

TRIDENT

UK nuclear weapons at a crossroads



This briefing has been compiled with the intention of informing the public debate on the future of the UK nuclear weapons programme. It seeks to provide information and analysis with respect to strategic decisions that will shortly need to be made and reflects the consistent concern of the churches over many years.

1. Our Nuclear Weapons

Britain's nuclear weapons system comprises submarines, missiles and warheads. The UK has 58 Trident D5 missiles acquired from the USA under the Mutual Defence Agreement (MDA). The UK has developed its own stockpile of nuclear warheads, each one about eight times more powerful than the Hiroshima bomb. The missiles are launched from 4 Vanguard class submarines (HMS Vanguard, Vigilant, Victorious and Vengeance) of which one is on patrol at any one time. They carry a stock of up to 48 warheads while on patrol.

2. Why Now?

The submarines are expected to last until the mid-2020s although their useable lifespan could be extended with refurbishment. The fact that it takes a long time to design, assess, develop and procure a new system means that a decision on the future of the current system needs to be taken soon. The Government has indicated that a decision is likely to be made during the lifetime of this Parliament i.e. before 2009.

Using the Whitehall language of 'Smart Acquisition', the Ministry of Defence (MOD) would need to commit to a Development and Manufacture Phase for a replacement launch system around 2015. A decision to embark on an Assessment Phase of a very small and specific number of options would need to be taken around 2010. In view of this, the MOD needs to decide fairly soon whether to embark on a Concept Phase that will determine the specific options to be addressed during the Assessment Phase.

The main procurement investment decision would need to be taken in 2015. This is likely to commit at least 85% of the total procurement cost. The bulk of the remaining 15% would be committed in 2010 with only a few percent of the total set aside to fund the concept phase.

3. The Churches' Objective: Debate and Transparency

Given the strategic and ethical importance of this decision as well as the financial implications of replacing or updating our nuclear weapons there is a need for greater transparency and accountability. While the Secretary of State for Defence has endorsed a Parliamentary debate, the Government maintain that it is they who will make the final decision¹.

In previous years the UK government has closely guarded its thinking on nuclear arms and possible future options. Several churches have called for a wide public debate on the issue and the government's support for such a debate is welcome. However this debate could achieve better focus if the government were to be more open with respect to information on options and costs. The government could further demonstrate transparency by authorising Ministers to give evidence before the Defence Select Committee enquiring into the decision.

In 2002-2003 the Ministry of Defence conducted concept studies at a cost of £560,000 on possible future platforms to carry nuclear warheads. This research could pave the way for an alternative to the current submarine system. If the results of this research were made available to the wider public it might better inform the current debate.

In 2005 Defence Secretary John Reid announced a £1 billion 3-year investment programme to upgrade facilities at the Atomic Weapons Establishment (AWE) at Aldermaston. The Government say this is to ensure the reliability and safety of existing warheads, but they could also be used to help design and produce new warheads.

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The public debate should consider all options including non-replacement, looking at whether the life span of the submarines and missiles could be

extended and, if replacement is to go ahead, the nature of any new system.

This decision will shape the future of Britain's nuclear capability, defence strategy and relations with other countries for decades to come.

4. Non-proliferation

The UK is a state party to the 1968 nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), an international agreement aimed at preventing the spread of nuclear weapons and on working towards disarmament.

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Although the treaty faces constant challenges it has been largely successful in limiting the spread of nuclear weapons over the past thirty years.

More countries have ratified the NPT than any other international treaty. Only four states are not party to the agreement (India, Israel, North Korea and Pakistan). All four either have or are thought to be developing a nuclear weapons capability.

The NPT requires that, "Each of the parties to the Treaty undertakes to pursue negotiations in good faith on effective measures relating to cessation of the nuclear arms race at an early date and on a treaty on general and complete disarmament under strict and effective control." It therefore obliges the UK and the other nuclear weapons states to pursue nuclear disarmament. It also obliges non-nuclear weapons states that are parties to the treaty not to receive or manufacture nuclear weapons.

North Korea claims to have developed nuclear weapons; Iran is widely believed to aspire to a nuclear weapons capability but denies this. The acknowledged nuclear weapon states (China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom and the United States) consider nuclear weapons to be central to their national security strategies and maintain active research and development programmes in nuclear weapons technology. Arguments have

been made that such programmes contravene the obligations that the NPT imposes.

Every 5 years the NPT is reviewed. The 2000 treaty review reached agreement on a set of 13 steps to non-proliferation however the 2005 treaty review failed to make any meaningful progress. The commitments made by state parties in 2000 remain.

In the 2000 treaty review non-nuclear states reaffirmed their obligations not to acquire nuclear weapons while nuclear weapons states recognised the corresponding legally binding commitments to disarmament. In 2005, the Head of the UK delegation confirmed support for this position when he noted that "non-proliferation and disarmament are inter-linked in achieving the Treaty's objectives."² It is generally accepted that enhancing nuclear weapons systems would undermine an objective to "bring to a conclusion negotiations leading to nuclear disarmament in all its aspects" and provide a material breach of the Treaty. The UK's continued adherence to the NPT would at one level appear to preclude an enhancement of the Trident system although not, some would argue, a replacement of Trident with a similar system³.

The Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) prohibits the UK from testing new nuclear warheads by explosion. However as long as any decision taken by the UK does not involve testing then the UK would not be breaking the CTBT.

Enhancing nuclear weapons would undermine the UK's commitment to the NPT

5. Issues, arguments & analysis

The International Court of Justice (ICJ) and international law

In 1996 the International Court of Justice (ICJ) gave an advisory opinion on whether the threat or use of nuclear weapons is permitted under international law. The ICJ started from the point that any threat

or use of force in contravention of Article 2, paragraph 4 of the UN charter and which fails to meet Article 51 of that charter is unlawful. However, the court could not conclude definitively “whether the threat or use of nuclear weapons would be lawful or unlawful in an extreme circumstance of self-defence, in which the very survival of a State would be at stake”.

While Article VI of the NPT may appear rather vague in its disarmament commitments, the nuclear weapon states are required to undertake good-faith negotiations leading to the “cessation of the nuclear arms race at an early date and to nuclear disarmament.” The ICJ reaffirmed the disarmament obligations on the nuclear weapon states under the NPT. Advisory opinions are not legally binding, although some would use the ruling in support of the ethical argument for disarmament. The 2000 NPT review conference built on the court’s interpretation of the NPT’s legal obligations in a 13-paragraph section of the final document, for which both the United Kingdom and United States credited themselves with having played a constructive role, working with key non-nuclear-weapon states to strengthen the NPT.

The Strategic Context

The world political context has altered significantly since the end of the Cold War. An assessment of current and foreseeable threats will inevitably be part of any consid-

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eration of appropriate measures for defence. Although China and Russia, in common with the US, still possess substantial stockpiles of nuclear weapons they do not currently present a threat to our national security. Some argue that retaining or replacing nuclear weapons offers limited benefit for the defence of the United Kingdom today. It is more difficult to assess whether major nuclear powers could present a threat to the UK in the

future. Nuclear weapons are perceived as having a political function in preventing a major war between nation states. It is difficult to conceive of a scenario in which they could have utility in combating terrorism, which is now a primary security concern. Arguments frequently put forward for the retention of an independent deterrent are as much concerned with our influence on the world stage and within the UN, as on national security. Some would take the view that by maintaining Britain’s position of influence in the international community, we can encourage other nations to adopt democratic political systems and live up to human rights obligations. Some would go further and argue that while the geopolitical environment has changed significantly since Trident was initially commissioned, the potential of proliferating states and failing states with nuclear weapons poses a significant and real threat that requires Britain to maintain adequate forces to deter nuclear and non-nuclear aggression. (While it is feasible that the possession of a nuclear arsenal by one party could have had a bearing on the progression of conflicts fought entirely with conventional arms, there are significant ethical dilemmas around the threat or use of nuclear arms in response to aggression by non-nuclear states). Others however would place greater emphasis on maintaining a strong non-proliferation regime and fear that this could break down catastrophically if the current nuclear powers insist on maintaining their nuclear arsenals.

The Costs

Both supporters and opponents of Trident recognise that, even when spread over several years, the development costs of replacing our current system would be considerable. It has been estimated that a replacement of Trident would run to many billions of pounds. The cost of staffing and management of any new system is also a factor for consideration. According to the Government’s Strategic Defence Review (1998) Trident currently costs £680 million per year to maintain. Some government reports indicate the annual cost may be somewhat higher⁴.

6. Church Statements & Christian Ethics

While not every Church has taken a position on nuclear weapons a number of general observations may be made.

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On many points relating to nuclear weapons and disarmament, the churches have been in general agreement.

- From a Christian perspective, the 'foundations of authentic peace rest on the truth about God and man.'⁵ Views about UK nuclear weapons policy should be determined in the light of the Gospel and informed by security needs of the nation and the wider world.
- The Gospel, as well as much of the Christian moral reasoning that has arisen from it, entails a presumption against violence. It follows that the goal of the global abolition of nuclear weapons is widely affirmed.
- The physical security of populations is a legitimate Christian concern and a duty of Government to assure.
- Decisions about UK nuclear weapons policy should not be taken in private but 'opened-up to democratic scrutiny and public debate'⁶.
- The actions of the acknowledged Nuclear Weapons States (China, France, Russia, UK and USA) as a group have fallen short of their obligations under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty to negotiate disarmament.

The historic 'Peace Churches' – Brethren, Mennonites and Quakers – believe that there is no ethical, practical or theological justification for nuclear weapons. The pacifist strand in other churches – represented by organisations such as the Fellowship of Reconciliation and Pax Christi, among others – shares this view.

Within other Christian traditions views about nuclear weapons are more divided. Some would argue for progressive nuclear disarmament consisting of multilateral

balanced reduction of weapons in the context of multilateral negotiations. Others would favour unilateral measures while pursuing such negotiations.

Among the Churches advocating the non-replacement of Trident is the Church of Scotland, whose position is one of 'sustained opposition' to nuclear weapons. On 23 May 2001, the Church called on the UK Government 'to abandon the Trident programme'⁷. In May 2006, churches in Scotland united in their opposition to a replacement of the Trident nuclear weapons system. The Church of Scotland, the Catholic Church and Episcopal Church signed the petition at Holyrood, Edinburgh, stating "We urge the government of the United Kingdom not to invest in a replacement for the Trident system and to begin now the process of decommissioning these weapons with the intention of diverting the sums spent on nuclear weaponry to programmes of aid and development."

In January 2006, Pope Benedict XVI described the policy of relying on nuclear weapons as 'not only baneful but completely fallacious' and called for 'a progressive and concerted nuclear disarmament'⁸.

On 30 April 2005, a letter published in *The Guardian* from five Church leaders reflected similar concern. Signed by the Archbishop of Wales and Presidents/Moderators of the Baptist, Methodist and United Reformed Churches and the Church of Scotland, the letter encouraged the UK to move towards nuclear disarmament: 'The cause of non-proliferation could gain significant impetus were the UK, despite the reductions in our nuclear capability since the end of the Cold War, to spell out the conditions under which the UK might be content to forego a replacement of Trident.'

Many believe that the logic of nuclear deterrence is ultimately a fully nuclear-armed world and thus a probable nuclear conflict to the detriment of all.

Some adherents of the Christian Just War

tradition consider that the destructive potential of nuclear weapons always precludes their threat or use within the meaning of the Just War criteria⁹ while others consider nuclear weapons to be an acceptable although imperfect means for delivering national security. Whilst

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affirming the Gospel imperative of striving for the abolition of nuclear weapons, a case may be made that nuclear deterrence is both prudent and just

within an inter-national situation characterised by emerging threats and tensions. This is also the UK Government’s policy.

The Church of England’s General Synod’s position was established in 1983: ‘...it is the duty of Her Majesty’s Government and her allies to maintain adequate forces to guard against nuclear blackmail and to deter nuclear and non-nuclear aggressors.’¹⁰ It also stated that: NATO’s nuclear posture should be ‘unmistakably defensive’ in nature; any ‘first use’ of nuclear weapons would be unacceptable; and nuclear deterrence should not preclude multilateral efforts towards disarmament. A House of Bishops report in September 2005 called for religious leaders ‘to assist in developing a wider conversation than currently exists on the ethics of procuring, manufacturing and possessing nuclear weapons.’¹¹ It stated that the nuclear weapons debate ‘needs to be conducted with much greater honesty and consistency’.¹²

7. Questions

The following questions have been included in this briefing to stimulate and structure debate between Christians and to assist those who have yet to form an opinion on the decision facing the UK.

Is it still morally justifiable to hold or threaten to use nuclear weapons in the post-Cold War era? What are the ethical questions surrounding the current government position that the UK should,

for the foreseeable future, retain a minimum nuclear deterrent in order to guard against future threats?

What considerations should be taken into account in deciding on a replacement of Trident?

How in practice could the UK maintain its international obligations to negotiate nuclear disarmament while investing in a replacement of the Trident nuclear weapons system?

If the UK were to dispense with an independent nuclear deterrent how can the Government provide security in the face of external nuclear threats?

What form of advice would church members like their Churches to offer government? Should churches advocate specific policy options or highlight moral concerns?

8. What can the Churches do?

The church at various levels can: -

- Help congregations to make sense of the issues and respond accordingly.
- Provide opportunity for prayer and reflection on these issues within liturgy, worship and study groups.
- Write to members of Parliament asking them to use every opportunity to influence the Government in the House of Lords or Commons.
- Make submissions to the House of Commons Defence Committee and engage with Parliament as this topic is debated.

9. Resources

Christian Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament

<http://www.ccnd.gn.apc.org/>

Christian Council for Approaches to Defence and Disarmament (CCADD)

<http://website.lineone.net/~ccadd/>

The Acronym Institute for Disarmament Diplomacy

<http://www.acronym.org.uk/>

British American Security Information Council


<http://www.basicint.org/>

Oxford Research Group

<http://www.oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk/>

WMD Awareness Programme

<http://www.comeclean.org.uk/>



The Decade to Overcome Violence is an initiative of the World Council of Churches, an ecumenical fellowship of churches founded in 1948, bringing together 348 Protestant, Orthodox, Anglican and other churches representing more than 560 million Christians in over 110 countries, and working cooperatively with the Roman Catholic Church.

www.overcomingviolence.org

Endnotes

- 1 Prime Minister's Questions (Hansard 19 Oct 2005 : Column 841)
- 2 Ambassador John Freeman, Head of the UK Delegation, to the Seventh Review Conference of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, May 2005, (See <http://www.un.org/events/npt2005/statements/npt05unitedkingdom.pdf>)
- 3 Legal opinion is divided on this point (see http://comeclean.org.uk/content/JOINT_OPINION.doc)
- 4 The Minister of State, Ministry of Defence (Lord Gilbert): Hansard, House of Lords, 9th December 1997, 2.44 pm.
- 5 Pope Benedict XVI, *Message for the Celebration of World Day of Peace*, 1 January 2006
- 6 Letter from five Church leaders published in *The Guardian*, 30 April 2005.
- 7 Church of Scotland General Assembly, 23 May 2001
- 8 Pope Benedict XVI, *Message for the Celebration of World Day of Peace*, 1 January 2006
- 9 See for example Bishop of Salisbury et al, *The Church and the Bomb: Nuclear weapons and Christian conscience* (London: CIO, 1982), Chapter 5.
- 10 General Synod Report of Proceedings, Vol. 14, 1983.
- 11 Church of England House of Bishops, *Countering Terrorism: Power, Violence And Democracy Post 9/11* (September 2005), p.88
- 12 *ibid.* p.74

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This resource has been prepared by representatives of member churches of Churches Together in Britain and Ireland including the Baptist Union of Great Britain, the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, the Mission and Public Affairs Division of the Church of England's Archbishops' Council, the Church of Scotland, the Methodist Church, the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) and the United Reformed Church.