

The Politics of British Nuclear Disarmament

Tim Street

15 October 2015

Introduction

The post-election debate on replacing the UK's Trident nuclear weapons system is welcome and necessary but so far has not dealt with the underlying political meaning of the UK being a nuclear weapon state (NWS) and what it would mean for it to disarm. A more far-reaching debate took place in the early 1980s, which is the last time a Labour leader proposed unilateral disarmament and questioned the UK's role in NATO and relationship with the US. Groups in favour of scrapping Trident need to understand the deeper political meaning of the UK's nuclear status if they are to overcome the obstacles to and seize the opportunities for disarmament in the years ahead.

The public and private politics of Trident

Latest

[An Update on the Security Policy Change Programme](#)

[Chances for Peace in the Third Decade](#)

[A Story of ORG: Oliver Ramsbotham](#)

[A Story of ORG: Gabrielle Rifkind](#)

The politics of the UK's nuclear weapons system, known as Trident, exists on two levels. The first level - the public realm - is visible and open, where citizens, mainstream media and most interested MPs debate the pros and cons of nuclear weapons based on what they believe is the most salient information. The first problem with the debate at this level is that Trident is often discussed as if it were just another, albeit the most destructive, weapons system. Trident is thus commonly referred to as being defensive and intended to deter nuclear threats to the UK mainland from overseas. Yet as several critical voices, including senior [politicians](#) and retired [military](#) personnel, have argued, the value of Trident lies not so much in its military as its political applications, although it is rarely explained in detail what this means.

The second level - at the highest reaches of Whitehall - involves, for [Nick Ritchie](#), a 'tightly controlled and secretive' policy-making process, where top-level bureaucratic, military and political figures make the key decisions on nuclear weapons. In addition, it is vital to appreciate the degree to which British nuclear dependence on the US, from [Polaris](#) in the 1960s through to Trident and beyond, narrows the parameters for UK political decision-making. The structural impact of this dependence alongside [intelligence](#) sharing, which are bound up with the role the UK plays in NATO, has been underappreciated by [analysts](#) agonizing over Britain's inability to fashion its own strategic direction and the disastrous consequences of being a junior partner to Washington, as experienced in the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The point is that if groups opposing nuclear weapons develop disarmament strategies based only on a response to the politics of the first level, and only treat Trident as a weapons system, then it is unlikely that they will be able to achieve their objective, as the politics of the second level is what really matters.

Related

[Chances for Peace in the Third Decade](#)

[Marib: A Yemeni Government Stronghold Increasingly Vulnerable to Houthi Advances](#)

[Looking Back to Look Forward: The Value of ORG's Approach to Conflict](#)

[COVID-19: The Dangers of Securitisation](#)

Most read

[The Role of Youth in Peacebuilding: Challenges and Opportunities](#)

[Making Bad Economies: The Poverty of Mexican Drug](#)

Continuity and decline

Compared to the understanding of nuclear issues achieved during the 1980s - represented by the work of Scilla Elworthy, Hugh Miall, E.P. Thompson and others, who were part of a much stronger disarmament movement than currently exists - the standard of debate within today's mainstream commentary is relatively poor. This is despite the fact that many of the core questions concerning the UK's nuclear status have not changed. For example, [John Baylis](#) wrote in the early 1980s about whether the UK could sustain Trident 'given the pressures on the defence budget' driven by the cost of hi-tech military equipment. The decision at that time to press on with Trident necessitated cuts to conventional forces, which raised the question of Britain's contribution to NATO and possible 'friction' with the US.

Leaving aside the fundamental moral and legal objections one may make to Trident, Whitehall planners face similar financial and strategic questions today. Yet whilst the 'Main Gate' decision to build new nuclear-armed submarines will officially be taken in parliament in 2016, analyst Ian Davis has [questioned](#) whether the government is bound to proceed with renewal because 'the process of replacing Trident has already begun' since key contracts have already been placed.

Davis's argument should make us revisit the 1963 [Polaris Sales Agreement](#), whereby the US provided the UK with the Polaris and later the Trident missile system. Without this agreement, as [Lawrence Freedman](#) explains, the UK would not have had 'any sort of credible nuclear capability'. Polaris was thus particularly fateful for British sovereignty and strategy as it locked the UK into dependence on the US for the types of nuclear systems and technology Washington developed and was willing to share.

Cartels

ORG's Vision

Remote Warfare: Lessons Learned from Contemporary Theatres

From here, the absolutist logic of the nuclear weapons system came to dominate, so that pragmatic technological demands strongly determined the British decision-making process. The shadow cast here is particularly long because designing and then deploying complex hi-tech military systems, such as submarines, can take 20 years and these systems may then have several decades in service. In addition, the **successor** to the UK's current Vanguard class nuclear submarines will be based on US designs so that efforts have been made to bring the two nation's replacement programmes in line.

Democracy, independence and the nuclear alliance

Supporters of Trident **argue** that whilst the UK is dependent on the US regarding nuclear procurement, it has independence regarding the decision to detonate the bomb. This distinction is important for domestic politics as it allows governments to maintain the idea - one might say fiction - that the UK is a fully independent and sovereign nation when it comes to defence and foreign policy and not just a client of Washington, **locked** into 'US electoral cycles' as former defence minister Eric Joyce put it.

But such narratives have ultimately had harmful real-world consequences, not least because they prevent the public from appreciating the fact that their representatives in parliament have little or no control over key strategic decisions, so that the UK's formally democratic institutions lack real teeth. This point is reinforced by the **fact** that a large number of Scottish people want Trident removed from Scotland because they reject Westminster rule and desire full sovereignty via independence.

The SNP, however, wants to remain in NATO whilst new Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn has **argued** that the alliance needs to be brought 'under democratic

control' and consider carefully future eastwards expansion. The unresolved political problems that a pro-disarmament stance implies for NATO members highlights the fault lines in the alliance and the problems this raises for relations with the US. In this sense the Green party's policies of 'pursuing immediate and unconditional nuclear disarmament' taking 'the UK out of NATO unilaterally', ending 'the so-called "special relationship" between the UK and the US' to focus on the development of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) presents a coherent, if far more radical, alternative to Labour and the SNP's current stance.

The impact of the different domestic and international political forces on UK planners can be seen in the policies governing Trident. For example, the government has opted for purposefully ambiguous language whereby it does not 'rule in nor rules out' the first-use of nuclear weapons. This is mainly because Trident is assigned to NATO, which analysts such as Dan Plesch and Norman Dombey have argued really means assigned to the US. Importantly, as Jack Mendelsohn has noted, NATO's first use policy gives other nations the impression that its 'out-of-areas operations', meaning interventions such as Kosovo, are backed by a nuclear threat.

The wider political significance of nuclear weapons for NATO was outlined in its 1999 Strategic Concept, which stated that, 'nuclear forces based in Europe and committed to NATO provide an essential political and military link between the European and the North American members of the Alliance'. The two key aspects of this 'link' are that it is: i) hierarchical, with Washington leading; ii) legitimating, so that political elites in NATO member states visibly assent to US hegemony in Europe. In this sense the UK's nuclear status and close relations with the US has given it a special position in Europe, but also separate from the

continent in terms of defence and foreign policy, as Zbigniew Brzezinski has [observed](#).

The problem here is that what public support exists for Trident is based on quite a different understanding of its role and function. For example, a 2005 Greenpeace [survey](#) found that ‘there is only one instance where a slight majority of the public would support the use of nuclear weapons. This is in the event of war with another country that itself uses nuclear weapons against the UK. This suggests that much of the support for the UK retaining nuclear weapons is premised on the understanding that their use would only be considered as retaliation, should another country launch a nuclear attack against the UK’.

Public opposition to first-use means that the government must downplay the decisive effect US dependence and NATO membership has on the UK’s nuclear policies. Indeed, it seems clear that UK planners, aware of much of the public’s consistent discomfort and opposition to the bomb, have factored this in to how they present British nuclear policy, so that they must [claim](#) the UK would not consider using Trident except ‘in extreme circumstances of self-defence’.

The government also benefits from public ignorance of the political function of Trident for London and Washington. This is partly a result of what the independent think-tank [NATO Watch](#) argues is the military alliance’s closed and secretive nature, whereby NATO denies civil society ‘the right to participate in the formulation of policies that have a profound effect on their liberties and security’. Having created a situation where it is stuck between an uninformed and ambivalent public, loyalty to the US and NATO and the need to fashion a nuclear policy that is credible, Whitehall thus emphasizes ambiguity in an

attempt to mask Britain's relative decline, lack of autonomy, and strategic inertia.

Use it or lose it- preserving the UK's military character

In addition to the corrosive impacts on national democracy and sovereignty, the historical record suggests that the UK's imperial history, nuclear status and unwavering support of the US have caused it to maintain both disproportionately high military spending and a low threshold for using force as a tool of foreign policy, leading to continuous overseas interventions. High military spending is also partly a legacy of Cold War commitments and partly due to investments in the capabilities that support Trident. A predilection for **combat** - the UK was involved in more conflicts than any other nation in the 20th century - may also reinforce the credibility of nuclear threats by showing a willingness to be uncontrollably and unpredictably violent.

Nuclear possession also benefits from and sustains the narrative that the world is a dangerous place so that the UK must 'spend to defend'. Whilst forces with malevolent intentions towards the UK and its citizens undoubtedly exist in the world, it is important to acknowledge the impact of Western power projection and how this affects other's threat perceptions, driving conventional and nuclear proliferation. As **John Mearsheimer** and **Ian Klink** have pointed out, to a significant extent the West has helped to create the threats - such as an aggressive Russia - that it must, so it is claimed, deter.

While it is often asserted, including by disarmers such as Corbyn, that the UK's nuclear status legitimates nuclear possession for all, the UK's arsenal cannot be considered, from a strategic point of view, a key factor in the decision-making of any state currently possessing or with the potential to acquire

nuclear weapons. Rather, it is clear from the strategic studies literature that US conventional superiority and domestic political dynamics are far more important considerations for states, including China and Russia, because nuclear weapons are ‘force equalisers’.

If this analysis is accepted, the question must be raised of what the UK can do to reduce international tensions and build cooperative relations internationally pursuant to ‘a treaty on general and complete disarmament’, as required by the [Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty](#). This might include, for example, reducing or ending arms transfers to regions of conflict such as the Middle East and not using military force in foreign wars of dubious legality.

The fear and threat of disarmament

Despite all of the above, there are signs from within the establishment that the end of the Cold War led to the UK’s nuclear status being seriously questioned. For example, prominent strategic thinkers such as [Michael Quinlan](#) noted that if the UK did not possess nuclear weapons it may not be advisable to seek them now. This is partly to do with the demise of a major state threat (whether or not one believes the Soviet Union posed such a threat) and partly to do with the costs of developing and maintaining the bomb and the expense of modern hi-tech military equipment more generally.

So why is disarmament not happening and why is Trident instead being renewed? In one word: continuity. Analysts such as [Nick Ritchie](#) and [Malcolm Chalmers](#) highlight the defence establishment’s inherent conservatism, resistance to radical change and the bureaucratic and technological momentum that pushes Trident along. In addition there is the question of loss aversion. Tony Blair argued in his memoirs that scrapping Trident would be too

much of a downgrading of the UK's status as a nation for which no Prime Minister wanted to take the blame. The phenomenon of political fear thus still looms large, for some in Labour this means looking weak and for the Conservatives, of letting the side down. George Osborne's need to shore up backbench support for a possible leadership bid, appeal to the unions and differentiate the Conservatives from Labour may well have been behind his recent [announcement](#) of investment (£500m) in the Faslane submarine base.

Moreover, it would be one thing for bureaucratic and political elites to give up the bomb having made their own technical analysis of the costs and benefits of such a move, but quite another to be defeated by the left and the peace movement on such a totemic issue. This raises the question of the causes of disarmament. If it is done as part of a move away from Atlanticism and towards more open, accountable institutions, pacifism and socialism then powerful interests will likely see this as a threat to their wider beliefs and traditions and the thin end of a dangerous wedge.

Becoming a former nuclear weapon state

In addition to looking at the factors supporting the reproduction of the UK's nuclear weapons we should look at the political strength of those supporting disarmament. Nick Ritchie's [research](#) into recent polls shows that the British public appears 'quite firm in its support of global nuclear disarmament', whilst its support for the planned replacement of Trident is 'increasingly limited'. A wider question here is what information reaches the public, how it is framed and how salient nuclear and related security issues become. For example, in addition to focusing on the short-term goal of 'No Trident replacement' it may be beneficial for disarmament advocates to propose that the UK become a former NWS.

The reason to have this as a medium to long-term goal is firstly that the UK will always be a NWS according to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty so that, as [Scott Sagan](#) argues, former NWS would be ‘more latent’ than states which ‘did not have their technological expertise or operational experience’. Secondly, rather than focusing on scrapping a particular weapons system, former NWS status- as an objective- conveys more appropriately the wider political implications for the UK if it is to live up to its international responsibilities and disarm irreversibly, verifiably and transparently.

Concluding remarks

Jeremy Corbyn failed to secure a debate on Trident’s future at the Labour party conference because his understanding of what the UK’s nuclear status means politically is quite different from those in Labour and beyond who support the UK retaining nuclear weapons. It is reasonable to suggest that his new band of supporters may not yet appreciate the implications of his stance and its historic roots. Yet as one of the staunchest pro-disarmament figures in politics, Corbyn is bound to keep the nuclear question on the agenda. It will also periodically emerge at key upcoming points such as the Strategic Defence and Security Review and the Main Gate decision on Trident replacement. The issue now for Corbyn and other parties opposing the UK’s nuclear status is what they imagine the political causes and consequences of the UK becoming a former NWS to be and how they use this analysis to craft compelling arguments that can win public support.

Download in PDF

About the Author

***Tim Street** is the Senior Programme Officer on the Sustainable Security programme at Oxford Research Group (ORG) and a PhD student at Warwick University. ORG's briefings are available from our website at www.oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk, where visitors can sign-up to receive them via our newsletter each month. These briefings are circulated free of charge for non-profit use, but please consider making a donation to ORG, if you are able to do so.*

Image source: [Flickr](#)

Copyright © Oxford Research Group 2015.

Some rights reserved. This briefing is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Licence. For more information please visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>

Share this page



Contact

Unit 503
101 Clerkenwell Road London

Follow us



Useful links

[Login](#)

EC1R 5BX

Charity no. 299436

Company no. 2260840

[Email us](#)

020 3559 6745



Registered with
**FUNDRAISING
REGULATOR**

[Contact us](#)

[Sitemap](#)

[Accessibility](#)

[Terms & Conditions](#)

[Privacy policy](#)