

Presentation by Sir Nick Harvey at the launch of *A Nuclear Weapons-Free World? Britain, Trident and the Challenges Ahead*, hosted by British Pugwash, University College London, 12 March 2013

The decision to have a nuclear deterrent comprising an intercontinental ballistic missile ready for action on a submarine that was on patrol 24/7 was taken in 1980, in a world that was very different in many fundamental ways from the world today. We were still at the height of the cold war. We had known nuclear adversary, whom we had reason to believe posed a nuclear threat to us. There was therefore a logic (whether you subscribe to it or not) to maintaining at all times a deterrent to that perceived threat.

On that logic, the deterrent was scaled to overcome the nuclear defences of the Soviet Union, our known or perceived nuclear adversary. It was believed that in the Soviet Union of 1980 the only thing that would fulfil the classic definition of deterrence – that that your adversary knows (rather than suspects) that you are capable of inflicting damage that he would consider to be unacceptable – was something capable of overcoming Moscow's nuclear defences, as it was felt that the politbureau and the Soviet leadership were very much in their citadel in Moscow, and only the ability to flatten Moscow would strike fear into their hearts. This is the basis on which we have continued to operate ever since.

Another particular difference between then and now was the overall state of British defence: we had an army several times larger than today, an air force likewise larger and a far greater naval fleet. This nuclear deterrent comprised a relatively modest proportion of British defence compared with the proportion of modern-day defence it will comprise if the decision is finally taken to go ahead on a like-for-like basis.

The world has changed a great deal since 1980 and in ways that, we are told, could not have been predicted. It is worth noting that after the end of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, we made no adjustment whatever to our nuclear posture. In fact, the Soviet Union de-targeted us and we de-targeted Russia 1994, a year before the Vanguard class submarines and Trident missiles came into being in 1995. Continuous at-sea deterrence just continued. This is not a criticism of those who have worked slavishly hard to maintain at-sea deterrence – it involves a good deal of sacrifice on the part of the Royal Navy and of the industrial supply chain.

The world in 2015/16, when the decision will be taken as to whether we are convinced that a weapons system appropriate in 1980 is still appropriate, looks very different. The National Security Strategy of 2010 downgraded the nuclear threat to a second-tier threat and acknowledged that there was no known or identified adversary. The armed forces have become a great deal smaller since 2010 and may be set to shrink further. Bluntly, the UK Ministry of Defence and UKPLC are broke.

And yet we know that in the 10 or 11 financial years in which it is proposed to build another weapon on a 1980s scale, the MOD faces a huge bulge in its equipment procurement programme. In the very same period of time, they will have to pay for whatever is going to

fly off the aircraft carriers –the joint strike fighter, for which we still have no sense what the unit cost is going to be. They have to pay for the Type-26 frigate – they are planning to have 13 but who knows how many will be built. If we are to have any further amphibious operations with the ability to land Royal Marines from the sea and potentially to evacuate people from the land by sea, we are going to need another generation of amphibious shipping. We are desperately short of helicopters. The army is still operating with very out-of-date kit which has to be replaced. Whatever the next generation of unmanned aerial system is going to be will have to be paid for as well. All this in the ten years when the UK and MOD are basically broke.

As a Liberal Democrat I opposed the like for like replacement of Trident in 2007, as did all my colleagues and 97 members of the Labour party. At the 2010 election we said we would not support like-for-like replacement, but when we found ourselves in the unlikely scenario of trying to negotiate a coalition after that election, it was clear that this was one issue where we had different views that could not be reconciled. So the uneasy truce was struck that we would allow the Conservatives to continue with the preparatory work for the replacement programme and they would recognise that we would continue to argue the case for alternatives but we would do that from within government and with the resources of government to do so.

The Trident Alternatives review was set up under the auspices of the Cabinet Office and not the Ministry of Defence so that no element of the MOD, be it a conservative Secretary of State, the military or the civil service could in any way get in the way of the review and its objectives. The review was asking ‘What is a deterrent for? What is it that we think we are seeking to deter and what is necessary in order to deter it?’ It then looked at alternative systems – ‘Are there any alternatives using submarines? Are there any alternatives to submarines?’ It is also looking at postures – ‘Do we really need continuous at-sea deterrence?’

I can’t predict the outcome of this review – I left the MOD last summer when the review was partway through. I am told that the work is nearing completion and will be handed to the Prime Minister and deputy Prime Minister. I would expect that it would be available in May or June of this year. That, in my view, will trigger a great national debate which will have two years to run through to the general election of 2015. I predict that this will be an issue in 2015, not the issue certainly, but an issue in a way it hasn’t been since the 1983 general election. And whatever government is elected in 2015, it will have to make the decision by 2016 whether or not to go ahead with the like-for-like successor programme which is being worked on.

I anticipate that when this report comes out, it will identify other systems that would be technically viable. There is no magic solution that would give equivalent capability to what we have at the moment and also save money. Anyone who is expecting such a solution to emerge from this review is in for a disappointment. I expect the review will look at the option of using Astute submarines with Cruise missiles or firing the missile from a surface vessel or using a fighter jet or bomber aircraft and it will also look at land options. I expect it

to conclude that it would be perfectly possible to have a deterrent of that sort. It will then look at the issue of cost. The background to all this, as Nick Ritchie said, is the UK's contribution to global disarmament and the fulfilment of our obligations under the NPT. Changing from having an ICBM in a large submarine, to using a surface ship or an aircraft would be extremely expensive, at least at the point of conversion. In the long run, maybe you would make some savings but in the short run it would be very expensive. I won't be entirely surprised if the report concludes that although perfectly feasible technically, these options would come at a very high cost and I think that means that in most cases, the political community would not be feverishly enthused by it.

When it comes to the question of postures, that is where I think a great debate is there to be had. I see a nuclear ladder, a ladder of opportunities available to us. The top rung is like-for-like replacement, and there are different stages we could climb to down that ladder, possibly using some of these alternative systems, possibly scaling down our nuclear posture using the existing system. I would expect to see a very lively debate around these issues in the next couple of years. In terms of raw politics, you are looking at an election in 2015 where the Labour Party will have a much younger leadership, a generation not so scarred by 1983 and Michael Foot, and their likely starting point is rather different from the Labour Party of 2007. Tony Blair's memoirs suggest that the decision to go ahead with Trident replacement was taken 'on balance' – he made it clear that he didn't think the opposite view was irrational. I would be surprised if the Labour Party goes into the 2015 election still committed to like-for-like replacement and I am certain the Liberal Democrats will not.

There is an interesting political dynamic here – only in the event of an outright Conservative majority is it likely that there would be the political will to recommit ourselves to like-for-like replacement of Trident. So there is a great deal at play here. The nation has to decide over the next couple of years whether we need a nuclear deterrent at all, certainly on the same scale as in 1980. If there is an argument for keeping a deterrent at all, it is as some sort of an insurance policy against the unknown and a more uncertain future where the potential adversary is not one block but possibly small new entrants. Can we afford this? I've described the awful financial situation defence ministers will face in a few years' time. If we don't face up to this decision quickly, the defence ministers in future will have headaches on a completely different scale from those we were wrestling with in 2010.

Is there another way? Is there a smaller scale way of doing this? That is what has to be debated. Are we ready to take steps down the nuclear ladder, or are we willing to come right off it? Do we want to keep one foot on the bottom rung, just retaining the technology and knowhow, the ability to put something together in the future. This is what this generation has to decide. Are we ready to close that old chapter in our history for future generations or do we have to leave them some continuing stake in it? But we surely don't want to visit upon them the same scale of deterrent as we thought necessary in 1980. We've got to consider our duties under the NPT. It is now many decades old and progress towards disarmament has not been as rapid as the architects of that treaty had expected it to be.

As more and more information and evidence becomes available about the impact of actually using a nuclear weapon, and a wider understanding of that takes root, we have to ask ourselves whether anyone will actually believe that these weapons have the deterrent effect that is claimed, because it is actually inconceivable that anyone would fire them. The next two years are the best opportunity to start a debate that would change fundamentally Britain's involvement in this business.