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The UK's Nuclear Future: Options between Rearmament and Disarmament

Tim Street

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Executive Summary

- With almost £4 billion already committed, the UK's procurement of a new generation of nuclear-armed submarines, known as Successor, is well under way despite the government rowing back on its commitment to hold a 'Main Gate' parliamentary vote—on finalising designs and tendering contracts worth billions—for what is by far the largest British military project.
- Strong government support notwithstanding, the Successor programme is increasingly plagued by cost and time over-runs, Scottish opposition to the nuclear base on the Clyde, questions over industrial and technical competence, and the future ability of submarines to evade detection.
- A parliamentary debate on Successor is likely to be timed to prolong and emphasise the divisions within the Labour Party over nuclear weapons, which may be exacerbated this year while the party undergoes a major review of its defence policy.
- The challenge for Labour's avowedly pro-disarmament new leader Jeremy Corbyn is both to find a nuclear weapons policy that is agreeable to his party and, potentially, to sell a radical change in the UK's nuclear status to voters.

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- Unlike recent cross-party reviews, the Labour defence review should consider more than just what is the most affordable and technically effective nuclear weapons system. A changed conception of what is required for 'minimum deterrence' would open up less destructive alternatives to the current Trident system that could reduce the salience of nuclear weapons in the UK's defence and foreign policy. The UK's dual international obligations to eliminate its nuclear arsenal and contribute to the creation of a nuclear weapons free world are ultimately the yardsticks by which any proposals and action should be judged.
- Alternatives to the Trident system and Successor that could help the UK begin to descend the nuclear ladder towards zero, alongside other progressive measures such as a commitment to a no first use policy, include: fewer new submarines and/or missiles and/or warheads; reducing submarine's operational readiness; using dual-use nuclear/conventional-capable submarines.
- Other options that the government or Labour could consider include: delaying a decision on Successor; sharing nuclear weapons with France (possibly outside NATO control) or the US (within NATO); a 'recessed deterrent' capability; or a phased full disarmament.
- Given its political implications, moves towards nuclear disarmament will likely require harnessing and deepening the public's ambivalence towards the UK's nuclear status, alongside Britain making a radical shift away from the 'control'-based strategies practiced by military and political elites, aimed at maintaining and projecting British power and influence globally.

Introduction

This briefing considers whether the UK's future as a nuclear weapons state (NWS) is under threat over three parts. The first considers the current status of

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plans to replace the UK's nuclear weapons system, the second reviews the Labour party's troubles in formulating a policy on this subject, while the third investigates the spectrum of options, from full replacement to full disarmament, currently available to the UK.

At first glance, several signs could lead one to believe that the UK's nuclear status is in greater jeopardy than it has been for many years. From a political point of view, the leader of the Labour Party, perhaps ninety Labour MPs, and the Scottish, Welsh and Irish nationalist parties are pro-disarmament and whilst the UK's possession of nuclear weapons isn't currently a top concern for the British public, some [opinion polls](#) show they are increasingly sceptical about the need to possess such weapons, especially when apprised of their hefty price tag.

From a military and technological point of view, there are numerous and growing concerns which have political implications. For example, the current Trident nuclear weapons system and its supporting infrastructure at the [Faslane](#) naval base and the [Atomic Weapons Establishment](#) at Aldermaston (AWE) have for several years been subject to serious [safety](#) and [security](#) problems. Prominent military figures have also voiced [concerns](#) about the costs and risks of Trident. In addition, the programme—known as 'Successor'—to replace the existing Vanguard fleet of nuclear submarines is suffering from severe cost overruns and industrial troubles. It is also possible that advances in cyber warfare and underwater technology will, in the near future, make submarines obsolete as they become vulnerable to detection and attack.

Beyond these interwoven issues, the embarrassing and unspeakable truth for Whitehall's nuclear priesthood is that sustaining the nuclear faith has become

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more about bureaucratic and technological **competence** and **continuity** than a firm conviction that the UK needs nuclear weapons to realise its global ambitions and responsibilities in the 21st century. The other side of this coin is that, despite presenting the UK as the most progressive nuclear power, the British establishment lacks the necessary will and vision to realise disarmament and contribute to the creation of a nuclear weapons free world (NFWF). Such elites understand the far-reaching domestic and international political implications—loss of power generally and reduced influence with Washington and in NATO specifically—that such a transition would have for them and their institutions, and actively resist meaningful moves in this direction.

Despite apparently being immersed in troubled waters, the UK's nuclear arsenal is therefore protected to a great, albeit not total, extent from the hurly burly of changing social and political realities because different, powerful institutions—including some within the trade unions—have stakes in the reproduction of nuclear weapons systems. These are embedded in and have important meanings for how the wider domestic and international political order operates.

1. Trident and the Successor Programme: in Deep Water or Home and Dry?

The November 2015 Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR) **announced** a new 'staged investment' plan for acquiring the next generation of submarines capable of firing nuclear-tipped missiles, stating that the existing approach was 'not appropriate for a programme of this scale and complexity'. Thus, instead of a single decision on whether to build new submarines (previously known as Main Gate) the government plans to hold a

debate in Parliament—probably now in July at the earliest—‘on the principle of Continuous At Sea Deterrence [CASD] and our plans for Successor’. What is the meaning and significance of this new approach to what is seemingly one of the most important decisions the current parliamentary cohort will make?

The first thing to note when answering this question is that parliament has thus far exercised little or no control over such key strategic decisions, because, as Nick Ritchie notes, the UK’s formally democratic institutions lack *real teeth*, with the executive retaining control over decision-making. This is especially so when it comes to the UK’s nuclear weapons, because as *Scilla Elworthy* and *Hugh Miall* have explained, the key choices have always been made behind closed doors by a small group of top officials and politicians. The Successor project was thus always very likely to proceed in some form because, as Ian Davis has *pointed out*, the process of replacing Trident began several years ago when key contracts were placed. The formerly envisaged Main Gate vote would thus have principally been a piece of theatre staged so that parliament could rubber stamp the existing subterranean process and the government could claim that the entire operation was accountable, democratic and transparent—when the opposite is, in reality, the case. This has most recently been shown by defence secretary Michael Fallon’s *announcement* on 3rd March of £642 million in further spending on Successor, prior to any parliamentary vote this year, bringing the total spent on the programme already to £3.9 billion.

Nicholas Watt thus correctly *observed* in the Guardian that the new approach and delayed debate was a political move by the Conservatives as they sought to ‘exploit *Labour* divisions’ over the UK’s nuclear future. In addition, the June referendum on whether the UK should remain in the EU has potential

implications for the future of Trident, which may have led to caution in Whitehall over timing. This is because calls for Scottish [independence](#) may rise if the UK as a whole votes in 2017 to leave the EU but the majority of Scottish voters opt to stay in. If a second independence referendum took place and Scotland voted to leave, this could lead to nuclear submarines being forced out of their existing home in Scottish waters, causing severe headaches for Whitehall planners over where the bomb could be based.

Shadow defence secretary Emily Thornberry has [claimed](#) that the real reason the government had delayed the planned vote on Successor is that the industrial programme to build a new generation of submarines is 'in trouble' and that the government was trying to conceal this. These problems are reflected in the SDSR, which outlined an increase for the submarines construction budget of £6 billion, from a prior 2011 estimate of £25 billion, with a further contingency of £10 billion. This, the government claimed, was down to the 'greater understanding we now have about the detailed design of the submarines and their manufacture'.

In reality, the programme is known to be facing significant production problems as the major contractors—BAE Systems, Rolls Royce and Babcock—have to deal with a project which the SDSR described as 'equivalent in scale to Crossrail or High Speed 2'. These concerns include Rolls Royce's [struggles](#) to develop the new-generation nuclear reactor. Media reports have [suggested](#) that the government would consider nationalising the nuclear section of Rolls-Royce if the company's financial difficulties worsen. The size of Successor is such that top MoD civil servant Jon Thompson [admitted](#) to the Public Accounts Committee last October that it is the project which 'most keeps me awake at night' because it is the 'single biggest future financial risk we face'. It has been

reported that Chancellor George Osborne subsequently sought to **take over** the mega-project, with the Treasury at the head of a new management consortium. Osborne apparently made this move to try and ensure that the Successor programme (whereby submarine construction is **projected** to eat up a **third** of the equipment budget for about fifteen years from the early 2020s) arrives on time and does not go even further over budget—unlike the UK's new conventionally-armed Astute subs which have been **plagued** by design and construction flaws. It is also reasonable to speculate that Osborne has been positioning himself as strong on defence and influential across Whitehall in preparation for a potential leadership bid.

Unions Disunited over Jobs and Subs

The other key industrial angle, which is of the utmost significance for Labour's evolving policy position on Trident, concerns the unions involved in the submarine industry. The Financial Times has **claimed** that 35,000 jobs directly or indirectly rely on the UK's submarine production, whilst Professor Keith Hartley **estimates** that 'some 26,000 jobs', some of which 'are located in high unemployment areas' will 'possibly' be supported by the Successor programme. Thus even though, as Hartley states, there are often 'alternative and more cost effective methods of creating UK jobs', the fact that these jobs currently exist means that the nuclear question is a battleground for the relevant unions, with **GMB** and **Unite** in particular fighting for members. It is worth noting that, unlike the GMB, Unite's official policy is to **support** disarmament, whilst the union also seeks to preserve the jobs and skills of its members through defence diversification. Despite senior political figures having argued in the Trident Commission **report** that economic and employment factors should not be a determining factor in deciding whether the UK remains a NWS, such

concerns do play a central factor for Labour decision-making given these union's influence over party policy.

Jeremy Corbyn recently stated in an [interview](#) for the BBC's Andrew Marr programme that he would be having conversations with union representatives in order to reach agreement on the topic. But previous efforts by Corbyn to highlight the [benefits](#) of defence diversification have been treated by some union representatives with intense scepticism, as they don't believe that the money saved from cancelling the submarines will be [spent](#) on equivalent employment for highly skilled workers or within communities currently involved in industries supporting nuclear weapons production.

Submarines: the Dinosaurs of the Deep?

Elsewhere, a variety of UK-based analysts such as Professor [Malcolm Chalmers](#), [Andrew Futter](#), [David Hambling](#) as well as retired Rear Admiral [Chris Parry](#) and Lord [Des Browne](#), alongside [Bryan Clark](#) in the US, have variously drawn attention to the possibility that submarines will in future be much more vulnerable to cyber-attacks and detection by underwater technologies and that ballistic missiles could even become obsolete. For example, China and the US are developing networked drones with greater ranges and sensing ability, which could be deployed to discover the locations of previously covert underwater vessels. Paul Ingram [speculates](#) that because the designers of the next generation of British nuclear submarines have to contend with this, the Successor project—which is already more technologically [advanced](#) and [stealthy](#) than its predecessor—is being made even more complicated. These reports led Emily Thornberry to [assert](#) at a meeting of Labour MPs in February that because the UK's nuclear weapons rely on the survivability of its submarines, Trident would become obsolete in the

near future, a claim which was quickly **attacked** as implausible by staunch Trident enthusiasts, including former defence secretaries Lords Hutton and Robertson and former head of the Navy Lord West. Notwithstanding the ability of British naval engineers to develop countermeasures and ways for UK subs to elude detection, it seems plausible that the rapid pace of technological change and the strategic value for a nuclear-armed power of being able to make other nation's submarines vulnerable to attack make the eventual obsolescence of Successor a possibility which cannot be lightly dismissed.

2. Labour's Disarmament Dilemma

A reworked timetable for the new Successor submarines exists alongside other time sensitive political processes, including Labour's **defence review**. Launched in January, this is set to report to Labour's policy forum in July before being debated at the party's annual conference in September. As a result of Labour going through these motions, it has been **claimed** that Labour no longer has a policy to renew Trident, though this has been dismissed by pro-Trident Labour MPs who argue that previous conference decisions in favour of nuclear weapons are still binding. It is this internal conflict, with Scottish Labour also now opposing Trident, which the government will aim to exploit for as long as possible, given that the nuclear issue will continue to expose the divide between the leadership and the Parliamentary Labour Party.

David Cameron will also seek to use the nuclear question to unite his party, especially after the bruising internal battles over the UK's EU membership, which has seen prominent Conservative ministers oppose the Prime Minister. By contrast, there are only a handful of former or serving Conservative MPs who have been openly critical of the UK's nuclear weapons programme. These include James Arbuthnot, former chair of the Defence Select Committee, and

former Army Captain Crispin Blunt, who is current chair of the Foreign Affairs Select Committee. Whilst by no means a unilateralist, since he favours cheaper nuclear options, Blunt has highlighted the rapidly escalating and ‘crippling’ cost of replacing Trident, which he claims is set to reach over £160 billion, for the rest of the defence budget. If other critics of Successor exist within Blunt’s party they are clearly disinterested in making their aversion visible. This can be explained by the strong support for nuclear weapons amongst Conservative voters, the prevalence of Cold War stereotypes, and the symbolism of Trident as a means of painting any opponent as weak on defence, as witnessed with Cameron’s extraordinary allegation that Corbyn’s ideas made Labour a ‘threat to national security’.

Labour’s External Challenge: Selling Unilateralism to Voters

Such allegations are clearly intended to provoke fury amongst Labour’s right wing, which has long been convinced that the party must be tough on defence to win general elections. The nuclear question sits at the centre of this anxiety—a hangover from the 1983 election when the unilateralism of then leader Michael Foot was largely blamed for his party’s crushing defeat. As a result of this, after the 1987 election Neil Kinnock moved Labour from unilateralism to multilateralism, whereby the UK would only place its nuclear weapons in disarmament negotiations once the superpowers were ready to commit to abolition. Yet Labour has historically won elections on platforms where it was commonly believed that the party would abandon the UK’s nuclear weapons when in power. Moreover, pollster John Curtice argued in the 1980s that Labour’s unilateralism was ‘not apparently a significant reason for its electoral slide during the election and neither was the electorate moved in a pro-nuclear

direction. Rather, we can see that the election period saw a shift of support towards an anti-nuclear position amongst a portion of Labour's support'.

A comparable shift in public opinion might today be the best-case scenario for Corbyn, if he can use his prominent position to expose the true costs and risks of possessing nuclear weapons, thereby raising public awareness and support for disarmament. For example, whilst public opinion polls variously show majority support and opposition for the UK's nuclear status, depending on how the question is put, a 2013 You Gov poll [found](#) that 24% would like to give up nuclear weapons completely, 26% would like to replace the current system with another that is equally powerful and 35% would support replacing Trident with a less powerful or expensive system. Elsewhere, the lack of appetite amongst the British public for leaving NATO, as well as the strong support within Labour for the military alliance, has led Corbyn to [argue](#) that the alliance needs to be brought 'under democratic control' and consider carefully future eastwards expansion, rather than for British secession.

For Corbyn to accomplish a swing within Labour to unilateralism would thus be an impressive feat given that, [according](#) to the Daily Telegraph, up to 130 of the 232 Labour MPs in Parliament support the UK's possession of nuclear weapons, with up to 90 opposing. Perhaps Corbyn's strongest gambit in this direction so far was his [announcement](#) that he would not detonate nuclear weapons if he became Prime Minister. The significance of Corbyn taking this stance is greater than it may first appear as it goes beyond just disposing of nuclear deterrence. For not only is it a moral position, reflecting the will of Corbyn's [supporters](#) amongst Labour's membership and of many people in the UK more widely, but may reflect a more democratic approach to decision-making.

This is because nuclear weapons are, in terms of their structural meaning for states and the devastation their detonation would cause, fundamentally despotic and undemocratic, creating, in Daniel Deudney's words, 'nuclear monarchies' in all nuclear-armed states. For example, the decision to use nuclear weapons is concentrated in the hands of one individual—the Prime Minister—but the UK's arsenal is also assigned to NATO, which retains a first-use policy. By relinquishing this extreme vestige of the royal prerogative, Corbyn would thus be taking an important step forward in reducing the centralised war-making power of the executive and the UK's prominent role in the military alliance, opening up a space more widely for the democratisation of defence and foreign policy decision-making. For just as technological breakthroughs may one day render the oceans transparent and submarines obsolete, so transparency in nuclear weapons decision-making is essential if these weapons are to come under democratic control so that they can eventually be irreversibly and verifiably dismantled, as required by the nuclear non-proliferation treaty (NPT).

Labour's Internal Challenge: Unifying the PLP

The political challenge for Labour's leadership of translating an almost exclusively black or white debate on the morality of nuclear possession, as well as the nature of the UK's international ambitions and responsibilities, into a spectrum of greyer technological choices, in order to build consensus, may, as senior Labour MPs acknowledge, ultimately be insurmountable. Both the pro- and anti-nuclear blocs see moves away from their positions as an unacceptable compromise, and there appear to be barely any swing MPs. Despite this, it is likely that in its forthcoming defence review Labour will continue to try to find

possible steps down the nuclear ladder, lying between the two maximal options of building four new submarines or full disarmament.

Corbyn made one [proposal](#) in this direction in January, suggesting that Successor submarines might end up being built but, crucially, deprived of their nuclear-tipped ballistic missiles (SLBMs). This idea is a variation on a more minimal or recessed deterrence, whereby a state maintains the capability to constitute and deploy a nuclear weapon, but keeps the parts of the kit separate, or maintains the ability to produce all the bits of the kit without doing so. Corbyn's proposal might be seen as an attempt to find a way out of the difficult position he is in between a membership that [supports](#) his principled unilateralism and sections of the unions involved in the submarine industry, which strongly back maintaining the UK's nuclear arsenal. It is worth noting that an alternate nuclear or conventional military posture that did not include SLBMs would also have the non-trivial effect of severing an element of the UK's procurement dependence on the US, from whom the UK [purchases](#) these missiles.

The Labour defence review is also intended to develop policy for the party that it can take into the 2020 general election. By this time, assuming four subs have been ordered, whilst work will have begun on all of them and, according to Paul Ingram, an estimated £8billion spent, completion of the first submarine will still be far off. As Ian Jack [explains](#), delivery of the new submarine fleet, already postponed from the early 2020s to 2028 is thus 'now scheduled to begin in the early 2030s, postponing the withdrawal of Vanguard submarines [commissioned between 1993 and 1998] at least 10 years beyond their expected operational life'.

Whether the Labour party goes into the 2020 general election committed to unilateral disarmament, full replacement or something in between, it will have to find policy positions regarding the still-operational Vanguard programme, the nascent Successor programme and the wider infrastructure belonging to the UK's nuclear weapons establishment. As well as progressive and responsible steps that may be taken concerning acquisition, the review would benefit from considering changes to the other policies governing these weapons. This includes declaratory, deployment, and employment policies, such as moving to a no first use posture or away from continuous at sea deterrence—a topic explored further below. Such moves are necessary if the UK is to live up to its international [commitment](#) made at the 2010 NPT Review Conference to reduce the salience of nuclear weapons in national security policy.

However, any significant change to the UK's nuclear policy would have wider political implications given the nature of the UK's close nuclear relationships with the US, NATO (and thus the alliance's pre-emptive, first use nuclear posture) and also France, with which the UK signed a far-reaching nuclear co-operation [agreement](#) in 2010. As for multilateral disarmament efforts, it will be important for Labour to [consider](#) how the UK may act responsibly in terms of its international actions, military capabilities and posture, both to enable nuclear possessors to move towards disarmament and reduce the incentives for others to seek non-conventional deterrents.

3. Examining the Alternatives: Is There a Middle Ground?

Before outlining what some of the acquisition and deployment options might include for any party reviewing its nuclear policy, it is necessary to address the notion that the current Trident system and its planned successor constitute a *'minimum independent deterrent'*. Leaving aside the independence question

(as noted above the UK is dependent on the US regarding nuclear procurement but *reportedly* has independence regarding the decision to detonate the bomb), this formulation is an inherently biased and political way of categorising what is an immensely *lethal* weapons system. The minimum here refers to nuclear strategist's Cold War *calculation* of what destructive power they believe would be necessary to deter the then Soviet Union—today's Russia—by being able to overcome Moscow's air defences and wipe out its government and military command centre.

This approach, which former Armed Services minister Sir Nick Harvey *described* as 'an almost lunatic mindset', continues to be operational, despite Harvey and other leading Liberal Democrats calling for it to be abandoned. As Nick Ritchie also *points out*, defining minimum deterrence is as much a domestic political issue as one of military strategy, connected to the UK's leading role in NATO and the larger nuclear weapons complex, including the submarine building industry and the Atomic Weapons Establishment. Importantly, adherents to the prevailing concept of deterrence believe that the UK must maintain a posture, which began in 1969, whereby one of the UK's four *Vanguard* submarines is at sea on operational patrol in the Atlantic at all times and fully armed with up to 48 nuclear warheads. This set up is known as continuous at sea deterrence (CASD) and is intended, in the *words* of Lord David Owen, to provide '100 per cent assurance that a retaliatory blow can be delivered via an invulnerable delivery platform' to defend against a 'bolt from the blue' attack, a posture Owen considers unnecessary.

As a result of the disagreement amongst the political establishment concerning these questions, several high-level reviews of the UK's nuclear policy options have taken place in recent years, including the *Trident Commission* and the

Liberal Democrat-inspired *Trident Alternatives Review*. The former concluded that, despite the end of the Cold War, the UK not facing a state-based threat and the government's austerity agenda, a submarine-based nuclear weapons system should be retained as the most cost effective option within the current timeframe. At the same time, the Trident Commission was divided on whether to relax CASD while the Liberal Democrats continue to reject how minimum deterrence is currently conceived and thus **propose** to end CASD and build fewer Successor submarines, arguing that this would save £4 billion and contribute to multilateral disarmament.

Labour, meanwhile, has in recent years made moves suggesting it would consider alternatives to the current arrangement. For example, in 2009 then Prime Minister Gordon Brown **announced** he would build three rather than four new subs, whilst maintaining CASD. Ed Miliband **indicated** he would replace Trident but with a cheaper 'least cost' option, potentially ending CASD, leaving room for a potential deal with the SNP. Ritchie has previously **examined** a series of four possible alternative options between the two maximal choices, which Labour will likely consider in order to move forward. These include:

1. A 'Trident lite' programme that adheres to current understandings of 'minimum deterrence'. This would mean retaining CASD but possibly building only three new submarines and arming them with fewer missiles.

2. A 'reduced readiness' downsized Trident replacement programme that scales back 'minimum deterrence' requirements. This would mean ending CASD and building only three new submarines, possibly reducing the number of missiles and warheads.

3. A flexible, dual-use 'hybrid' submarine programme for conventional and nuclear missions that also ends CASD and scales down 'minimum deterrence' requirements.

4. A nuclear-armed cruise missile capability aboard current or new submarines.

Notably, Ritchie does not include in his list the UK arming its Eurofighter Typhoons or F-35 Joint Strike Fighter jets with nuclear-tipped air-launched cruise missiles, arguing that this is 'perhaps the least likely option'. Yet a similar idea to this was recently put forward by Toby Fenwick of Centreforum, a think tank with strong connection to the Liberal Democrats.

Fenwick's [report](#) argued that the Trident Alternatives Review was biased because it was based on a flawed analysis which did not consider properly the costs and timings involved if the UK used a 'British-built version of the new US precision-guided B61-12 thermonuclear bomb delivered through the UK's forthcoming F-35 Joint Strike Fighters, operating from land bases and from the Royal Navy's new carriers'. The justification for this [proposal](#) is that the UK can 'achieve deterrence with a considerably less capable nuclear weapons system', whilst saving money that could be spent on conventional forces. France has a similar capability using nuclear-tipped cruise missiles on its Mirage and Rafale fighter-bombers, which operate from land bases and France's aircraft carrier, although these supplement rather than replace ballistic missile submarines.

Aside from the different options outlined above, which maintain a nuclear force structure in some shape or form, other options exist for political parties to consider. These include:

1. Delay: Paul Ingram has [suggested](#) that a decision on whether to build new submarines could be suspended, which could be achieved by 'reassessing the

life-expectancy of the current Vanguard class submarines, planning for further life-extension activities, measures to monitor and extend the life of the reactor pressure vessel, changing the patrolling patterns (relaxing CASD requirements) and deployment of submarines (perhaps mothballing two), or by reducing the estimated time for the construction of Successor submarines'. A delay, whilst not without its own risks, would allow the potential vulnerability of submarines to cyber threats and underwater technology to be properly considered.

2. Sharing: Shadow Energy Minister Clive Lewis recently **raised** the idea that the UK could share its nuclear arsenal with France. Indeed, Paris apparently proposed in 2010 that it and London join their nuclear forces—an idea which the latter rejected. Bruno Tertrais has **discussed** this possibility, noting that while France and the UK's nuclear cooperation is closer than ever before there are three barriers to sharing a nuclear force: 'the close US/UK nuclear partnership; different modernization timelines; and the force of habit'.

Alternatively, might Labour or another party consider scrapping Trident and either accept US tactical nuclear weapons on British soil or cooperate in some other way with NATO's nuclear structures? The US currently deploys 160-200 so-called 'tactical' weapons in five European states, under nuclear sharing arrangements. If Trident were scrapped the Scottish National Party (SNP) **argues** that an independent Scotland could follow the path of states such as Denmark and Norway which stay within the alliance and 'allow NATO vessels to visit their ports without confirming or denying whether they carry nuclear weapons' whilst advocating multilateral non-proliferation and disarmament. New Zealand is the only country under explicit US nuclear protection, known as 'extended deterrence', to have withdrawn this right from Washington. Notably,

in 1985 the US responded by suspending its ANZUS alliance treaty commitment to New Zealand's defence—a situation which lasted until 2010.

3. Virtual deterrence / active threshold capability: There are several different options here. For example, the UK could cancel *Successor*, end submarine patrols and dismantle its warheads but maintain all the civilian technology necessary to quickly reconstitute a nuclear weapon, albeit one with much diminished capabilities. Japan is assumed to have a virtual nuclear capability, with its [space programme](#) giving it the ability to develop intercontinental ballistic missiles, for which it would then have to develop a compatible warhead, a [process](#) that could take several years. Alternatively, as [Ingram explains](#), it might be possible to take the UK's nuclear submarines off patrol 'with their reactors defueled and switched off' for several years and then 'rapidly reconstitute an active deployment'. Clearly this would only be an option as long as Vanguard-class subs remained serviceable.

4. Full disarmament: John Ainslie of Scottish CND has [outlined](#) an approach to de-activating and dismantling the UK's nuclear weapons system which, it is argued, could include 'eight specific phases' covering the submarines, missiles and warheads, over four years. Aldermaston would stay open, working on dismantlement, decommissioning and verification activities. With regards to *Successor*, likely [action](#) would include altering relevant contracts and pausing submarine construction. In this regard, [Ingram has suggested](#) that the new staged investment approach may actually 'make it easier than it would otherwise have been for a future government to walk away' from the nuclear submarine programme 'but not without big costs'.

How might Labour decide on which of the many options outlined above to adopt as policy? Reflecting on the nuclear policies of the main three parties in

relation to public opinion, former Defence Secretary Sir Malcolm Rifkind *argues* that the two questions that matter are 'what the public think of the policies themselves' and 'how the adoption of a specific policy might affect the public's perception of their party'. In summary, Rifkind draws several conclusions from the polling data. Firstly, the public is far more favourable to replacement than generally understood and the issue of Trident's cost is key. Furthermore, the issue of replacement is more salient and sensitive an electoral issue for Labour and the Liberal Democrats, with Conservative voters being more supportive of nuclear weapons than the average voter.

The other key point Rifkind makes is that if the debate about the UK's nuclear future focuses on the technical question of which posture or platform is best, then the Conservatives are likely to have their way. Supporters of moving down the nuclear ladder, and especially those who favour disarmament, therefore need to find a way of framing the nuclear issue that lifts it out of the shadows to make it visible and relevant to people's lives. This is ultimately because whether one views nuclear weapons as moral or immoral, and thus affordable or not, largely depends on one's view of the world and the UK's place in it.

If Labour, or any other party, is to take significant steps down the nuclear ladder or pursue full disarmament and take the UK into uncharted waters, it will therefore need to develop—in addition to a more democratic, transparent and accountable defence and foreign policy— a positive alternative vision of the UK's role in the world. This should include a compelling analysis of key global problems such as climate change, conflict, migration and terrorism, how the UK relates to institutions such as the EU, NATO and the UN—as well as countries such as China, France, Russia and the US—and what the UK's ambitions and

responsibilities should be in order to protect the rights and interests of British citizens and the rest of humanity.

For example, a move away from the ‘control paradigm’, whereby the projection of military power is used to ensure political control in regions of key strategic importance such as the Middle East, would expedite a rethinking of the UK’s minimum deterrence requirements, so that nuclear and other offensive forms of power are replaced by conventional and defensive capabilities. Overall, this brief contextualisation of nuclear decision-making highlights the fundamentally political nature of nuclear disarmament and the need for its advocates to properly consider the domestic and international causes and consequences of a decision to relinquish the bomb.

Conclusion

The British political landscape is in a state of flux with the integrity of the United Kingdom, its future in Europe and wider role in the world all open to question. Having contributed significantly to the fracturing of the Westminster consensus on the UK’s role in the world, Jeremy Corbyn and the SNP have put nuclear abolition back on the political agenda. Yet despite the renewed disarmament debate and the significant problems the Vanguard and Successor programmes are experiencing, there is still much bureaucratic and political interest in maintaining the status quo. It is also questionable whether—in the current atmosphere of anxiety, fear and uncertainty—the public mood is conducive to disarmament. This is perhaps the greatest challenge for unconventional politicians such as Corbyn, who aspire to achieve office, democratise the state and bin the bomb, having created a supportive social movement outside of parliamentary politics.

Could a Corbyn government ever be able or feel justified in unilaterally disarming absent a deeper political understanding and support for disarmament within Labour and the country at large? This question may seem unworthy of immediate attention, but it does reveal something about the paradox those on the radical left find themselves in, if they pursue high office in order to redistribute or dissolve what they judge to be illegitimate forms of power. Whilst it is uncertain whether Corbyn and the SNP's movement-building can have a decisive impact in shifting attitudes to nuclear weapons and the UK's defence posture, let alone how long this might take, British history shows that the potential for radical and reformist causes to achieve a critical mass does exist. Moreover, given the powerful forces arrayed against it, only by engaging in such a dual long-term strategy of building new political cultures outside the state to support progressive initiatives within it, will it be possible to reorient the UK so that it faces away from business as usual and towards international cooperation, democracy and disarmament.

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About the Author

Tim Street is Senior Programme Officer on the Sustainable Security programme at ORG and has worked for many years on the politics of nuclear disarmament and the arms trade. *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.*

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