

## Renewing Trident: The 'Great Non-Debate' Over British Nuclear Weapons

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To talk of a 'debate' preceding the UK government's decision in March this year to renew the Trident nuclear weapon system may be a little misleading. Distinguished journalist John Gittings, speaking at the annual DDMI public lecture, was probably more accurate when he described it as 'the great Trident non-debate'. Nevertheless, despite a general lack of both political opposition and public interest, the implications did not go unnoticed by the DDMI, arising as a point of discussion at various DDMI events this year and engaging a number of academics and policy practitioners. This engagement offered a unique insight into the nature of the political debate surrounding the issue.

To the extent that abolishing the UK's nuclear deterrent actually entered the realms of political possibility at all, the discussion seemed focused on two key questions. Firstly was the question of whether the UK is obliged to disband its nuclear arsenal as a signatory to the nuclear non-proliferation treaty (NPT). Discussion here was focused in particular on Article VI of the treaty, the article dealing with the nuclear weapon states' obligations to disarm. Second, was the issue of whether disbanding the UK's nuclear arsenal would make any difference to the activities of those states currently developing, or suspecting of developing, nuclear weapons.

As for the first question, those arguing for Trident renewal have played on the ambiguities of Article VI. There is no clear timeframe for disarmament in the article, and as such Trident protagonists have come to the conclusion that renewal does not constitute a contravention of the treaty. Opposing this argument the anti-renewal camp have tended to stress the 'spirit' rather than the 'letter' of the NPT, and in particular the clearly stated objective in the treaty's preamble of abolishing all nuclear weapons. According to this reasoning the ambiguities of Article VI do not imply an indefinite right of the nuclear weapon states to maintain their arsenals, but were a necessary measure to accommodate the particularities of nuclear politics during the cold war,

when the extended deterrence provided by the superpowers would have made moves towards the abolition of nuclear weapons at that time inconceivable. Thus, the argument goes, in the post-cold war era disarmament should be given a new impetus.

The government left us in no doubt over its preferred line of reasoning. It has convinced itself and the majority of its political opposition in Westminster that the UK is in full compliance with article VI of the NPT. The government has stressed the UK's 'right' to possess nuclear weapons over its 'obligation' to seek their abolition. This was encapsulated by the then prime minister's response to a question in the commons on the 28th February this year. When Labour MP Chris Mullins asked Tony Blair to comment on IAEA chief Mohamed ElBaradei's disapproval of the government's policy, the premier responded, "I should remind my honourable friend of the non-proliferation treaty, which makes it absolutely clear that Britain has the right to possess nuclear weapons". Prime minister's questions, Wednesday 28th February 2007. (For a transcript of the session see <http://www.theyworkforyou.com/debates/?id=2007-02-21b.250.2> )

The government's stance on this issue is disappointing. It ignores the deliberate versatility of the treaty and any historical understanding of the text. Perhaps more importantly, it ignores the perception of much of the international community that nuclear weapon states should take immediate measures to instigate nuclear disarmament. The government's justifications are all well and good for gaining the support, or at least the acquiescence, of a domestic audience. But this will mean absolutely nothing if, and this is a very possible if, the 2010 NPT review conference fails to produce a substantive consensus, and as predicted in a United Nations report in 2004, such failure results in a 'cascade of proliferation' (United Nations Report 'A More Secure World: Our Shared Responsibility'. Report of the High-Level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change, 2004, <http://www.un.org/secureworld/report.pdf>)

If there is any consolation for those in the pro-disarmament camp it is that the government went to some lengths to justify its decision in terms of its obligations under the NPT. It did so in relation to both Article VI and the thirteen steps towards disarmament that had been the agreed outcome of the NPT's year 2000 review conference. Reference to the norms and principles of the

treaty itself can go some way towards maintaining them, even if we perceive that the government is actually circumventing its central obligations. In short, this is not as detrimental to the NPT as dismissing the importance of treaty obligations altogether, an approach that is unfortunately characteristic of the current US administration.

Whilst the UK government may not be living up to its obligations to disarm in accordance to the spirit of the NPT, its position on whether relinquishing the UK's nuclear arsenal would impact on the activities of proliferating states was even more short-sighted. The argument made in the pro-Trident camp is basically this: not renewing Trident and disbanding the UK's deterrent would have no impact on the decisions of states such as Iran and North Korea to develop their own nuclear weapons capacity. Thus, in a world of increasing proliferation and continual uncertainty over the intentions of states, it is prudent to maintain a minimum deterrent.

Admittedly, critics of the government's policy, including this author, would be hard pushed to argue that any such unilateral action on the part of a middle power such as the UK will make much of a difference to the immediate strategic calculations of the aforementioned states. However, to focus solely on such strategic calculations belies the complexities of nuclear politics. Anti-trident campaigners have long argued that replacing Trident will serve to reinforce the perceived political and military utility of possessing nuclear weapons, and that this in turn will serve to increase the incentives for nuclear weapons acquisition across the globe. This argument is an important and valid one. But it is hard to quantify and even harder to convince both policy practitioners and the general public that undermining the perceived utility of nuclear weapons in the long run is worth sacrificing a nuclear deterrent that could, we are told, deter aggression from hostile states in the near future.

This has allowed the protagonists of Trident renewal to espouse the merits of a nuclear weapons policy based on the premise that disarmament can only enhance the security of the UK if it is done multilaterally. The government remains rhetorically committed to multilateralism whilst eschewing any calls for unilateral disarmament as naïve and foolhardy. Multilateralism good, unilateralism bad, has long been the common sense doctrine proffered by our policy practitioners.

However, upon further inspection such 'common sense' belies the complexities of multilateral arms control and is not nearly as sensible as it appears.

At the 1995 NPT review conference South Africa played a crucial role in presenting a formulation of a text for the indefinite extension of the treaty. Some commentators have argued that South Africa was perhaps the only state that could have formulated the necessary compromise and achieved agreement between the nuclear weapon states and the non-aligned states. Despite not being a major power on the world stage, South Africa was an immensely effective negotiator due to its recent acceptance as a responsible member of the international community through the dismantling of apartheid and relinquishing its nuclear weapons capabilities (Nicole Deitelhoff and Harald Mueller, 'Theoretical paradise – empirically lost? Arguing with Habermas', *Review of International Studies*, 31(1), 2005, pp. 155-160). It was its legitimacy to speak about the issue rather than its financial or military resources that made the South African delegation so valuable at this conference.

The moral capital accrued by states that adhere to international norms is vital in the processes of negotiations that occur between them. Recognising this sheds important light on the impact of the decisions of nuclear weapon states such as the UK, and makes it worth re-assessing the potential impact of a UK decision had it gone down the bath of abolition.

In relation to the NPT, the UK would have been the first of the recognised nuclear weapon states to live up to its disarmament obligations. This would have been seen as a major achievement for the treaty, giving the UK a leading role in re-energising the regime at the forthcoming NPT review conference in 2010. Not only would the legitimacy of the NPT regime been significantly enhanced, but it would have given a renewed impetus to the disarmament pillar of the treaty as well as sending a clear signal to states that the UK no longer sees nuclear weapons as a key provider of security in the post-cold war environment.

In addition to enhancing the legitimacy of the non-proliferation treaty, there is the issue of regime enforcement. The five nuclear weapon states recognised by the NPT are the five permanent

members of the United Nations Security Council. The recent cases of Iran and North Korea have clearly shown that the safeguards of the International Atomic Energy Agency alone are insufficient to enforce the regime, and increasingly recourse to the Security Council is being sought in cases of transgression. Had the UK sought to disband its arsenal, it would be the first permanent member to do so. If the non-proliferation regime is to avoid a major crisis of legitimacy it must remain effective in its enforcement. Having a non-nuclear weapon state as a permanent member of the Security Council could only have been a positive development in this respect.

Focusing solely on the strategic calculations made by potential proliferating states fosters a myopic understanding of arms control. To eschew unilateralism whilst espousing the merits for multilateralism is untenable. Unilateral actions by states can be a significant catalyst for multilateral processes. Faced with a decision over its nuclear deterrent, the UK was in a position to make a very significant impact in this respect, take a lead in reviving the process of multilateral nuclear disarmament, bolster the legitimacy of the nuclear non-proliferation regime in efforts to thwart proliferation, and enhance the credibility of the international community to embark on measures to enforce it.

Through enhancing the legitimacy and efficacy of the regime that monitors and enforces nuclear non-proliferation, the impact on proliferating states could have been substantial. When posited against the benefits of a weapons system that the government admits we would not seek to develop had we not already done so, it is both curious and disappointing that such implications were overlooked.

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#### Further reading

A full text of the NPT can be found at: <http://www.un.org/Depts/dda/WMD/npttext.html>

Ken Booth, 'The Certainty of Uncertainty'. Paper presented to a Greenpeace/WMD Awareness Programme seminar on 'Trident Replacement: the tipping point'. (12th December, 2006). Available at

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<http://www.aber.ac.uk/~inpwww/research/DDMI/TRIDENT-HC%20seminar-12dec06-4.htm>

Ken Booth and Frank Barnaby (eds.), *The Future of Britain's Nuclear Weapons: Experts Reframe the Debate* (Oxford Research Group, March 2006).

Michael Codner, Gavin Ireland and & Willet, 'The United Kingdom's Independent Strategic Nuclear Deterrent: Observations on the 2006 White Paper and Issues for Parliamentary Debate', Royal United Services Institute, Whitehall Report (January 2007).

Richard Price, 'Nuclear Weapons Don't Kill People, Rogues Do', *International Politics*, 44 (2-3), 2007, pp. 232-249.

Tariq Rauff & Rebecca Johnson, 'After the NPT's Indefinite Extension: The Future of the Global Non-Proliferation Regime.' *Non-Proliferation Review*, (Autumn, 1995), pp. 28-42.