



What is Trident?

What is this Trident anyway?

Trident is Britain's nuclear weapons system. It is made up of four nuclear submarines. Each sub carries up to 8 missiles on board, and each missile carries up to 5 nuclear bombs (warheads) on top. Each of these bombs is around eight times as destructive as the bomb which flattened Hiroshima in 1945, killing over 140,000 civilians. One Trident submarine patrols the seas at all times.

Why does the government want to replace it?

Because the whole system will wear out sometime between 2025 and 2030.

What do they want to replace it with?

A very similar submarine-based system. Due to the Liberal Democrats being opposed to a like-for-like replacement, the Coalition Agreement with the Conservatives signed in 2010 defers any decision on replacing Trident until 2016. In the meantime, a Lib Dem-led Cabinet Office review is looking into the alternatives.

So when will we get a chance to see what the alternatives are?

The latest we've heard is that the review will be completed in 'the first half of 2013'. Even then we might not get to see all of it. The government initially said there were no plans to make it public – on national security grounds of course. They've since said that it will be published – but it will most likely be censored. The Tories are already trying to rubbish the review and they're spending a lot of money on their preferred replacement system, even though a final parliamentary decision hasn't been taken yet.

How much money is this costing?

The government has announced that £3.9 billion will be spent on the replacement submarine programme before 2016. Additionally, there is a £1 billion annual bill for the atomic weapons establishment at Aldermaston. We're also seeing rising annual costs at this facility – with new infrastructure being built including warhead facilities and high explosives plants.

So how much money would a new system cost in total?

No one knows exactly – but £25–30 billion just to build the subs. Then the running costs will be around £3bn a year for 30 years or so: amounting to more than £100 billion in total. That doesn't

include the decommissioning cost: which is estimated to be about £25bn. It also excludes the cost of replacing the warheads – a decision on this would be taken in 2019. This says nothing of inflation which will of course push these figures right up. This money would be better spent on employing more nurses and teachers, developing clean energy or scrapping tuition fees.

Who will this new Trident defend us against?

No-one seems to have an answer to this. It will be useless against terrorists who are supposed to be the new threat. The Soviet Union, the enemy when Britain developed its first nuclear weapon, has long since disappeared. No other country is threatening to use nuclear weapons against us: North Korea doesn't have a deliverable nuclear warhead, and Iran doesn't have anything but enriched uranium.

Surely it is an insurance policy for an uncertain future?

This is just what the government says. But it is a very odd insurance policy, which actually increases the risks that it is supposed to protect us against.

What do you mean?

If Britain shows the world that we think our security depends on us having nuclear weapons far into the future, then other countries without them will want them too. So the dangers of accidents or crises increase. India and Pakistan are less secure with nuclear weapons today than they were when they did not have them.

Why not just cut down the destructive power we now have to a lower level?

Reductions are good as a first step forward, but they do not solve the problem when one bomb alone can kill hundreds of thousands of people. Even a 'small' nuclear exchange would kill millions. It would have a devastating impact on the world's climate, resulting in a major drop in temperature leaving large parts of the world's agricultural land unable to produce crops, so millions more would starve. No matter how few or how many nuclear weapons countries have, while they exist at all other countries will try to get them too. The only way to be really safe is to abolish all nuclear weapons. This is what the majority of the countries in the world and their people want.

Have any countries actually got rid of their nuclear weapons?

Yes: South Africa dismantled its nuclear arsenal entirely between 1989 and 1993. Ukraine, Kazakhstan, and Belarus gave up their nuclear weapons following the break-up of the Soviet Union.

How many countries now have nuclear weapons?

At least eight, and possibly nine. They have over 20,000 nuclear warheads between them. Nearly all those warheads have more destructive power than the bomb which destroyed Hiroshima in 1945 and killed over 140,000 civilians.

Have there ever been accidents or moments of tension when nuclear weapons might have been used?

There have been plenty of dangerous accidents and several moments of crisis when leaders or military advisors wanted to use them. We have, says Robert McNamara, who was once in charge of US nuclear policy, been very lucky. It is not a luck which can hold out forever.

So what's this nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty then?

It was signed in 1968 and it agreed three things:

1. That every signatory is entitled to have civilian nuclear energy.
2. That those without the bomb at the time would not try to get it.
3. That those five countries then with the bomb would negotiate the elimination of all nuclear weapons.

So is Iran in violation of the NPT?

No – but it may be in violation of a subsequent voluntary agreement entered into with the International Atomic Energy Agency about inspections.

Are the countries with nuclear weapons in violation of the NPT?

Yes, since no negotiations aimed at the abolition of nuclear weapons have ever even started. All we have had are negotiations aimed at good housekeeping of nuclear arsenals – not so many nuclear weapons, rules about test explosions, and agreements not to put them into space, for instance.

Has the International Court of Justice had anything to say about all this?

Certainly. In 1996 the judges of the Court said unanimously that 'there is an obligation to pursue in good faith and bring to a

conclusion negotiations leading to nuclear disarmament in all its aspects under strict and effective international control'.

How does that ruling affect Trident replacement?

For Britain to decide to replace Trident, and at the same time refuse to start abolition negotiations, it cannot possibly demonstrate the 'good faith' demanded by the International Court judges. Trident replacement will mean Britain possessing nuclear weapons until nearly 2060 – 90 years after we agreed to disarm!

How could negotiations on abolition start?

Easily, with enough political will. There is already a detailed draft treaty, a model Nuclear Weapons Convention, lodged with the UN which could be the basis for starting discussions. This would ban all nuclear weapons and it covers all the difficult issues: such as observation, inspection on demand, verification, control of nuclear material and criminality.

Does that mean that international inspectors might want to have a look at the British bomb factory at Aldermaston or the nuclear submarine base at Faslane in Scotland?

Of course. In our global world, threats – disease, climate change, shortage of water and energy sources, the danger of war, and especially nuclear war – are all global. Solutions have to be global as well. This country cannot be above the law, even though we tried to be with the Iraq war.

Why don't abolition negotiations start?

There are already moves in that direction. But there are still many people who do not realise that to start abolition negotiations is perfectly possible. Many of the top people in countries with nuclear weapons still think of them as status symbols or even as useable weapons of war. It is like storing dynamite in your cellar as a means of protecting yourself against burglars. You will go up with the burglar. Wherever and whenever nuclear weapons are used, they will release radioactive and dangerous material which will go wherever the wind takes it.

So is it time to start?

Of course! We must begin by telling the world now that we are not going to replace our existing Trident system when it comes to the end of its life AND that we are going to call for the start of nuclear weapon abolition negotiations immediately.

