

Briefing on Trident, its manufacture, deployment and renewal

‘Trident’ is short-hand for Britain’s only nuclear weapons system, which comprises four *Vanguard*-class nuclear submarines, equipped with US Trident D-5 ballistic missiles (SLBM), and sustained by a stockpile of nearly 200 warheads. The current system was designed for the cold war Soviet threat and planned to be operational until the 2020s. The current Trident system costs Britain over £1,500,000,000 pounds (£1.5 billion) every year to run.

The UK submarines are built at Barrow, Cumbria, by BAE Systems, which has been mired in frequent corruption scandals. The ‘home-port’ for Trident is the HM Naval Base Clyde at Faslane, 30 miles from Glasgow. Current deterrence doctrine requires that at least one British nuclear-powered Trident submarine is always out on patrol, carrying 16 missiles armed with up to 48 thermo-nuclear warheads. Most of the warheads are 100 kilotonnes, which means that their destructive capacity – a hundred thousand tonnes of TNT equivalent – is around eight times greater than the atomic bomb that destroyed Hiroshima and killed over 140,000 civilians.

About half of these deaths were instantaneous due to heat and blast effects. The firestorm produced by the bomb killed tens of thousands more. Burned flesh fell from the bodies of many who suffered horrible pain for hours, days and weeks prior to death. Radiation sickness killed thousands more in the weeks, months and years that followed the bombing. Even today survivors (‘Hibakusha’) and their children and grandchildren are dying from cancers caused by exposure to radiation from the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombs.

After a rushed debate and with a three-line whip imposed by the Prime Minister and Leader of the Opposition together, the UK parliament voted on May 14th to allow research and development on a new class of submarines to upgrade Trident. The motion was: “This House supports the Government’s decision as set out in the white paper *The Future of the United Kingdom’s Nuclear Deterrent (CM6994)* to take the steps necessary to maintain the UK minimum strategic nuclear deterrent beyond the life of the existing system and to take further steps towards meeting the UK’s disarmament responsibilities under Article VI of the Non- proliferation treaty”. The motion was carried by 409 votes to 161. In a severe blow to the credibility of the government’s position, 88 Labour MPs opposed and several others failed to register votes. Several Scottish junior ministers and ministerial aides (and one Welsh aide) resigned government jobs in order to vote against the whip.

Though the government published a price tag of £20 billion, the actual replacement of the system has been estimated by the Liberal Democrats to cost over £76 billion, which could well rise to more than £100 billion if the new nuclear weapons went ahead. Parliament has been promised a further debate before construction of the submarines or changes to the warheads are authorized.

US-UK Nuclear Collaboration

Most of Britain’s nuclear weapon system is based on US technology. The warheads are manufactured at AWE Aldermaston and Burghfield in Berkshire, but they are based on the

W76 US warhead and have to fit Trident D5 missiles. The UK 'leases' the missiles, which are designed, manufactured and refurbished by US arms manufacturer Lockheed Martin at the US King's Bay facility. Aldermaston, which produces the UK's warheads, is co-managed by Lockheed-Martin. The very close nuclear collaboration between British and US scientists is coordinated through the 1958 Mutual Defence Agreement (MDA), which was renewed in 2004, ignoring requests from MPs for a debate.

Though Congress has restricted funding, the US has embarked on a design and development process intended to lead to a new generation of more flexible warheads, currently dubbed the 'reliable replacement warhead'. Despite UK government denials, US analysts have revealed that Britain is collaborating in design work, including subcritical warhead testing, and may also be preparing to build a similar warhead if Trident is renewed. It should be noted that three years before the March 2007 vote in Parliament, Aldermaston had received over £5.3 billion to build a new laser facility and supercomputer which will be used to design and test any new warheads for Trident.

For more info, see www.acronym.org.uk, especially '*Worse than Irrelevant: British Nuclear Weapons in the 21st Century*', by Rebecca Johnson, Nicola Butler, Stephen Pullinger. Acronym Institute: London, 2006.

[http://www.acronym.org.uk/uk/Worse_than_Irrelevant.pdf]

For the latest on construction and planning developments at Aldermaston and Burghfield see www.aldermaston.net.