

The Need for Robust Independent Assessment of Rationales for New Warheads

On July 25, reports in the *Guardian*¹ and the *Telegraph*² highlighted a document released by the Freedom of Information Act and made available by John Ainslie³, which stated that an MoD official briefed the defence industry that the “decision to replace Trident warheads has already been taken.” The MoD response, as reported on the same day by the Press Association, states that “we are undertaking a detailed review of the optimum life of the existing warhead stockpile and analysing the range of replacement options that might be available. No decisions have yet been taken.” This word ‘replacement’ indicates that the preference is for a new warhead and not a refurbishment of the existing design.

This dialogue highlights the difficulty decision makers face in trying to assess robustly the need for a warhead upgrade or replacement. They are at a clear disadvantage in having to rely only upon the advice of (a) the weapons scientists themselves and (b) those companies with interests in providing systems, expertise, materials or components.

All states with nuclear weapons are faced with decisions relating to ageing warheads. It would therefore be sensible to work towards a clear understanding of the common problems, and to explore alternatives to warhead modernisation and redesign. This is essential if we are to avoid locking states with nuclear weapons into prolonged reliance on nuclear weapons through lengthy investments in upgrades, as the UK is currently considering – though interestingly the US Congress, following independent scientific assessment of the needs, has not approved funds for a warhead replacement.

As the UK explores options for nuclear warhead modernisation or replacement, decision makers can benefit from further exploring similar possible moves in other countries, and working with other nations to address perceived technological issues. A great deal of information can be—but rarely is—discussed in declassified fora. The UK could incorporate these issues in its pursuit of its stated goal as a ‘disarmament laboratory’ and in their proposed P5 negotiations leading up to the 2010 Review Conference of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.

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¹ Matthew Taylor, ‘Britain plans to spend £3bn on new nuclear warheads Decision breaches non-proliferation treaty, opponents say,’ *The Guardian*, 25 July 2008, http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2008/jul/25/nuclear_weaponstechnology.

² Lucy Cockcroft, ‘Britain's nuclear warheads will be upgraded, document suggests’, *Telegraph*, 25 July 2008, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/2456478/Britains-nuclear-warheads-will-be-upgraded,-document-suggests.html>.

³ Available at <http://www.cnduk.org/index.php/press-releases/trident/secret-plan-to-replace-nuclear-warheads-parliament-misled.html>.