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A progressive nuclear weapons policy for the next Labour government

A briefing by Nick Ritchie - February 2014

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The UK has now embarked on an expensive, long and controversial programme to replace Trident, beginning with a new fleet of ballistic missile submarines to carry the US-designed and built Trident missiles into the 2060s. Debate on whether and, if so, how to replace the current system continues. It is this debate that provides a significant opportunity for Labour under Ed Miliband's leadership to take further important steps towards controlling the spread of nuclear weapons and strengthening UK national security.

We face a global crisis of nuclear weapons diplomacy. Nuclear weapons will spread if we continue to value them as a currency of power and security. More nuclear weapons in the hands of more states will increase the risk of use. Any use of nuclear weapons will cause an unprecedented humanitarian and environmental catastrophe. The spread of nuclear weapons and the risk of their use is an inherent and inescapable feature of the nuclear weapons world of which we in the UK are a part. The only progressive direction of travel in a globalised and interdependent world is towards a world free of nuclear weapons. Labour can lead in making a significant contribution to this goal through a more progressive 21st century nuclear policy.

Ed Miliband stated at the 2012 Party Conference that Labour's policy on Trident replacement will be reviewed after the publication of the Trident Alternatives Study (July 2013) and the independent British American Security Information Council (BASIC) Trident Commission report due in summer 2014, stating: ***"We need to look at what are the arguments around the Trident upgrade, how soon does it have to happen and what are the alternatives, and I think that is the right way forward."***¹

Labour should remain open to a progressive nuclear weapons policy in its 2015 election manifesto.

This briefing paper outlines the contours of such an approach and responses to familiar concerns and criticisms. The political constraints on a 2015 Labour manifesto are very real, but we must reject the suggestion that the nuclear status-quo is a wise and acceptable choice for another generation.

A progressive UK nuclear policy is one that acknowledges the realities of an evolving nuclear security environment and the overwhelming British interest in serious progress towards nuclear disarmament. This means rethinking current notions of 'minimum nuclear deterrence' in terms of the size and operation of the UK's nuclear arsenal.

The rationale for such a nuclear course correction is clear:

1. The nuclear threat to the UK has diminished considerably since Trident was procured. Successive governments have all acknowledged we face no major direct existential nuclear threat to our survival and haven't since the early 1990s when we de-targeted our nuclear weapons. That is one third of the time we have been a nuclear weapon state.
2. A nuclear weapons-free world and the continued viability of the NPT are clear, long-term national interests. The UK has a responsibility to adjust its nuclear policy to reflect the declining utility of nuclear weapons when opportunities arise, like now.
3. It is incumbent upon government to align stretched defence resources to a suite of capabilities designed to respond to the threats and risk we are likely to face in the future. A like-for-like replacement of the Trident system for extremely unlikely nuclear scenarios does not represent sensible investment.

The reality of nuclear use

The UK has stipulated that it would only ever consider using nuclear weapons in “extreme circumstances of self-defence when the very survival of the state is at stake.”² Any conceivable use of nuclear weapons would cause unimaginable human suffering. The circumstances under which we would consider using nuclear weapons are extremely narrow and relate to a very small number of exotic scenarios involving an existential nuclear or possibly biological threat to the very survival of the state from a major power. The much-reduced salience of nuclear weapons provides a clear opportunity to further reduce the size and posture of our nuclear arsenal, or even relinquish nuclear weapons altogether.

The wider effect of a progressive nuclear policy

A UK decision to further reduce its minimum nuclear deterrence posture would demonstrate UK leadership as a progressive force in global politics. It would send a clear signal about the declining utility of nuclear weapons for a still-powerful, influential and activist country.

A progressive policy under Labour would reinforce the vital Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) and its norm of progress towards nuclear disarmament. A strong NPT is vital for British and global security, but its legitimacy is undermined by an indefinite discrimination between nuclear and non-nuclear weapon states. A British decision that maintains its current nuclear arsenal on permanent alert *can only* reinforce the value of nuclear weapons and weaken the treaty. Ending the continuous deployment of nuclear weapons would, at the very least, lend important support to the treaty.

The last Labour government worked hard to position Britain as a progressive policy leader in Europe, on climate change, on the global financial crisis, on global poverty and development aid, and on lifting the debt burden of the poorest countries, particularly in Africa. Labour needs a progressive nuclear weapons policy that supports this agenda.

The 2013 Trident Alternatives Review: rethinking permanent nuclear alert

A progressive nuclear weapons policy means rethinking current notions of ‘minimum deterrence’ by *ending the commitment to nuclear forces on permanent alert ready to launch a nuclear attack and further reducing the nuclear force on a path towards zero*. There is no compelling strategic rationale for continuous deployment of nuclear weapons. There is an opportunity to end this practice and to make additional reductions in the future stockpile of nuclear warheads.

This was reinforced by the government’s Trident Alternatives Review. It presented a hierarchy of nuclear postures at decreasing levels of operational readiness. It defined ‘focussed deterrence’ as a posture with ‘reduced readiness’ and the potential to return to continuous patrolling for a specific period against a specific adversary. Three postures at progressively further reduced readiness were also outlined: ‘sustained deterrence’, ‘responsive deterrence’, and ‘preserved deterrence’. The Review then applied these postures to four generic delivery systems: the Trident ballistic missile and submarine combination; a new cruise missile and warhead deployed aboard the UK’s new Astute-class attack submarines; a nuclear bomb, stealthy, or supersonic cruise missile for the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter the UK is procuring from the US; or a stealthy cruise missile for a new large aircraft. The Review concluded that “there are alternatives to Trident that would enable the UK to be capable of inflicting significant damage such that most potential adversaries around the world would be deterred”, though each of the systems had their weaknesses or concerns.³

The credibility of a progressive nuclear weapons policy

Ending continuous patrolling is not a radical idea. Former Chief of the Defence Staff Charles Guthrie, former Foreign Secretary David Owen, former Defence Secretaries Des Browne and Tom King, chair of Commons Defence Committee James Arbuthnot, and the late Sir Michael Quinlan, former Permanent Under Secretary at MoD, have all questioned the strategic necessity of continuous deployment of nuclear weapons.

The case for continuous patrolling rests on several problematic assumptions. It usually points to the possibility that an adversary might contemplate a pre-emptive strategic attack.

To do so, such a state would have to be absolutely confident that:

- 1) We could not retaliate, that all our nuclear warheads had been destroyed or rendered undeliverable by other means, at that point and for at least the foreseeable future;
- 2) The United States and other NATO allies would not respond; and
- 3) There would be sufficient advantage, measured against the negative military, economic, political and diplomatic consequences.

Some argue that a decision to re-instate continuous patrols in crisis would risk unintentional escalation leading to heightened chances of conflict. But any decision to sail a nuclear-armed submarine would be part of a major and general mobilisation of the UK's armed forces in the context of an existential military threat to the survival of the state. The political signals to an adversary would go far beyond the sailing of a single nuclear-armed submarine.

Electoral support

Nuclear weapons policy may not weigh heavily with the electorate at present, but this could change. The SNP will seek to use the issue for its own symbolic messaging in the Scottish referendum in September 2014, and the Liberal Democrats may see electoral advantage in raising the issue to distance themselves from the Conservatives in the 2015 General Election. This in turn opens up the question of where Labour stands.

The majority of the public want the UK to 'step down the nuclear ladder' and perceive Cold War rationales for UK nuclear weapons as 'out of touch'. This creates political space for sensible policy innovation. Labour has a clear opportunity to break from the past by prioritising smart defence, significantly reducing reliance on nuclear weapons, and demonstrating international leadership on progress towards a world free of nuclear weapons.

A survey of over 20 opinion polls on Trident since 2004 suggest UK public opinion has moved from majority support for replacing Trident on a like-for-like basis to a much more fluid picture. Majorities *against* replacing Trident tend to increase when respondents are presented with the government's recapitalisation cost of £20-25bn.⁴

The picture is complicated by the introduction in some polls of a third option of a smaller, cheaper alternative to a like-for-like replacement of the current system. Data from these polls suggest a clear majority wanting a smaller, cheaper system or no replacement at all.

The polls also demonstrate that women, younger people and non-Conservative voters are more inclined to think nuclear weapons make the UK a less safe place to live and favour a more progressive nuclear weapons policy.

US perceptions

A progressive nuclear policy would not undermine the UK's commitment to NATO or the 'special relationship'. What appears to really concern the United States is the impact of cuts to the UK's conventional armed forces. The New York Times reported in April 2013 a 'senior American official' stating "Either they [the UK] can be a nuclear power and nothing else or a real military partner".⁵

The 'specialness' of the relationship with Washington, however defined, is characterised by common values, language, alliance and history, economic trade and investment, intelligence cooperation, and interoperable conventional military capabilities. Even as Washington's strategic focus shifts from the European to the Pacific theatre, it stretches credibility to envisage an abrupt disentangling of institutionalised defence and intelligence arrangements that have endured for so long on the basis of a decision to reduce the size and alert status of our nuclear weapons.

A progressive nuclear policy aligned with current defence policy

The armed services are increasingly opting for flexible, multi-use capabilities. The 2010 Strategic Defence and Security Review divided the planned 'Future Force 2020' into four categories of readiness: the deployed force; the high readiness force; the low readiness force' and extended readiness. The review stated, "we will hold some capabilities at what is known as extended readiness. The capabilities... will be capable of being reconstituted if we have strategic notice of possible, but low probability, events to which we might have to respond to protect our national security."⁶ Over time the nuclear force could be re-categorised as part of the high, low, or even extended readiness force.

The UK could, for example, maintain a reduced stockpile of Trident warheads ashore at RNAD Coulport. Procedures could be tested during annual exercises to re-mate warheads with missiles and redeploy aboard a submarine. A new fleet of two or three ballistic missile submarines would routinely engage in other non-nuclear activities and operational missions. Other credible options have also been explored.⁷

Parts of the US nuclear arsenal have already been operated in this way, demonstrating that it isits operational practicability achievable.

Final word

A global nuclear status quo is not an option: the nuclear weapons world will evolve. Pressure for serious progress toward nuclear disarmament is increasing as non-nuclear-weapon states become ever more frustrated with slow progress by the nuclear-weapon states. The non-nuclear weapon states are looking for significant steps that will radically devalue nuclear weapons in the security policies of the weapon states, and as a result are resisting additional, important non-proliferation measures. The non-nuclear-weapon states elicited commitments at the 2010 NPT Review Conference when, in the meeting's final document, the treaty parties, including the UK, formally agreed "[t]o further diminish the role and significance of nuclear weapons in all military and security concepts, doctrines and policies" as part of a 64-point action plan.⁸

Dr. Nick Ritchie

Dr Nick Ritchie is a Lecturer in International Security at the Department of Politics, University of York. His current research focuses on UK nuclear weapons policy, nuclear disarmament, and national security. He previously worked as a Research Fellow at the Department of Peace Studies, University of Bradford, and as a researcher on international security issues at the Oxford Research Group. Recent publications include *A Nuclear Weapons-Free World? Britain, Trident and the Challenges Ahead* (Palgrave, 2013), and "Valuing and Devaluing Nuclear Weapons" (*Contemporary Security Policy* 34: 1, 2013).

WMD Awareness

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BASIC (British American security Information Council) is a small think tank based in Whitehall, London and in downtown Washington DC taking a uniquely non-partisan, dialogue-based and inclusive approach to promoting global nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation. We look for ways to build constructive engagement between individuals from different geographical, political or cultural backgrounds on traditionally sensitive or complex issues. And we create space for new and diverse perspectives. In the UK we set up and run the BASIC Trident Commission, intending to report in the summer of 2014, and which is co-chaired by Sir Malcom Rifkind, alongside Lord Browne of Ladyton and Sir Menzies Campbell. We also operate throughout Europe and the Middle East. www.basicint.org

Reducing the readiness of nuclear forces, or "de-alerting", is part of a package of measures long advocated by non-nuclear-weapon states to diminish the role of nuclear weapons. Ending continuous at-sea deterrence in the UK and adopting a "reduced readiness" posture with a smaller arsenal as part of a firm commitment to a world free of nuclear weapons would constitute an important qualitative change in nuclear posture.

The UK has taken a number of valuable concrete steps in the direction of disarmament over the past two decades. An opportunity now exists for the UK to continue on this trajectory and demonstrate international leadership. This is eminently plausible in an era of negligible strategic military threats to the survival of the UK.

The political moment is ripe for a Labour leadership to fashion a progressive 21st century defence policy that reduces reliance on the threat of indiscriminate nuclear violence for national security. It comes at a time when the strategic rationales for nuclear business-as-usual are thin, the opportunity costs for the armed forces are significant, public opinion is ambivalent or hostile to the replacement programme, and the commitment to the NPT and a desire to exercise leadership on nuclear disarmament is strong. The next Labour government should pursue a progressive nuclear weapons policy as the next step down the nuclear ladder towards a world free of nuclear weapons.

- 1 Northwest Evening Mail, "Work Needed on Sub Plans", 5 October 2012. Available at <www.nwemail.co.uk/news/work-needed-on-sub-plans-1.1002640?referrerPath=> and defencemanagement.com that reports on Miliband's comments at a Labour fringe meeting available at <www.defencemanagement.com/news_story.asp?id=21058>.
- 2 For example, House of Commons Defence Committee, *The Future of the UK's Strategic Nuclear Deterrent: The Strategic Context: The Government's Response to the Committee's Eighth Report of 2005-06*, HC 1558, (London: HMSO, 2006), p. 3.
- 3 Cabinet Office, *Trident Alternatives Review*, July 2013, p. 10.
- 4 Nick Ritchie and Paul Ingram, *Trident in UK Politics and Public Opinion*, briefing paper, BASIC, London, July 2013.
- 5 Stephen Erlander, "Shrinking Europe military spending stirs concern" *New York Times*, 22 April 2013.
- 6 Cabinet Office, *Securing Britain in an Age of Uncertainty: Strategic Defence and Security Review*, Cm 7948 (London: HMSO, 2010), p. 20.
- 7 Nick Ritchie, 'Stepping down the nuclear ladder: options for Trident on a path to zero', briefing paper, University of Bradford, 2009; Malcolm Chalmers, 'Continuous at-sea deterrence: costs and alternatives', briefing note, RUSI, London, 2010; Toby Fenwick, 'Dropping the bomb: a post-Trident future', Centre Forum, London, 2010.
- 8 2010 Review Conference of States Parties to the Treaty of the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, Final Document (Volume 1), NPT/CONF.2010/50 (Vol. I), New York, 2010, p. 21.