

QA Replacing Trident

Questions and Answers

What is this Trident anyway?

Trident is shorthand for four nuclear submarines each with 16 missiles on board. Each missile has somewhere between 3 and 8 bombs (warheads) on top. So that is a possible 192 warheads – each one at least ten times as destructive as the bomb which flattened Hiroshima in 1945 and killed about 100,000 civilians.

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?

No one knows. They will need a new launch platform, new missiles (probably borrowed from the United States like our present ones) and new warheads.

What will that lot cost?

No one knows exactly – anything between £25 billion and £40 billion. That's the equivalent of 120,000 newly qualified nurses every year for the next 10 years, or 60,000 newly-qualified teachers every year for the next 20 years. Or it could provide a bonus of about £2500 for every pensioner, or free public transport for generations.

Who will this new Trident be aimed at?

No one knows. It will be useless against terrorists who are supposed to be the new enemy. The Soviet Union, once thought of as the enemy, has long since disappeared. No other country is threatening us with nuclear weapons. In fact, to think of using them would be insane. Land in the Lake District is still dangerous from radioactive fallout from an explosion and fire in a reactor at Chernobyl, in the former Soviet Union, in 1986.

Surely they are 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 the insured person against.

What do you mean?

If Britain shows the world, by replacing Trident, that we think our security depends on us having nuclear weapons into the far future, then other countries without them will want them as well. So the dangers of accidents or crises increase. India and Pakistan are more insecure 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?

That sounds like an intelligent proposal, but is actually quite silly. To start with, no one knows except our own Government exactly what the present level of destructive power is. So if we say we have cut down, who is going to believe us? Moreover, other countries are not interested in whatever level of nuclear destructiveness we might say we have. If we want nuclear weapons, whatever their destructive power, for our security, so will they.

Have any countries actually got rid of their nuclear weapons?

Yes: South Africa, Ukraine, Kazakhstan, and Belarus

How many countries now have nuclear weapons?

At least eight, and possibly nine. They have 25,000 nuclear warheads between them. Nearly all those warheads have more destructive power than the bomb which destroyed Hiroshima in 1945 and killed over 100,000 civilians.

Have there ever been accidents or moments of tension and panic 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.

What about this nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty that gets talked about so much?

It was signed in 1968 and it agreed three things:

1. That every signatory is entitled to have nuclear energy without limits.
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 nuclear weapon good housekeeping – not so many nuclear weapons, rules about test explosions, and agreements not to put them into space, for instance.

How could negotiations on abolition start?

Easily, if there was the political will. Already there is a detailed draft treaty lodged with the UN which could be the basis for starting discussions. It covers all the difficult issues: observation, inspection on demand, control of nuclear material, criminality, and the like.

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 — AIDS, 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 over the Iraq war.

Why don't abolition negotiations start?

Because there currently is no political will. Most people do not realise that to start abolition negotiations is perfectly possible. The top people in the nuclear weapon countries still think of nuclear weapons as status symbols or even as useable weapons of war. This is an insanity. 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 should 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 in twenty years time AND that we are going to call for the start of nuclear weapon abolition negotiations *immediately*.

