TRIDENT & THE UNILATERALIST TABOO

The curious case of British nuclear weapons retention

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Cover photo: A Trident submarine leaving its base on the Clyde. The village of Strone is visible in the background (Wikimedia Commons. Duotone added).

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Abstract

This policy paper provides a critical overview of the major points of contention in the British nuclear policy debate, before examining the decision to renew Trident in 2007 in more detail, and evaluating the prospects for reversal. The paper concludes with reflections on where the current policy trajectory will likely lead the UK and the potential difficulties associated with this strategy.

Introduction

“It will not be independent and it will not be British and it will not deter”, ran the Labour slogan before the 1964 election. They might also have added “and we cannot afford it”.

More than the others in the nuclear club, the UK’s membership remained a contentious issue in British mainstream politics throughout the Cold War. The anti-nuclear movement has long enjoyed significant support in the UK, and this is manifested most visibly in Labour Party policy, which since the Second World War has fluctuated between reluctant support and outright rejection of British nuclear weapons. Beyond the continuous rumble of ethical objections, the deepest re-occurring problem has been coping with the cyclical costs of acquiring new nuclear weapons amid the UK’s long-term economic stagnation.

Opponents, including a number of leading political figures, have frequently claimed that British nuclear weapons serve mainly as an expensive boon to the UK’s flagging international status rather than offering genuine security utility. Nonetheless, consecutive UK governments, including Labour, have always, when push came to shove, preferred to find a way to pay for new nuclear weapons rather than face the political uncertainty of discontinuing the nuclear weapons programme. The debate over the replacement of the current nuclear weapons system, Trident, echoes those of the past in terms of the financing problems, but differs considerably in that it is the first major nuclear decision undertaken in the post Cold War era.

This policy paper provides a critical overview of the major points of contention in the UK nuclear policy debate, before examining the decision to renew Trident in 2007 in more detail, and evaluating the prospects for reversal. The paper concludes with reflections on where the current policy trajectory will likely lead the UK and the potential difficulties associated with this strategy.


A history of British nuclear weapon systems

The UK became the third member of the nuclear club in 1952 when it successfully tested its first nuclear device. Initially, the UK’s long-range V-Bomber aircraft provided the nuclear delivery system. As with all the UK’s Cold War era nuclear weapon systems, its primary purpose was to deter the Soviet Union. It quickly became clear, however, that the V-bombers were vulnerable to Soviet defences. In 1962, the UK struck a deal with the US to purchase a submarine-based ballistic missile system. The first of a total of four submarines armed with American nuclear missiles – a system known as Polaris – entered service in 1968. In the early 70s, the missile technology was improved in order to counter the Soviet missile defence system concentrated around Moscow.

When information about Polaris – not least, its costs – became public in 1980, it generated considerable political debate. Nevertheless, this occurred at the height of the Cold War. While Thatcher took great efforts to reduce state spending in other areas, she was adamant about the need for Britain to possess nuclear weapons. The Thatcher government opted to replace the Polaris system with a new generation of submarines and missiles known as Trident, the most advanced submarine-launched ballistic missile system (SLBM) of its kind, often referred to as the ‘Rolls Royce’ of nuclear weapons.

When the UK purchased Trident from the US in 1980, the principal rationale was to deter the Soviet Union. Trident’s multiple independently targetable re-entry vehicle (MIRV) missiles carry a 100-kiloton payload, have a range of 11,000km, and can strike to within 100m of a given target. At least one of the four Trident-armed submarines remains on patrol at all times, performing continuous at-sea deterrence (CASD). This was considered necessary to ensure that the UK could inflict ‘unbearable damage’ on the Soviet Union, even in the event of a surprise attack. Ironically, given its original purpose, the long procurement time meant the first Trident-armed submarine only rolled off the docks in 1992, perfectly coinciding with the end of the Cold War. In February 1994, the absence of enemies to deter was confirmed when Russia and the UK announced a joint agreement to de-target their nuclear missiles. The first Trident submarine carried out its maiden patrol in December of that year.

The life expectancy of the Trident system, together with the long procurement cycle, meant that the nuclear question began to loom again during Tony Blair’s third term. A 2006 White Paper, ‘The Future of the United Kingdom’s Nuclear Deterrent’, outlined the case for a like-for-like replacement of Trident. A bill was presented to Parliament in 2007, and following a four and a half hour debate, the members of Parliament voted 409 to 161 to begin the process of renewing Trident. However, the final ‘Main Gate’ decision on whether to go ahead with renewing Trident has been postponed until 2016, after the next election. Much has changed internationally and domestically since 2007, and it is therefore worth reconsidering the UK’s current trajectory of nuclear renewal.

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Timeless points of contention

The Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) from 1968 is the cornerstone of the international legal framework regulating nuclear weapons. The UK ratified the NPT in 1968, becoming one of the five recognised nuclear weapons states (NWS). Through the NPT, the states that already possessed nuclear weapons entered a bargain with those that did not. The treaty permits the NWS to possess nuclear weapons on the condition that they ‘pursue negotiations in good faith on effective measures relating to cessation of the nuclear arms race at an early date and to nuclear disarmament….’ For their part, the non-nuclear weapons states (NNWS) gained under the NPT access to the benefits of civilian nuclear technology on the condition they refrain from developing nuclear weapons and submit to inspections from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).

This NPT ‘Grand Bargain’ has been more successful than most predicted. Conventional security wisdom suggested that mass proliferation was inevitable, yet reality has not matched theory; the nuclear club has proven far less popular than many feared. Currently, the only additional members of the nuclear club beyond those recognised by the NPT are India, Pakistan, Israel, and possibly, North Korea. South Africa developed nuclear ‘bombs in the basement’, but disarmed in 1987, while Kazakhstan, Ukraine and Belarus, ‘borne nuclear’ upon their independence from the Soviet Union, voluntarily gave up their nuclear weapons shortly after.

Today, all but those four states (189 in total) are parties to the NPT, yet the obligation to disarm amongst the NWS remains far from fulfilled. Consequently, the NPT has come under increasing pressure since the end of the Cold War. Many of the NNWS have become frustrated with the perceived lack of progress on disarmament, while the NWS bemoan the NNWS’ unwillingness to accept stricter non-proliferation measures. This was reflected at the 2010 NPT Review Conference, when the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) states made it clear that further concrete moves on disarmament were a condition for their acceptance of the Additional Protocol to the NPT, as well as their support for stricter punishment for non-compliance and withdrawal from the treaty. Indeed, the strength of the treaty as a whole is arguably based on its perceived legitimacy among states parties. Recently, this has seemed to rest upon demonstrating progress on the proliferation and disarmament pillars of the NPT’s Grand Bargain.

Therefore, the UK’s nuclear weapons cannot be divorced from the context of the NPT disarmament/proliferation tension. As Nick Ritchie argues, the decision to renew Trident, ‘inextricably undermines the legitimacy of the NPT and the norm of non-proliferation because of the commonly accepted linkage between the NPT’s two core norms’.

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9 The full text of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) is available here: http://nwp.ilpi.org/?p=1357.
10 NPT, Article VI.
11 John F. Kennedy famously predicted in the aftermath of the Cuban missile crisis that ‘15 or 20 or 25 nations may have these weapons’, by 1975. Meanwhile, the dominant theory in international relations theory has spent and continues to spend a great deal of effort in trying to explain why more states have refrained from developing nuclear weapons. See Jacque Hymans, The Psychology of Nuclear Proliferation (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006) pp. 2–9.

12 NAM consists of 116 states, a complete list of which can be found here: http://www.nam.gov.za/background/members.htm.
14 For a more in depth discussion, see Nick Ritchie, A Regime on The Edge? How Replacing Trident Undermines the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (Bradford: Bradford Disarmament Research Centre, November 2008).
15 Nick Ritchie, Submission from Dr. Nick Ritchie, Department of Peace Studies, University of Brad-
The extent to which the UK’s decision to renew undermines the NPT is impossible to ascertain, but renewing Trident for another 40 years is likely to only reinforce NNWS suspicions that the UK has no intention of adhering to its disarmament commitments, placing further strain on the treaty’s perceived legitimacy. It is worth noting that while the NPT is unlikely to be a decisive factor in the UK’s decision-making process, the health of the regime nonetheless affects the conditions of the international system within which the UK exists, and therefore, the effects upon the NPT must be counted amongst the issues at stake in the decision to renew.

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Independent dependence

Although the UK was an early pioneer of nuclear weapons, it has always struggled with the cost. From Clement Attlee’s initial decision in 1947 to (secretly and reluctantly) begin the program during post World War II austerity, to the cuts undertaken by the current Conservative-Liberal Coalition government, budgetary constraints have always shaped the UK’s nuclear policy. One result has been the UK’s decision to sacrifice self-sufficiency in nuclear weapons technology in the interest of cost savings. Since the key 1962 Nassau Agreement between the US and Britain, the UK has acquired critical parts for its nuclear weapons system ‘off the shelf’ from the US. This has allowed the UK to avoid the vast R&D costs that developing a comparable indigenous system would entail. One downside of this arrangement is that the UK nuclear weapons system reportedly must rely on US intelligence and targeting, which critics claim equates to a potential US veto of any decision the UK might take to launch its nuclear weapons. While the level of UK nuclear ‘operational independence’ is disputed, if the US decided to end co-operation, even supporters of British nuclear weapons possession concede that the UK would have difficulty finding the considerable additional investment required to remain in the nuclear game. In short, while UK governments are in the habit of referring to their nuclear weapons as the UK’s ‘independent deterrent’, it is arguably something of a misnomer.

Vanity bombs

Another recurring critique of UK policy asserts the UK retains its nuclear weapons mainly to buffet its prestige and status in the world. From reports of Ernie Bevin’s decisive intervention after meeting with the US in 1946: ‘We’ve got to have this thing [a nuclear bomb] over here whatever it costs. We’ve got to have the bloody Union Jack on top of it’, to the now clichéd ‘seat at the top table’ argument, there is no shortage of anecdotal evidence that suggests status concerns constitute at least part of the reason the UK insists on maintaining its nuclear weapons. There is reported

18 The UK only contributed 5% of the R&D costs, which was widely acknowledged as a very generous deal.
19 For a more detailed discussion of the debate surrounding the extent to which the UK’s nuclear deterrent is actually independent, the Select Committee hearing on the matter is available here: http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200506/cmselect/cmdfence/986/98607.htm.
22 Lawrence Freedman notes wryly that the UK has studiously avoided taking a seat at the top table in arms control, given that its limited arsenal means...
to be a common belief in Whitehall that the UK’s nuclear weapon status grants Britain influence in Washington that would be forfeited were the UK to give up its nuclear weapons. There is also a popular, if dubious school of thought that argues the UK’s already shaky position in the UN Security Council would become further undermined if it were to give up its nuclear weapons.

As the memory of the Cold War has faded, the suspicion that the UK’s nuclear weapons are maintained primarily for symbolic purposes has grown. For instance, former Foreign Minister Michael Portillo claimed in 2012 that British nuclear weapons are maintained ‘entirely for reasons of national prestige’. This argument is impossible to either confirm or refute, however, not least because, for obvious reasons, it never features in official rationales. Moreover, status vis-à-vis security concerns will undoubtedly change according to personnel, time, and circumstances. Finally, given that we have no perfect window into decision-makers’ minds, it is ultimately impossible to pin down the extent to which concerns related to status have influenced policy. Thus, Croft’s and Williams’ muted conclusion that status concerns have had a significant, if not decisive impact on policy, appears apt in avoiding the hyperbole of some of the more outspoken critics of British nuclear weapons possession.

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24 Dubious because it is quite clear that non-proliferation is high on the agenda of all the P5, and removing the UK from the Security Council for furthering nuclear disarmament would provide a strong inducement for aspiring superpowers to engage in nuclear proliferation. Indeed, the late Sir Michael Quinlan, Former MoD permanent secretary and long-term supporter of British nuclear weapons, was dismissive of this view in the evidence he gave to the House of Commons Defence Committee in 2006. House of Commons Defence Committee, The Future of the UK’s Strategic Nuclear Deterrent: the Strategic Context, Eighth Report of Session 2005-06 (2006), para. 60, available here: http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200506/cmselect/cmdfence/986/986.pdf.

25 For example, this editorial in The Telegraph suggests with certainty that the UK would lose its place on the UN Security Council: http://www.telegraph.co.uk/comment/columnists/concoughlin/7967116/If-Britain-wishes-to-remain-a-barglobal-power-it-needs-Trident.html.


The third wheel

The UK has always had a certain difficulty finding a public role for its nuclear weapons. With the early realisation in the late 1950s that it could not keep up with the superpowers, the UK fashioned its ‘minimum deterrence’ doctrine as much out of economic necessity as strategic foresight. Rather than seek numerical parity with the superpowers, the UK Cold War doctrine was developed to fulfil the ‘Moscow Criterion’. This entailed maintaining an invulnerable second-strike capability to inflict ‘unacceptable damage’ on Moscow. Beginning in the 1960s, however, the strike power UK nuclear weapons added to NATO’s nuclear umbrella quickly became superfluous. In tacit acceptance of this, the UK arrived at the ‘Second Centre of Decision Making’ nuclear rationale that asserted the UK’s nuclear weapons add to NATO deterrence by complicating Soviet calculations of NATO’s resolve. As Lawrence Freeman has argued, this rationale was adopted more for its ‘diplomatic convenience than its strategic rigour’. The Second Centre rationale justifies the need for a UK ‘independent deterrent’, but without explicitly stating that Britain might not be able to rely on the US to defend its NATO allies. Despite its flaws, this policy persisted until the end of the Cold War, when it became clear, to borrow MoD Civil Servant Nicholas Withey’s euphemism, that the UK rationale needed ‘refurbishment’.

34 Ibid. p. 129.
35 Ibid. p. 129.
Justifying renewal

Labour’s nuclear honeymoon came to an early end in 2006 with the realisation that the UK would soon need to make the first decision over renewal in the post Cold War era. The upcoming decision put Labour in a predicament: if they renewed Trident – which a majority of Labour voters opposed – how could they reconcile this decision both with the lack of an obvious nuclear-armed enemy to replace the Soviet Union, and with New Labour’s self-proclaimed ‘ethical foreign policy’?

The solution arrived at was typical of New Labour’s ‘Third Way’: it combined a policy of renewing Trident with the seemingly incongruous yet vigorous assertion that the UK was ‘unequivocal [in] undertaking to accomplish the total elimination of nuclear weapons’.

The UK laid out its updated rationale in the 2006 White Paper ‘The Future of the United Kingdom’s Nuclear Deterrent’. While the White Paper admits ‘no state has both the intent to threaten our vital interests and the capability to do so with nuclear weapons’, it reasserts by now familiar worries about the future. Stating that the emergence of a nuclear threat from either an old or new nuclear state, or from nuclear terrorism, could not be ruled out, the White Paper asserts that the UK has no option but to renew its nuclear weapons. In addition, the White Paper outlines how Trident would also serve to underpin the UK’s interventionist foreign policy and stop potential rogue states from being able ‘to deter us and the international community from taking the action required to maintain regional and global security’.

In the meantime, the UK would do all it could to foster the conditions for multilateral disarmament leading to a nuclear-weapon-free world (NWFW). The White Paper argued forcibly that there was no contradiction between renewing Trident and the UK’s disarmament commitments, suggesting instead that the UK’s small arsenal and history of support for various multilateral disarmament initiatives made renewing Trident ‘fully consistent with all our [the UK’s] international obligations’. The government would later add that the UK’s good record on disarmament should be considered a ‘model’ for other nuclear weapons states to follow. While this reading of the Non-Proliferation Treaty’s disarmament obligations is heavily disputed, the wording of Article VI of the NPT is sufficiently vague to allow British officials to present this view with a straight face. These arguments were also sufficient to persuade Parliament in March 2007 to pass the bill authorising Trident’s renewal.

White Paper critique

The role the White Paper sets out for Trident has been heavily contested. For instance, Nick Ritchie disputes the White Paper’s claim that Trident is needed to deter against the possible ‘re-emergence of nuclear threat’. Ritchie writes, ‘...it is barely conceivable that British nuclear deterrent threats and the consideration of using nuclear weapons against Russia or China will

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43 Ibid. p. 19.
44 Ibid.
46 The full text of the Non-Proliferation Treaty is available here: http://nwp.ilpi.org/?p=1357.
ever be part of the solution to future confrontations’. Moreover, Ritchie argues that nuclear retaliation against a ‘rogue’ state would ‘constitute a disproportionate and indiscriminate response, be deeply counterproductive to western political objectives, and would be viewed as such at home and abroad’. Furthermore, according to Ritchie, the notion that the UK can credibly threaten to retaliate against a regime that provided terrorists with nuclear weapons appears far-fetched. As Ritchie explains, nuclear retaliation would inevitably kill thousands of innocent civilians, and would therefore likely be both illegal and counterproductive. Finally, the White Paper’s argument that the UK nuclear arsenal is necessary to deter against nuclear blackmail appears especially weak. As former British Army General Hugh Beach notes wryly, Japan and Germany do not seem ‘unduly worried’ about the prospects of nuclear blackmail.

...there has never been a recorded incident of successful nuclear blackmail.

As Michael MccGwire points out, ‘despite theorists’ best efforts, there has never been a recorded incident of successful nuclear blackmail. Even the late Kenneth Waltz, a flag-bearer for the pro-nuclear academic wing, writes with deep scepticism about the potential for nuclear blackmail: ‘No state can make the threat with credibility because no state can expect to execute the threat without dangers to themselves’. These arguments have led Beach and Ritchie, among many others, to conclude – contrary to the White Paper – that nuclear weapons and Trident are irrelevant for the types of conflicts the UK is likely to face in the 21st century.

Ultimately, the UK nuclear policy’s coherence and logic rests upon viewing the UK only in comparison to the other nuclear-armed states, rather than the 184 NNWS, most of which (fortunately for the UK) do not appear to share its belief in the necessity of nuclear weapons. In this sense, the White Paper promotes a rationale for nuclear proliferation. Remove the references to the NPT and all the arguments made for retaining the UK’s nuclear arsenal could apply to any state in the international system. As the head of the IAEA Mohamed El Baradei argues, ‘national security strategies that rely on nuclear weapons... serve as a constant stimulus for other nations to acquire them’. Indeed, the White Paper provides a ready-made rationale for why every state ought to develop its own ‘independent deterrent’. Advocates of the UK’s nuclear weapons often claim that if the UK were to disarm, this would have no impact on rogue states’ security ambitions. This might be so, but the UK’s forceful arguments for why nuclear weapons are necessary implicitly legitimise nuclear deterrence for other mid-ranking liberal NATO states, not to mention the rest of the world.

...both the rationale contained in the White Paper and the democratic foundations of the law authorising Trident renewal appear shaky

Democratic deficit?

The White Paper served as the basis for the bill that began the Trident renewal process. Upon inspection, however, the bill’s democratic le-

48 Ibid. p. 85.
49 Ibid. p. 89–90.
50 Ibid. p. 92.
53 Nevertheless, as most NNWS realise, referring to the NPT would provide scant comfort in the face of nuclear aggression.
gitimacy also appears suspect. While it passed with a majority of 409 to 161, the bill was forced through Parliament through cross-party employment of a three-line whip. Given the individual repercussions ministers faced for voting against a three-line-whip (not to mention their historic unwillingness to vote against their individual interests), the number of defections from the party line looks much more like a mandate for further debate than one for Trident renewal. Indeed, the only example of a larger New Labour rebellion occurred when the decision to go to war with Iraq was taken. That war has finally ended, but the Blair regime’s foreign policy judgement remains permanently tarnished. Unlike the Iraq war, however, the decision to renew Trident is still reversible.

In sum, both the rationale contained in the White Paper and the democratic foundations of the law authorising Trident renewal appear shaky.

In the UK Parliament, each party sends its MPs a weekly update known as ‘The Whip’ outlining party positions on upcoming matters. Parties indicate the importance of a particular upcoming vote by the number of times it is underlined in The Whip. Thus, a ‘three-line whip’ refers to a vote of critical importance to the party. Voting against a three-line whip has guaranteed negative career repercussions, and MPs who choose to do so generally have to resign any post they have in their party and in serious cases, resign from the party itself. UK Parliament, Whips, http://www.parliament.uk/about/mps-and-lords/principal/whips/ (accessed 14 February 2014).
The nuclear election

Although the current coalition government supports the renewal of British nuclear weapons, the final ‘Main Gate’ decision has been delayed until after the next election, leaving open a window of opportunity for a U-turn. The next election is expected in 2015 and the issue of Trident renewal is almost certainly going to be on the agenda. Moreover, much has changed since 2007 that could alter the UK nuclear cost-benefit equation and lead to a different policy conclusion.

Certainly, changed domestic conditions since 2007 appear conducive to nuclear disarmament. In addition to the UK’s self-acknowledged lack of a clear nuclear threat, the UK economy flat-lined following the global financial crisis, prompting widespread and deep cuts across the public sector that are set to continue into the next election period. Furthermore, while UK public opinion on British nuclear weapons is divided and somewhat malleable, it seems to be gradually shifting against Trident renewal. Certainly, justifying spending at least £80 billion on nuclear weapons (the estimated lifetime cost of renewing Trident) while undertaking deep cuts in spending across the rest of the public sector will be politically tricky for the next UK government. Indeed, even members of the British military establishment are now questioning the wisdom of purchasing nuclear weapons at the expense of under-funded conventional forces.

Any party advocating for nuclear disarmament would inevitably face a barrage of attacks labelling it as ‘utopian’ and irresponsible

Moreover, the international political climate appears significantly more favourable to UK nuclear disarmament than it was in 2007, when the decision to renew Trident was taken. The Obama Administration set the trend with the US President’s 2009 Prague speech, and he has since reiterated the goal of a nuclear-weapon-free world. Although some hoped for more, Obama has backed up his words with actions, pushing through a fresh START treaty, appointing an anti-nuclear advocate as an ambassador to NATO, and aiming to reduce the role of nuclear weapons in the US security doctrine. NATO has reduced the prominence of nuclear weapons in its Strategic Concept, and there is mounting pressure for the removal of nuclear weapons from its nuclear triad.


57 Depending on how the question is phrased, their opinion about renewal varies considerably. For example, if costs are included in the question, the opposition to Trident renewal grows substantially. On the other hand, if asked whether the UK should remain nuclear while others do, the majority swings in the other direction. John Gittings, ‘After Trident: Proliferation or Peace?’, International Relations 21, 4 (2007) 389.

58 An aggregate of opinion polls on Trident suggest this, although a cautionary note is in order, as the Campaign For Nuclear Disarmament produced this compilation: http://www.cnduk.org/campaigns/no-to-trident/opinion-polls.

59 The bipartisan Basic Commission estimated the costs at £87.4 billion, Greenpeace at £97 billion. The White Paper offers nothing more specific than 5-6% of the defence budget. In view of the defence cuts announced in 2011, the 5-6% estimate is likely to be low, although the nominal cost will obviously remain the same.

of the remaining US-controlled tactical nuclear weapons stationed in Europe. Even the NPT has enjoyed a new lease on life: the final document of the 2010 Review Conference included a 64 Point Action Plan to be further developed before the next NPT Review Conference in 2015.\(^61\)

Furthermore, the international civil society anti-nuclear ranks have swelled with a growing number of influential former statesmen and famed ‘hard-headed realists’\(^62\) who have lent disarmament a hitherto unobtainable credibility within the security policy community. In the US, the former ‘Cold Warriors’ Henry Kissinger, George Shultz, William J. Perry and Sam Nunn have written several influential op-eds in the Wall Street Journal laying out the case for a nuclear-weapon-free world,\(^63\) while four former UK Defence Ministers Sir Malcolm Rifkind, Lord David Owen, Lord Douglas Hurd and Lord George Robertson mirrored their American counterparts by writing an op-ed in the Times in 2009 entitled ‘Start worrying and learn to ditch the bomb’.\(^64\) In short, there has never been a time in which a UK government policy of nuclear disarmament could count on such widespread and mainstream international and domestic support.

\[\text{Given the prevailing security conditions, a UK move to non-nuclear security would appear to be a no-brainer}\]

Given the prevailing security conditions, a UK move to non-nuclear security would appear to be a no-brainer. The UK would save more than £80 billion during a period of austerity, remove the tension between its nuclear policy and the UK’s broader human rights agenda, and fulfil without ambiguity its international disarmament obligations. As Michael McGwire has suggested, the UK would have the political opportunity to lead a growing coalition of mid-size and major powers committed to humanitarian objectives, while remaining allied to the US, but willing to criticise US foreign policies.\(^65\) The UK could become a ‘humanitarian superpower’ as its efforts to curb nuclear proliferation and promote multilateral disarmament would cease to be hamstrung by its own weapons of mass destruction. In effect, the UK would simply adopt the same non-nuclear security strategy as the majority of its NATO allies.


\(^{62}\) ‘Realist’ in the sense of those that considered to subscribe to the international relations theory known as ‘realism’.


The unilateral taboo

It might seem odd then that the three main parties in the UK apparently remain committed to renewing the UK nuclear arsenal. While public opinion polls might suggest that at least one of the parties would favour disarmament, this policy has been considered electorally toxic since Labour’s election defeats in the 1980s.66 Amongst the Labour Party leadership, a policy of non-nuclear security (or unilateral disarmament67) is not considered a winning issue, but certainly, a potential vote loser.68 Moreover, breaking the policy of nuclear defence that has ‘kept Britain safe for 50 years’ represents a brave decision – not something that typically appeals to British politicians. Any party advocating for nuclear disarmament would inevitably face a barrage of attacks labelling it as ‘utopian’69 and irresponsible for willingly giving up the ‘ultimate insurance policy’.70 Collectively, the fear of being called a ‘unilateralalist’ constitutes what could be termed the ‘unilateral taboo’ in British politics, which severely limits the space for political debate on the nuclear issue.

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Indeed, all three parties are currently committed to debating the specifications and costs of the UK’s next nuclear weapons, rather than questioning whether the UK should possess them at all. The upcoming election will thus likely be a damp squid for anyone hoping for nuclear disarmament. The UK government’s recently published Trident Alternatives Review demonstrates this clearly: the only ‘alternatives’ under consideration involve nuclear weapons.71 The elephant in the room – non-nuclear security – was ignored as an option.72

67 Apparently describing the same thing, critics usually emphasise the action of engaging in nuclear disarmament as ‘unilateral disarming’ or ‘unilateralism’, with the underlying assumption that no other state would do the same. Hence, ‘unilateral disarmament’ is the common and often pejorative label for this policy. See, for example, Hugh Beech’s discussion of UK political aversion to this idea: Hugh Beech, ‘The Case for One-Sided Nuclear Disarmament’, Open Democracy (12 June 2013), http://www.opendemocracy.net/hugh-beach/case-for-one-sided-nuclear-disarmament.
68 The majority of Labour voters oppose British nuclear weapons; however, for them the issue is not a deal breaker, they would not vote Conservative regardless of the nuclear policy. In contrast, unilateral disarmament would likely be a deal breaker amongst conservative swing voters in the swing seats Labour typically targets at each general election.
69 MP Dr. Julian Lewis offers perhaps the best example of the type of criticism levelled against those that advocate a security strategy that does not include nuclear weapons. Julian Lewis, ‘Nuclear Disarmament versus Peace in the Twenty-First Century’, International Affairs 82, 4 (2006), 53, available here: http://www.rusi.org/downloads/assets/Lewis.pdf (referring to Article VI under the heading “Utopian NPT Obligations”).
70 This is the phrase David Cameron routinely uses to describe Trident’s role in UK security policy.
Conclusion

Renewing Trident for 40 years while simultaneously supporting disarmament initiatives and lobbying for a nuclear-weapon-free world is not a risk-free strategy.\(^73\) The financial savings that could come from disarmament are contingent on when the UK decides to disarm. Although the average annual cost of Trident is around £2.1 billion, the capital outlay for the submarines and the warheads cannot be retrieved once the final decision is made to go ahead with renewal.\(^74\) After making that initial decision, the majority of the outlay required to renew Trident would become a sunk cost, meaning that the financial benefit to be gained by later renouncing nuclear weapons would be far more modest. The total costs are in effect committed once the contract has been signed; subsequent cancellation would save little if any money.\(^75\)

Given indications that multilateral disarmament initiatives may pick up pace in the coming years, this financial dynamic could limit UK policy choices. If the nuclear-armed states progress rapidly on disarmament, this could put the UK in an awkward position. The UK’s stated policy objective of working for a world without nuclear weapons would conflict with not wanting to be seen to have wasted £25 billion on useless equipment. The UK could conceivably end up committing £25 billion on nuclear weapons it must retire before they enter into service. Trident under this scenario would go from an apparent symbol of prestige to an expensive white elephant - a monument to the UK’s former commitment to weapons of mass destruction. Alternatively, if the UK insists instead on maintaining Trident throughout its usable life, then Britain would assume the unenviable role of an international obstacle to global nuclear disarmament. At the very least, making the initial commitment to renew Trident would render any future UK government financially (and therefore, politically) handcuffed to nuclear weapons.

Ultimately, renewing Trident would give the UK a very expensive incentive to avoid hastening the disarmament process

Ultimately, renewing Trident would give the UK a very expensive incentive to avoid hastening the disarmament process. The UK’s efforts to style itself as a leader in the multilateral disarmament movement are therefore likely to fall flat if it renews Trident. Indeed, this is already becoming apparent. The UK recently boycotted the Oslo and Nayarit conferences on the humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons (along with the rest of the P5). This is likely to become a recurring problem. It certainly appears over-optimistic to believe that the NNWS will allow the UK to have its nuclear weapon cake, and swallow its anti-nuclear rhetoric too.

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\(^75\) Ibid. p. 681.