



## In Brief: The Trident White Paper

Standard Note: SN/IA/4199

Last updated: 8 March 2007

Author: Claire Taylor and Tim Youngs

International Affairs and Defence Section

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The Government's White Paper on *The Future of the United Kingdom's Nuclear Deterrent* (Cm 6994) was published on 4 December 2006.<sup>1</sup>

This note sets out the main points and decisions outlined in that paper. A discussion of the wider issues associated with the replacement of Trident including assessments of the future security environment, the UK's international treaty obligations, alternative procurement options, potential costs and public opinion, is available in Library Research Paper [RP06/53, \*The Future of the British Nuclear Deterrent\*](#), 3 November 2006.

A list of suggested reading is also available in Library Standard Note [SN/IA/4207, \*The Future of the British Nuclear Deterrent: Suggested Reading\*](#), 8 March 2007.

### Main Points of the White Paper

- Threats to the UK's national security have changed since the Cold War. However, it is not possible to accurately predict the global security environment over the next 20 to 50 years. The emergence of a direct nuclear threat to the UK's strategic interests at some point in the future, from either an existing nuclear weapon state or a new nuclear weapon state, cannot be ruled out. Equally, there is a risk that some countries may in future seek to sponsor nuclear terrorism from within their own borders. As such the international security environment does not justify complete UK nuclear disarmament.
- The UK has used its nuclear capability only to deter blackmail and acts of aggression against its vital interests, never to coerce others. The retention of a nuclear deterrent will ensure that the UK can continue to take action to maintain regional and global security. The UK would consider using nuclear weapons only in self-defence (including in defence of its NATO allies), and even then only in extreme circumstances. In order to maintain ambiguity about when the deterrent might be used, the Government will not rule out the first use of nuclear weapons.
- Renewing the UK's minimum nuclear deterrent capability is considered to be fully consistent with the UK's international obligations. Article VI of the nuclear Non-

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<sup>1</sup> A copy of the White Paper is available online at:  
<http://www.mod.uk/DefenceInternet/AboutDefence/CorporatePublications/PolicyStrategyandPlanning/DefenceWhitePaper2006Cm6994.htm>

Proliferation Treaty does not establish any timetable for nuclear disarmament and does not prohibit maintenance or updating of existing capabilities.

- Other states continue to retain large nuclear arsenals and some are being modernised. The UK will continue to press for multilateral negotiations towards mutual, balanced and verifiable reductions by all nuclear weapon states. To demonstrate the Government's commitment to a minimum capability, the UK stockpile of operationally available warheads will be reduced from fewer than 200 as set out in the 1998 Strategic Defence Review, to fewer than 160. This represents a 20% reduction and a corresponding reduction will be made in the size of the overall stockpile.
- Retaining a submarine-based system will provide the most effective deterrent; whilst no credible alternative will be cheaper. The UK's independent nuclear deterrent will therefore be maintained through the design and manufacture of a new class of submarine. The intention is for the submarines to be manufactured domestically, although this will be dependent upon the credibility of proposals from British industry, including value for money. The UK will participate in the current US service-life extension programme for the Trident II D5 missile, which will be deployed aboard the new class of submarine until the early 2040s. The UK will also retain the option of participating in any US-led successor programme to the Trident II D5 missile. The existing ability to deploy up to 48 warheads on a submarine on deterrent patrol at any one time will remain unchanged; whilst it is regarded as essential that the UK's future deterrent capability remains fully operationally independent.
- The UK's existing nuclear deterrent will begin to leave service in the early 2020s. The Government estimates that it will take approximately 17 years to design, manufacture and commission a replacement submarine. A decision on doing so, therefore, must be taken in 2007 if a gap in deterrence is to be avoided. Consequently, detailed concept work is expected to commence in spring 2007, with a view to placing a contract for the manufacture of the submarines between 2012 and 2014. The White Paper suggests that the "design of the new SSBNs will maximise the degree of commonality with other in-service submarines where this can be done in a cost-effective manner".<sup>2</sup> It does not, however, provide any specific analysis of the potential options for the design of a new class of submarine, including the possibility of converting the Astute-class submarine to deploy the Trident II D5 missile, and any successor system.
- The UK's existing nuclear warhead design will remain effective until the mid 2020s. It is unclear at present whether the in-service period of that warhead can be extended through refurbishment, or whether a replacement warhead will need to be developed. A decision on the warhead is likely to be necessary in the next Parliament.
- The UK's policy of continuous-at-sea-deterrence (CASD) will be maintained in order to assure the invulnerability of the deterrent. However, there may be some scope within the design of a new platform and the requisite operating, manning, training and

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<sup>2</sup> *The Future of the United Kingdom's Nuclear Deterrent*, Cm 6994, p.25

support arrangements for reducing the number of platforms from four to three. The possibility of this option will become more apparent when detailed information on the design of the submarine becomes available.

- The procurement costs of a successor system, including the new platform and associated equipment and infrastructure, are expected to be in the region of £15-20bn (at 2006/07 prices). The years of maximum expenditure are expected to be principally 2012-2027. In-service costs for the deterrent between 2020 and 2050, including the cost of maintaining the AWE infrastructure, are expected to be broadly the same as at present i.e. 5-6% of the defence budget. However, more accurate cost estimates are expected to become available once a contract for the detailed design of the submarines is placed.

### **Next Steps**

- There will be a debate and vote in the House on 14 March 2007 on whether the UK should retain a strategic nuclear deterrent beyond the life of the current system.
- A decision on the refurbishment or replacement of the warhead will be required in the next Parliament.
- A decision on the number of submarine platforms to be procured will be taken once more detailed information on their design becomes available.
- A contract for the submarines will be placed between 2012 and 2014. A decision on whether the submarines will be manufactured in the UK will be taken in the lead up to this contract placement.
- A decision on participating in any US programme to develop a successor to the Trident II D5 missile system is unlikely to be necessary until the 2020s.