A Nuclear Refrain

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Trident Replacement and Deterrence

“Trident” is frequently used as shorthand for the UK’s at-sea nuclear weapons system, which includes four Vanguard submarines (one of which should always be at sea, according to the military strategy), Trident II ballistic missiles, and nuclear warheads. It also involves an extensive infrastructure: HM Naval Base Clyde at Faslane, Scotland (where the submarines are based); the Royal Naval Armaments Depot at Coulport, Scotland; HM Naval Base Devonport in Plymouth, England; and AWE in Berkshire, England (where the assembly and maintenance of nuclear warheads occurs).
Each Vanguard is armed with up to sixteen missiles, carrying forty nuclear warheads. Each warhead has an explosive power eight times that of “Little Boy,” the bomb dropped on Hiroshima. Thus, each Trident warhead could kill over a million people in an urban area, and the warheads carried by one Vanguard submarine have the potential to kill over forty-three million people.

The House of Commons vote on 18th July 2016 was not about replacing the Trident weapons system or any of the supporting infrastructure. Prime Minister Theresa May moved a motion to maintain the UK’s continuous at-sea “nuclear deterrent” and to begin that process by replacing the Vanguard Class submarines. In the future, the missiles, warheads, and infrastructure will also require replacing, demanding further parliamentary votes and additional funds. Thus, the political struggle will continue for a lengthy period.
The government stressed the economic benefits of replacing Vanguard for the defence industry and “thousands of highly skilled engineering jobs” and the motion was largely supported by trade unions. The cost of replacement, though, was fiercely contested. What is certain is that estimates from all sides have increased year on year. In 2015, the Ministry of Defence (MoD) claimed that replacement would cost between £17.5 and £23.4bn, up from their initial figure of £15bn. By 2016, the official figure before the House of Commons was £31bn (plus another £10bn put aside as contingency for an anticipated overspend).

Some external observers, as well as Trident replacement’s critics, estimate the cost significantly higher. A 2015 analysis by the international news agency Reuters put it at £167bn. Meanwhile, in 2016, the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) calculated the cost as high as £205bn. CND claim that this sum could “improve the NHS by building 120 state of the art hospitals and employing
150,000 new nurses, build 3 million affordable homes, install solar panels in every home in the UK or pay the tuition fees for 8 million students.”¹ The discrepancies between estimates stems from whether or not the lifetime costs of replacement are taken into account. In 2016, the Defence Secretary maintained only that the running costs for the Trident system would remain at 6% of the MoD’s budget. At time of writing, the UK has the world’s fourth largest military budget, spending £35.1bn on defence in 2016, around 2.5% of GDP, and committed to increasing that by 0.5% above inflation every year until 2021.

The UK’s nuclear deterrent is heavily dependent on the United States. The Mutual Defence Agreement signed in 1958 is a bilateral treaty where both countries share information to develop their respective weapons.

systems. Missiles for Trident are leased by the US and UK submarines have to return to a naval base in the USA for replacement and maintenance of these missiles. The Atomic Weapons Establishment (AWE) where British warheads are manufactured is part owned by the American company Lockheed Martin and missile tests took place under US supervision off the coast of Florida. Additionally, the missile guidance system is made by US corporation Charles Stark Draper Laboratories, and the bodyshell containing the warhead is purchased from the US. A long-running discussion also relates to whether Trident is “operationally independent,” with some arguing that it would be politically inconceivable for a UK Prime Minster to refuse a request by a US President to participate in a nuclear attack using Trident. At the very least, the officially acknowledged technical and financial dependence on the US for maintaining the UK’s nuclear deterrent throws into doubt the idea that the UK’s
nuclear weapons system is “independent” as is often claimed.