

Trident – time for a real debate?

Posted on Tuesday 7th June 2011

The Defence Secretary, Dr Liam Fox, has recently announced the approval of the Initial Gate Business Case for the replacement for the Vanguard Class nuclear submarines. The contracts for this phase are likely to be in the region of £3bn. However, the Defence Secretary admitted that the total cost was likely to reach £25bn by the time the boats are built. Given that the initial estimates prepared in 2006 were in the region of £15–20bn, the sceptics around Whitehall, who are well used to Ministry of Defense (MoD) 'guesstimations', anticipate the final bill being closer to £38bn.

Coincidentally, or not, this figure is identical to the MoD funding deficit which the recent Strategic Defence and Security Review sought to address. Although the MoD claims to have made serious inroads into this deficit it is clear that much more has to be done. Further 'difficult decisions' are inevitable and will lead to reductions in conventional capability. At first sight, therefore, it seems bizarre that the government is determined to proceed with the replacement of what many see as a cold war legacy at such huge cost. Part of the reason for the apparent lack of real debate stems from the tensions in the Coalition, with the Defence Secretary taking a hard-right Conservative stance that only envisages a like-for-like replacement. This is in marked contrast to the embattled Lib-Dems who have been campaigning against such a move.

The reality is that whatever debate there is in the preparation of the Cabinet Office Report on the options for replacement, the government policy is likely to remain extant. The MoD line is likely to be heavily in favour of a continuous at-sea deterrent with all of the overheads that go with it. The Defence Secretary has openly stated that a 'minimal credible nuclear deterrent' could only be met in this way, raising the possibility that a direct nuclear threat to the UK could emerge in the next 50 years.

The issues in this are clear, but the evidence is highly unlikely to reach the public domain where the debate is most needed. The first of these is the potential risk that the UK could face over such an extended timescale; the military interventions of the last 20 years have shown the foolhardiness of attempting to predict world events. Secondly, and more importantly, is the requirement to ascertain which potential adversaries are likely to be deterred by what level of nuclear capability. Only then could the debate attempt to identify the feasibility and credibility of alternative systems. Costing such options could only be highly speculative.

The Lib Dem stance is that this debate should be published, but the reality is that only the key headlines will emerge in public. Given the impoverished nature of the debate over the Strategic Defence and Security Review, and the security restrictions surrounding the Trident Replacement Study, it is hard to escape the conclusion that we are merely going through the motions.

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