

Scrapping or replacing Trident?

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Britain's nuclear deterrent will become an election issue for the first time since 1983 – with clear blue water between the sceptical Liberal Democrats on the one hand, and on the other side both Labour and the Conservatives in favour of carrying on with a full arsenal. [Chris Brown](#) considers the arguments for and against:



The latter parties are committed to replacing Trident with another submarine-based system when the four Vanguard Class submarines which currently carry the deterrent reach retirement age – a date which is generally taken to be 2024, although some in both parties have argued that this could be extended to 2029. The cost of such a replacement is contested, but, factoring in running costs as well as construction, will probably approach £100 billion spread over 30 years.

The Liberal Democrats have said in their Manifesto they will not replace Trident with a 'like-for-like' submarine-based system arguing that 'Britain's security would be better served by alternatives', leaving open what those alternatives might be. The Liberal position has already attracted support from retired Generals who believe that money spent on the deterrent could be better used elsewhere in the defence budget (see [The Times today](#), Wednesday 21/4, and wait for some retired Admirals to weigh in on the other side tomorrow!).

This issue is likely to feature in tomorrow's Leader's Debate; what are the issues, claims and counter-claims we should look out for? There are three arguments that we may hear, but that really won't wash:

1. 'We should set an example by disarming unilaterally'. This is popular with the Bishops, but, to put it bluntly, virtually no-one in the rest of the world cares whether we have nuclear weapons or not. Those states who are actually likely to become nuclear powers in the near future, such as Iran and then Saudi Arabia really aren't influenced by whether or not we have these weapons. They will make their own decisions based on their own strategic assessments in which we simply do not feature.
2. 'We could use the money saved to cut the deficit, and/or support our troops in Afghanistan'. This argument is popular with the Treasury and the Generals respectively. The problem is that nothing will be saved immediately by cancellation and the amounts that could be saved over the next five years are very small; the building programme may begin in 2012 (although I suspect both main parties will delay this) but even then the construction costs initially will be very low. In the longer run there are obviously savings to be made – but too late to affect either the campaign in Afghanistan or the current crisis in government financing.
3. 'We don't need a Rolls-Royce system, there are cheaper alternatives'. This sounds intuitively plausible, but the problem is that we are a small, heavily populated island so we don't have empty spaces where missile silos could be based, and nuclear-tipped cruise missiles – apart from posing a major security threat – would be neither invulnerable nor guaranteed to be deliverable. It probably is Rolls-Royce or nothing.

These are red herrings – the real issue is whether we need a nuclear deterrent at all. The usual defence is that this is a last-resort weapon, a kind of insurance policy – the problem is specifying what it is that we are insuring against. David Cameron rather unwisely spoke of uncertainty about our future relations with China and Iran last week, unwisely because even if e.g. relations with China do go pear-shaped it is difficult to envisage any kind of nuclear stand-off. The actual rationale for our deterrent is I think rather different, and has two components. First, nuclear weapons are indeed seen as an insurance policy, but we are actually insuring against being abandoned in a crisis by the United States, which is obviously not a position that the political elite is prepared to articulate although the Americans are well aware that this is what British and French weapons are partly about. But second, and perhaps more fundamentally, nuclear weapons are a status-symbol, and to give them up would be to make the kind of statement about Britain's position in the world that no government has been prepared to make since 1945 – Ernie Bevin's announcement in cabinet committee that we needed a bomb 'with the bloody Union Jack on top of it' articulates this thought perfectly.

Are these good reasons for replacing Trident? In a few weeks the voters may decide this, along with many other questions.

