

The future of Trident

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The future of the Trident replacement programme

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Background

In the **2006 White Paper**, the Labour government presented its view that the UK should replace its current Trident nuclear weapon system. The government declared that a decision was needed in 2007 in order to ensure the first new ballistic missile submarine could be designed and deployed by 2024 as the current Vanguard-class submarines that carry the Trident missile reach the end of their service lives in the early 2020s. In 2007, Parliament voted for a decision in principle to replace Trident and begin the process to design, build and commission new submarines to carry Trident missiles.

The UK continues to be heavily dependent on the US for the design and purchase of its nuclear weapons system, particularly the Trident missiles, but also design assistance with the warheads, submarines, and submarine reactors. The US has also embarked on a new programme to begin replacing its fleet of Ohio-class submarines that also carry the Trident missile. The UK is already working with the US on a 'common missile compartment' for both the planned new UK and US ballistic missile submarines that will carry the Trident missile and any future replacement over the coming decades.

The 2010 Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR) stated that the service life of the current Vanguard submarines can be extended from five to nine years, so that the first new submarine will now be required in 2028. This brings the UK programme into line with that of the US, where the US Navy is also planning to deploy its first new ballistic missile submarine in 2028, thereby reducing operational and financial risk for the UK.

There are three key future decisions:

- The Initial Gate – the business case to the MOD Defence Board for the submarine design, committing approximately 15 per cent of the £15-20 billion procurement costs originally due in 2009
- The Main Gate – the decision to initiate the manufacture of the submarines, originally due in 2014, but the SDSR pushed it back to 2016, into the next Parliament
- The warhead decision – whether the current warhead can be maintained for the foreseeable future or needs to be replaced, will now be made around 2019.

Areas of momentum

1. Technological momentum:

This was slowed by the SDSR.

- Hence no initial gate decision has yet been taken but the design is moving ahead – BAE Systems, that will build the submarines, are taking on staff and orders are being placed for long-lead items.

- It is inconceivable that the US will not go ahead with building its own new generation of Trident-carrying submarines.
- It is likely that some new UK subs will be built and deployed that are capable of deploying Trident missile, but they need not in practice carry nuclear missiles and could instead be used for conventional operations. The US, for example, took four of its Trident submarines out of nuclear commission and refitted them with conventional weapons.

2 Political momentum:

This is less clear and more complex.

- There are disagreements between the political parties on whether or not to proceed, but there is a broader and deeper political momentum - the belief in an abiding connection between UK deployment of nuclear weapons and the 'special relationship' with the US and our political and military credibility in Washington.
- There are differing views on the US attitude to UK nuclear weapons. A 1995 report¹ suggested that Washington would not object to the UK moving towards non-proliferation and reduction of its nuclear weapons. A contrary view² in 2010 argued that a reduction in UK's commitment to nuclear weapons would weaken the special relationship.
- There remains a cross party contention that that the UK has a global role that requires a high tech expeditionary and interventionist military capability backed by a nuclear capability.

3 Financial momentum:

This appears the least secure.

- The cost of replacement – estimated at £20bn in the 2006 White Paper – has always been controversial given the thin strategic rationale for such a substantial investment.
- The £20bn figure is likely to be too low because of the effects of defence procurement inflation that runs several percentage points above regular inflation. This suggests a figure of £30billion for the procurement of four new submarines could be more realistic, based on the costs of procuring the current Vanguard submarine fleet. However, the 2010 Strategic Defence and Security Review said that the 2006 figure was 'sound'.
- The MOD will be expected to find the capital costs for Trident replacement from its core budget, not from the Treasury reserve. Faced with a 7 per cent cut in funding over the current Parliament, and significant pressure to massively reduce its procurement budget after MOD acknowledged a £36 billion hole in its planned procurement programme over the current decade, MOD is in no position to ask for extra funds.

¹ Nick Witney, former Director of Nuclear and Security, MoD

² Frank Miller, former Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Strategic Forces