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Scrap Trident

No replacement, no new warheads

In March 2021, the government controversially announced that it would increase the number of warheads in its arsenal by over 40% – the first increase since the Cold War. This comes on top of the ongoing work the government is undertaking on replacing its current nuclear weapons system, Trident.

This increase comes in spite of the coronavirus pandemic, clearly demonstrating that the government has its security priorities all wrong. While successive governments had identified pandemic threats as a major security risk, they have chosen instead to squander our national resources on weapons of mass destruction, rather than funding our health service, making it fit for purpose to deal with major public health emergencies.

Trident is a militarily useless, immoral and hugely expensive weapon of mass destruction which should be stopped.

What is Trident?

Trident is Britain's nuclear weapons system. It is made up of four nuclear submarines which can each carry up to eight missiles. In turn, each missile can carry up to five nuclear warheads, each around eight times as destructive as the bomb which flattened Hiroshima in 1945. A Trident submarine patrols the seas at all times. The government announcement on additional warheads may mean that the number of warheads carried, or the number of submarines on patrol, may be changed.

The current submarines will have to come out of service in the early 2030s and so work on building the successor submarines – named the Dreadnought class – has begun.

The British Parliament voted in 2007 to begin the process of replacing Trident and in 2016, parliament, voted in favour of building new submarines.

In a shock development, the government's Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy, 'Global Britain in a Competitive Age',¹ published in March 2021, included a commitment to increase the number of nuclear warheads in the UK's arsenal for the first time since the Cold War. The document also included a change in use posture – the government will consider using nuclear weapons in response to non-nuclear threats, including 'emerging technologies' which could mean a cyber-attack.

The government is also rejecting transparency, now intending to 'no longer give public figures for our operational stockpile, deployed warhead or deployed

missile numbers'. This will, of course, make it even harder to scrutinise the cost of developing these weapons of mass destruction.

Submarines

Contracts for designing the new submarines, worth billions of pounds, were awarded to BAE Systems, Rolls-Royce and Babcock Marine. The 2015 Strategic Defence and Security Review increased the amount to be spent on the new submarines from £25 billion to £31 billion, with an extra £10 billion contingency fund in case the project goes over-budget.

The motion adopted by Parliament stated that four new submarines will be built and that Britain will continue with its Continuous at-Sea Deterrence posture.

The submarines will be propelled by a new design of nuclear reactor, the PWR3 – the design of which has been principally US-led. The Rolls-Royce plant in Derby is manufacturing the reactors.

Missiles

Britain leases the Trident II D5 missiles from a US missiles pool, an arrangement which is set to continue with the replacement system. The government is paying £350 million to participate in a missile life-extension programme so that they can be used until the early 2040s.

The US is planning to develop new missiles and Washington has given assurances that they will be compatible with the UK's Trident replacement system.

The cost of Trident

Manufacturing four Successor submarines	£31 billion ⁶
Contingency fund	£10 billion ⁷
Missile life extension programme	£350 million ⁸
Replacement warheads	£4 billion ⁹
Infrastructure capital costs	£4 billion ¹⁰
In-service costs	£142 billion ¹¹
Conventional military forces directly assigned to support Trident	£1 billion ¹²
Decommissioning	£13 billion ¹³
TOTAL	£205 billion

Warheads

The UK's current warhead design is widely understood to be based on the W76 bomb with which the US Trident system is armed. Additionally, several of the UK warhead's vital components are bought off-the-shelf from the US.

It's expected that the current warhead stockpile will last until the late 2030s. A decision on replacing the warhead was expected to be taken in Parliament but the government was forced to admit that work had already started on a new version when Pentagon officials revealed details of the programme in 2020. As mentioned above, the government's Integrated Review,² included a commitment to increase the number of nuclear warheads in the UK's arsenal. The UK currently has around 200 warheads, and had previously announced it would reduce this number to no more than 180 by the mid-2020s. It will now increase its stockpile to 260 warheads, a 40% increase.

The cost of developing a new warhead design and producing a higher number than previously planned is currently unknown. While the 2006 White Paper on 'The Future of the United Kingdom's Nuclear Deterrent' provided for up to £3 billion (£4 billion in today's prices) for the possible future refurbishment or replacement of the warhead,³ more recent estimates suggest a total of £30 billion.⁴

The UK government continues to invest significantly in the Atomic Weapons Establishment (AWE), near Reading, which produces and maintains Britain's nuclear warheads. It was recently revealed that spending on the AWE sites has doubled from a budgeted £2 billion to almost £4 billion in a single year.⁵

Why we must not replace Trident

Trident is expensive

Even before the coronavirus pandemic highlighted the chronic underfunding of health care, communities across the country were suffering from insufficient government spending on housing, health, education and welfare. Pay and pensions, public sector jobs, even support for disabled people have all been hit. The one important exception is the government's commitment to replacing Trident, despite its staggering cost.

CND has calculated that replacing Trident will end up costing at least £205 billion, and that's before taking into account that Ministry of Defence projects typically go well over budget. The figures below will be updated when the cost of the additional warheads is known.

This is an appalling waste of money. Cancelling the Trident replacement would mean we could instead invest in our real security needs. We could invest billions in the NHS, make our schools and universities better, build new homes, build flood defences and develop renewable energy sources. In other words, things we need. £205 billion would be enough to improve the NHS by building 120 state of the art hospitals and employing 150,000 new nurses, or building three million affordable homes, installing solar panels in every home in the UK or paying the tuition fees for eight million students.

The economic crisis resulting from the coronavirus crisis may well force cuts to the defence budget, and there have been reports that as a result, HMS Vanguard, currently at Devonport Dockyard for much-delayed work on its reactor, may never be completed and returned to patrol. The government needs to take the opportunity presented by this crisis, rethink Britain's real needs, and move on from nuclear weapons technology.

Trident does not keep us safe

In terms of national security, nuclear weapons are irrelevant.

The world is reeling from a coronavirus pandemic that has changed our lives in an unprecedented fashion. Covid-19 has caused personal devastation and economic hardship for many and our lives will not return to 'normal' any time soon.

It's an indisputable fact that the government should have been more prepared. The UK government's 2015 National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review¹⁴ highlighted pandemics as a tier one threat, and yet when Covid-19 hit, there were not enough ventilators or personal protective equipment for nurses, doctors, social workers and others caring for our most vulnerable. This document identified further security threats we face today, based on 'a judgement of the combination of both likelihood and impact'. Other tier one threats listed

included terrorism and cyber-attacks. This quite sensible analysis was not reflected in the government's policy or spending priorities; it claims having nuclear weapons is vital for our security, when actually they are useless in the face of these threats. The recently published Integrated Review should have included an updated assessment, but this was omitted for reasons unknown.

The discrepancy between planning for a pandemic and planning for nuclear war exposes a flaw in the government's strategic thinking. It should be a government's priority to keep its citizens safe. But the concept of true security in the 21st century should be re-evaluated. Climate change and its repercussions also pose a serious threat to international stability. Ensuring our security is no longer centred on military scenarios, but rather on increasingly complex and ever-changing factors, and the government should plan accordingly.

Experts are increasingly questioning the technological viability of Trident, as developments in underwater drone technology could render the system obsolete. The vast amounts of money being poured into drone technology means that eventually Trident will be both detectable and targetable, meaning the government is wasting money on weapons with built-in redundancy.

Many supporters of Trident claim that nuclear weapons keep the peace by acting as a 'deterrent'. This is the false belief that we will dissuade an 'enemy' from attacking if they know that we could retaliate with nuclear weapons. But the nuclear powers have been involved in hundreds of wars since the atomic bomb was first invented in 1945. In addition, possessing nuclear weapons did not defend France, the US or the UK from terrorist attacks: one of the actual threats we face today. In fact, replacing Trident might encourage more countries to get nuclear weapons and so increase the danger of nuclear war. If countries like the UK and others insist that they need these weapons for security, other countries will come to the same conclusion. The government decision to increase the nuclear arsenal will only exacerbate the danger of nuclear proliferation.

Most of the world doesn't want nuclear weapons

In the international community, Britain is in a very small minority possessing nuclear weapons. Indeed, the requirement for nuclear disarmament has been enshrined in international law since 1970, in the form of the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), to which Britain is a signatory. But lack of action by the nuclear states pushed much of the rest of the world to work for a new treaty to outlaw nuclear weapons.

As a result, the United Nations adopted a historic international treaty to ban nuclear weapons in 2017 – the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW). It entered into force in January 2021, making it illegal under international law for states party to the treaty to develop, test, produce, manufacture, acquire, possess, stockpile, transfer, use or threaten to use nuclear weapons. It also makes it illegal to assist or encourage anyone to engage in these activities.

The UK government shamefully refused to even participate in the treaty talks and even now it refuses to engage with this piece of international law.

Trident is illegal

Nuclear weapons have no legitimate purpose: their use would be illegal under almost every conceivable circumstance, as huge numbers of civilian casualties would be unavoidable. That is why continued possession of nuclear weapon means that Britain is contravening international rulings and declarations. In 1996, the International Court of Justice concluded that 'the threat or use of nuclear weapons would generally be contrary to the rules of international law applicable in armed conflict, and in particular the principles and rules of humanitarian law'.¹⁵ The basis for this judgement is the Geneva Convention, which states that civilians cannot be targeted. It is impossible to use a nuclear weapon selectively, meaning that launching Trident would certainly be illegal as there would be a huge number of civilian casualties and devastation of the natural environment.

In addition, the UK signed a legally binding international treaty in 1968, the NPT, agreeing to negotiate in good faith on effective measures relating to nuclear disarmament. The NPT commits its signatories to undertake 'concrete disarmament efforts', not invest in a brand-new nuclear weapons system that will ensure Britain is nuclear-armed for further decades to come. Indeed, legal opinion in 2005 found that replacing Trident would be a material breach of the NPT. Now, following the announcement of a planned increase in the number of Britain's nuclear warheads, many legal experts have confirmed that this contravenes Britain's obligations under the NPT: the official UN spokesperson said they do not believe it is 'consistent' with the UK's obligations under the treaty.¹⁶

Trident is not the jobs provider it is claimed to be

CND has calculated that approximately 11,520 civilian jobs are directly dependent on Trident. Guaranteeing people's livelihoods matters but £205 billion can be used far more effectively to create well-paid jobs than wasting it on replacing Trident. A Defence Diversification Agency should be established to ensure the skills of the workers would be transferred to other industries, such as building conventional ships or producing renewable energy. A government-led economic diversification plan would minimise the job losses should Trident be scrapped.

Recent experience shows that is possible: to address the need for health supplies because of the coronavirus pandemic, a consortium of UK companies came together to produce medical ventilators. Several arms companies – including a number involved in nuclear weapons production - were members of the consortium, which won a contract to manufacture 10,000 ventilators. It is believed that staff who routinely work on defence contracts were redeployed to work on the ventilator project. Workers at the Barrow shipyard, where BAE Systems is building the Dreadnought submarines, were also put to work on producing medical equipment.

This development shows that it is possible to redeploy workers to more socially useful parts of the economy. When CND has previously called for Trident to be scrapped, this has been challenged on the grounds of the job losses this would entail. However, when necessary, a defence company such as Babcock, and its workforce, was able to diversify and produce something different. There is no reason why this cannot be replicated on a wider scale, especially when the diversification is pre-planned and factored into the Ministry of Defence's planning.

Conclusion

The government's decision to increase Britain's nuclear arsenal is a sea change in UK policy, with hugely dangerous implications globally. It's not just that we would rather the money was spent on something more useful; or that this flagrant breach of the NPT may encourage others to pursue nuclear weapons; it's a question of what kind of world we want to see, what role we want Britain

to play and what it actually stands for. Rearming with weapons of mass destruction is not something that we can accept.

We should be scrapping this antiquated weapons system and addressing our defence needs in ways appropriate to the twenty first century. The overwhelming majority of states in the world – those without nuclear weapons – continue to insist that we comply with our international treaty obligation to disarm. Our continued failure to do so does us enormous harm in the eyes of the global majority.

Scrapping Trident and its replacement remains an urgent priority for CND. We want to see a world without nuclear weapons, and getting rid of Britain's nuclear weapons is part of that process. CND will continue to campaign to this end, working with those broad forces across society that wish to see an end to Britain's possession of weapons of mass destruction.

- 1 'Global Britain in a Competitive Age, The Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy', https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/969402/The_Integrated_Review_of_Security__Defence__Development_and_Foreign_Policy.pdf
- 2 'Global Britain in a Competitive Age, The Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy', https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/969402/The_Integrated_Review_of_Security__Defence__Development_and_Foreign_Policy.pdf
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- 5 'Trident factory upgrades costs double original budget', 11 July 2017, BBC News <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-berkshire-40566701>
- 6 'National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review 2015: A Secure and Prosperous United Kingdom', Published by HM Government, November 2015, https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/478933/52309_Cm_9161_NSS_SD_Review_web_only.pdf
- 7 *ibid*
- 8 as stated by the government in its 2006 White Paper on the future of Britain's nuclear weapons: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/27378/DefenceWhitePaper2006_Cm6994.pdf. Confirmed by the secretary of State for Defence in November 2015 and taking into account inflation <http://www.theyworkforyou.com/wrans/?id=2015-11-13.16101.h&s=missile+extension#g16101.r0>
- 9 as stated by the government in its 2006 White Paper on the future of Britain's nuclear weapons: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/27378/DefenceWhitePaper2006_Cm6994.pdf
- 10 Based on the government's 2006 estimate for decommissioning Polaris, our previous nuclear weapons system, taking into account inflation: <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200506/cmhansrd/vo060724/text/60724w1879.htm>
- 11 As calculated by Crispin Blunt MP, Chair of Parliament's Foreign Affairs Committee <http://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-britain-defence-trident-exclusive-idUKKCN0SJ0ER20151025>
- 12 Based on the government's estimate in HC Deb 8 March 2007, c2130W, taking into account inflation <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200607/cmhansrd/cm070308/text/70308w0007.htm>
- 13 Based on the government's 2006 estimate for decommissioning Polaris, our previous nuclear weapons system, taking into account inflation: <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200506/cmhansrd/vo060724/text/60724w1879.htm>
- 14 'National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review 2015: A Secure and Prosperous United Kingdom', https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/478933/52309_Cm_9161_NSS_SD_Review_web_only.pdf
- 15 Legality of the Threat or Use of Nuclear Weapons, Advisory Opinion of 8 July 1996, International Court of Justice, <http://www.icj-cij.org/docket/files/95/7497.pdf>
- 16 Daily Press Briefing by the Office of the Spokesperson for the Secretary-General, 18 March 2021, <https://www.un.org/press/en/2021/db210318.doc.htm>

