



# **Towards a World Free of Nuclear Weapons**

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# **1. Executive Summary**

## **1.1 Introduction**

1.1.1 Liberal Democrats seek a world that is free of nuclear weapons.

1.1.2 The Liberal Democrat commitment to global nuclear disarmament is rooted in our values as an internationalist party that aims to pursue peace, individual freedom, human rights, justice and democracy all over the world.

1.1.3 The catastrophic consequences of the detonation of nuclear weapons represent a direct threat to the UK's national interests, those of our partners and allies, and the interests of people around the world. That is why Liberal Democrats seek to ensure that nuclear weapons are never used and therefore seek, ultimately, that all nuclear weapons are put beyond use.

1.1.4 We recognise the duty of Government to maintain a UK defence and security capability that can protect its population, and that of its dependent overseas territories, from attack, and that can help to protect the UK's allies and partners, particularly in pursuit of its legal responsibilities through formal alliance structures such as NATO and through other treaty obligations.

1.1.5 Liberal Democrats are clear that our goals of peace and security are best advanced by working actively and constructively through alliances, partnerships and international institutions, including the European Union, the United Nations, NATO and the Commonwealth, within a framework of international law. The UK has a vital role in promoting global security and stability, including under its legal responsibilities as a permanent member of the UN Security Council and as signatory of the Non-Proliferation Treaty and other disarmament and non-proliferation regimes.

## **1.2 The Future of the UK's Minimum Nuclear Deterrent**

1.2.1 The immediate security challenges the UK faces, in common with its partners and allies, are: combatting violent extremism and terrorism; the growth of cyber technology and its implications for the vulnerability of the UK's infrastructure; and instability and conflict in North Africa and the Middle East which is putting significant pressure on Europe and its neighbours, not least through flows of refugees. None of these threats can be addressed using nuclear deterrence.

1.2.2 Liberal Democrats, therefore, do not believe that the current risks to the UK provide a rationale for the maintenance of the UK nuclear deterrence in the same hair-trigger posture as during the Cold War, when the UK faced a standing and existential threat from the Soviet Union, and which the current Trident/Vanguard system of four submarines operating a continuous at-sea deterrent (CASD) was designed to address.

1.2.3 We also believe that, as a member of the P5 (permanent members of the UN Security Council) and a founding signatory of the 1968 Treaty on the Non-Proliferation on Nuclear Weapons (NPT), the UK has a responsibility to seek to reinvigorate international nuclear disarmament initiatives and to place itself at the forefront of reducing the prospect of a nuclear exchange through operational and stockpile warhead reductions, de-alerting, confidence-building measures and other disarmament actions.

1.2.4 Liberal Democrats also recognise that the international security environment has become less stable over recent years. There is growing turmoil in the Middle East. The continued rise of Chinese military power and expansion in the South China Sea is changing the balance of power in Asia and contributing to instability. Relations between nuclear weapons-capable India and Pakistan

remain strained, and North Korea's pursuit of nuclear weapons continues.

1.2.5 We are particularly concerned with the increasingly aggressive foreign and defence policy of the Russian Federation. Russian aggression in Crimea, Ukraine and its consequences for the security of NATO's Baltic states has led to a deteriorating relationship with western powers. Confrontation in the coming years cannot be ruled out. In such circumstances, it is conceivable that Britain's possession of a viable nuclear deterrent would contribute significantly to the security of its people.

1.2.6 Liberal Democrats conclude that maintaining strong relationships within NATO should be the highest priority for the UK's defence policy. NATO could become even more important to the UK if it leaves the EU and takes no further part in the EU's Defence and Security Policy. Any measure the UK can take to strengthen NATO solidarity, military capability, and coherence should be taken, including in the field of nuclear weapons policy.

1.2.7 Liberal Democrats believe, therefore, that the UK should maintain the most cost-effective minimum nuclear deterrent while seeking to kick-start new international talks that will reinvigorate the drive to reduce nuclear stockpiles and operational weapons, and de-emphasise the relevance of nuclear weapons in national and global security. The UK could choose, at any point, to abandon its nuclear weapons, take the current Vanguard-Trident system out of service and cancel any replacement system. The time has not come to take such a step, although we do not rule it out in the future.

### **1.3 UK Leadership to Secure a Nuclear Weapons-Free World**

1.3.1 As a signatory of the NPT, the UK has certain obligations with regard to its own nuclear weapons and to wider international nuclear security. As a nuclear weapon state, the UK is permitted to

possess nuclear weapons, provided it commits to the principles of nuclear arms control and disarmament. This obligation is unconditional and should proceed in parallel with global efforts at conventional and nuclear disarmament.

1.3.2 Liberal Democrats have argued consistently that the UK should be engaged fully in efforts to secure international nuclear disarmament. While progress on international disarmament and arms control has slowed in recent years, the UK's continued role as a permanent member of the UN Security Council and as a recognised nuclear weapon state under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty present an opportunity for the UK to reinvigorate international diplomacy to achieve nuclear disarmament.

1.3.3 The worsening security context underlines the need to open a dialogue with Russia and others over nuclear disarmament and the reinforcing of arms control treaties. While the UK's commitment to the defence of its NATO allies must remain resolute, we believe that a new push is needed, both by NATO itself and the P5, to reinvigorate the disarmament agenda. The nuclear weapons states need to get back to the negotiating table in order to strengthen the framework for the long-term elimination of nuclear weapons and make progress on wider nuclear security issues.

1.3.4 Liberal Democrats believe that the UK should attempt to regain momentum in the disarmament and control of nuclear weapons primarily through its role in the so-called 'P5 process' and in three key areas:

- a concerted effort to build a regime for de-alerting nuclear weapons;
- strengthening the legal framework for arms control and disarmament, including pressing for the final ratification and implementation of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), making a renewed push for a Fissile Material Cut-off Treaty, implementing a protocol for naval

fuels with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and removing surplus fissile material from military stocks; and

- developing new verification and transparency measures.

1.3.5 Liberal Democrats would also engage with the UN Open-Ended Group and the process focussed on the humanitarian consequences of using nuclear weapons, and work to provide a link between their activities and the discussions that make up the P5 process.

1.3.6 The UK could, working through the P5 process and after careful pre-consultation with our NATO allies, place its nuclear weapons posture on the table for international talks on de-alerting and steps towards nuclear disarmament.

## **1.4 Maintaining a Minimum Nuclear Deterrent**

1.4.1 Liberal Democrats accept that SSBNs (Ship, Submersible, Ballistic, Nuclear) remain the safest, most defensible and least detectable delivery system for nuclear warheads. We would therefore use SSBNs to deliver the UK's minimum nuclear deterrent.

1.4.2 However, the current threats to the United Kingdom do not warrant maintaining a nuclear weapons system held in a Cold War posture. Nor is the 'like-for-like' replacement of the Vanguard-Trident fleet required to maintain a minimum nuclear deterrent. The current CASD posture could be safely discontinued without threatening the UK's current or future security. Such a step could contribute to de-emphasising nuclear weapons in Europe.

1.4.3 With the UK facing no active hostilities with a nuclear power and no immediate territorial threat, Liberal Democrats propose that the UK should, working with its NATO partners, adopt a medium-readiness responsive deterrent posture that provides a minimum

deterrence of maintaining armed patrols, without continuous at-sea deployment.

1.4.4 A medium-readiness responsive posture would mean that the UK would maintain stable deterrence, with a system protected from attack, and the capability to change posture (that is, move to a higher state of readiness, with continuous patrols) if threats became more imminent. A medium-readiness responsive posture could be achieved in various ways, such as through irregular deployment patterns, with periods where no submarine was deployed at sea, whilst providing sufficient ambiguity to potential adversaries, or through de-mating missiles and warheads.

## **1.5 Moving Down the Nuclear Ladder**

1.5.1 Liberal Democrats seek to take a step down the nuclear ladder, in a way that contributes to the UK's commitments under the NPT and provides others with an incentive to do as well.

1.5.2 We believe the UK should declare its intention to move to a medium-readiness responsive posture as part of efforts to de-emphasise nuclear weapons in the European theatre and to invigorate multilateral disarmament talks. A pledge to move towards discontinuing continuous patrols could be made in return for similar, though not necessarily equivalent, pledges from the P5 states to move away from their current 'hair-trigger' postures or in return for reductions in nuclear weapons in Europe, and stockpiles.

1.5.3 As part of the multilateral discussions, the UK could provide the option of moving to a low-readiness responsive posture (or even having no nuclear weapons at all) should significant nuclear disarmament take place. In a low-readiness responsive posture, submarines carry out unarmed patrols and conduct conventional duties only, with nuclear weapons either on board the submarine or held on shore.



## **1.6 Delivering a New Nuclear Posture**

1.6.1 Liberal Democrats would ensure that the next Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR), in 2020/21, considers how best to deliver operationally a medium-readiness responsive posture while maintaining a credible minimum deterrent. It would also investigate other lower-readiness posture options that could be employed should conditions allow, and examine the feasibility of a “zero option” under which the UK would not field a nuclear capability. Operational details would remain classified.

1.6.2 Under the Liberal Democrats, the SDSR 2020/21 would:

- explore options for greater operational co-ordination with partners as part of extended deterrence to NATO;
- investigate the impact of a medium-readiness posture on the schedule for maintaining and replacing the current Vanguard fleet;
- take into account the requirements and timescale to deliver new posture variations including medium and low-readiness postures;
- examine how many submarines would be required to fulfil such roles with resilience (we currently believe three will be required for the medium-readiness posture);
- consider options for *Dreadnought*, the replacement class of submarines for the Vanguard fleet, becoming capable of taking a conventional defence role, in addition to contributing to nuclear deterrence if required; and the level of nuclear capability required to deliver minimum deterrence.

1.6.3 The mounting costs of the Dreadnought programme remain a matter of considerable concern. The total estimated capital cost

currently stands at £41bn, significantly up from the 2005 figure of £13.6bn. Large defence projects usually exceed their budgets and take longer than planned to complete as demonstrated by the annual Major Projects Review published by the National Audit Office. If the same were to happen with Dreadnought, the strain on the defence budget would be considerable, and could lead to fewer boats being built because of fiscal considerations.

1.6.4 Any minimum nuclear deterrent must be invulnerable to first strike. Submarines, like all weapons systems, are a potential cyber target for adversaries, and the trend towards increasing transparency in the undersea environment, as a result of developing marine robotics, sensing and communications techniques, could call into question the integrity of the UK's nuclear deterrent system.

1.6.5 Under the Liberal Democrats, the SDSR 2020/21 would consider both the projected costs of the Dreadnought programme, bearing in mind the financial realities of sunk costs at the time, and its utility in light of changing technological developments.

## **2. Introduction**

2.1 Liberal Democrats seek a world that is free of nuclear weapons.

2.2 The Liberal Democrat commitment to nuclear disarmament is rooted in our values as an internationalist party that aims to pursue peace, individual freedom, human rights, justice and democracy all over the world.

2.3 There is considerable ethical debate as to whether the use of nuclear weapons could ever be considered right. Any firing of nuclear weapons – whether by accident, miscalculation or design – would have devastating consequences. A single nuclear bomb exploded over a large city, for example, could kill millions of people. Even a ‘limited’ regional nuclear war would disrupt the global climate, potentially exposing millions of people to famine and starvation, and seriously affecting ecosystems. Other impacts would include widespread disease and serious disruption to social and economic systems, rendering an effective medical response all but impossible. The sheer scale of civilian casualties that could be expected with any use of nuclear weapons on an environment that has a significant human population, suggests that their use has no place in any just war, even in response to a nuclear attack itself, or the mass killing of civilians. Any detonation of a nuclear weapon against a civilian population should therefore be considered to constitute mass murder.

2.4 Such arguments relate to the use of, rather than the possession of nuclear weapons. If possession of such weapons is for the purposes of deterrence – to ensure that such consequences never come to pass and to ensure that nuclear weapons are never used – there is a body of opinion that maintains that this can be morally justified. The ethical basis for legitimate possession of nuclear weapons as a deterrent is the motivation to prevent a great evil from taking place. If possession is unlikely to cause great harm

in itself, or bring about use, it is argued that possession to prevent use can be considered ethical.

2.5 The catastrophic consequences of the detonation of nuclear weapons represent a direct threat to the UK's national interests, those of our partners and allies, and the interests of people around the world. That is why Liberal Democrats seek to ensure that nuclear weapons are never used and therefore seek, ultimately, to ensure that all nuclear weapons are put beyond use.

2.6 We are clear that our goals of peace and security are best advanced by working actively and constructively through alliances, partnerships and international institutions, including the European Union, the United Nations, NATO and the Commonwealth, within a framework of international law.

2.7 As a founding signatory of the 1968 Treaty on the Non-Proliferation on Nuclear Weapons (NPT), the UK has certain obligations with regard to its own nuclear weapons and to wider international nuclear security. As a nuclear weapon state, the UK is permitted to possess nuclear weapons, provided it commits to the principles of nuclear arms control and disarmament. This obligation is unconditional and should proceed in parallel with global efforts at conventional and nuclear disarmament.

2.8 In 1996, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) issued an advisory opinion on the legality of the threat or use of nuclear weapons. The Court concluded that "There exists an obligation to pursue in good faith and bring to a conclusion negotiations leading to nuclear disarmament in all its aspects under strict and effective international control". The Court concluded that the threat or use would "generally be contrary to the rules of international law applicable in armed conflict, and in particular the principles and rules of humanitarian law", but added that it could not conclude definitively whether the threat or use "would be lawful or unlawful in an extreme circumstance of self-defence, in which the very survival of a State would be at stake".

2.9 Liberal Democrats have argued consistently that the UK should be engaged fully in efforts to secure international nuclear disarmament. As one of the parties to the Manhattan Project which created nuclear weapons, the UK has a moral responsibility to see that the technology that was unleashed does not bring about the end of humanity. We believe our goals for nuclear disarmament are best pursued through multilateral efforts with Britain making full use of its seat at the negotiating table as a Permanent Member of the UN Security Council and a nuclear weapons state under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. It is also open to the UK to take unilateral steps towards nuclear disarmament. We want to make positive contributions to the UK's non-proliferation commitments and seek to persuade other countries to do so as well.

2.10 In this paper, we consider the contribution of the UK's nuclear weapons policy to:

- The strength of UK defence and security capability in protecting its population, and that of its dependent overseas territories, from attack.
- The strength of UK defence and security capability in helping protect the UK's allies and partners, particularly in pursuit of its legal responsibilities through formal alliance structures such as NATO and through other treaty obligations.
- The UK's role in promoting global security and stability, including its legal responsibilities as a member of the UN Security Council and as signatory of the NPT and other disarmament and non-proliferation regimes.

## **3. The UK's Nuclear Deterrent**

### **3.1 Background**

3.1.1 The first Anglo-American nuclear weapons programme, the so-called Manhattan Project, was undertaken in response to the potential development of atomic weapons by Germany in World War II. The UK launched its own nuclear weapons programme when the US suspended nuclear collaboration after the war. The Blue Danube free fall bomb, which came into service in 1954, was designed for the UK's V-bomber forces and was part of the UK's strategy of countering the Soviet Union's overwhelming conventional superiority in Europe.

3.1.2 Since their inception, the UK has held its nuclear weapons in a deterrence posture, designed to make the use of nuclear weapons against the UK and its allies less likely based on the threat of massive retaliation. Deterrence theory contends that, although the UK may have no intention of using nuclear weapons, their possession, and posture of deployment, are necessary to deter attack. Having the capability to respond with nuclear weapons to any attack is desired to prevent a nuclear war, not to take part in one. The size and posture of the UK's deterrent has traditionally been based on the need to meet what is known as the 'Moscow Criterion' – the minimum level needed to destroy a target of our choice at a time of our choosing.

3.1.3 The UK has had a single delivery system for nuclear weapons since 1998, when its air launched nuclear missiles and depth charges were abandoned. This single delivery system is known as Trident, and currently consists of:

- Four Vanguard class submarines.
- Up to 8 Trident II missiles, and up to 40 warheads arming all four submarines.
- National nuclear command control.

- Basing, training and maintenance facilities at HM Naval Base Clyde, Faslane.
- Supporting force elements.

3.1.4 Under the UK's current 'continuous at-sea deterrent' (CASD) posture at least one submarine is always on patrol and armed with Trident ballistic missiles, each capable of carrying multiple nuclear warheads. CASD is predicated on the belief that a potential adversary is unlikely to be able to pre-emptively destroy the UK's nuclear capability in a surprise disabling strike. The expected 'invulnerability' of the UK's Vanguard submarines when at sea should provide the UK with a 'second-strike' capability which would deter any surprise 'first-strike'. The deterrent is 'operationally independent,' meaning that the UK's ability to launch a nuclear strike is in no way contingent upon other states.

3.1.5 The UK's nuclear deterrent is dedicated to NATO and supports collective security for the Euro-Atlantic area. It is held not just to protect Britain's people and interests, but those of all NATO members, as is the French nuclear deterrent. The UK has always been ambiguous about how this process – known as extended deterrence – would work in practice.

## **3.2 The Liberal Democrat Approach to Minimum Nuclear Deterrence**

3.2.1 Liberal Democrats have traditionally supported the UK's possession of an independent minimum nuclear deterrent, in the context of seeking multilateral nuclear disarmament that upholds the UK's legal and moral responsibilities under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (see Chapter 1). Over the last decade, we have questioned consistently whether the level, posture and readiness at which the UK holds its nuclear deterrent represents an appropriate level deterrent in the context of current threats to the UK.

3.2.2 The Trident system itself has been progressively reduced in terms of the numbers of missiles and warheads carried by its Vanguard submarines. The Trident Value for Money Review, conducted under the Coalition Government 2010-2015, saw a reduction in the number of warheads on board each Vanguard-class submarine from 48 to 40, reduced the number of operational thermonuclear warheads from 160 to 120, and the overall stockpile to no more than 180 warheads<sup>1</sup>. Liberal Democrats in Government also put in place the Trident Alternatives Review (see Chapter 4).

3.2.3 The United States and Russia have cut their stockpiles of nuclear weapons drastically over time (as further explored in 2.3.2). In this context, the UK's nuclear arsenal becomes more relevant, and its contribution to multilateral disarmament more important.

3.2.4 There is no doubt that the political and strategic context has changed dramatically since the Cold War and remains considerably volatile. In addition, a re-emergence of Russian expansionism and chronic instability in the Middle East, the referendum decision in the UK to leave the European Union, and the election of Donald Trump as US President have contributed to a considerable state of flux in international relations. The implications for nuclear policy are discussed below. In this context, the key questions that should determine the future of the UK's nuclear deterrent are:

3.2.5 Does the UK's possession of a nuclear weapons capability remain necessary to deter current and future threats to ourselves and its allies?

3.2.6 Are the finances of the UK robust enough to maintain a nuclear weapons capability in light of other priorities?

3.2.7 If so, what posture and platform provides the minimum capability required in the current context, and how can that be

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<sup>1</sup>

[https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/62492/Factsheet10-Trident-Value-for-Money-Review.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/62492/Factsheet10-Trident-Value-for-Money-Review.pdf)



flexible and adaptable to meet both disarmament requirements and threats in the future?

### **3.3 The Global Security Context**

3.3.1 The most recent National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review (NSS/SDSR 2015) set out the Government's assessment of the global security situation and potential future trends. NSS/SDSR 2015 described a world changing rapidly and fundamentally, with long-term shifts in global economic and military power<sup>2</sup>. This transition is being characterised by uncertainty, volatility and by "increasing competition between states and the emergence of more powerful non-state actors".

3.3.2 The NSS/SDSR assessed that the UK faces four challenges that will drive UK security priorities over the coming decade: terrorism and extremism; the resurgence of state-based threats; cyber threats and wider technological developments; and the erosion of the rules-based international order.

3.3.3 These are reflected in the assessment of priority risks which places the domestic and overseas risks to UK security into three tiers, based on a judgement of the combination of both likelihood and impact. Tier one risks are considered the highest priority over the next five years and include terrorist attacks at home and abroad, cyber-attacks against the UK or its interests, and international military conflict between states and/or non-state actors where the UK's national interest requires our involvement.

3.3.4 Liberal Democrats believe that the UK is better off as a member of the European Union, and strongly regret the outcome of the 2016 referendum. The European Union's Common Security and Defence Policy has provided the UK with a platform through which to extend its influence and reach, particularly in the application of soft power. The UK has worked with partners to ensure that the EU's defence structures are complementary to NATO's. Liberal

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<sup>2</sup> NSS/SDSR 2015 p15

Democrats believe that, as negotiations are undertaken on the terms under which the UK would leave the EU, a new evaluation of the National Security Strategy is required to ensure that the UK is fully prepared for the new circumstances in which it may find itself.

Liberal Democrats believe that the public must have the final say on any new negotiated deal in a referendum, and the consequences for UK security should be part of that debate.

3.3.5 The NSS/SDSR noted, in particular, that Russia has become “more aggressive, authoritarian and nationalist. Russia is modernising its forces, including its nuclear forces, and is testing the UK’s and NATO’s responses by increasing military activity around the territory of NATO members.”<sup>3</sup> NATO’s Baltic member states, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, are particularly exposed.

3.3.6 The NSS/SDSR concluded that “there is currently no immediate direct military threat to the UK mainland.”<sup>4</sup> It also notes, however, that “other states continue to have nuclear arsenals and there is a continuing risk of nuclear proliferation. There is a risk that states might use their nuclear capability to threaten us, try to constrain our decision making in a crisis or sponsor nuclear terrorism.”<sup>5</sup>

3.3.7 It is disappointing that the risk set out above is not adequately quantified in the NSS/SDSR or in accompanying papers. The NSS/SDSR ranks a military attack against the UK and its dependencies as a Tier 3 risk. It ranks attacks or pressure on allies and chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear weapons proliferation as a Tier 2 risks, but provides no assessment of likelihood or whether the UK’s nuclear capability addresses these threats.

3.3.8 The NSS/SDSR states that the UK “will continue to keep our nuclear weapons under constant review in the light of the

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid p18

<sup>4</sup> Ibid p24

<sup>5</sup> Ibid p34

international security environment and actions of potential adversaries”<sup>6</sup>. Liberal Democrats recognise that the UK nuclear weapons policy should be agile enough to adapt to current and future circumstances as well as contribute to multi-lateral disarmament.

3.3.9 We are also clear that the UK’s nuclear weapons capability is a weapon of absolute final resort and that its only utility is to prevent others attacking or threatening the UK with nuclear weapons. The capability does not help the UK to address the Tier 1 threats identified in the NSS/SDSR, including terrorism and cyber-attacks, and does not contribute meaningfully to the UK’s ability to respond to conflict or instability overseas.

## **3.4 The Euro-Atlantic Region, NATO and Russia**

3.4.1 Over 90% of global deployed nuclear weapons, stockpiles and weapons-usable nuclear materials are held in the Euro-Atlantic region and the axis between NATO and Russia.

3.4.2 The West and Russia have worked together over many years to maintain stability and to diminish the threat of use of nuclear weapons. In 1986, there were 70,841 warheads worldwide. This figure marks the maximum number of warheads in the world at any point in history.<sup>7</sup> As part of international diplomacy including multilateral negotiations and treaties such as the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, bilateral treaties such as the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty, and unilateral action by nuclear weapons states, nuclear arsenals have been reduced by 80% since the Cold War and a number of significant de-alerting and confidence-building measures put in place. From a combined stockpile of over 57,000 warheads in 1989,<sup>8</sup> Russia and the United States currently have

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid p34

<sup>7</sup> Kristensen, H.M., Norris, R.S., (2006), ‘Nuclear Notebook: Global nuclear stockpiles, 1945–2006’, *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 62:4 (July 2006), 64

<sup>8</sup> <http://blog.ucsusa.org/david-wright/nuclear-weapons-end-of-the-cold-war-769>

deployed arsenals of 1,790 and 1,930 nuclear weapons respectively with stockpiles of around 4,000 each. In addition, France holds around 300 warheads and the UK around 200.<sup>9</sup> While there remains a long way to go, this represents significant progress for nuclear disarmament.

3.4.3 Over the last decade, however, tensions between NATO and Russia have been rising, with Russia adopting an increasingly militaristic posture. Liberal Democrats consider Russia's invasion of Georgia and Ukraine and the contested annexation of Crimea to be illegal, and therefore condemn them. Russia's intervention in Syria is a further example of President Putin's willingness to use Russia's military power to further his strategic aims.

3.4.4 The relationship between Russia and the West is consequently deteriorating and threatens to revert to one of strategic competition. Russia's relative weakness in conventional military strength in comparison to NATO has made her nuclear arsenal more relevant. Russia is once again emphasising the 'nuclear consequences' of any confrontation.<sup>10</sup>

3.4.5 As a result, some NATO members have pressed for greater emphasis on the role of nuclear weapons in NATO security policy.<sup>11</sup> The communique issued at the NATO summit in Warsaw in July 2016 reflects this hardening position and contains stronger language than previously about the basing of US nuclear forces in Europe and the role of nuclear weapons in providing security.

3.4.6 The deterioration in NATO-Russia relations and the increasing emphasis on nuclear weapons is a matter of great concern. Liberal Democrats would work with our partners in NATO to ensure that any emerging threats are addressed and Russia is re-

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<sup>9</sup> <http://fas.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/inventories2016-1.jpg>

<sup>10</sup> The Economist October 22 2016 Russia special report p13

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.nti.org/newsroom/news/post-warsaw-analysis-what-nato-said-or-didnt-say-about-nuclear-weapons/>

engaged in meaningful co-operative dialogue, including on nuclear disarmament. (see chapter 3)

3.4.7 The UK's nuclear co-operation with the United States is well-defined and governed by the 1958 Mutual Defence Agreement. However, the election of Donald Trump as US President has given rise to concerns about the future commitment of the United States to NATO, and the impact of any change in the US approach to President Putin's Russia on NATO/Russia engagement. Despite these concerns, there has been no indication that the United States' contribution to NATO's nuclear deterrence will be discontinued in the foreseeable future.

3.4.8 The UK's collaboration with France on nuclear policy, while growing, remains minimal compared to that with the United States and restricted mostly to safety and maintenance of nuclear stockpiles. The UK Government has previously ruled out any moves to seek future efficiencies and co-ordination at the operational level<sup>12</sup>. This is an opportunity wasted. The UK and France have significant strategic interests in common and share similar nuclear doctrine and posture. Liberal Democrats believe in building on co-operation with France and other NATO partners while maintaining a nuclear contribution to NATO and an ultimate guarantee of the both nations' security.

## **3.5 Asia**

3.5.1 China has an arsenal of around 260 nuclear warheads<sup>13</sup> kept in a low-readiness with a small number of Inter-Continental Ballistic Missiles (ICBMs) which are both land and submarine based.<sup>14</sup> Its defence modernisation programme could see delivery mechanism become more sophisticated. Since 1964 China has had

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<sup>12</sup> [www.basicint.org/trident](http://www.basicint.org/trident) commission Final Report July 2014 p 34

<sup>13</sup> <http://fas.org/issues/nuclear-weapons/status-world-nuclear-forces/>

<sup>14</sup>

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/China\\_and\\_weapons\\_of\\_mass\\_destruction#Delivery\\_systems\\_estimates](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/China_and_weapons_of_mass_destruction#Delivery_systems_estimates)

a declared 'no first use policy' whereby it has made an unequivocal commitment that it would only use its nuclear weapons if attacked and has consistently called on other nuclear powers to make the same pledge. China's island building in the South China Sea is aggressive and militaristic, and poses a threat to regional stability.

3.5.2 Many analysts now see China's nuclear programme in the context of regional competition with India and Pakistan rather than the United States or Russia, although China's nuclear posture does not preclude wider deterrence. India and Pakistan are thought to hold between 120-130 warheads each,<sup>15</sup> and relations between the two countries, particularly over Kashmir continue to be unstable. There are particular concerns over Pakistan's command and control mechanism and nuclear security<sup>16</sup> as well as reports that tactical nuclear weapons are being developed.<sup>17</sup> Liberal Democrats would like to see a nuclear-free South Asian region and would work through international diplomacy to achieve this aim.

3.5.3 North Korea's nuclear programme represents a significant challenge to the international community. In 2016, the regime conducted two nuclear tests and 21 missile tests including one from a submarine. It has limited capabilities at present, including untested ICBMs that could in theory reach Alaska, but it remains improbable that North Korea will have the resources or the motivation to develop a threat to the UK. Efforts to draw North Korea into meaningful dialogue and non-proliferation regimes have not been successful.

3.5.4 While the UK has global interests, economic partnerships and historic links in Asia and the Far East, it no longer has a major strategic or military presence in the region. No states in Asia directly threaten the UK or the European region. With the advent of the Trump Administration, it is possible that the UK could be drawn into large-scale confrontation in Asia alongside the US or with the NATO

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<sup>15</sup> <http://fas.org/issues/nuclear-weapons/status-world-nuclear-forces/>

<sup>16</sup> [www.basicint.org/trident](http://www.basicint.org/trident) commission Final Report July 2014 p 12

<sup>17</sup> <http://carnegieendowment.org/2016/06/30/pakistan-s-tactical-nuclear-weapons-and-their-impact-on-stability-pub-63911>

alliance. However, it is difficult to see how the UK's nuclear deterrent would contribute to such an effort.

3.5.5 Liberal Democrats believe that the UK's contribution to stability, nuclear security and disarmament in Asia can best be pursued through international diplomacy. It is unlikely that unilateral changes to the UK's nuclear posture would have a material effect in the region. Equally, the UK's current nuclear weapons posture, based on CASD, is not consequential for stability in the region.

## **3.6 The Middle East and North Africa**

3.6.1 The Middle East presents a great challenge for UK foreign and defence policy. There is chronic instability in the region, including: the conflicts in Syria, Yemen and Libya; the rise of Da'esh; ongoing conflict over the Palestinian Occupied Territories; and Sunni-Shia confrontation involving Iraq, Iran and Saudi Arabia. Instability has increased in the Horn of Africa, with a war of attrition continuing in Somalia, instability in Eritrea and South Sudan, and with Chinese commercial investments being followed by military agreements with Ethiopia and a new Chinese military base in Djibouti, across the Straits of Mandeb from Yemen.

3.6.2 Israel's possession of nuclear weapons and Iran's threshold status are of concern. It is commonly accepted that Israel maintains a nuclear capability of around 80 warheads<sup>18</sup> and this represents a challenge for regional arms control. While Israel's nuclear weapons offer no direct threat to the UK, they should be considered in the context of regional competition and instability.

3.6.3 Iran's nuclear ambitions are currently being managed through the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). Liberal Democrats believe that implementation will benefit all parties to the agreement. However, the future of the JCPOA is not guaranteed, particularly given the attitude shown by the new US administration. There is a significant possibility that the agreement will break down

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<sup>18</sup> <http://fas.org/issues/nuclear-weapons/status-world-nuclear-forces/>

and, in future, the Iranian leadership or others in the region, would see value in moving closer to the nuclear threshold.

3.6.4 Liberal Democrats do not believe that the UK's nuclear deterrent presently contributes to the UK's defence from threats emanating from the Middle East and North Africa. No nation in the region currently threatens the UK with nuclear weapons, and the UK does not have an extended deterrence role in the region. Liberal Democrats would like to see a nuclear-free Middle East and will work through multi-lateral agencies and with partners to that aim.

3.6.5 The NSS/SDSR considers that "there is a risk that states might... sponsor nuclear terrorism." Liberal Democrats agree with the conclusions of the Trident Commission 2014, that "it is unlikely that the UK's nuclear deterrent would be credible as an element of defence against nuclear terrorism." As the Commissioners point out: "The level of proof required, not only in sourcing the nuclear material but in showing clear intent from the sponsoring state, would need to be extremely high to justify a nuclear retaliatory response."<sup>19</sup>

## **3.7 The Future of the UK's Minimum Nuclear Deterrent**

3.7.1 Liberal Democrats agree broadly with the assessment of priorities in the NSS/SDSR. No state currently has the capability or intent to pose an existential threat to the UK's territory or people. The immediate security challenges the UK faces, in common with its partners and allies, are: combatting violent extremism and terrorism; the growth of cyber technology and its implications for the vulnerability of the UK's infrastructure; and instability and conflict in North Africa and the Middle East which is putting significant pressure on Europe and its neighbours, not least through flows of refugees. None of these threats can be addressed using nuclear deterrence.

3.7.2 Liberal Democrats, therefore, do not believe that the current risks to the UK as set out in the NSS/SDSR 2015 provide a rationale

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<sup>19</sup> Trident Commission Concluding Report July 2014, P14



for the maintenance of the UK nuclear deterrence in the same hair-trigger posture as during the Cold War, when the UK faced a standing and existential threat from the Soviet Union, and which the current Trident/Vanguard system of four submarines operating CASD was designed to address.

3.7.3 As part of efforts to reduce the fiscal deficit, the Coalition Government reduced the UK's conventional forces as part of the 2010 Strategic Defence and Security review while maintaining the UK's commitment to meet the NATO threshold of 2% GDP on defence spending. The defence budget will remain under pressure while the Conservative government attempts to reduce the deficit and borrowing. In these circumstances, there is an increasing need to consider whether the contribution of nuclear weapons justifies both their actual cost and the opportunity cost to other priorities.

3.7.4 We also believe that, as a member of the P5 and a signatory to the NPT, the UK has a responsibility to seek to reinvigorate multilateral nuclear disarmament initiatives and place itself at the forefront of reducing the prospect of a nuclear exchange through operational and stockpile warhead reductions, de-alerting, confidence-building measures and other disarmament actions.

3.7.5 Liberal Democrats also recognise that the international security environment has become less stable over the last five years. We are particularly concerned with the increasingly aggressive foreign and defence policy of the Russian Federation. Confrontation in the coming years cannot be ruled out. In such circumstances, it is conceivable that Britain's possession of a viable nuclear deterrent would contribute significantly to the security of its people. Such concerns need to be reflected in the decisions we will take regarding the future of the UK's nuclear weapons deterrent and posture.

## **3.8 The New Importance of NATO and Alliance Relationships**

3.8.1 NATO is now more important for the maintenance of the UK's defence and security than at any time in the last 25 years. Despite substantial reductions in UK conventional capability since the Cold War, including over the last five years, the UK remains one of Europe's most capable military powers. However, while the UK retains full-spectrum capabilities, and could deploy a small independent operation force if required, capability has been reduced to the point that we are likely to rely on the NATO alliance, particularly the US, or other international coalitions to project significant power and protect our interests.

3.8.2 Liberal Democrats campaigned to keep the UK in the European Union, and maintain that Britain's interests are best served by remaining at the heart of Europe. We regret that the UK's departure from the European Union could diminish our ability to participate in EU defence projects. Liberal Democrats believe that defence co-operation with our European partners provides a vital complimentary mechanism to our participation in NATO. We further believe that Brexit could have negative consequences on the UK's economy and could put further pressure on military budgets and the ability of the UK to meet NATO spending requirements.

3.8.3 The UK's nuclear forces are dedicated to NATO, except in cases of extreme national emergency, as agreed in the original 1963 Polaris Sales Agreement with the United States. But the Conservative Government's NSS/SDSR 2015 contains only a single, brief mention of Trident's role in NATO's deterrence strategy and does not define the precise contribution of the UK's CASD posture. The Warsaw communique recognised the contribution of the UK and French nuclear forces as providing "separate centres of decision-making" to complicate "the calculations of potential adversaries."<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> [http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official\\_texts\\_133169.htm](http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_133169.htm) par 53.

3.8.4 Liberal Democrats believe that various statements made by the new US President, Donald Trump, questioning the relevance of NATO, and appearing to make U.S. military support for NATO member states conditional on whether those states have met their financial obligations to the bloc, strengthen the case for an effective minimum UK nuclear deterrent. We also note with alarm the statements made by President Trump relating to the defence of the Baltic States, particularly in the context of the increasing militarism by Russia and worsening relations between the NATO powers and President Putin.

3.8.5 Liberal Democrats believe that maintaining strong relationships within NATO should be the highest priority for the UK's defence policy. NATO could become even more important to the UK if we were to leave the EU and take no further part in the EU's Defence and Security Policy. Any measure the UK can take to strengthen NATO solidarity, military capability, and coherence should be taken, including in the field of nuclear policy. Therefore, we recognise that any changes to the UK's nuclear posture would need to be handled very carefully in order to ensure that our partners do not consider the UK's contribution to be diminished.

3.8.6 However, we believe the UK's contribution to NATO can be maintained without the requirement for a CASD posture. Before taking a decision to move away from this posture, we would consult with our NATO allies and ensure that NATO's nuclear strategy remains coherent and maintains a collective deterrent relevant to current circumstances.

## **4. UK Leadership to Secure a Nuclear Weapons-Free World**

*“Let us never negotiate out of fear. But let us never fear to negotiate.”*

President John F Kennedy, Inaugural Address, 1961.

### **4.1 Background**

4.1.1 British diplomacy on nuclear weapons must balance two obligations. The first is to defend the UK and its allies in NATO through an equitable contribution to the security of the alliance, through both nuclear and conventional deterrence and diplomacy. The second obligation is to the entire world and is set out in the 1968 Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons: *‘to pursue negotiations in good faith on effective measures relating to cessation of the nuclear arms race at an early date and to nuclear disarmament, and on a treaty on general and complete disarmament.’*

4.1.2 The security context in Europe has deteriorated badly in recent years. Relations between Russia and NATO states are at their lowest ebb since the Cold War. The case for the retention of a British minimum nuclear deterrent is far stronger today than for many years (see Chapter 2). That does not mean that we should accept that continuous at-sea deterrence is a minimal deterrent, nor does it mean that the UK’s obligations under the NPT have become any less important. On the contrary, steps to meet those obligations on a multilateral basis are now more urgent than ever.

4.1.3 Multilateral negotiations on nuclear disarmament can achieve positive results. Agreements between the US and Russia have reduced the global stockpile of nuclear warheads from over 60,000 in the 1980s to around 15,000 today. The fundamental bargain of the NPT regime has provided a framework for norms of behaviour to develop around nuclear weapons. As a result, fissile material is no longer present in many countries and several have

abandoned nuclear weapons programmes. Most recently, the so-called 'P5 +1' group<sup>21</sup> successfully negotiated a deal with Iran to renounce the development of a nuclear weapons programme and to peacefully pursue civil nuclear energy.

4.1.4 While the US and Russia have the greatest contribution to make through reducing their huge nuclear arsenals, the smaller nuclear weapon states (NWS) can play a positive role. Through its status as a NWS on the UN Security Council, the UK has been instrumental in the creation and maintenance of the multilateral regime for the non-proliferation and restriction of nuclear weapons.

4.1.5 The UK with or without its own nuclear weapons would remain a member of NATO and the United Nations Security Council (for which possession of nuclear weapons has never been a requirement) and a signatory to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. There is much the UK can do to promote negotiations between Nuclear Weapon States and Non-Nuclear Weapon States to secure international nuclear disarmament.

4.1.6 The NPT to date has neither completely stemmed the proliferation of nuclear weapons nor their modernisation by NWS. It is also worth noting that a significant proportion of NWS are not signatories of the NPT, including India, Pakistan, Israel and North Korea. North Korea initially signed the NPT in 1985, but withdrew in 2003 after being accused by the USA of violating the Agreed Framework. States must give three months' notice before withdrawing.

4.1.7 Progress on disarmament and control has slowed in recent years. The last NPT Review Conference in 2015 failed to agree a substantive final declaration. In part this was due to disagreements over calls for a nuclear weapons free zone for the Middle East. There is also tension between NWS and non-NWS due to a lack of progress on disarmament and frustration that in some cases the NWS appear to be modernising their nuclear forces. Russia's recent

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<sup>21</sup> The UN Security Council (US, Russia, China, UK and France) plus Germany

actions in Eastern Europe have also undermined the context for talks.

4.1.8 In early October 2016, Russia abandoned a bilateral deal with the US for the disposal of weapons grade plutonium, and reportedly moved nuclear missiles into Kaliningrad, possibly in contravention of the Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces Treaty. Although previous British governments made genuine attempts to use the UK's diplomatic leverage to make progress on NPT goals, the present Conservative Government has placed dogmatic faith in like-for-like replacement of the Trident system while failing to provide a positive and creative lead for the disarmament agenda.

4.1.9 Liberal Democrats believe that, while the UK's commitment to the defence of its NATO allies must remain resolute, it is equally important that the NWS get back to the negotiating table and make progress on disarmament measures, strengthen the framework for the long-term elimination of nuclear weapons and make progress on wider nuclear security issues.

## **4.2 Diplomatic context**

4.2.1 The UK's nuclear deterrent represents a significant financial and security contribution to NATO, which remains an avowedly nuclear alliance. The 1962 Nassau Agreement between the US and the UK allowed the UK to draw from a pool of US-built and maintained submarine-launched ICBMs. It is, however, a condition of the agreement that British nuclear weapons are 'assigned to NATO'. Thus, while the UK reserves the right to use nuclear weapons to defend its 'supreme national interests', their primary role is to deter an attack on the NATO alliance. In providing for a separate centre of decision-making, it is argued that the British deterrent also presents a potential aggressor with a degree of ambiguity over how NATO would respond if attacked, and it provides an incentive for confidence-building measures. The fact that the UK could *in extremis* launch its nuclear weapons even if the US declined to do so thus provides further deterrence reassurance for

European NATO states. The UK's contribution to NATO's defence also provides a platform for significant international cooperation with the US and increasingly France, with whom the UK signed a major treaty on nuclear weapons research in 2010.

4.2.2 Unfortunately, the confidence of the UK's allies in the commitment to the post-war settlement in Europe has been badly shaken by the referendum vote in favour of leaving the EU. European allies, particularly those that border an increasingly nationalistic and erratic Russia, rightly seek reassurance that 'Brexit' is not a precursor to further UK isolationism. It is vital that the UK demonstrates unwavering commitment to our NATO allies, in both political and military terms. If the UK were to give up its nuclear weapons unilaterally it would also have significant ramifications for both European security and British influence, particularly among our closest allies. There is a real risk that just as Brexit will undermine and weaken the EU and a move towards unilateral nuclear disarmament by the UK could inflict similar damage on the NATO alliance and unnerve our allies in Eastern Europe and further emboldening Putin's Russia.

4.2.3 The UK's continued role as a permanent member of the UN Security Council and as a NWS presents an opportunity for the UK to reinvigorate multilateral diplomacy on nuclear disarmament. The security context for nuclear disarmament has worsened in recent years, which serves to underline the need to open a dialogue with Russia and others over nuclear disarmament and the reinforcing of arms control treaties. The deteriorating situation means that, while resolve and solidarity with our allies are required, so too is a new push, by NATO and the P5, towards reinvigorating the disarmament agenda.

## **4.3 Creating the conditions for a nuclear weapons-free world**

4.3.1 In 2009, the then Labour Government proposed four broad conditions that would be required for a world without nuclear

weapons. These include: a positive relationship of mutual trust and interest in stability between the existing nuclear weapons states; credible controls on other forms of technology that could be used to gain military advantage; robust collective security arrangements to generate confidence in handling challenges to international peace and security; and stronger, more cohesive global governance across the board. These four conditions are very challenging, particularly in the current climate.

4.3.2 Liberal Democrats are clear that progress on nuclear disarmament goes hand in hand with greater confidence in the mutual advantage of a stable international order. As the 2014 BASIC Trident Commission pointed out:

*'Multilateral disarmament and associated verification and confidence-building mechanisms can play a proactive role in improving trust and security relationships between states, as well as being an expression of that improvement.'*<sup>22</sup>

4.3.3 Thus, even at a time of great international uncertainty and stability, it is incumbent on the international community to seek ways to regain momentum in the disarmament and control of nuclear weapons. Liberal Democrats believe that the UK should attempt to do this through its role in the so-called 'P5 process'. The 'P5 process' was created at the instigation of the UK in 2008 and is a forum for discussion of disarmament, non-proliferation, nuclear safety, transparency and confidence-building measures between the permanent five members of the UN Security Council. In part as a result of greater instability in Europe, progress in recent years has been disappointing, and the P5 process has failed to feed through strong initiatives to the quinquennial NPT Review Conference.

4.3.4 Even so, Liberal Democrats believe that the P5 process still represents the most valuable forum for UK diplomacy on the disarmament agenda. The process provides for an existing framework for discussions and can feed initiatives into the NPT review conferences and other bodies meeting under UN auspices.

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<sup>22</sup> p. 39.



The UK should therefore use its membership of the P5 group to concentrate its efforts in four key areas: a new focus on regimes for de-alerting nuclear weapons; a push for the ratification of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty and the Fissile Material Cut-off Treaty; implementation of a protocol for naval fuels with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), while removing surplus fissile material from military stocks; and further UK-led work on disarmament verification.

## **4.4 Removing the hair-trigger – de-alerting nuclear weapons**

4.4.1 The US and Russia maintain much of their nuclear arsenals on a ‘hair-trigger’ or ‘high alert’ posture. The US President is believed to be able to launch nuclear missiles in 5-15 minutes, and the Russians claim such commands can be completed even more quickly. The UK’s nuclear weapons are currently placed on ‘several days’ notice to fire’ and are not targeted, although it may be that targeting can be undertaken relatively rapidly. Such hair-trigger response times require nuclear weapons to be held in a state of high-readiness, and thus at higher risk of accident or accidental use. Several former US decision-makers have called for this posture to be ended.

4.4.2 A concerted effort to build a regime for de-alerting nuclear weapons would help to reduce the risk of nuclear accidents and would also provide a fresh start for dialogue and building confidence in other areas of the nuclear disarmament agenda. The de-alerting of nuclear weapons, alongside continued reductions in stockpiles and treaty-based restrictions on their development and posture, are the essential first-steps towards their eventual eradication.

4.4.3 Since the end of the Cold War, UK reductions in weapons platforms and stockpiles have been undertaken unilaterally and have not been explicitly linked to negotiations with others. And, given the significant asymmetry in nuclear arsenals between the UK on one hand, and the US and Russia on the other, this is

understandable. The UK could, working through the P5 process place its nuclear weapons posture on the table for international talks on de-alerting, and steps towards nuclear disarmament. Such a move would require careful pre-consultation with NATO allies, but a pledge to move towards discontinuing continuous at-sea patrols [see chapter 4] could be made in return for similar, though not necessarily equivalent, pledges from the P5 states to move away from their current 'hair-trigger' postures or in return for reductions in nuclear weapons in Europe, and stockpiles. As part of these discussions, the UK could provide the option of moving to a low-readiness preserved posture (or having no nuclear weapons at all) should significant nuclear disarmament take place.

4.4.4 Crucial to such talks would be the need to develop international inspection regimes for the verification of moves towards preserved postures, an area in which the UK has developed specialist knowledge.

## **4.5 Strengthening the legal framework for arms control and disarmament**

4.5.1 In addition to the NPT, there are other vital components in the international arms control framework. Several states, including the US, China, Egypt, Iran and Israel, have signed but not yet ratified the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT). Liberal Democrats would press for the final ratification and implementation of the CTBT. The UK played a co-equal role in developing the Limited Test Ban Treaty of 1963 and should now resume a leadership role by pushing for China and the US to ratify the treaty and thus provide a lead to the rest of the world to bring the treaty into force.

4.5.2 Discussions are already taking place in the UN Conference on Disarmament regarding a new Fissile Material Cut-off Treaty whereby states would pledge an end-date for the production of fissile materials needed for nuclear weapons. Liberal Democrats propose to harness the P5 process to make a renewed push for

such a treaty. The UK has developed expertise in potential verification regimes and has made proposals as to how the IAEA could verify that states were adhering to such a treaty.

4.5.3 The UK could kick-start talks by unilaterally minimising the UK's holdings of weapons-grade plutonium to only that required for the minimum deterrence posture, with excess material declared to and secured under IAEA civilian safeguards. The UK should also agree a protocol with an inspection regime with the IAEA allowing for the declaration and inspection of stocks of Highly Enriched Uranium (HEU) for naval propulsion, such that these stocks cannot be returned to a nuclear weapons programme, and pushing for its adoption by other states with naval nuclear propulsion systems.

## **4.6 Getting to zero – verification of arms control measures**

4.6.1 Even where progress is made on reducing nuclear arsenals there are expected to be many further hurdles as states approach smaller and smaller numbers of nuclear weapons. Nuclear weapons technologies and their delivery platforms represent some of the most closely guarded of state secrets. It is, therefore, a huge challenge to develop verification measures that can command sufficient confidence between states that they will commit to disarmament measures and changes in posture.

4.6.2 Working together with Norway, the UK has already established itself as a centre of expertise in the complex and highly technical area of verification. As suggested above, in some areas the UK could, as a confidence-building measure, proactively develop new verification and transparency measures and subject its own nuclear arsenal to such measures in order to help to build on verification regimes.

## **4.7 Engaging with non-nuclear weapons states**

4.7.1 Liberal Democrats believe that the UK should prioritise the P5 process as the starting point for diplomatic influence, broadening talks out to the UN Disarmament Conference when appropriate. We must not, however, discount the role and views of other non-NWS forums for policy discussion. Non-NWS forums for discussion on nuclear weapons are becoming increasingly common. The 'Humanitarian Initiative' (HINW) arose out of the 2010 NPT Review Conference and sought to emphasise the wider humanitarian impacts of nuclear weapons. Those who pledge to the initiative argue that nuclear weapons must not be used 'under any circumstances'. Such a declaration clearly causes problems for NWS and for those non-NWS that are covered by the 'nuclear umbrella' of another NWS. The UK has not signed the pledge but attended, along with the US, an HINW conference in 2014. The UN Open-Ended Working Group on Nuclear Disarmament (OEWG) was first convened by the UN General Assembly in 2012 to develop proposals for taking forward multilateral nuclear disarmament negotiations for achieving and maintaining a world without nuclear weapons. The UK has boycotted the group's activities. Liberal Democrats would seek to engage with the OEWG and the process focussed on the humanitarian consequences of using nuclear weapons and work to provide a link between their activities and the discussions that make up the P5 process.

4.7.2 Some non-NWS states are pressing for a new treaty banning nuclear weapons. While the ultimate aims of such a treaty are laudable, we believe that it could risk undermining the NPT regime. Liberal Democrats believe that while the NPT, while not perfect, places obligations on both NWS and non-NWS and has arguably created a robust framework for international norms around both nuclear weapons and civil nuclear energy programmes. Liberal Democrats therefore believe the best way of addressing the concerns of non-NWS is to reinvigorate the NPT, which is itself committed to an end goal of a treaty to end nuclear weapons,

through the leadership of the P5, working constructively with other states to make concrete moves towards disarmament and stronger control of nuclear weapons.

## **5. The Future of Trident**

### **5.1 Background**

5.1.1 In 2006, Prime Minister Tony Blair announced the Successor programme, designed to replace the UK's four existing Vanguard-class ballistic missile submarines (SSBN) with four new submarines. A vote was held in the Commons in March 2007, with a majority of MPs supporting the Labour Government motion to maintain the UK's minimum strategic nuclear deterrent beyond the life of the existing system. Liberal Democrat MPs voted against the Labour Government motion, arguing that the decision on Trident replacement was premature and that it would impede the progress of nuclear non-proliferation talks under the NPT.

5.1.2 Under the Coalition Government there were profound differences between the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats on the Successor Programme. The project continued but the primary investment decision ('Main Gate') was postponed until after the 2015 General Election. Liberal Democrats secured a Cabinet Office review into the alternatives to Trident (published as the 2013 Trident Alternatives Review, or TAR), which set out options regarding both platform and posture for alternative approaches to a like-for-like replacement of the Trident system operating CASD.

5.1.3 Despite these differences, the Coalition Government approved the initial assessment phase for the new submarines, and authorised the purchase of 'long lead' items. The submarines will carry up to eight Trident II D5 submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBM), and no more than 40 warheads. With a life extension programme in place, the Trident II D5 missiles will not need to be replaced before the mid-2040s; with Successor slated to enter service in the early 2030s it is possible that the missiles will be further extended to match Successor's service life into the 2060s.

## **5.2 The Dreadnought Programme**

5.2.1 In November 2015, the Conservative Government's Defence and Security Review 2015 (SDSR15) said that a four boat Successor programme, now to be known as the *Dreadnought* programme, would continue, using a phased construction programme, with the first submarine expected to enter into service in the early 2030s. These submarines would sustain a posture of 'high readiness' and perform continuous, covert patrols for the life of the system.

5.2.2 In July 2016, the Conservative Government tabled a Commons motion, to support taking the necessary steps required to maintain the current posture by replacing the current Vanguard Class submarines with four Successor submarines. The motion supported the position set out in the "National Security Strategy and SDSR15 that the UK's independent minimum credible nuclear deterrent, based on a continuous at-sea posture, will remain essential to the UK's security today." It was not a decision on a specific 'Main Gate' production contract. The Commons approved the Government's motion, though Liberal Democrat MPs were opposed. Whilst we accept that the UK needs to retain a credible nuclear weapons capability, the current threats to the United Kingdom do not warrant maintaining a nuclear weapons system held in a Cold War posture and 'like-for-like' replacement of the Vanguard-Trident system is not required to maintain a minimum nuclear deterrent.

5.2.3 Moreover, Liberal Democrats seek to take a step down the nuclear ladder, in way that makes a contribution to the UK's commitments under the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) and provides others with an incentive to do as well.

5.2.4 Liberal Democrats accept that SSBNs (Ship, Submersible, Ballistic, Nuclear) remain the safest, most defensible and least detectable delivery system for nuclear warheads. Alternative systems, whether land-based or aircraft-based, create more obvious

targets for a potential opponent, and any non-ballistic system would be easier to intercept. SSBNs also have the advantage that the UK has fifty years' experience in operating them. We would therefore use SSBNs to deliver the UK's minimum nuclear deterrent. The current continuous at-sea posture could, however, be safely discontinued without threatening the UK's current or future security. Such a step could contribute to de-emphasising nuclear weapons in Europe.

5.2.5 With the UK facing no active hostilities with a nuclear power and no immediate territorial threat, Liberal Democrats believe that the UK could adopt a medium-readiness responsive deterrent posture that provides minimum deterrence without the hair-trigger requirement of the Cold War. Extended deterrence within NATO provides further options for the UK to adjust its posture.

5.2.6 A medium-readiness responsive posture would mean that the UK would maintain stable deterrence, with a system protected from attack, and the capability to change posture (that is, move to a higher state of readiness, with continuous patrols) if threats became more imminent. A medium-readiness responsive posture could be achieved in a number of ways, such as through irregular deployment patterns, with periods where no submarine was deployed at sea, whilst providing sufficient ambiguity to potential adversaries, or through de-mating missiles and warheads.

5.2.7 Liberal Democrats believe the UK should declare its intention to move to a medium-readiness responsive posture as part of efforts to de-emphasise nuclear weapons in the European theatre and to invigorate multilateral disarmament talks (see Chapter 3). As part of the multilateral discussions, the UK could provide the option of moving to a low-readiness responsive posture (or even having no nuclear weapons at all) should significant nuclear disarmament take place. In a low-readiness responsive posture, submarines carry out unarmed patrols and conduct conventional duties only, with nuclear weapons either on board the submarine or held on shore.



5.2.8 Liberal Democrats would undertake work as part of the next Strategic Defence and Security Review, in 2020/21, to consider how best to deliver operationally a medium-responsive posture while maintaining a credible minimum deterrent. It would also investigate other lower-readiness posture options that could be employed should conditions allow. Operational details would remain classified. The review would explore:

- Options for greater operational co-ordination with partners as part of extended deterrence to NATO.
- The impact of a medium-readiness responsive posture on the schedule for maintaining and replacing the current Vanguard fleet.
- The requirements and timescale to deliver new posture variations including medium- and low-readiness postures
- How many submarines would be required to fulfil such roles with resilience (we currently believe three will be required for the medium-readiness posture)
- Options for the *Dreadnought* fleet being capable of taking a conventional defence role, in addition to contributing to nuclear deterrence if required.
- What level of nuclear capability is required to achieve minimum deterrence
- A Zero Option under which the UK would not field a nuclear capability.

5.2.9 We recognise that formulating long-term UK nuclear policy in the midst of the *Dreadnought* programme presents significant challenges for evidence-based policy making. In addition to the international security risks and variables [see Chapter 2], there are many domestic and programme risks and variables to consider.

5.2.10 The mounting costs of the *Dreadnought* programme remain a matter of considerable concern. SDSR2015 estimated that the manufacturing cost of the four-boat programme is £31 billion for the four submarines with an additional £10bn contingency. This takes the total estimated capital cost to £41bn, significantly up from the 2005 figure of £13.6bn. Large defence projects usually exceed their budgets and take longer than planned to complete as demonstrated by the annual Major Projects Review published by the National Audit Office. If the same were to happen with *Dreadnought*, the strain on the defence budget would be considerable, and could lead to fewer boats being built due to fiscal considerations.

5.2.11 Any minimum nuclear deterrent must be invulnerable to first strike. Submarines, like all weapons systems, are a potential cyber target for adversaries, and the trend towards increasing transparency in the undersea environment, as a result of developing marine robotics, sensing and communications techniques, could call into question the integrity of the UK's nuclear deterrent system. Such new technologies do not appear to pose an immediate threat to the UK's SSBN fleet, but any nuclear weapons system needs guaranteed protection against attack to maintain the deterrence, and as such it is vital that advances in stealth policy keep pace. Given that cyber warfare would also threaten conventional defence, research and development in this area must be a high priority.

5.2.12 We expect that by 2017-25, the purchase of equipment for at least the first two submarines will be underway, and this period represents the last point at which a future UK government could, in the context of the global security situation, nuclear disarmament obligations and the UK's own economic and defence requirements, decide to cancel the *Dreadnought* programme and implement a range of alternatives. Under the Liberal Democrats, in addition to the impact of changes in posture outlined in 4.2.7 above, the SDSR 2020/1 would consider both the projected costs of the *Dreadnought* programme, bearing in mind the financial realities of sunk costs at the time, and its utility in light of changing technological developments.



# **Towards a World Free of Nuclear Weapons**

## **Policy Paper 127**

This paper has been approved for debate by the Federal Conference by the Federal Policy Committee under the terms of Article 8.4 of the Federal Constitution.

Within the policy-making procedure of the Liberal Democrats, the Federal Party determines the policy of the Party in those areas which might reasonably be expected to fall within the remit of the federal institutions in the context of a federal United Kingdom.

The Party in England, the Scottish Liberal Democrats, the Welsh Liberal Democrats and the Northern Ireland Local Party determine the policy of the Party on all other issues, except that any or all of them may confer this power upon the Federal Party in any specified area or areas.

The Party in England has chosen to pass up policy-making to the Federal level. If approved by Conference, this paper will therefore form the policy of the Federal Party on federal issues and the Party in England on English issues. In appropriate policy areas, Scottish, Welsh and Northern Ireland party policy would take precedence.

## **Working Group on Nuclear Weapons**

Note: Membership of the Working Group should not be taken to indicate that every member necessarily agrees with every statement or every proposal in this Paper.

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