

## Ron Smith

# Defence After Trident

**The future of Trident looks unlikely. But that doesn't mean any basic change in defence policy.**

Within the last few years there has been a revival of concern in the UK about defence issues. After a period when military matters were widely regarded as technical questions to be decided by experts, they have returned to the centre of the political stage. Increased east west tension and weapons system modernisation have made the public more conscious of the threat of nuclear annihilation. Systems like SS20s, Cruise and Pershing II missiles, neutron bombs, MX and Trident have been seen not merely as trading in old systems for new as their proponents would present them, but a qualitative escalation which increases the likelihood of war. In the UK the increasing burden of defence expenditure at a time of falling real income and cuts in social services has also spurred concern.

Ironically the debate has also been fuelled by divisions within the defence establishment. Even with the prodigal military budgets proposed by the present government, the UK cannot afford to maintain its present strategic roles. Substantial reductions in the size of one or more of the services

seems inevitable and this is recognised within Whitehall. Each group in the military and the bureaucracy is thus trying to mobilise political support for its position while attempting to discredit its rivals. The real enemies of the British army become not the IRA and the Soviets, but the navy and airforce who are trying to cut its budget and recall the army from the Rhine, to provide the cash for new ships and planes. This bureaucratic infighting has had the benefit that much more information has been brought into the public domain. This is illustrated by the contrast between the degree of public information on Chevaline — the Polaris warhead enhancement project — and Trident decisions. The warhead research programme was begun in 1967

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under the codename Antelope, and went into development in 1973 as Chevaline. It was confirmed in 1974 by a small group of Labour ministers, the cabinet merely being informed that a Polaris improvement programme was under way at a cost of some £250 million. The first the public heard of it was in 1980 when Pym described Chevaline to the Commons, which by then had cost over a billion.<sup>1</sup> Although many politicians and public servants wish that a similar degree of secrecy was the rule, divisions within the bureaucracy and economic pressures have brought important issues into the open. As a result there has been more public discussion of Trident than any other comparable defence issue. In many ways this Trident debate represents a turning point, but to see why this is so some background to British defence policy is needed.

### Defence Planning

Behind a screen of secrecy and a facade of strategic continuity British defence policy has gone through a series of radical transformations in the postwar period and it seems



inevitable that these transformations will continue. Since the Korean War, the poor performance of the British economy and the rapidly rising real costs of military goods and services have repeatedly forced Britain to adjust its defence policy towards that appropriate for an impoverished minor European nation. It has been economic pressures not political choices which have caused Britain to abandon imperial aspirations, withdraw from East of Suez, reduce the size of its forces and cancel a whole sequence of gradiose weapons systems. Not only were these transformations not the result of political choice, they were rarely planned. The major defence reviews which implemented these adjustments at roughly five year intervals were usually hasty responses to inevitable but unpredicted clashes between escalating weapons costs and fiscal crises.

With the retreat from East of Suez in the late 1960s, British military policy focussed on the European theatre, and during the 1970s security doctrine was organised around the concept of a structure of balanced forces. Within this structure each service consumes a roughly equal portion of the budget and within each service a wide range of combat missions is covered. Fighting capability is provided to meet four major roles which together account for the bulk of the budget. These roles are:

- the semi-independent 'strategic' nuclear forces of Polaris, to be replaced by Trident;
- the immediate defence of the UK by the home forces including those in Northern Ireland;
- air and land forces in West Germany;
- naval forces in the eastern Atlantic and Channel.

To maintain this balance in the face of economic pressures, the navy bore the main brunt of the 1981 cuts, since it benefitted from the decision to purchase Trident.

But even these four roles will not all be sustainable for long. Since Britain's economic performance is worsening, since the military inflation rate is still about 2% greater than the general rate of price increase, and since the changes made in the 1981 Defence Review were rather marginal it is reasonable to expect another crisis in the next two or three years, and another major cut in the British order of battle, irrespective of the government in power.

The first signals of the next crisis are already appearing. British forces in Germany are reported to have new equipment which they are unable to use for lack of fuel.

NATO is complaining that on present plans RAF front line forces will be reduced by over 100 planes during this decade. Pressure for another defence review is growing, and in this context the Trident decision is crucial.

### The consequences of Trident

A decision by whatever government, to maintain cash limits which allow no more than slowly rising real defence expenditure and to proceed with Trident would lead to remarkable changes in the UK defence posture. The cost of Trident is likely to be so vast that on any plausible defence budget it will displace a large number of other military activities. The 1980 estimate of £5-6 billion for Trident, at prices then ruling, is only about half the figure now being discussed. This escalation arises for a number of reasons. The cost of the components bought from the US were priced at the 1980 exchange rate of about 2.40 rather than the much lower current rate. The 1980 calculations were based on buying the C-4 missile, rather than the larger D-5, which Reagan has now opted for. Not only is the D-5 likely to be substantially more expensive, but we will not know for a couple of years how much more expensive, since it is still under development. Persisting with the C-4 is not a viable option because the US will cease production of it in the 1990s when Trident is supposed to become operational, and the UK would lose all the benefits of commonality with the US system for most of Trident's life.

The D-5 will certainly need a larger submarine, which will be more expensive, and possibly a different nuclear power unit which will require further development expenditure. Even for the smaller submarines originally intended, extra construction capacity would have been required and the cost of this was not included in the estimate. With larger missiles and submarines the investment in construction facilities would be correspondingly greater. Although current estimates for the cost of Trident are for £11-12 billion, these contain an even larger margin of error than the original estimate. That was for a known and now operating system. The new estimate is for an ill-defined system under development, leaving greater scope for over-runs, development bugs, and general cost escalation.

Unless the defence budget was almost doubled, which would provoke strong political opposition and severe economic consequences, it would be impossible both to proceed with Trident and to maintain and equip the present UK force structures. Changes in the order of battle of at least the

magnitude of withdrawing and disbanding the British Army on the Rhine (BAOR) will be required to provide the resources for Trident. Britain would then move towards an arrangement like that of the French services in which nuclear capability is maintained only at the cost of very poor quality and badly equipped conventional forces. It seems unlikely that even a Conservative government would adopt this course, since the strategic utility of Trident is so marginal and the adjustments required elsewhere would be so major. There would also be serious opposition from the other services. It seems more probable that were the Tories to win the next election they would rapidly cancel Trident.

### Party policies

It seems almost certain that a Labour or SDP government would cancel Trident and very likely that a Conservative government would. But whichever government next comes to power it seems likely that they would present the decision as maintaining the continuity of British defence policies. Despite differences in rhetoric, there has been a broad consensus between the parties on defence policy in the UK. It is difficult to

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find significant differences between the defence policies implemented by past Labour and Conservative administrations and there is as yet little indication that a future government, Labour, Conservative, or SDP, would break with that consensus.

Whatever changes to military posture that financial and geopolitical reality make inevitable, the parliamentary parties still seem likely to adjust to them within the framework of the dominant ideology. This involves maintaining the existing orientation towards the Soviet threat, the extensive military collaboration with other European states and the subordination to US hegemony.

Even within this framework, however, it is possible that in the course of the technical changes required to reorganise and economise on force structures and weapons systems, a centrist-style Labour government might shift the perspective of policy somewhat. Given the incoherence and waste in British defence policy; the potential for manipulation of inter-service rivalries and internal bureaucratic conflicts; and the opportunity to take advantage of the lever-

<sup>1</sup>See *Britain and Nuclear Weapons*, Lawrence Freedman, Macmillan 1980.



age provided by economic constraints, there is scope for shifts. Attempting to reform policy under the guise of rationalising provision has advantages for Labour politicians. It avoids a head-on confrontation with the dominant defence ideology, and it does not raise the most sensitive political issues on which the Left is divided, such as the perception of the USSR and the extent of common interests with Europe and the US. The disadvantage of this procedure is that it will depend on bureaucratic manoeuvring in which Labour politicians are likely to be outflanked by professional military bureaucrats, and quite likely to be co-opted by them. While, by refusing to confront the underlying political issues, the Labour leadership would cut themselves off from the movement which maintains their morale, provides their backbone and gives them their bureaucratic bargaining power.

### Other options

While there is very little evidence to suggest that a shift in British defence policy is likely, it is possible that cancellation of Trident could be sufficiently traumatic to 'break the mould' of the British military consensus. Whether it results from economic or political pressures and whichever government does it, cancellation would be a major boost to the morale of the peace movement. It is possible that the momentum created by the cancellation of Trident and the other changes enforced by economic necessity could be used as a springboard for a major new political movement. Scrapping Trident would reinforce the campaign to scrap Polaris (which requires large expenditures for new motors) and to prevent the UK

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basing of Cruise missiles. In the case of Cruise it is unlikely that economic pressures would work in the campaign's favour, since the cost is negligible. However, reliability problems and technical difficulties may provide powerful additional arguments against their deployment. While the main thrust of the campaign must be taken by points of principle, the leverage provided by technical and economic arguments should not be ignored. The next step would be to fight for the removal of all warheads from nuclear capable systems like the V bombers, Tornado, ASW helicopters and artillery. Longer term goals would involve closing US bases in the UK, withdrawal of BAOR, and leaving either NATO's integrated military command, as France did, or the whole political structure as well. The specific military measures listed could also lead to substantial reductions in the size of the armed forces and in defence expenditure.

Necessary as they are, specific military proposals of this sort are inadequate on their own. Although, at the moment the peace movement mobilises almost exclusively around weapons-based proposals geared to scrapping systems and withdrawing forces, this focus has severe disadvantages, because it does not provide a general framework for opposition.

The fact that in the present political climate the Left's defence proposals appear Utopian, reflects the hegemony of the pre-

vailing ideology. And this hegemony persists despite the fact that opinion polls, demonstrations, and CND membership show the breadth of disaffection among the electorate with current defence policy. To transform this potential constituency into a politically effective force would require the development of a coherent alternative which counters the prevailing ideology, justifies specific proposals and provides a framework within which detailed choices can be made. Such an alternative security policy would play a similar role to the alternative economic strategy in providing an essential weapon in mobilising mass support and challenging existing doctrines. The development of an alternative security policy would provide a common focus for a wide range of disparate groups who share a common concern about the suicidal implications of present policy.

But just as the alternative economic strategy cannot be narrowly economic, an alternative security policy could not be narrowly military. The major issues in defence policy do not merely involve military questions, but are inherently intertwined with perceptions of the role and status of the UK in world affairs and with conceptions of British foreign policy. At the moment there is a considerable body of work going on within the peace movement, the Alternative Defence Commission, the Labour Party and other political groups towards the definition of such a strategy. The effectiveness of the strategy would of course be increased if it could be linked to more general moves to European Nuclear Disarmament and non-alignment.

There are a variety of forms the strategy could take. It could be based on closer integration with a non-aligned Europe or independent isolated neutrality by the UK. It could rely on conventional, territorial or non-violent means of defence. But whatever

### Disarmament is invariably presented as costing jobs

its form, its function is to provide a framework which relates general conceptions of foreign policy to specific military questions such as weapons acquisitions and force structures.

### The problems

Rather than examine specific proposals here, it may be more useful to consider some of the questions the alternative security policy must be able to deal with. These are the major issues on which crucial choices must be made, and which will be the focus of attacks made by opponents. There seem to

be four key issues. These relate to how the alternative security policy would deal with: the question of the 'Soviet threat'; the status of existing commitments; the problems of economic adjustment; and the difficulties of implementation of an alternative.

### The 'Soviet threat'

With respect to the Soviet Union, the Left has in many ways implicitly accepted the establishment definition of the question. On this basis one must be either for or against the Soviet Union. A crucial element in the development of an alternative security policy will be making an independent judgement on the nature of the Soviet state and the extent to which it poses a military threat to the UK. It is important to recognise that these two questions are distinct. It is possible to have a negative view of the Soviet state — for example as a reactionary and militaristic social structure which oppresses those within its sphere of influence — and yet at the same time to see it as posing no threat to the UK because, for instance, of the inherent conservatism of its geriatric leadership and the fragility of its productive base.

While in principle the issues of the nature of the Soviet state and the Soviet threat are distinct, in practice the establishment treats them as inseparable. Moreover, Poland, Afghanistan, SS20s, and the incursion of a nuclear armed submarine into Swedish waters all provide apparent evidence for this prevailing ideology. And such issues are exploited by the establishment to promote a militaristic response, including knee-jerk rearmament and support for the US. Now even if sections of the public accept that the Soviet Union does represent some kind of threat, the militaristic response is still both wrong and dangerous. There do exist a variety of alternative defence philosophies other than pure pacifism, which would increase our security and reduce the risk of us becoming the victims of either US or USSR adventurism, and these should be explored in detail. In this respect we can learn a great deal from the neutral and non-aligned countries. It is important that the British public also share those lessons so that support for disarmament does not melt away with the first Soviet scare.

### Existing commitments

A second question is the status of existing commitments. Here I am simply concerned with commitments to existing arms contracts and export orders rather than the numerous inter-state obligations like US bases in Britain. Since the lead times for weapons systems are so long there is likely to

be a considerable backlog of contracts.

For example British Aerospace and Rolls Royce are beginning the development of a new jet fighter for service in the late 1980s, the P-110, and an ultra short take-off and landing combat aircraft, the PI03 for the 1990s. These will require commitments by the Ministry of Defence and RAF within the next year, and if this is given, large amounts

## The major issues in defence policy do not involve merely military questions

of money will have been invested in development by the next election. Cancelling such contracts will be presented as wasting large amounts of money already sunk in the projects; causing the loss of many jobs; and incurring large cancellation fees, much of which will be due to foreign countries since many of these projects are collaborative. The difficulties involved will be greater because many of the arms firms are nationalised industries. Almost the whole of the aerospace and shipbuilding components of the defence industry plus large other parts are in public ownership. Given that there is a general philosophy to justify the breaking of these commitments and a suitable concern for the political treatment of the legal difficulties, most of these arguments can be reduced to the third prong of the attack - economic consequences.

Disarmament is invariably presented as costing jobs. In arguing for it, the bottom line tends to be that cuts in military expenditure reduce employment. Although this argument is prevalent and widely used by the establishment it is the weakest defence of military expenditure. Firstly there is strong evidence that a major factor in the UK's poor economic performance and rising unemployment is the burden that military expenditure has put on the economy through depressing investment, innovation and productivity growth. Secondly, various alternative corporate plans developed by workers; the experience after the Second World War and in other countries; and a number of detailed studies all indicate that with planning and appropriate macro-economic policies conversion from military to civil production can be implemented rapidly and effectively<sup>2</sup>.

### Implementation

Any government trying to implement an alternative strategy will face administrative harassment. Business as usual will continue without ministerial approval and when the military bureaucracy is forced to implement alternative policies it will be done in such a

way as to have politically damaging consequences. Ministers will find that the fishery patrol vessel they approved turns out to look remarkably like an aircraft carrier, and that every defence cut will have to fall on a marginal constituency. In these skirmishes financial and technical details plays a major role. By suitable choice of GDP and public expenditure projections, the price basis of the calculations, and the target base used, the Defence Ministry can turn what the politicians expected to be a reduction into a much increased out-turn. These tactics are well known, though Defence Ministers might learn from Conservative cash control innovations in other Departments, and the best defence against them is open government and wide involvement in decisions. Official secrecy is a major source of bureaucratic power, and wider provision of information will help demystify defence issues. But openness alone will not solve all the problems, structural changes within the military apparatus are also needed. Although, thinking about how to democratise and transform the armed services and the Ministry of Defence has hardly begun, encouragement of trade union membership in the forces and a reduction in their internal security and strike breaking role would contribute to it.

There seem to be a number of possible lessons from this exercise. Firstly, strategy and tactics must be integrated within a developed philosophy. This provides the vision for an alternative security policy and a structure which can be used to challenge the prevailing ideology. A list of specific proposals without a coherent framework is almost certain to be inadequate. Secondly, any such philosophy must be developed within a mass movement, it cannot be

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imposed by experts from above. The success of any attempt to transform British defence policy in the face of opposition from the military bureaucracy will depend on the breadth of popular support. Such support will only be forthcoming if there is wide involvement in the development of policy. Thirdly, the tactics of the individual political battles will depend on the command of details of military technology, legality and economics. Expertise will be an indispensable subordinate to a philosophy and a movement in the battle. O

<sup>2</sup>These issues are discussed at greater length in Dan Smith and Ron Smith, *The Economics of Militarism*, Pluto Press, spring 1982.