

Vintage Trident

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*This excerpt is from a new book, *Corbyn's Campaign*, edited by Tom Unterrainer (www.spokesmanbooks.com £7.95).*

US Trident missiles form a significant part of NATO's nuclear arsenal. Many of these are deployed on the Royal Navy's four ageing Vanguard class submarines, which the Americans count as part of the US fleet, as Major General (ret'd) Patrick Cordingley recently told us during a television interview. The US Navy also deploys some of its 14 Trident-armed Ohio class submarines in the Atlantic Ocean. In addition, contrary to the requirements of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, the US Air Force deploys about 180 modernised B61 gravity nuclear bombs in five European countries (Belgium, Germany, Italy, The Netherlands, Turkey) and engages Poland, Romania and the Baltic states in exercises to enhance its 'non-strategic nuclear posture in Europe', according to the *SIPRI Yearbook 2015*. Trident forms NATO's 'strategic' nuclear posture, although the distinction between 'strategic' and 'non-strategic' conceals dark intent, as all this nuclear firepower still threatens mass death and destruction in Russia, aggravated by US moves to make some of its nuclear weapons lower yield and therefore, in some sense, more 'useable'.

NATO's nuclear armoury is central to what, in the UK, is somewhat misleadingly called 'Trident renewal' or 'replacement'. In fact, it is the submarines rather than the missiles that the UK government wishes to replace. The US is currently modifying the Trident II D5 missiles for deployment in any new submarines to extend their service life beyond 2028 until 2042, by which time Trident will have been operational for more than 50 years.

Meanwhile, in the United States design of the next generation submarine to replace

the Trident-armed Ohio class boats is already under way, with construction of a Common Missile Compartment/Advanced Launcher. Known as ‘SSBN-X’, 12 submarines are envisaged, a reduction of two on the current fleet, with procurement scheduled for 2021, and deployment on patrol starting in 2031. The last of these 12 submarines is planned to remain in service until 2080. How will submarine technology change during this 65-year period?

Trident missiles, in their essentials, are scheduled to continue in service in the US and UK navies for another 25 years or more. The pressing problem for the Royal Navy is the four ageing and increasingly unreliable Vanguard submarines, over which UK governments have been agonising since Tony Blair exchanged letters with George W Bush in 2006, shortly before leaving office. In May 2015, the deteriorating state of at least one of these submarines, and the declining morale of its crew, was highlighted by Able Seaman William McNeilly, in a 12,000 word report (see *Spokesman 129*). In an extended eyewitness commentary, McNeilly recounted his first dive in *HMS Vanguard*:

‘... there was a loud continuous banging heard by everyone. It was down the forward starboard side. The next day in the junior rates mess, I heard people complaining amongst themselves about it being ignored. After all, patrol objective no.1 is to remain undetected, except by forces allocated in direct support. They suspected it might have been the fore-planes. The fore-plane is a control surface that is used to alter the depth of the submarine. There were jokes about the fore-planes being defective throughout the entire submarine ...’

AB McNeilly’s disturbing eyewitness report underlines the decrepit state of the four Vanguard class submarines operated by the Royal Navy. For the UK government, the crux of ‘Trident replacement’ is actually whether to build three or four ‘Successor’ submarines to replace them to carry the also ageing and ‘life-extended’ Trident missiles and their modified warheads, ‘leased’ to the UK by the United States.

The four Vanguard class submarines can carry up to 16 Trident II D5 missiles, each armed with up to three warheads, giving a total of up to 48 warheads on the one deployed submarine under the UK’s continuous at-sea deterrence (CASD) posture. The warheads have vast explosive power, ranging up to 100 kilotons, although the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) comments that ‘it is believed that a number of them are deployed with only one warhead, possibly with a reduced explosive yield, to increase the flexibility of nuclear targeting options’. Where are these warheads manufactured? In its *Yearbook 2015*, SIPRI states:

‘The warheads are manufactured at the Atomic Weapons Establishment (AWE) Aldermaston, but are believed to be very similar to the US W76 warhead.’ A footnote adds, ‘According to some reports, the UK may have been supplied with the US-produced W76-1 nuclear warhead with an improved firing mechanism.’

If the United States is indeed supplying nuclear warheads and components to the United Kingdom, does that not contravene the provisions of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty?

Apparently, Trident’s current nuclear warhead was first deployed in the early 1990s and, with modifications, is expected to remain in service until the 2040s. Should the three or four new Trident-carrying submarines actually be built for the Royal Navy, can the United States be relied upon to supply suitable missiles and warheads for all of their projected period of service, into the 2040s and beyond? The US has some form in this regard. In 1980, Margaret Thatcher decided to replace US Polaris nuclear missiles with a ‘UK variant of the US Trident system’, as Commander Robert Green RN (Ret’d) records in his authoritative study, *Security Without Nuclear Deterrence* (AstronMedia, Christchurch, 2010; for an updated and revised ebook edition, see www.amazon.com/dp/BOOMFTBUZS). He continues:

‘The UK agreed to purchase Trident I C-4 missiles. The Reagan administration then quickly opted to replace them with the much more accurate and longer-range Trident II D-5, which made it a counter-force weapon, capable of destroying opposing nuclear weapon systems. In 1982, Thatcher had no choice but to accept the D-5 version ...’

The Trident D-5 was bigger than the C-4, and changes were required accordingly. What surprises lie in store for the builders and submariners maintaining UK ‘Successor’ submarines in the long haul to the 2040s and beyond?

One thing is certain: nuclear warheads and Trident missiles aboard Royal Navy submarines will be firmly under US control, as General Cordingley emphasised on television. The Royal Navy ‘couldn’t fire’ Trident missiles without US approval, he told his interviewer.

Jeremy Corbyn opposes nuclear weapons and their inherent threat of catastrophic casualties and destruction. In saying he would not ‘press the button’, were he to become Prime Minister, Corbyn exposes the myth behind the ritual ‘nuclear test’ of British political leadership. The reality is that no Prime Minister would have to do this, because that dirty work is delegated to the Commanding Officer of the deployed Trident-carrying submarine. exposing one of the weaknesses in this deadly structure.

The Royal Navy Submarine Service currently has two main parts: its four ballistic missile-armed submarines (SSBNs) ‘maintaining the nation’s strategic nuclear deterrent’, and ten nuclear-powered attack submarines (SSNs), ‘fast, deep-diving and capable of a wide range of roles’, according to the Navy’s website.

Seven Astute class attack submarines are planned to replace the four remaining Trafalgar class SSNs, which were designed as ‘Cold War’ warriors, according to the Navy. Three Astute class SSNs are already operational, with three more at various stages of production at Barrow-in-Furness. All seven will be nuclear powered, and they will be based at Faslane in Scotland. US commentaries such as *Defense Industry Daily* describe submarine manufacture as a ‘strategic’ industry for the UK. The Royal Navy Submarine Service will endure, with or without replacements for the four Vanguard class SSBNs. Indeed, the Navy may well be better placed to maintain its other roles without the hugely expensive drain on resources to keep Trident operational. Commander Green, responding to AB McNeilly’s eyewitness report, argues that the Royal Navy is increasingly ‘out of its depth’ with Trident, as it struggles with too few skilled personnel, insufficient money for repairs and replacements, and low morale amongst submariners who may prefer a posting in an attack submarine, whose role is more active and interesting (see *Spokesman 129*). Apparently, the Navy has increasing difficulty in securing sufficient young recruits willing to become submariners.

Notwithstanding these difficulties, the Submarine Service will continue to require the services of those people employed in Faslane, as it will those of the submarine designers and builders concentrated in Barrow. In turn, they will continue to require the substantial supply chain of components, materials and parts that go into manufacturing sophisticated, large-scale, nuclear-powered submarines. In this connection, it is notable that the plant in Scotland which supplies specialised steel for submarines is currently under threat of closure.

Without Trident missiles, not only would plans to replace the four Vanguard SSBNs be abandoned. It seems likely that the build programme of the Astute class SSNs would be scaled down, because the current need to assign one SSN to help the deployed SSBN remain undetected would end. If so, Corbyn’s proposal for a defence diversification agency is all the more appropriate. This proposal (excerpt below) was made in the context of the defence sector as a whole and ‘transitioning away from nuclear weapons’.

Defence Diversification

Jeremy Corbyn, August 2015

I entered the Labour leadership contest as a candidate who is opposed to austerity, because it is possible to have investment to grow our economy and create decent jobs for all with a more equitable distribution of wealth. That is the central choice in the leadership election and the one facing Britain. Job security in high skill, high paid, productive work is not just good for those workers who have it, but good for our economy too. I am committed to ensure that in transitioning away from nuclear weapons, we do so in a way that protects the jobs and skills of those who currently work on Trident, and in the defence sector more widely. This will help grow the British economy.

The UK desperately needs to build its skills base and to invest in the industries that will take our country forward. That is why I have set out plans for both a *National Education Service* and for a *National Investment Bank*. For all these reasons, I have set out a clear commitment to establishing a Defence Diversification Agency to focus on ensuring a just transition for communities whose livelihoods are based in those sectors, so that engineering and scientific skills are not lost, but are transferred into more socially productive industries. A huge investment in renewable energy networks, new and improved railway infrastructure, new housing, as well as upgrading our digital infrastructure are all necessary parts of that plan and will offer skilled job opportunities to those in the defence sector.

Additionally, the workforce in the defence industry will also have ideas about how the innovations you work on, and the skills you have, can be adapted to other social uses.

So a Defence Diversification Agency should not be some arcane Whitehall bureaucracy, but will be driven by the workforce and communities in partnership with government. We need a strategy to redeploy those skills to tasks that will build a stronger country for all and these are the issues that a DDA would be tasked with taking forward in practical terms.

From energy to the railways, from housing to digital infrastructure, the UK lags behind the rest of the world in our infrastructure. In Britain we do not lack for the innovators or inventors, but we do lack the strategic government and public investment to support them and to harness their skills and insights. Money saved by not replacing our nuclear weapons system could be used to sustain the process of defence diversification, vital to our manufacturing future, as well as freeing resources for investment in other socially-useful forms of public spending to build a sustainable future that benefits us all. I am confident that we can make a just transition to a nuclear-weapons-free Britain, and diversify more of the skills in the defence sector into more peaceful industries.