

Briefing Note

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TRIDENT

Britain has possessed her own nuclear weapons since the 1950s. Their purpose has been to contribute to NATO's strategy of deterrence and to provide an ultimate guarantee of our national security. Eight successive British Governments, Conservative and Labour, have all considered the maintenance of Britain's independent strategic nuclear deterrent to be an essential element in our defence effort.

Accordingly, the Government announced in July 1980 that it had decided to acquire the Trident I (C4) submarine-launched missile system from the United States to replace our Polaris force when it becomes obsolete in the mid 1990s. The four submarines and their nuclear warheads would be designed and built in Britain.

The change to Trident II (D5). Six months ago, the United States Administration decided to develop the more advanced Trident II (D5) missile several years earlier than previously planned. Therefore, on 11th March 1982, the Secretary of State for Defence, Mr. John Nott, announced that Britain would buy the Trident II missile instead, since if the Government continued to choose the C4 missile in these circumstances:

"it would enter service with the Royal Navy only shortly before it left service with the United States. This would mean that the United Kingdom alone would be responsible for keeping open special Trident I C4 support facilities in the United States and the United Kingdom alone would be forced to fund ... any research and development needed to counter improved Soviet anti-ballistic missile defences. For these reasons, our judgement is that the through life costs for Trident I would almost certainly be higher than for Trident II" (Hansard, Col.975).

The Cost of Trident II. In July 1980, it was estimated that the Trident I (C4) would cost about £5,000 million spread over 15 years. The Government estimates that the Trident II (D5) will cost some £7,500 million over 18 years. However, the great majority of this increase in cost can be attributed to inflation since July 1980; to the large rise in the value of the dollar against the pound; and to new improvements to the missile, which would apply whichever version was bought. Furthermore, the Government has obtained better terms from the United States than would have been the case with the C4 version, and these will protect us completely from development cost escalation. Mr. Nott also disclosed that the United States had agreed to help British industry to compete on equal terms with American industry for sub-contracts for weapons systems components for the D5 programme.

Employment Aspects. Mr. Nott has said that the Trident II programme will "produce an extra £550 million worth of work for British industry compared to previous plans. The Trident programme is expected to involve directly some 20,000 jobs annually in the peak years of the programme and some 15,000 indirectly" (Hansard, 22nd March, Written Answers, Col 275). In addition, there will be an unquantifiable amount of extra work, which should result from the new opportunities for British companies to compete with United States industry for contracts (see above).

Trident and Our Conventional Forces. It has been widely suggested that the Trident programme is the cause of reductions in our conventional forces and particularly in the surface fleet, announced by Mr. Nott last

June. However, only about 3 per cent of the overall defence budget and about 6 per cent of the equipment budget over the next 18 years will be spent on the Trident programme.

It should be made absolutely clear that in many respects our conventional forces have been strengthened substantially since the Conservative Government took office. As Mr. Nott said in his statement on 11th March 1982:

"There are nearly 30,000 more Regulars and reservists in the Services than there were when we came to office. Every unit is up to strength. We now have one-third more tanks manned and operational in Germany, and the amount spent on defence equipment with British industry in the coming year will have doubled since the last general election" (Hansard, Col. 978).

In general, Mr. Nott's review of June 1981 meant, as he put it in a speech at Harrogate on 13th February 1982: "a shift towards a rather smaller surface fleet and support infrastructure, but with more submarines and maritime patrol aircraft with advanced weapons; more war stocks and a range of new equipment for our forces in Germany; more reservists and more air defence fighters and missiles for the United Kingdom."

The defence review was not necessitated by the Trident programme. It was made necessary by quite separate financial pressures on the defence budget, flowing from the pace of technological change and the need for increasingly expensive and sophisticated weapons systems to meet the developing Soviet threat. As Mr. Nott has said:

"the purpose of my defence review last summer was to decide how best to spend the increasing resources we have allocated to defence to respond to tomorrow's - and not yesterday's - threat" (Hillhead, 15th March 1982).

He also pointed out that although much had been made of reductions in older surface ships whose refits would soon be costing as much as newly designed frigates, Britain still had "the largest and most powerful navy in the world outside that of the United States and the Soviet Union."

Conclusion. The Conservative Government is convinced in Mr. Nott's words that:

"compared with Trident, with its ability to destroy targets throughout a large area of the Soviet Union, there can be no comparison between Trident and more tanks, more ships or more aircraft when it comes to the overriding objective of the deterrent - the maintenance of peace ... (and) that there is no other system than Trident which can give us the assurance of real deterrence for the next 40 years" (News of the World, 14th March 1982).

For answers to arguments put forward by supporters of the CND, see Briefing Note No. 36, dated 4.11.1981, on Disarmament.

RT/JLS