world a darn sight safer as a result”.⁵⁴

Second, a role of ensuring that America remains engaged in the world, because Britain cannot realise global security on its terms without it. This is based on the assertions that Britain can shape the exercise of US power by maintaining a very close and ‘special’ political and military relationship and that the US could easily succumb to the temptations of isolationism.⁵⁵ In 1999 Blair expressed his concern that “if anything Americans are too ready to see no need to get involved in the affairs of the rest of the world” and exhorted his American audience to “never fall again for the doctrine of isolationism. The world cannot afford it...and realise that in Britain you have a friend and ally that will stand with you, work with you, fashion with you the design of a future built on peace and prosperity for all”.⁵⁶ This requires unqualified support for US national security objectives and full participation in their operationalisation.⁵⁷ In the current ‘war on terrorism’, for example, Blair insisted that it is America’s destiny to lead the fight and that “our job, my nation that watched you grow, that you’ve fought alongside and now fights alongside you...our job is to be there with you” as loyal ally.⁵⁸

The third plank of this identity is therefore to be the country that works alongside the United States to spread American/British/universal values throughout the world and thereby ensure peace and security. America is portrayed by Blair as “the leading representative of our values”, the country that “can bequeath to this anxious world the light of liberty”⁵⁹ and “bring the democratic human and political rights we take for granted to the world denied them”.⁶⁰ It is these common values and a preparedness to defend them militarily that justifies the ‘special relationship’.⁶¹

Fourth, this identity requires Britain to have the capability as well as the willingness to fight alongside the United States. From Britain’s perspective it can only engage in military intervention alongside the United States either leading a coalition or through NATO.⁶² British forces must therefore be fully interoperable with US forces and command and control structures. They must be able to “match the US operational tempo and provide those capabilities that deliver the greatest impact when operating alongside the US” in order to “secure an effective place in the political and military decision-making process” and influence American policy and planning.⁶³

American power therefore defines and facilitates the dominant identity of the British policy-making elite. Its centrality to British foreign and defence policy and identity cannot be overestimated. It is fundamental to this identity that Britain is America's primary military and political ally, that it shares common values, that Britain has a 'unique' role to play in forging a bridge between America and Europe and an equally important role in keeping America engaged in the world through unflinching support for the exercise of American power in defence of American/British/universal values. This was reinforced by 9/11 and New Labour's subsequent commitment to full political and military support for the war on terrorism and its military interventions.⁶⁴ Political and military credibility in Washington through interoperability with US armed forces at all levels and full commitment to American national security policy is essential.⁶⁵ This must include a significant power projection capability in order to be able to undertake a range of military tasks in order to maintain that credibility and consequently a degree of influence.⁶⁶ This includes a nuclear weapons capability.⁶⁷

Nuclear weapons and the American alliance

Britain's identity as 'pivotal' power, its ability to act as an interventionist 'force for good' and its status as a nuclear weapon state cannot conceivably exist without America. In fact Britain's nuclear ties with America run very deep and constitute a core feature of the 'special relationship' so central to Britain's international identity.⁶⁸ Nuclear weapons cooperation with America goes back to the 1940s Manhattan project to build the first atomic bombs and was formalised under the terms of the 1958 Mutual Defence Agreement that allows cooperation on all aspects of nuclear warhead development through a range of US-UK Joint Working Groups.⁶⁹

Britain's nuclear weapons serve two important functions in support of the 'special relationship' and British identity as America's primary military and political ally. First, they are perceived to facilitate its willingness to support the US militarily in interventionist activity that Britain believes will enhance international security. As noted above, they provide a reassurance that regional powers will not transgress major UK interests when it intervenes abroad.⁷⁰ By facilitating that support, Britain's nuclear weapons serve a crucial if indirect role in allowing Britain to remain America's primary military ally, thus ensuring British security from the political-defence establishment's perspective. Second, they serve an important role in sharing the 'burden' of the nuclear defence of NATO and extension of a nuclear deterrent 'umbrella' over Europe (the French nuclear force is not formally assigned to NATO). As Michael Quinlan argues, "partner countries of the United States in seeking stable international order should accept the duty of backing the United States in bearing the nuclear task".⁷¹ This adds to Britain's credibility in Washington as a powerful, reliable and responsible allied power. Anchoring itself to the US is therefore a fundamental part of British security strategy and identity and nuclear weapons are seen as both an important part of the anchor and a symbol of its strength.

**Britain's identity as
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There is an important military and political constituency in Whitehall that sees significant risk to Britain's credibility in Washington, its interventionist doctrine and therefore its core identity in not retaining nuclear weapons beyond the current Trident system.⁷² Actions that could conceivably have a negative affect on the relationship with the US and thereby undermine Britain's security must be avoided. The validity of this concern is difficult to demonstrate but it cannot be dismissed. As Jeremy Stocker argues, "the symbology of nuclear weapons is important. It may be that a decision to give up nuclear weapons would be taken as a sign of a changed role for Britain in the world in which it might no longer be prepared to remain a close and useful ally" of the United States.⁷³

Beyond the deep political connection, Britain remains highly dependent on the US for nuclear weapon systems, technology and support.⁷⁴ Britain purchased its Trident submarine-launched ballistic

missiles (SLBMs) directly from America, received substantial design assistance with its Vanguard ballistic missile submarines that carry the Trident missiles, based its warhead on America's W-76 Trident warhead design, tested its warhead at America's nuclear test site in the Nevada desert, tested its Trident missiles near Cape Canaveral under American supervision, bought a range of important warhead components off-the-shelf from America, relies on America for aspects of nuclear targeting data and uses American software for target planning and data processing. British warheads can be integrated into American nuclear war plans and there is a UK Liaison Cell at the headquarters of US Strategic Command (STRATCOM) responsible for American plans. British nuclear forces are also formally committed to NATO and targeted in accordance with Alliance policy and strategic concepts that are dominated by America.⁷⁵ Britain will look to the US for political and technical support in replacing its four Vanguard submarines as it begins the process of replacing the current Trident system.

5. New Labour and France

Britain's 'nuclear' identity under New Labour has been dominated by its 'internationalist' and 'Atlanticist' dimensions that generate a perceived national interest in deploying nuclear weapons. Two further dimensions cannot be ignored and these relate to the meanings assigned to British nuclear weapons in the context of France and the defence of Europe and the transformation of the Labour Party in 1990s into New Labour.

An important part of Britain's identity as an interventionist, pivotal state is its historical competition with France to be Europe's preeminent military power willing and able to defend the continent from external aggression. In this context Britain's nuclear weapons have long been associated with the ultimate defence of Europe. Jeremy Stocker, for example, highlights the role assigned to British nuclear weapons by Edward Heath in 1967 as being held 'in trust' for Europe in case the United States were unable or unwilling to come to Europe's aid in a severe military crisis.⁷⁶ A significant aspect of this identity relates to an abiding reluctance to leave France as Europe's sole nuclear weapon state in the event of British nuclear disarmament.

This identity relates to an abiding reluctance to leave France as Europe's sole nuclear weapon state

This aspect of British identity is often cited as a reason for maintaining nuclear weapons and has little to do with 'rational' nuclear deterrence arguments. The strength of this identity is seen in a question by Mike Hancock MP to Sir Michael Quinlan before a House of Commons Defence Committee hearing on Trident replacement in 2006. Hancock asks "Would it be possible for any British government of any political persuasion to be able to sell the idea of the abandonment of the nuclear deterrent all the time the French maintain one?", to which Sir Michael replies "It would be very difficult...I think it is just a *national gut feeling*. To leave the French as the only people with this I think would twitch an awful lot of very fundamental historical nerves. I am not arguing about the *logic* of it; I just think it would be that gut feeling that we cannot" (emphasis added).⁷⁷ This is despite the fact that the two countries have increased cooperation on nuclear matters since 1992 through a Joint Commission on Nuclear Policy and Doctrine and have very similar conceptions of nuclear deterrence and 'vital interests'.⁷⁸

The difficulty, as Rebecca Johnson argues, is that if the government "were to say to the British public, 'We need to spend upwards of £25 billion for a nuclear weapon because the French have one', I think you would be laughed out of court".⁷⁹ The argument is therefore often framed in a realist 'balance of power' context. RUSI's Lee Willett, for example, asks whether Germany might seek to

acquire a nuclear capability to balance France if Britain relinquished its nuclear weaponry, but this logic is anathema to Franco-German relations.⁸⁰ RUSI's Mike Codner also questions whether it is safe to leave Europe with *only* one nuclear weapon power, suggesting that nuclear safety comes in numbers and for Europe to be truly safe it needs two nuclear powers, as well as America's extended nuclear deterrent umbrella, so dressing Britain's retention of nuclear weapons in relation to France in seemingly rational, 'realist' clothes.⁸¹

Underpinning the argument is the construction of a self-other identity in which Britain is identified as a responsible nuclear power that can be trusted to defend Europe with nuclear weapons if necessary and that sees its nuclear weapons as an important means of ensuring a long-term American commitment to NATO and the defence of Europe. France, on the other hand, is viewed as a country that cannot be trusted to use its independent nuclear force in a responsible way in response to potential future threats to the European continent because it is not committed to NATO or tied to the United States. Instead the French nuclear force is intimately linked to a powerful Gaullist identity of the glory of France, leadership in Europe, and independence from Washington in which French nuclear weapons provide a 'Europeanised' nuclear deterrent for a future European military entity.⁸² This dimension of Britain's foreign policy and defence identity is mirrored in France where Philip Stevens at the *Financial Times* noted in July 2008 that "Nicolas Sarkozy has lately been lambasted by his generals for proposing to re-engineer France's armed forces. Planned base closures at home and in France's former African colonies have seen the president accused of surrendering Europe's military leadership to Britain. There could be no more heinous crime".⁸³

The second of these two secondary dimensions of Britain's 'nuclear' identity concerns the Labour Party. The traumatic history the Party's nuclear weapons policy decisions during the Polaris and Trident debates in the 1960s and 1980s that threatened to tear it apart remain a resonant part of New Labour's identity.⁸⁴ In 1987 Labour leader Neil Kinnock accepted that the party needed to jettison the electorally unpopular policy of unilateral nuclear disarmament in favour of negotiated, multilateral nuclear disarmament with the other established nuclear powers. This began a long process of transforming the Party's foreign policy and defence identity to one in which it was seen as strong on defence. This meant supporting Trident and Britain's status as a nuclear weapon power albeit whilst pursuing multilateral nuclear disarmament, further reductions in its nuclear holdings and greater transparency over Britain's nuclear weapons programme. As Darren Lilleker argues, "Fear of electoral rejection led the new Labour leadership not to explore such paths [as nuclear disarmament]. The determination to be elected meant no risks could be taken. As such, old Labour ideals and commitments had to be replaced with a commitment to nuclear weapons".⁸⁵

The shift in Labour's identity was largely complete by 1997 when the party was elected to power under Tony Blair.⁸⁶ This was reflected in Labour's 1998 Strategic Defence Review, which stated that "while large nuclear arsenals and risks of proliferation remain, our minimum deterrent remains a necessary element of our security" but that "We will retain our nuclear deterrent with fewer warheads to meet our twin challenges of minimum credible deterrence backed by a firm commitment to arms control".⁸⁷ There was perceived to be little domestic political payoff in being the government to renounce British possession of nuclear weapons. Nearly a decade after coming to power the perceived fragility of this identity resonates within the Party. As Polly Toynbee wrote in December 2006 when the government released its White Paper setting out the case for Trident replacement, "there are plenty in Labour – including the whole acquiescent cabinet – who do sincerely believe in the absolute political necessity for a new Trident platform. The very idea that New Labour might wobble on the deterrent sends them into a cold sweat". The crux of the matter, she argues, is that "Ministers will think it is money well spent if that's what it costs to keep Labour in power" based on "fear of how our own voters might perceive the threat to our global status if they thought Labour might ever let the UK cease to be a nuclear power".⁸⁸

6. It's a man's world

These four dimensions of Britain's 'nuclear' identity are not exhaustive but constitute the primary components of the discourse on Britain's nuclear weapons. Examination of one final dimension is also necessary. This relates to the powerful ideas about masculinity that underpin the entire narrative about what British nuclear weapons are for and what they mean.

The 'gendered' nature of international politics has been extensively analysed by scholars such as Ann Tickner and Cynthia Enloe.⁸⁹ Gendered analysis examines how the dichotomous characteristics of masculinity and femininity such as strong/weak and active/passive and are constructed in society, how they are assigned and appropriated in international politics, and their role in creating and perpetuating particular power relations.⁹⁰ A central focus is the manner in which "certain ideas, concerns, interests, information, feelings and meanings are marked in national security discourse as feminine, and devalued" and consequently silenced and sidelined as 'irrational' and 'weak'.⁹¹

Gendered analysis has been extended to the realm of nuclear weapons, most notably by Carol Cohn, and any debate about identity, status and nuclear weapons must engage with the masculine symbolic meanings assigned to nuclear weapons.⁹² Possession of weapons in general is associated with manliness, sexual potency and the importance of demonstrating resolve and strength.⁹³ This is based on a broader dynamic in which men tend to be socialised into the role of 'protectors' and 'defenders' of society with women cast as the protected and therefore dependent, passive and vulnerable. This extends to the 'realist' construction of the state as a masculine, unitary and rational actor in which 'manly' states seek autonomy, maximum political advantage and security through military power.⁹⁴

Any debate about identity and nuclear weapons must engage with the masculine symbolic meanings assigned to nuclear weapons

In her detailed study of the American discourse on nuclear weapons Cohn concludes that beneath the surface of the abstract 'technostrategic' language of nuclear deterrence lies a "strong current of homoerotic excitement, heterosexual domination, the drive toward competence and mastery, the pleasures of membership in an elite and privileged group".⁹⁵ She argues that "political actors incorporate sexual metaphors in their representations of nuclear weapons" in order to mobilise the association between nuclear weapons and masculine characteristics of virility, strength, rationality and power and thereby generate support for their possession.⁹⁶ The result is that "regardless of their military utility nuclear weapons are turned into the ultimate arbiter of political/masculine power".⁹⁷ This is exemplified in Professor Colin Gray's strongman rhetoric before the House of Commons Defence Committee: "...I certainly would not want terrorists and those who support them to say they can use weapons of mass destruction against Britain and we will do our best with conventional weapons to bring the roof down on their heads. I would like them to know they are messing with a nuclear power".⁹⁸ In contrast the concept of nuclear disarmament is associated with feminine characteristics and portrayed as irrational, unrealistic, idealistic and emotional and associated with emasculation.

A gendered analysis allows us to recognise that the commonly accepted 'technostrategic' language of nuclear deterrence and the meanings assigned to nuclear weapons are not 'normal', objective and natural but the product of an "emphatically male discourse" in which the masculine side of masculine/feminine dichotomous characteristics is overwhelmingly favoured over the feminine.⁹⁹ It then becomes apparent that this gendered discourse constructs a masculine identity around nuclear weapons that places firm parameters on what is considered appropriate and inappropriate behaviour.

Any decision to relinquish nuclear weapons is framed as a demeaning sign of weakness. It is the gendered nature of the discourse that transforms Britain into a ‘manly’ state committed to ‘hard’ power through its possession of nuclear weapons. Nevertheless, New Labour under Tony Blair has articulated a particular form of masculinity in relation to British nuclear weapons that portrays Britain as a ‘responsible steward’ of nuclear weapons and a ‘reluctant protector’ of the state and its citizens through its nuclear arsenal.¹⁰⁰ The government would like to get rid of its nuclear weapons but the world isn’t yet ready for nuclear disarmament. As the government’s 2006 White Paper setting out the decision to replace the current Trident system argued, retaining nuclear weapons strikes “the right balance between our commitment to a world in which there is no place for nuclear weapons and our responsibilities to protect the current and future citizens of the UK.”¹⁰¹

Claire Duncanson and Catherine Eschle examine this identity in detail and identify a “strong tension between the government’s desire to maintain its masculinised status as a nuclear state and its concurrent desire to claim a more ethically-based leadership role”.¹⁰² They argue that New Labour has assumed an identity as a reasonable, moderate and ‘reluctant protector’ that minimises some of the masculine characteristics assigned to nuclear weapons and celebrates the reductions in British nuclear weapons, progress in transparency and commitment to arms control, albeit whilst insisting on their continued possession. This is characterised as a “shift in the identity of the British nuclear state, from a Cold War male warrior to a kind of post-Cold War ‘new man’”, although one that is far from complete.¹⁰³ At the same time “challenges to the nuclear-protector role are positioned as emasculating, rendering the British state not only incapable of protecting its citizens but at risk of losing its independence and leadership status”.¹⁰⁴ Colin Gray also argues that New Labour has sought to present Britain’s possession of nuclear weapons as a ‘regrettable necessity’ and describes the government’s policy as “running with the nuclear fox *and* hunting with the disarmament hounds”.¹⁰⁵ The framing of Britain as a ‘responsible’ and reluctant nuclear weapon state reflects Britain’s wider self-identity as a responsible and reliable major power committed to defending and promoting universal values.

7. Transforming identity

This analysis highlights how the dominant collective identity of the policy-making elite generates particular political and military national interests and policy outcomes that affect British possession of nuclear weapons in a number of ways. This identity is constituted primarily by the image of Britain as a major ‘pivotal’ power and as America’s primary political and military ally, supplemented by a rivalry identity with France and a transformation of New Labour’s defence credentials all underpinned by a strong masculine identity associated with possession of nuclear weapons. This leads to a series of identity conceptions and implicitly or explicitly accepted causal relationships relating to British nuclear weapons – all of which can be questioned.

First, nuclear weapons underpin Britain’s global expeditionary, interventionist foreign and defence policy and its core identity as a major ‘pivotal’ power with a special responsibility for the upkeep of the current international order and a duty to intervene with ‘hard power’ in conflicts that threaten international peace and stability. Arguments levied in support of this identity and its reproduction suggest that a decision to abandon nuclear weapons would signify a major rethink and downgrading of Britain’s role in the world and abrogation of its international responsibilities.

Second, Britain *is* a nuclear weapon state and this is an important part of its identity as a major, ‘pivotal’ power. Arguments levied in support of this identity suggest that if Britain relinquished its nuclear capability Britain could no longer consider itself a major power because and would probably not be considered as such by other countries.

Third, Britain's possession of nuclear weapons is an important means by which it maintains political and military credibility in Washington, gains access to the highest levels of policy-making to support the 'special relationship', and keeps America engaged in the world to pursue British/American/universal values. Arguments levied in support of this identity suggest that relinquishing nuclear weapons would destabilise the relationship, break vital bonds that ensure British security, encourage American isolationism and challenge Britain's identity as America's primary ally.

Fourth, as a responsible defender of Europe Britain cannot leave France as Europe's only nuclear weapon state. Arguments levied in support of this identity suggest that becoming a non-nuclear weapon state would undermine NATO cohesion and European security and establish an unacceptable inferiority vis-à-vis France.

Fifth, New Labour must commit to nuclear weapons to vanquish any accusations of being soft on defence and avoid reopening old wounds inflicted by the Party's divisive commitment to unilateral nuclear disarmament in the 1980s. A decision to give up Britain's nuclear weapons risks making Labour once more unelectable.

Sixth, nuclear weapons are implicitly accepted as part of the firmament of masculine international politics associated with the motivating concepts of virility, strength, autonomy and rationality. Nuclear weapons remain an essential British ingredient in the masculine conception of the 'realist' state as 'protector' of the country and its citizens. Arguments in support of this identity associate nuclear disarmament with weakness, irrationality, subordination and emasculation.

This suggests that if Britain is to relinquish nuclear weapons these powerful identity conceptions and the causal relationships and interests they generate will have to be transformed and the meanings assigned to British nuclear weapons reconceptualised.

This is not a simple task since dominant identities can become institutionalised and change can be resisted and inhibited by a strong desire to maintain stable role identities in order to reduce uncertainty and avoid any unexpected costs from deviating from those roles. The result is that a dominant set of collective identities, meanings, understandings and expectations can become self-perpetuating.¹⁰⁶

Relinquishing nuclear weapons will require the acceptance and institutionalisation of a non-nuclear British identity

Relinquishing nuclear weapons will require the acceptance and institutionalisation by the policy elite of a non-nuclear British identity. This could take many forms but it will generate a modified set of British national interests, expectations and understandings around nuclear weapons.¹⁰⁷ In particular the association between British major powerdom and possession of nuclear weapons will have to be overcome to divorce Britain's identity as a major power from the possession of nuclear weapons in a way that moves beyond gendered associations of weakness and emasculation, perhaps through a reconceptualisation of what it means for Britain to be an international leader. The challenge here is that there exists a powerful collective and largely masculine *international* understanding that nuclear deterrence is a valid, objective and rational concept, a relevant state practice and a necessary adjunct to major power status. This could be overcome through a robust, international effort led by the USA and Russia to achieve a nuclear weapons-free world (which could take many forms) that would eliminate the distinction between nuclear and non-nuclear weapon states and the identities that go with them.

Successfully institutionalising a non-nuclear British identity will likely depend on conceptualising the continuation of Britain's current role in the world, its 'pivotal' major power status, its ability to intervene with military power projection capabilities, and its 'special relationship' with America but without a nuclear arsenal. Critiques of Britain's interventionist foreign policy, its expeditionary

defence doctrine and its relationship with America are wide and varied, but a non-nuclear identity that explicitly ties relinquishing nuclear weapons to a clean break with these powerful role conceptions is unlikely to take root in Whitehall. In fact new identities and collective understandings generally have to 'fit' with the prevailing understandings of a policy community if they are to be accepted. Domestic political processes and structures tend to allow or restrict the access of new ideas and understandings to political leaders and policy-making processes depending on the extent to which they align with current understandings.¹⁰⁸ Ideas that are at strong variance with the core identity of the governing elite have less chance of becoming adopted and institutionalised.¹⁰⁹ This is likely to be the case with British nuclear weapons. This does not imply or advocate that current conceptions of Britain's role in the world must continue undimmed but that an evolution rather than a revolution in Britain's identity on the world stage is the more likely route to acceptance and institutionalisation of a non-nuclear identity. This will require:

1. Conceptualising an interventionist foreign and defence policy that is not judged to require a nuclear back-up. The link between the two carries weight at the political level but appears weaker within the armed forces. Concerns about future strategic uncertainty and the possibility that British policy-makers may in the future want to resort to nuclear deterrent threats during military interventions are a major obstacle. These arguments have been addressed in the second briefing in this series that questions the relevance, credibility and legitimacy of using nuclear weapons in regional interventions.¹¹⁰ It is worth noting that non-nuclear Australia under the Premiership of John Howard committed 1,500 troops to Iraq as a firm American ally.
2. Conceptualising a relationship with the United States in which cooperation on many aspects of nuclear weaponry may continue for a some time, not least in decommissioning, and in which a reduction in nuclear weapons design and stockpile stewardship cooperation and collaboration is not *expected* to affect the wider military and political relationship. The procurement of the Astute-class nuclear-powered attack submarines and two new Future Aircraft Carriers and accompanying fleet of F-35 Joint Strike Fighter aircraft will ensure Britain remains America's primary military ally with a credible expeditionary fighting force for some time to come.

Such a reconceptualisation is eminently possible based on the argument that the relationship has become culturally, politically and militarily institutionalised far beyond the realm of nuclear cooperation. James Whither suggests that "It is hard to imagine the disentangling of institutionalized defence and intelligence arrangements that have endured for so long".¹¹¹ Professor John Simpson also suggests that the United States would not be overly concerned if the UK decided to relinquish its nuclear capability.¹¹² A wider critique of the 'special relationship' also questions the extent to which British possession of nuclear weapons or indeed its much wider military interoperability and willingness to intervene in conflicts alongside the United States allows Britain to exert any influence on the United States.¹¹³ Blair's failure to persuade the Bush administration to fully support a second UN Security Council resolution in February 2003 that Blair was extremely anxious to secure to justify invading Iraq is a prominent case in point. The ensuing debacle in Iraq has led a wider questioning of the legitimacy of Whitehall's seemingly unquestioning loyalty to the White House.¹¹⁴

3. A reconceptualisation of Britain's role in providing security for the European continent with nuclear weapons and its historical competition with France. The historical legacy of military conflict and competition with France has left an enduring British identity that requires military parity between the two countries. This will have to be overcome in the field of nuclear weaponry in the context of future European security. This could be eased by the steady denuclearisation of NATO and progress with France towards a formal European nuclear weapons-free zone.¹¹⁵

4. It will require continued confidence in Britain's international leadership qualities and a reconceptualisation of major power status in which nuclear weapons add little in the eyes of others. Under Blair New Labour worked hard to position Britain as a leader in Europe, a leader on climate change and a leader on addressing poverty and international debt, particularly in Africa, as well as a country prepared to use 'hard' power for military intervention. This leadership role can continue in the event of Britain divesting itself of nuclear weapons, as will Britain's permanent seat on the UN Security Council, its membership of the G8 and its central role in the EU. It will, however, require moving beyond perceptions of strength and masculinity attached to nuclear weapons and beyond the association between nuclear disarmament and emasculation.¹¹⁶
5. It will require the Labour Party, if it remains in power, to move beyond the spectre of the 1980s when the idea of nuclear disarmament was an electoral liability. The lack of interest in Britain's nuclear weapons amongst the electorate (see below) gives the Labour government considerable leeway to present any future decision to relinquish the capability in a positive light, for example as a leader on nuclear non-proliferation, as strong on the country's pressing defence priorities by redirecting billions earmarked for Trident replacement to conventional defence procurement and support, or as a forward looking, 21st century national security policy. It is noticeable that after more than 50 years the presence of American nuclear weapons on British soil ended with barely a word. It was reported in June 2008 that RAF Lakenheath no longer hosts American B61 nuclear bombs and that the last may have slipped quietly away in 2004 or 2005.¹¹⁷

A shift in identity may be possible because of the absence of consensus or widespread interest in British nuclear weapons within the electorate

Changing policy by reconceptualising the *meanings* assigned to nuclear weapons as opposed to a change in international political and material conditions has been achieved in the past, for good and ill. George W. Bush, for example, in his first term in the White House reconceptualised the meanings assigned to Russian nuclear weapons and America's identity vis-à-vis Russia. He argued forcefully and repeatedly that America and Russia must develop a 'new strategic framework' based on further mutual reductions in nuclear forces and a host of confidence-building measures. This was based on a fundamental reconceptualisation of the Cold War concept of 'strategic stability' based on parity in nuclear weapons and large nuclear arsenals and marked the end of "the era in which the United States and Russia saw each other as an enemy or strategic threat". The Bush White House insisted instead that Russia and America were now officially cooperative partners "to advance stability, security, and economic integration, and to jointly counter global challenges and to help resolve regional conflicts".¹¹⁸

Nuclear weapons would play a much reduced role in the new framework, Russia was no longer considered an immediate strategic nuclear threat and American nuclear planning and force structure would no longer be based on the size and composition of Russia's nuclear arsenal.¹¹⁹ As Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld noted in 2001, "We do not consider Russia a threat to the United States of America. We do not plan to arrange our forces to prevent a tank attack across the North German Plain. We do not intend to get up in the morning and fret over the possibility of a strategic nuclear exchange" and that "the idea of an arms race between the United States and Russia today is ludicrous".¹²⁰

A shift in identity may also be possible in Britain because of the absence of consensus or widespread interest in British nuclear weapons within the electorate. Important shifts in the meanings assigned to capabilities such as nuclear weapons and the dominant understandings and identities built around them can occur when consensus breaks down. This can spur a critical re-examination of conventional wisdom and a reconceptualisation of the identities and interests that have sustained the consensus.¹²¹

This can occur, for example, when new governments are elected and a new set of officials come to power with different shared understandings about national security policy; with the advent of new technology that forces a reconsideration of doctrine; routine events that provide regular opportunities to revisit an issue; a series of minor changes creates sufficient incentive for internally driven change; or with dramatic changes that create new problems whose resolution can be aided by new ideas.¹²²

There is currently no consensus in Britain on the country's possession of nuclear weapons as the current debate on Trident renewal has demonstrated. A 2005 MORI/Greenpeace opinion poll found the country evenly split on the question of whether Britain should replace Trident and keep nuclear weapons (44% yes, 46% no and 10% don't know). When the price tag of £25 billion to procure new missiles, submarines and base facilities was included in the question over half (54%) said no with only a third (33%) saying yes.¹²³ An ICM poll in 2006 found 51% of those polled in favour of replacing Trident and 39% against with 10% undecided.¹²⁴ In addition a Populus poll in June 2006 found that 64% of those polled thought spending £25 billion on Trident replacement was hard to justify, 65% felt Britain should keep nuclear weapons as long as other countries had them but 59% also agreed that nuclear weapons are no longer the best form of defence following the end of the Cold War.¹²⁵

Within the Labour Party there was a substantial revolt against the decision to begin the process of replacing Trident, together with very limited but high-level criticism of the decision in the Conservative Party.¹²⁶ In Scotland, where Trident is based, opposition is much more widespread. The ruling Scottish National Party is against replacing Trident and seeks a nuclear weapons-free Scotland. The majority of Scottish MPs are against Trident replacement, a sentiment reflected in a vote in the Scottish Parliament in June 2007 when MSPs voted overwhelmingly against the decision to begin replacing Trident by 71 to 16 with 39 abstentions. Opinion polls also show a majority of Scots opposed to Trident.¹²⁷

A change in Britain's nuclear weapon status is therefore conceivable, but it will require the acceptance, evolution and internalisation of a non-nuclear identity. Evidence and theory suggest such an identity will be more readily accepted if other powerful aspects of Britain's identity on the world stage remain intact and are not seen to be jeopardised by a decision to relinquish nuclear weapons. Nevertheless, the absence of a consensus either for or against possession of nuclear weapons or general interest in the subject gives the current or future government considerable scope for successfully reconceptualising the meanings assigned to nuclear weapons, pursuing a non-nuclear defence policy and framing it as progressive international leadership with full support for Britain's conventional military capabilities.

Notes

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TRIDENT AND BRITISH IDENTITY

LETTING GO OF NUCLEAR WEAPONS

This research paper argues that in order to fully understand how a decision to replace Trident was possible and explain why it was taken we must examine the role of identity.

This means examining the role of British nuclear weapons in the political establishment's conception of Britain's identity and its role in the world, including its identity as a major, 'pivotal' and interventionist power, as America's primary political and military ally, and as a responsible defender of Europe.

The paper argues that these identities play a powerful role in generating a 'national interest' in deploying nuclear weapons. If Britain is to relinquish its nuclear arsenal these identities will have to be transformed and a 'non-nuclear' identity will have to be accepted and institutionalised.

Such a transformation is inherently possible, particularly given the absence of consensus within the electorate on whether Britain should remain a nuclear weapon state.

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