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A Conservative approach to the forthcoming debate on Trident

A briefing by Rt Hon Sir Malcolm Rifkind - February 2014

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Introduction

Although the final decision to renew the UK's nuclear deterrent is not due to be taken until 2016, during the next Parliament, it was during the previous Parliament that the lengthy process of authorising and establishing the process of renewal was initiated.

In December 2006, Tony Blair's Government published a White Paper entitled *The Future of the United Kingdom's Nuclear Deterrent*, in which it argued that although there was no existing or imminent nuclear threat to the vital interests of the United Kingdom, 'there are risks that, over the next 20 to 50 years, a major direct nuclear threat to the UK or our NATO Allies might re-emerge.'

In March 2007, the House of Commons endorsed the general principle that the UK should retain a strategic nuclear deterrent.

The Coalition Government's Strategic Defence and Security Review of October 2010 endorsed the 2006 White Paper's analysis of a potential future threat, arguing that 'only a credible nuclear capability can provide the necessary ultimate guarantee to our national security'. It concluded that the UK strategic nuclear deterrent would be retained, albeit with a reduced nuclear stockpile, including fewer operational warheads and fewer operational launch tubes.

Rt Hon Sir Malcolm Rifkind

In 1979, Malcolm Rifkind was appointed a Minister in Margaret Thatcher's first Government, serving first in the Scottish Office and then, at the time of the Falklands War, in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, where he became Minister of State in 1983.

He became a member of the Cabinet in 1986 as Secretary of State for Scotland. In 1990 he served as Secretary of State for Transport and in 1992 Secretary of State for Defence. He was Foreign Secretary between 1995 and 1997. He was one of four ministers to serve throughout the whole of both the Thatcher and Major premierships.

Malcolm Rifkind was re-elected as a Member of Parliament in May 2005 for the constituency of Kensington & Chelsea, and in 2010 for the new constituency of Kensington. He is currently serving as the Chairman of the Intelligence and Security Committee, which oversees the UK's intelligence agencies.

In May 2011, the Coalition published its Initial Gate Parliamentary Report, a review to assess the feasibility of the renewal programme. Although approval at this stage does not commit the Government to a final investment decision, due in 2016 (known as “Main-Gate”), it did envisage the procurement of certain long lead items, such as nuclear reactors, that would have to be in place for when the final decision is taken.

It was also announced concomitantly with the Initial Gate report that a review would be conducted under the aegis of Liberal Democrat ministers to examine potential alternatives to renewing Trident on a like-for-like basis. The Alternatives Review was published in 2013.

The Alternatives Review

The Alternatives Review was a creature of coalition, borne of the differences between the coalition parties and their electoral commitments.

The Conservative Party manifesto for the 2010 General Election declared that ‘We support the decision to renew Britain’s submarine-based nuclear deterrent, based on the Trident missile system.’ This commitment is reflected in the 2010 SDSR, which forms the basis of Government policy.

The Liberal Democrat manifesto took a more equivocal line, aided by creative use of the bold function on their keyboards: ‘We will strive for nuclear disarmament, showing leadership by **committing not to replace the Trident nuclear weapons system** on a like-for-like basis.’ (their emphasis)

In this short briefing for the WMD Awareness Programme, I shall outline the likely parameters of the debate ahead of the 2015 election, giving passing consideration to factors of cost, security and public opinion.

I shall argue that the Conservative Party’s support for renewing Trident on a like-for-like basis is the most convincing policy, even in the context of a post-Cold War world and present pressures on the public finances. Furthermore, it is my contention that both the process and the outcome of the Alternatives Review have strengthened, not weakened, the Conservative case to the public.

Whereas the passage in bold suggested to the casual reader outright hostility to renewal, the surreptitious ‘on a like-for-like basis’ allowed room for compromise. Although the Liberal Democrats are notionally fully subscribed to Government policy as outlined in the SDSR, it was agreed that a study into the costs, feasibility and credibility of alternative systems and postures would be undertaken.

The study was conducted by the Cabinet Office and overseen by Liberal Democrat ministers (first the former Lib Dem Defence Minister Sir Nick Harvey, and then Danny Alexander, the Chief Secretary to the Treasury). It did not make recommendations, and does not constitute Government policy. Its raison d’être was to find plausible alternatives to like-for-like renewal, in order to help members of the Government to identify reasons not to support Government policy.

Given the political context, it is striking just how unconvincing the review's authors appear to have found so many of those alternatives. Alternative platforms or systems to submarine-launched Trident missiles are given short shrift. Aircraft deployed with missiles would be vulnerable to attack prior to launch. Maritime cruise missiles would be more vulnerable to launch than Trident missiles launched from submarines as they would have to deploy closer to the target. Cruise's limited range would mean either there would be areas that the deterrent could not reach, or forward bases would have to be secured, raising doubts as to guaranteeing the ability to deploy. The improving missile defence systems of other countries would also raise doubts about any British deterrent's credibility.

Most damningly, to procure and develop a convincing nuclear cruise missile system, with all the flaws outlined above, would likely not be deliverable before 2040, meaning that in the meantime Britain would have to procure a small capability based on their existing systems for the interim period. This interim system, in addition to the costs of developing a new system, would make any new system prohibitively expensive in relation to straightforward renewal as envisaged in the 2010 SDSR.

It is no surprise therefore that the report's Liberal Democrat patrons should instead focus on the more credible possibility of an alternative nuclear posture, namely whether the UK should maintain a continuous-at-sea deterrent (CASD). As Danny Alexander argued in the House of Commons upon the review's publication:

The review presents a much greater opportunity for change and the consideration of alternative postures, and that in turn presents the possibility of maintaining our nuclear deterrent capability with fewer submarines.

This is where the real opportunity resides for making long-term savings, for recalibrating our policy to the requirements of our age, and [...] for contributing to nuclear disarmament [...].

We can afford to go much further in de-alerting our nuclear deterrent. The option of non-continuous deterrence does not threaten current security, and by changing postures we can reduce cost at the same time. For example, ending CASD and procuring one fewer successor submarine would make a saving of about £4 billion over the life of the system.

Many of those - including a number of Members of Parliament - who wish for the unilateral abandonment of a British nuclear deterrent expressed dismay that what they regard to be the ultimate alternative was not given consideration. However this reflects the reality of the debate: none of the three parties with a plausible chance of participating in Government in the next Parliament when the final procurement decision is to be taken support or appear to be tempted by a policy of unilateral disarmament.

Instead, the debate ahead of 2015 will be focused on a narrower series of questions regarding Britain's nuclear posture, namely: Does the financial saving outlined by Mr Alexander justify the increase in risk involved in moving away from a non-continuous posture? Is it wise to dispose of the means of returning to a CASD posture? What options are the public most likely to support? They are questions to which I shall now turn.

Costs

Money will always be a factor when making a decision about whether to retain a nuclear deterrent, but cannot be the only one. But although states must operate within their means, if one is convinced that nuclear weapons contribute to the country's security, then this consideration should be given precedence. £100 billion is the figure most commonly cited by those who oppose the renewal of Trident. As a recent CND press release pronounced, 'The total cost of a replacement for Trident would be over £100 billion. At this time of cuts to jobs, housing and public services think what else Trident's £100 billion could be spent on!'

The casual reader might assume that the 'cost of a replacement for Trident' means an upfront cost to pay for the equipment necessary to be able to operate an independent nuclear deterrent in future. An upfront cost could therefore be translated into an upfront saving, preserving resources that might be reallocated to other areas of public spending.

This is highly misleading. The £100 billion figure is broadly plausible, so long as it is made clear to what it is referring to. The cost of procuring and operating a Trident nuclear deterrent over its estimated lifetime, i.e. taking a "Main Gate" decision in 2016 to renew a system that would be operational until 2062, is estimated by Professor Keith Hartley of the University of York at £87 billion. That figure is front-loaded, as the current capital costs of the successor programme that began in 2007 (developing and building the new system) are estimated at £15-20 billion. Operating Trident costs approximately £2 billion a year, which constitutes about 5% of the annual defence budget - a proportion that the MOD has confirmed will remain broadly stable under the new system.

However a decision not to renew would not make any operating savings immediately available – indeed decommissioning costs could almost certainly make cancelling Trident the more expensive option in the short-term. It may be reasonable to wish to ease current austerity, but cancelling Trident would not enable you to do it.

As with any figures regarding public spending, it is important to put them in their proper context. Operating an independent nuclear deterrent, as currently constituted, is estimated to cost around £2 billion a year. In 2011-2012, total public spending by the UK government was about £665 billion, with about £121 billion spent on health care, about £91 billion on education, about £39 billion on defence and about £6 billion on energy and climate policy.

As I have already argued, the nub of the debate ahead of 2015 is the specific question of Britain's nuclear posture, as raised by the Alternatives Review. The first argument cited by Danny Alexander in outlining the rationale for a change is the financial saving of £4 billion over the new system's lifetime that would be engendered by renewing with three submarines as opposed to four, operating on a non-continuous basis.

It might reasonably be argued that £4 billion is a considerable amount of money. But given that the new system is estimated to expire around 2062, as the former Defence Secretary Liam Fox has pointed out, the saving of £4 billion cited by Mr Alexander is the equivalent to less than two weeks' spending on the national health service, or six days of what is spent on pensions and welfare, and would be made over a 34 to 50-year period: 'For that infinitesimally small saving over a 50-year period, they would abandon a crucial element of our national security – a very interesting definition of value for money.'

Security Implications

The conviction that a change in posture would increase risk in exchange for derisory financial benefit forms the basis for Conservative objections to the Lib Dem proposals. Whether one finds these objections convincing will depend to a great extent on whether one accepts Mr Alexander's other assertions, namely that their policy is better suited to present international circumstances, and that as a de-escalatory measure would have no impact on British security, whilst encouraging global non-proliferation efforts.

It is claimed by some opponents of renewal that the history of the UK's nuclear capability is that of an inability to come to terms with its diminished status and influence in a changing world. However its purpose is not to maintain prestige. Successive generations of leaders have concluded that it is a cost-effective means of ensuring protection from the nuclear weapons held by others, and from any attempt at nuclear blackmail that those who possess nuclear weapons might contemplate in future. That is the bottom line of any decision to renew, and it is an argument that all major political parties have accepted.

Danny Alexander has described his proposals as an opportunity for 'recalibrating our policy to the requirements of our age'. However this assertion is based on the misconception that Britain has hitherto failed to adapt to changing international circumstances, particularly after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War. This could not be further from the truth. After the Cold War, Britain adopted the policy of maintaining a minimum nuclear deterrent. As Defence Secretary in the 1990s, I played a part in the dramatic reduction in the scale and nature of Britain's nuclear capabilities, including a large reduction in warheads, scrapping tactical nuclear weapons, scrapping our capability to drop free-fall nuclear bombs from aircraft, and detargetting our submarines (Mr Alexander's claim that Britain's submarines are on a 'hairtrigger' is factually incorrect).

These decisions were taken not just to encourage others to do the same, but because it was decided that it was the right thing to do, and because Britain could afford to do so. But they were taken on the understanding that what remained, namely a sea-based deterrent, would retain its credibility. This is more important for Britain than for other major nuclear powers, including allies such as France and the United States, because unlike those countries it has no other platform with which to provide deterrence capability.

Moving to a non-continuous posture risks the deterrent's credibility by making the submarines or their access to the open seas vulnerable to a pre-emptive strike that could incapacitate the boats themselves or make it impossible for them to be deployed. This kind of vulnerability is precisely the reason that the Alternatives Review ruled out alternative systems such as aircraft and maritime cruise missiles.

Nor is it certain that moving to a continuous posture would contribute to a de-escalation in international tensions in the long-term. It is argued that Britain's submarines would move to a non-continuous posture during periods of reduced tension, but that they could return to continuous patrols if necessary. However this could force Britain to take what might be perceived by others as an escalatory step just at the time when it is most dangerous to be seen to be doing so, increasing tensions or even inviting a pre-emptive attack.

One might argue that the decision to deploy in such circumstances might have a de-escalatory effect, as moving back to a continuous posture would help deter any potential adversary.

But aside from the fact that with three submarines this would no longer be possible over a sustained period, this illustrates a key problem with the idea that moving to a non-continuous posture constitutes, in layman's terms, a move from being 'more aggressive' to being 'less aggressive', as befits present international circumstances. It is better understood as moving from being 'more predictable' to being 'less predictable'. This is likely to have negative ramifications for stability, and therefore to result in an increase in risk.

Nor should it be assumed that a marginal adjustment in nuclear posture would give a serious boost to global disarmament efforts, or to Britain's influence in that process. The measures it took in the 1990s had no impact on the decisions taken by other nuclear weapons states, nor did they encourage those pursuing nuclear aspirations not to do so. It stretches credibility that an adjustment of nuclear posture would have any more of an impact.

The key distinction is that between unilateral and multilateral steps towards global disarmament. I have for some time advocated moving towards a world without nuclear weapons. However moves to make this possible are primarily the responsibility of the two major nuclear powers, the United States and Russia, who despite significant achievements in reducing their nuclear arsenals still possess 95% of the world's nuclear warheads. It is through further progress in bilateral reductions of American and Russian nuclear stockpiles that new life can be breathed into wider multilateral efforts.

A diminished commitment to maintaining a credible deterrent may also have wider implications for Britain's relationship with its NATO allies, as well as for the alliance itself. NATO reaffirmed in 2010 the centrality of its collective nuclear capabilities. However the alliance is presently under deep strain. Disillusioned and exhausted after ten years in Afghanistan, and with austerity biting, there has been a softening of the European commitment to NATO (not including the UK, France, and a number of other countries), raising serious concerns in the United States.

As the SNP are finding out to their discomfort, it is one thing to decide not to obtain nuclear weapons in the first place, but another to remove from service a deterrent that has already been committed to collective security efforts. Every state has the right to do as it sees fit with their own deterrent, but any such decision will inevitably have consequences. An abrogation or weakening of the United Kingdom's commitments it has made to share NATO's nuclear burden would in my view make the United States seriously question its commitments to Europe and to the United Kingdom in particular, endangering the future viability of NATO in the process.

It is unlikely that replacing a credible and predictable nuclear deterrent with one that is less credible and more erratic in its deployment would serve British security or international stability. A marginal increase in risk might be acceptable if it was in exchange for a very substantial financial saving, but as has already been demonstrated, this would not be the case.

Public Opinion

It would be wrong for the prospect of electoral gain to encourage political leaders to take any decision contrary to their perception of what best serves the UK's fundamental national security. But it is only right and natural, in a democracy, that public opinion and the electoral context should be given due consideration when taking a decision of such magnitude.

Politicians must consider two subtly different factors when trying to ascertain how the public will react to the adoption of certain policies. The first is what the public think of the policies themselves. The second is how the adoption of a specific policy might affect the public's perception of their party.

When it comes to the specific question of renewing Trident, the latter consideration is not so much a concern for the Tories, who have traditionally been unequivocal in their support for renewal. It is more of a concern for the Labour Party, for whom even hints of doveishness remind the electorate of past unilateralist tendencies and other doses of electoral hemlock the party imbibed in the 1980s. It is also more important, electorally speaking, for the Liberal Democrats, who wish to demonstrate to their supporters and to the wider electorate that as a junior coalition partner that they can have a substantive influence on Government policy.

As I have already outlined, of the three simplified options regarding the future of the nuclear deterrent, namely 'keep', 'scrap', or 'downgrade', the positions adopted by the three main parties mean that the nub of the present debate is about the desirability and viability of proposals to downgrade our present capability by moving to a non-continuous deterrent operated by three as opposed to four submarines.

In order to take this into account, a recent study of public opinion by YouGov yielded interesting results by following a standard question about support for the three main options with a forced-choice or 'squeeze' question which asked respondents what their view would be 'If the government decided there is no cheaper alternative'.

Prior to the squeeze question, 32% of respondents supported renewal on a like-for-like basis, 34% thought the United Kingdom should try to find a cheaper system for keeping nuclear weapons, and 20% thought the UK should give up nuclear weapons altogether. 14% didn't know. If the government decided there was no cheaper alternative, 56% would support like-for-like renewal, 29% would support cancellation, and 15% didn't know. In other words, when unconvinced of the alternatives, two thirds of those who supported a downgrade on the grounds of cost swung behind like-for-like renewal, meaning an over two-to-one margin in favour.

This trend was even more pronounced amongst Conservative supporters, for whom the squeeze question encouraged 79% to support renewal from 49%, and only 13% supporting cancellation, from 8%.

The study also showed that respondents tended to greatly overestimate the costs of maintaining the nuclear deterrent. When asked to estimate the annual cost of maintaining the present nuclear deterrent, 71% overestimated its cost, with the mean average estimate by respondents at £15 billion. Upon being given the real figure for the period in question, about £2 billion in 2011-12, support for finding a cheaper system fell particularly strongly amongst supporters of the Liberal Democrats, from 47% to 31%, with support for like-for-like renewal rising from 12% to 24%. Those of a less charitable disposition towards to our Liberal Democrat coalition partners might appreciate one of the study's sub-headings, 'A notable flexibility in Lib Dem attitudes'.

Conclusion

The key to securing public support at the next General Election for like-for-like renewal is to win the argument regarding Britain's future nuclear posture. The Alternatives Review, established in order to allow senior Liberal Democrats to demonstrate to their supporters their commitment to identifying a means not to renew Trident on a like-for-like basis, has in fact strengthened the Conservative position.

By demonstrating how unconvincing the alternatives to like-for-like renewal really are, Conservatives can justly argue not only that the study has strengthened their case, but also that far from being anachronistic or demonstrating a reflexive opposition to change, their policy remains relevant and proportionate to the circumstances of the present, as well as providing greater assurances for the future.

The public has adopted the utterly reasonable position that they support renewal, but that they wish to be convinced that there is no cheaper way of doing so. They are more likely to be persuaded once they have been informed of the costs of maintaining the present system, and the meagre savings proposed by those who advocate renewal with three submarines.

It is up to supporters of the Government's position to make the case that any savings envisaged under a shift in nuclear posture are minimal, and do not justify the concomitant increase in risk. Given the strength of their case, this is eminently possible.

WMD Awareness

We are a UK-based coalition led by a small staff team and a steering group of representatives from our partner organisations. We raise awareness of nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction, giving a fresh perspective on the debate by encouraging young people to get involved and have their say. For more information on our activities please visit our website:

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BASIC

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.

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