



# Trident: Responding to the white paper



Quaker Peace & Social Witness  
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## Background

In December 2006, the government published its white paper on "The Future of the UK's Nuclear Deterrent". As predicted, the government argues that the UK should retain its nuclear weapons system for the foreseeable future. The document outlines the reasons why the government believes a decision should be taken now and explains why the UK should continue its possession of nuclear weapons, before moving on to how and at what cost Trident should be replaced.

## What the white paper says

The main reasons given for replacing Trident are:

1. The strategic context has changed but the fundamental logic of deterrence has not. Significant nuclear arsenals remain and the number of states possessing nuclear weapons has grown. Given this, we cannot rule out the re-emergence of a strategic threat in the future and such threats can only be deterred through the continued possession of nuclear weapons.
2. We cannot predict the way the world will look in 30 or 50 years time and replacing Trident is an essential part of our insurance against the uncertainties and risks of the future.
3. The white paper denies that a decision could be delayed, arguing that due to the shelf-life of the submarines and the Trident D5 missiles, a decision must be taken now.

## What's missing from the white paper

The white paper does not amount to "a careful review of all the issues and options" as its introduction claims.

1. There is no urgent need to make a decision about replacing Trident now. The House of Commons Defence Committee Report [HC 986] highlighted the fact that a final decision need not be taken before 2014. Postponing the decision would allow for a full and properly informed debate; further, it would enable the UK to initiate high level international negotiations towards nuclear disarmament with a view to influencing other nuclear powers. The British American Security and Information Council (BASIC) have produced a briefing (at [www.basicint.org](http://www.basicint.org)) explaining why a decision can be delayed until at least 2014, and offering alternatives to the government's proposals. In addition, using his in-depth technical knowledge

of the subject, US physicist Richard Garwin has presented compelling evidence to the Defence Select Committee, rejecting the government's assertion that a decision is required now and brands the plans "premature and wasteful"<sup>1</sup>.

2. The paper offers no assessment of the moral issues associated with possessing nuclear weapons. The attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki show that the use of nuclear weapons against populations could never be moral; yet questions of morality — vital though they are — are missing from the government's assessment.
3. The government has not assessed the impact that retaining nuclear weapons is likely to have on efforts to contain and reverse the worldwide spread of nuclear weapons. Whilst disarmament carries risks of its own, the dangers of continuing the current trend of indefinite retention of nuclear weapons, which could lead to their global proliferation within a generation, are far greater. By keeping nuclear weapons, the UK may be jeopardising its own security rather than enhancing it, but this possibility is absent from the white paper.
4. The UK will find it more difficult to influence disarmament and non-proliferation negotiations if it decides to keep relying on nuclear weapons, because few will believe that the UK is serious about its disarmament obligations under the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). The UK's nuclear policy will confer legitimacy to nuclear weapons in general, badly undermining prospects for disarmament.
5. If the UK describes nuclear weapons as vital to national security, then states with emerging military nuclear programmes will feel vindicated in justifying themselves in the same way, especially given that such states generally face greater insecurity than does the UK. The logical conclusion of this process, if unchecked, is the worldwide proliferation of nuclear weapons and eventual nuclear conflict.
6. Whilst remaining ambiguous about the actual circumstances under which nuclear weapons would be used, the paper appears to extend these to include the possibility of their use as a response to state sponsored terrorism. [White Paper 3-11 and 3-12]
7. The white paper says that the NPT recognises the UK as a nuclear weapons state and established other signatories as non-nuclear weapons states. However, there is no implication in the Treaty of a "recognised" status; rather, nuclear weapons states are simply defined (in Article IX) "for the purposes of this treaty" as those who tested before 1967.
8. The white paper argues that those who would have the UK relinquish its nuclear weapons must prove that the UK would be a safer place in the future than it would be if it retained them. This is a specious argument since there is no way of proving one way or the other ahead of time.
9. The white paper emphasises the unpredictability of the future, arguing for nuclear deterrence by worst-casing future uncertainties and ignoring possible best cases. An uncertainty is really just that: uncertain, with no predictive value. Just as it is irrational to fear the dark, so it is irrational to believe that the future will be dangerous because we do not know what it holds. It is irrational in turn to assume that a dangerous world justifies UK nuclear deterrence, just as it is irrational for a person afraid of the dark to choose to carry a weapon on the streets, especially if this leads everyone else to do the same. The white paper does not discuss in any depth whether deterrence enhances or jeopardises security; rather, it is assumed without analysis that the more dangerous the world is, the safer we will be with nuclear weapons.
10. The white paper could have argued that the more dangerous the world becomes, the more vital disarmament becomes, but it does not. In many respects, the paper appears to have been composed in such a way to justify a decision that was made quietly some time ago.

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<sup>1</sup> The Guardian, 24 January 2007,  
<http://politics.guardian.co.uk/homeaffairs/story/0,,1997202,00.html>