

The New Trident Debate

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According to Sir Humphrey Appleby in the 1980s BBC sitcom “Yes Prime Minister”, the Trident missile system was “the Rolls Royce of nuclear weapons, the sort of deterrent that one would buy from Harrods.” As the decision point looms for the replacement of this capability, questions are being asked whether Britain can afford a new Rolls, whether it should instead go for a more modest system, perhaps more of a Ford Mondeo deterrent, or whether indeed it should go green and eschew the need for such a costly and controversial system altogether. As a result of the disastrous electoral consequences of its unilateral nuclear disarmament policy of the 1980s, the Labour Party is relatively quiet on the nuclear issue. It reluctantly supports the need for a national deterrent, leaving it to the Liberal Democrats to argue for a cheaper, less elaborate system than the retention of Trident advocated by the Conservatives. To accommodate these differences of opinion within the coalition, the final or “main gate” decision on the replacement of the Trident submarines will be delayed until 2016 after the next general election and the government has tasked a committee to look into the feasibility of cheaper alternatives.

Britain has operated a “continuous, at sea deterrent” since the deployment of the Polaris system in 1968, and its rationale was very much linked to the Cold War context of the time. Because the adversary was the Soviet Union, basing missiles on land was seen as being vulnerable to “barrage” attack and pre-emptive destruction on the ground. The previous reliance on the RAF to deliver the deterrent was questioned due to improved Soviet Air Defences. The deployment of an Anti Ballistic Missile system around Moscow (Galosh) in the late 1960s also meant that only a Manoeuvrable Re-Entry Vehicle (MARV) on top of a ballistic missile could meet the UK’s stated policy of holding the Soviet capital at risk, the so called “Moscow criterion”. The result was a policy of basing the deterrent at sea where it is hidden, undetectable, invulnerable and mobile – which also increases its range. The choice of weapon – a submarine launched ballistic missile (SLBM) also gives greater range, assured penetration to the target and greater accuracy. Importantly it also gives commonality with the US Navy as the Trident missiles are bought from and serviced by the US. Whether the UK needs or can afford such an elaborate system for its nuclear deterrent is at the heart of the current debate. Nick Clegg calls Trident a “Cold War” weapon and questions whether Britain needs such a capable and expensive system. For the Lib Dems a cheaper option might be to return nuclear weapons to the RAF, who operated their own “sub-strategic” air based systems until 1998, or to equip the new F35 Joint Strike Fighters with nuclear missiles and operate them from the Royal Navy’s two new Aircraft carriers. A third alternative would be to build three or four more Astute nuclear powered submarines and to equip their tomahawk cruise missiles with nuclear warheads. Any of these options would be less capable than a straight Trident replacement. They would lack the range of the Trident system which is currently 7000 miles, would be more vulnerable to air defences and would blur the distinction between conventional strike systems and nuclear weapons, raising the spectre of an enemy mistaking a conventional attack as one containing a nuclear warhead. Any return to an air based deterrent would in theory be vulnerable to the airfield or carrier being attacked thus preventing an assured second strike capability. Conservative critics dismiss the Astute proposal as a “Tuppenny Trident”. It is even suggested by some critics that the Astute route might be more expensive than Trident as the submarines still need to be built and a new smaller warhead would have to be designed which would be very expensive, whereas the existing Trident missiles can still be used in the new submarines. Another alternative would be to build less than the four submarines that have been part of the force since the Polaris fleet of the 1960s. Four boats are regarded as necessary in order to guarantee that one is at sea at all times, but some argue that this isn’t necessary and that the boats could be put to sea at times of heightened tension. Others argue that Royal Navy Trident patrols could be coordinated with the French navy’s nuclear submarines so that there was always a “European” independent deterrent at sea.

What none of this debate seems willing to address, however, is what Britain’s nuclear weapons are for and whether the UK should remain a nuclear weapons state. Within the coalition it is accepted that nuclear weapons are necessary and the argument has concerned itself with the question of capabilities alone, but this is merely a proxy for a real debate as to who the capability is designed to deter. There is an assumption that Britain needs a deterrent and the argument is about how much of a minimum deterrent can we get away with. Implicit in the Lib Dem argument is that only the need to deter a resurgent Russia or a far future Chinese nuclear threat would justify the capabilities of a new Trident system on grounds of threat assessment. No other threat would justify the expense of continuous at sea deployment or the need for ballistic missiles with potential global reach. Yet this argument is never articulated. Lesser systems, as suggested, might satisfy the desire for a hedge against an uncertain future without consuming ever greater proportions of the nation’s shrinking defence budget. But the lack of debate over what the deterrent is for means that the issue is framed as a narrow technical argument about costs and capabilities, rather than its military or political utility. The narrow technical nature of this nuclear debate is also indicative of a less articulated aspect of this complex subject. That is the reluctance to engage in a discussion over how, when, where, and against whom Britain’s nuclear weapons would ever be used. Instead its supporters argue that nuclear weapons protect against “uncertainty” in a dangerous world, an obfuscation that avoids specific scenarios which in itself demonstrates how inconceivable the detonation of a nuclear weapon by the UK would be. With the end of the Cold War there are no existential threats to the UK, nor are there any on the horizon, and to threaten to use nuclear weapons outside of that context lacks credibility. Implicit in the Lib Dems argument is that if the deterrent is unlikely to be used then we might as well have a cheaper one. But this is no substitute for a real debate on the nuclear question.

Similarly the argument for less Trident boats, effectively for half a deterrent also avoids the issue. The idea of Britain replacing the present fleet of Vanguard submarines with a part time deterrent or a shared European deterrent should only bring us back to the question of whether Britain needs a nuclear deterrent at all. If the UK is secure with a Trident boat not at sea some of the time then why not all of the time? Or if we are to move to reliance on an ally for our deterrence, why is the reliance on the French for some of the time superior to reliance on an American nuclear deterrent all of the time? Are the French any more of a reliable ally than the Americans? Even though the US is on a different continent to the UK, absent an existential threat to Europe, it is hard to see why this matters.

What the current debate over Trident versus its cheaper alternatives fundamentally misses is a genuine analysis of Britain’s relationship with the bomb. The absence of debate over their utility is rooted in an avoidance of addressing a love that dare not speak its name. As a nation Britain is attached to nuclear weapons because they have become a totem of lingering great power status. The historical coincidence that the five permanent members of the UN Security Council are nuclear weapons states and the privileged position that the UK enjoys in the Non Proliferation Treaty as a recognised Nuclear Weapons State reinforce in the British political elite the conviction that as a former British Prime Minister once put it, nuclear weapons give Britain a seat at the top table. That the UK shares nuclear secrets and technology with the Americans provides another rationale for the bomb that has little to do with external threat perception or credible employment scenarios. Rather ironically the Cold War “Moscow criterion” for nuclear possession has been replaced with the post cold war “Washington criterion”, we have then in order to talk nuclear at the top table and thus have influence with the Americans bilaterally and within NATO. In this context nuclear weapons are a post imperial security blanket, a device to cloak our loss of global influence and sustain in us a sense of identity that is greater than either our defence budget or diplomacy would otherwise justify. The irony of this position, of course, is that such a stance is counter-productive to global efforts to convince nascent nuclear weapons states such as Iran that there is no relationship between nuclear weapons and great power status and no political and military utility in developing a bomb that they can call their own.

Dr David Hastings Dunn

Reader in International Politics, and Head of Department, Political Science and International Studies, University of Birmingham





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