Trident & the unilateralist taboo
Overview of the British nuclear policy debate and examining the decision to renew Trident
Background

• More than others, UK membership in the nuclear club 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 is manifested most visibly in Labour Party policy

• The debate over the replacement of the current nuclear weapons system, Trident, echoes those of the past in terms of financing problems

• Differs considerably in that it is the **first major nuclear decision** undertaken in the post Cold War era

• Where will the current policy trajectory likely lead the UK?
British weapons systems

- The UK became the third member of the nuclear club in 1952, when it successfully tested its first nuclear device
- Primary purposes was to deter the Soviet Union
- Thatcher government replaced the old Polaris system with a new generation of submarines and missiles known as Trident (the ‘Rolls Royce of nuclear weapons’)
- Decision on whether to renew Trident postponed until 2016
- Changes internationally and domestically since 2007 could make the UK reconsider their current trajectory of nuclear renewal
Trident II missile: underwater launch
Points of contention

• The Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) from 1968 is the cornerstone of the international legal framework regulating nuclear weapons
• Permits the NWS to possess nuclear weapons on two conditions: negotiations and measures for nuclear disarmament
• 189 States Parties to the NPT, yet the obligation to disarm far from fulfilled
• The UK’s nuclear weapons cannot be divorced from the context of the NPT disarmament/proliferation tension
• The decision to renew Trident would undermine the legitimacy of the NPT, showing that the UK has no intent to disarm
Independent dependence

- Although the UK was an early pioneer of nuclear weapons, it has always **struggled with the cost**

- Critical nuclear parts acquired from the US - UK weapons systems reportedly rely on US intelligence and targeting

- One school of thought argues that the UK’s already shaky position in the UNSC 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
The third wheel

• ‘Minimum deterrence doctrine’ – maintaining an invulnerable second-strike capability to inflict ‘unacceptable damage’ on Moscow

• With the threat from the Soviets gone, one might have expected the anti-nuclear movement to gain the upper hand in UK politics

• ‘Structural nuclearism’ – rather than deter specific threats, Trident instead served as a general hedge against uncertainty in an anarchic world system
Justifying renewal

- Labour’s ‘nuclear honeymoon’ ended in 2006
- Realization that the UK would soon need to make the first decision over nuclear renewal in the post Cold War era
- New Labour’s ‘Third Way’: combined a policy of renewing Trident with the assertion that the UK was unequivocal in undertaking to accomplish the total elimination of nuclear weapons
- UK White Paper argued no contradiction between renewing Trident and the UK’s disarmament commitments
- The wording of NPT Article VI is sufficiently vague to allow British officials to present this view with a straight face
White Paper critique

• The role the White Paper sets out for Trident **heavily contested**
• Arguments that nuclear weapons and Trident are irrelevant for the types of conflicts the UK is likely to face in the 21\(^{\text{st}}\) century
• UK nuclear policy coherence and logic rests upon viewing the UK only in comparison to the other nuclear-armed states
• The White Paper provides a ready-made rationale for why every state ought to develop its own ‘independent deterrent’
• The UK’s forceful arguments for why nuclear weapons are necessary, implicitly **legitimise nuclear deterrence** for other mid-ranking liberal NATO-states, and the rest of the world
Democratic deficit?

- The White Paper **served as the basis** for the bill that began the Trident renewal process

- While passed with a majority (409 to 161), it was forced through Parliament through cross-party employment of a three-line whip

- Both the rationale contained in the White Paper and the democratic foundations of the law authorising Trident renewal appear shaky
The nuclear election

- Current coalition government supports renewal of British nuclear weapons
- Changed domestic conditions since 2007 appear conducive to nuclear disarmament + international political climate significantly more favourable
- Never a time in which a UK government policy of disarmament could count on such widespread and mainstream international and domestic support
- Would save the UK more than €80 billion during a period of austerity, remove the tension between its nuclear policy and the broader human rights agenda, and fulfil without ambiguity its international disarmament obligations
The unilateral taboo

- The three main parties in the UK apparently remain committed to renew UK nuclear arsenal.
- Breaking the policy of nuclear defence that has ‘kept Britain safe for 50 years’ is a brave decision.
- Any party advocating for nuclear disarmament would inevitably face attacks labelling it as ‘utopian’, and irresponsible for giving up the ‘ultimate insurance policy’.
- The fear of being called a ‘unilateralist’ constitutes what could be termed the ‘unilateral taboo’ in British politics.
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

• Making the initial commitment to renew Trident would render any future UK government financially (and politically) handcuffed to nuclear weapons

• 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 likely to fall flat if it renews Trident