

Nuclear Weapons: The State of Play in 2011

This is the first in a series of periodic briefings on aspects of nuclear security policy and gives an update on the current 'state of play' affecting UK's nuclear weapon policy. This concise briefing is intended for use in correspondence with constituents and preparing for Debates / Questions.

The Global Context

In 2009, President Obama set out the future of US Nuclear Weapons policy:

"I state clearly and with conviction America's commitment to seek the peace and security of a world without nuclear weapons. I'm not naive. This goal will not be reached quickly - perhaps not in my lifetime. It will take patience and persistence. But now we too must ignore the voices who tell us that the world cannot change. We have to insist, yes, we can."¹

This commitment has the support of all of the UK's main political parties, as well as governments and policy experts from across the political spectrum around the world.² NATO endorsed this aspiration in its new Strategic Concept (overarching policy for alliance defence) in November 2010.

In April 2010 President Obama initiated the Nuclear Security Summit, the largest gathering of heads of state called by a US President since 1945. The next summit is due in South Korea in 2012. President Obama is also committed to US ratification of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), though changes in the composition of the US Senate following elections last November could make this more problematic.

The Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) states held their five-yearly review conference in May 2010, and unanimously agreed programmes of action on disarmament, non-proliferation and nuclear energy. This was followed by the recent entry into force of the 'New START' treaty between the US and Russia, setting a limit on the number of deployed warheads and launchers and establishing a new inspection and verification regime. Negotiations have now started on further nuclear arms reductions. These could open up space for more steps to fulfil the NPT and Obama's vision, but will require concerted international efforts.

The British Situation

Both the Conservative and Labour 2010 manifestos voiced support for the decision taken in 2007 to renew the Trident nuclear weapons system whilst the Liberal Democrats did not support a 'like for like' replacement. The Coalition agreement stated that:

"The renewal of Trident should be scrutinised to ensure value for money. Liberal Democrats will continue to make the case for alternatives. We will immediately play a strong role in the

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Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty Review Conference, and press for continued progress on multilateral disarmament.”³

The “Value for Money” review has been conducted and its conclusions published alongside the Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR) last October. Overall the changes announced were estimated to save £1.2bn and defer £2bn of spend. This included:

- a delay to the start of the principal construction phase of the successor submarines (‘Main Gate’, the most expensive part of the process) until 2016, after the next election;
- a deferral of any decision on whether a new warhead is required until at least 2019;
- reducing the UK’s maximum nuclear weapon stockpile from 225 to 180 and the number of operationally available warheads from 160 to 120;
- reducing the number of launch tubes onboard the submarines from 12 to 8 and the maximum number of warheads onboard each submarine from 48 to 40;
- a deferral and possible removal of spend on infrastructure of £1bn over the next 10 years;
- retaining ‘continuous-at-sea deterrence’ (CASD) - having a submarine on patrol at all times;
- guarantees given to all non-nuclear weapon states in good standing with the IAEA that they would never be threatened with UK nuclear weapons.

In November 2010 the UK and France signed the Teutates Treaty agreeing to share nuclear research and testing facilities, with the potential for further co-operation in the future.

During 2011, the cross-party BASIC Trident Commission, co-chaired by Sir Malcolm Rifkind MP, Lord Des Browne of Ladyton and Sir Menzies Campbell MP, will consider many of the issues concerning British nuclear weapons policy. The report will be published in early 2012.⁴

2011: Key Questions

The Initial Gate decision is imminently due (as of April 2011; it was originally planned for September 2009) but the full value for money report has not been published. This leaves a number of important questions unanswered:

- What are the implications of committing significant spending to the procurement of long-lead items (like the hull structure, propulsion systems and some combat systems) during this assessment phase of the process, prior to the next election?
- Are there plans to publish the ‘Value for Money’ report in full? And if not, why?
- What are the implications of the Teutates Treaty between the UK and France a) for the UK’s efforts to reduce its arsenal and engage in disarmament diplomacy and b) for the US-UK Mutual Defence Agreement?
- Is the commitment to continuous-at-sea deterrence appropriate for UK security today?
- How can the UK best engage in follow-on negotiations after new START to maximise its positive influence on future multilateral disarmament efforts?

NOTES

¹ President Barack Obama, Prague, 5 April 2009, speech available online at: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/7984353.stm>

² The list of supporters ranges from Henry Kissinger and George Schultz <http://www.nuclearsecurityproject.org/> to Hans Blix and Lech Walesa: <http://www.europeanleadershipnetwork.org>

³ The Coalition Agreement is available online at: <http://www.direct.gov.uk>

⁴ More details of the Commission’s work are available at: <http://www.basicint.org/tridentcommission>