

THE CASE AGAINST THE RENEWAL OF TRIDENT

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Editor's Note

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The case against renewal of the UK strategic nuclear deterrent may be summed up as follows:

1. Military

The threat In the eighties and nineties, when the Polaris and its successor the Trident nuclear strategic defence system was brought into operation, its purpose was unambiguous. The missiles were targeted against the principal cities of the USSR, in order to deter an attack through the threat of an overwhelming response. It is probably the case that the balance of MAD (mutually assured destruction) did indeed prevent the cold war between the western and eastern blocs from breaking out into open warfare. However, the world has changed. On 20th June 2006 the House of Commons Defence Committee published its report *The Future of the UK's Strategic Nuclear Deterrent*. There is no longer a hostile state in the world against which the kind of strategic deterrence represented by the Trident system would be appropriate. It is pointed out that deterrence against potential aggression might take various forms: economic, diplomatic, or through conventional forces. 'The UK will need to examine whether the concept of nuclear deterrence remains useful in the current strategic environment.' (para.55) The Ministry of Defence had refused to take part in the proceedings of the Select Committee and the report states 'We believe that it is essential that, before making any decisions on the future of the strategic nuclear deterrent, the MOD should explain its understanding of the purpose and continuing relevance of nuclear deterrence.' (para.56) In other words, it is not obvious to this influential and well-informed group of Members of Parliament, drawn from across the parties, what the purpose of the Trident missile system is. They don't know what it's for!

Terrorist activity Security specialists seem to be in agreement that any imaginable nuclear threat is more likely to come not from a hostile state but from a terrorist group. One can imagine a nuclear weapon being taken into a major port by ship. No strategic missile force can be a plausible deterrent to such a threat. A single witness (the Committee describes him as 'a lone voice') argued that terrorist groups could only obtain nuclear weapons from states, and that any states with such hostile intentions could be deterred by the threat of a nuclear response (para.90). However, although states could certainly be deterred from using strategic nuclear weapons, the nuclear force of the UK would be unlikely to deter such states from supplying nuclear weapons secretly to clandestine terrorist organisations. The terrorists themselves, being ready for 'martyrdom', could not be deterred by fear.

Independence While the claim is that Britain must have its own independent deterrent, the truth is that as long as the UK uses Trident missiles as the delivery vehicle for its warheads, the system is hardly independent. The Defence Committee distinguishes between independence of acquisition and independence of operation (para.84). We do not have independence of acquisition and it is not clear whether the UK possesses operational independence or not. The Committee calls upon the MOD to clarify the exact nature of the independent status of our deterrent (para.84). In other words, these well-informed and responsible Members of Parliament were unable to ascertain whether or to what extent the British Trident system is genuinely independent.

The unknown future It is true that we live in a world that is dangerously insecure, and that we cannot tell what threat there might be to the UK twenty or thirty years hence, but the question is whether the world is likely to be a more secure place if the policies of the United Nations for nuclear disarmament are pursued rather than a policy of building up renewed forms of such weapons. It might be argued that continuing to possess our own strategic nuclear deterrent is a sort of prudent insurance policy (para.102). It could equally well be argued that since the unknowable future will certainly become more dangerous if nuclear proliferation gets out of hand, an even more prudent insurance policy would be to discourage such proliferation by decommissioning our own nuclear weapons.

2. Political

The special relationship between the USA and the UK Will it weaken relations between the UK and the USA if Britain adopts nuclear disarmament? Such a step would probably be opposed by the USA, in whose interest it is that there should be something that can be called an ‘international alliance’ of democratic nuclear powers. However, friendship between the two countries would doubtless survive. After all, Britain’s support for the American invasion of Iraq has not been depended upon nuclear weapons. In many ways, a nuclear free Britain might be able to lend greater support to certain American policies, such as the Human Rights agenda.

NATO British participation in NATO does not depend upon the survival of the strategic deterrent. A number of countries are members of NATO, but have no such force, and yet their loyalty and useful contribution to NATO is not questioned.

United Nations Security Council The UK is one of the five permanent members of the Security Council, the others being the USA, France, Russia, and China. These are all nuclear powers. It is sometimes claimed that if the UK were not a nuclear power, our place would be lost. However, the report of the Defence Committee (para.60) describes the views of a number of influential witnesses denying that continued possession of nuclear weapons is a condition of membership of the Security Council. The five major powers were those who emerged following the end of the Second World War and the creation in 1948 of the United Nations. Moreover, it is widely believed (para.62) in the developing world that the UK possesses nuclear weapons precisely in order to maintain its position in the world and to enhance its status. It is pointed out that this is a dangerous perception since it leads to a desire for such status creating increased momentum in favour of nuclear proliferation. As far as the status of Britain is concerned, the apparent dependence of the UK’s Trident system upon the USA leads to the view that Britain is a vassal state. The UK should preserve its influence through being a leading industrial nation, with a long and extensive diplomatic history, a secure and well-founded democratic life and because it has more international connections than any other state. The Report concludes (para.65) ‘There is no clear consensus that international influence, is, of itself, a reason to retain the strategic nuclear deterrent.’

UK domestic politics Would a nuclear disarmament policy be politically damaging for a major UK party? A MORI poll published on October 24 in 2005 revealed that 46% of people in the UK are opposed to the renewal of the Trident missiles, and 44% are in favour. In a second sample in which people were not only asked for their opinion but told about the projected cost of replacement, the percentage of those opposed rose to 54%, while only 33% support it.

Such a policy would not necessarily lead to a charge of being soft on defence, since a significant proportion of the saved resource could be devoted on enhanced expenditure on conventional forces.

3. Economic

Current estimates of the cost of the renewal or the retention of the strategic force range from £20 billion to £25 billion. To get this into perspective, one must realise that the profit of Tesco, Britain’s largest retail store, exceeded £2 billion for the first time in 2004; in his budget speech in March 2006, the Chancellor announced an increase in the education budget from £5 billion to £8 billion, and that he was aiming for a budget surplus of £16 billion by the end of 2010. In 2005, the total cost to the UK taxpayer of the National Health Service was just over £36 billion.

In addition to the projected cost of possible replacement, one must take into consideration the cost annually of maintaining the existing system. Government estimates put the cost of the entire Trident program, including capital and operational costs, at approximately £1.38 billion for 2005-06. This represents 4.5 per cent of the defence budget for the same year. This estimate includes personnel, stores, refits, transport, shore facilities, decommissioning and disposal costs plus some of the expense of the Atomic Weapons Establishment. It is understood that the government is preparing a White Paper which will form the basis of public discussion on this question. If tax-paying citizens are to engage in this debate with a reasonable understanding of the situation, one presumes that there will be a full and accurate disclosure in the White Paper of both the current and projected replacement costs.

4. Legal

Paragraph 2(4) of the UN Charter declares 'All members shall refrain in their international relations from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state or in any other manner inconsistent with the purposes of the United Nations'.

Article 51 of the Charter extends to nation states the right of self defence but this is subject to necessity and proportionality. Moreover, such self defence must comply with universal humanitarian law. This refers to the law of armed conflict, which involves the principle of discrimination between military and civilian populations, and prohibits causing unnecessary suffering. The General Assembly of the UN asked the International Court of Justice to rule on the question 'Is the threat or use of nuclear weapons in any circumstances permitted under international law?'

On the 8th July 1996, the court presented its finding. The use or the threat to use nuclear weapons would be inadmissible in an armed conflict unless it was consistent with the rules of armed conflict and with humanitarian law. Several judges ruled that the use of nuclear weapons was inadmissible in any circumstances, however extreme, where even the very existence of a state was at stake.

This ruling is further supported by the Non Proliferation Treaty (1970) especially paragraph vi. All parties bind themselves to eliminate nuclear weapons within a reasonable time scale. The UK is one of the founding signatories of this treaty.

There is a mass of legal opinion and supporting documents on this subject. One can consult, for example, the Lawyers' Committee on Nuclear Policy (LCNP.org), the Arms Control Association (founded 1971) with its headquarters in Washington DC, the UN First Committee, which is a subcommittee of the General Assembly dealing with disarmament and international security, the Oxford Research Group, and the Middle Powers Initiative (MPI), a forum dedicated to the elimination of nuclear weapons. This sponsors The Article vi Forum, the first meeting of which took place in the UN headquarters in New York in October 1995. It seeks to study the progress of states in fulfilling their obligations under the article of the Non Proliferation Treaty which requires states to progress towards nuclear disarmament.

There can thus be no doubt that the UK government is required by law to reduce its nuclear weaponry. A start to this was made in the late 1990s, but the renewal or retention of the nuclear force would clearly be an illegal policy. The July 20 Report of the House of Commons Defence Committee reported the view that the future security of the world depends upon the authority and stability of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (para.101). The same paragraph declares that the present Report does not intend to consider the question of legality, but focuses upon the strategic context and the timetable of the decision-making process.

It is clear however that the only British policy compliant with international law would be the continuing gradual de-escalation and decommissioning of the Trident system. It is just as clear that no action, unless illegal on other grounds, which seeks to bring the UK into line with the law, or to prevent the planning, retention or threatened use of nuclear weapons, can of itself be illegal.

5. Ethical

It is inconceivable that the use or the threat to use nuclear weapons should in itself be ethical. What could be more evil than the destruction of millions of human beings, and of the environment, and the malformation and sickness of generations yet unborn? Of course, the point of nuclear weapons is not to use them but to prevent their use by others. It could be claimed that the threatened use would be less of

an evil than the actual use, and the threat is intended to prevent the actual. The plausibility of the threat, however, depends upon the readiness to use the weapons in response. Would it not be unethical to use them in retaliation, even if others had used them? By then, their purpose of restraint would have failed, so how could their additional use be justified ethically? Since the claim that the use or threatened use of nuclear weapons is morally justified is only credible in so far as such weapons are to be used as a means to avoid a more immoral end, if the end fails, the ethical character of the weapons as means to that end also fails. Such use would be too late to deter and could only be retaliation.

But even if they do succeed in preventing the greater evil, can nuclear weapons be regarded as ethical even as means to an end? Only if there are no other more ethical means of achieving the same end. So what is more ethical, to threaten the use of such weapons, or to seek rational and mutually enforceable means of gradual disengagement?

6. Religious

The major world faiths are united in their belief that the unity of the human species, the human vocation for spiritual development, and the peaceful doctrines of all the great religious teachers must lead to a nuclear free world. A prominent example is the Declaration toward a Global Ethic, pronounced by the Parliament of the World Religions, meeting in Chicago in 1993. The Declaration begins with the sentence 'There will be no new global order without a new global ethic' and goes on to say 'Every human being must be treated humanely'. There then follow the four 'irrevocable directives', the first two of which declare a common 'Commitment to a Culture of Non Violence and Respect for Life', and 'Commitment to a Culture of Solidarity and a Just Economic Order'. Another well known document is 'A Call for Arms Control and Nuclear Disarmament' issued by the World Conference of Religions for Peace (WCRP) in March of 2005. This states 'The claim of several states to a unique right to have and threaten to use these horrific devices is the greatest stimulus to their proliferation'.

Turning specifically to Christian faith, there can be no doubt that the value implications of belief in the living God, the Creator of life, and the world as a creation of God, intended to be the theatre of human flourishing and ultimate salvation are utterly hostile to the possession, use, or the threat of using nuclear weapons. Similar conclusions are irresistibly drawn from the life and teaching, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, leading to the concept of the human body as a temple of the Holy Spirit, and of love for every person, made in the image of God, and a brother and sister for whom Christ died. No interpretation of the nature of the mission of the church in the world can be consistent with the possession of nuclear weapons, whatever the political or psychological arguments for them. Christian faith must therefore resist the claim that the threat to use nuclear weapons can ever be justified, no matter what the claims of purely national security might be, and no matter how strongly the claim is made that possession of such weapons is the lesser of evils in an evil world. A nuclear threat goes far beyond the legitimate role of the state in the preservation of law and security, a responsibility of the state generally recognized by the church, since the use of nuclear weapons, especially the type associated with the Trident missile is incompatible with the demands for discrimination between civilian and military populations, and with the demand for proportionality of response, the two basic features of the theology of the just war.

Conclusion

On military, political, economic, legal, ethical and religious grounds, the case for the renewal of Britain's nuclear force lacks credibility.

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