

THE TRIDENT FACTOR

As we proceed towards the fun and games of a general election, we need to make a realistic assessment of the actual 'disarmament' measures that can be achieved in Britain during the next year. The answer is: probably none, if we speak of real nuclear disarmament. On the other hand, there is a fair chance of some almost valueless British-American 'arms-control' gesture, such as dual-control of ground-launched Cruise missiles. Arms control will not



satisfy the blossoming and fairly well-organised disarmament movement, but there is always a danger that a wider public could be disproportionately reassured, at which stage the politicians of all the major parties will stop short of rapid and genuinely unilateral nuclear disarmament. Therefore the crucial demand to pursue in

the immediate future is something between cosmetic arms-control and genuine nuclear disarmament, namely 'arms limitation'. For the moment that means: no Cruise missiles, no Trident missiles.

The current up-front CND campaign is against Cruise and Trident missiles jointly, so the cancellation of either or both *should* be credited to the peace movement. But there is a danger that the establishment would try to portray the cancellation of Trident as merely a technical decision, and the hawks would then argue for some more modest replacement for the present Polaris 'deterrent'. The only response to such a scenario is to give the anti-Trident campaign a very high profile.

Another danger is that we simply take a Trident cancellation too much for granted. We must remember that defence is an area where elitist decision-making is deeply entrenched. And if the new government is again headed by Mrs Thatcher, or if it includes people like Dr David Owen, who has said he would not cancel Trident once too much money (unspecified) had been invested, then Trident will go ahead, despite the very strong and widely-acknowledged arguments against it.

This is despite the fact that, while the pro-Trident lobby has considerable power, it does not have much of a case for the system, still less many knowledgeable allies. Thus, we could expect little NATO resistance to a British cancellation. In fact, opposition in the US to the sale of Trident to Britain has been widely reported from American defence middle-management, and a revised decision has been taken to refit the actual missiles in America, not here. So Britain can make its own decision more freely on Trident than on Cruise.

From a purely British point of view, many military people, as well as the genuine nuclear disarmers, insist that Trident is too costly, too sophisticated and too powerful for any conceivable British defence needs in financial terms. If Britain had to pay for a wholly British-made, long-range missile system, especially an accurate and secure, submarine-based one, then the costs of development and production would frighten even our warmongers. Instead, the Government wants to buy an American system off-the-peg, which suits the US financially, but costs Britain foreign exchange (as well as its final military independence). Even this ready-made system will cost us an astronomical £10,000m at least, and there

¹This will be discussed at length in the next END Journal — Issue 4, June — July.

²See 'China's future position in Asia', *Beijing Review*, 18 April 1983.

are countless projects, all more labour-intensive, to which such sums would be better devoted: in useful manufacturing, in social services, in personal consumption, and even in more credible and less grandiose military preparations. The army and air force resent Trident for both selfish and theoretical reasons, but the navy itself also wants more non-nuclear equipment, especially in the afterglow of the Falklands exercise.

Notwithstanding its cost, Trident just does not fit our supposed nuclear requirements. Its overkill potential, for Britain's second-strike deterrent purposes, is huge. To realise this potential, the British Trident force must either escalate even faster proportionately than the nuclear giants, or else escalate more slowly but with wasted capacity - the Government's avowed (probable) intention. If the British Trident system *did* end up with its full destructive potential, the killing-power could equal 20,000 Hiroshimas. This is a hypothetical and unlikely maximum effect, but we are quite justified in speculating pessimistically, because of the continuing uncertainties about the number of missiles per submarine, the number of separate warheads per missile, and the power of each warhead. Estimates of the explosive power of the British warhead have ranged from 150 kilotons up to a figure in the *Observer* recently of 475 kilotons (about 30 Hiroshimas). There are also hidden escalations in the Trident system, in that it will have more rapid, in-tube missile servicing, and less frequent major overhauls.

Trident not only exceeds Thatcher's quantitative needs. We will also be paying for qualitative excesses: a pointless range of up to 6,000 nautical miles, and pointless accuracy. Again it is very uncertain to what extent Britain would actually exploit the full potential of Trident's accuracy, and do so independently of American assistance or control. But in theory, the Trident D5 system could be accurate to less than 100 metres. No second-strike 'deterrent' for threatening cities only could possibly need such accuracy. Trident is an aggressive weapon for 'first-use' on battlefields, or even for a surprise 'first-strike' on military sites. The British Trident would normally be assigned to NATO for targetting according to alliance (ie, American) needs, not British. It will tie us tightly into automatic participation in war-fighting strategies. And if it comes to the crunch, Trident may not be an effective British independent revenge deterrent, since many experts regard independent firing and guidance as a 'technical impossibility'.

Considering the international aspects of the question, we can see that the USSR will fear the very worst of Trident, and the military planners will make their usual worst-case assumptions, which are the signposts of the arms race, and an essential part of its rationale. The Soviet Union will be tempted in turn to escalate its nuclear arms. It will tend to quantify the perceived escalation on the basis of Trident's full potential for early, accurate, powerful and widespread attack. It may gear its plans increasingly to an automatic and perhaps irretrievable nuclear-missile response, as it threatened to do in the case of Pershing missiles.

Trident will also hinder arms-control bargaining (and obviously, disarmament). The evident relevance of British (and French) nuclear weapons to the US-USSR talks on intermediate-range missiles in Europe has already been asserted by the Soviet Union and denied forcibly by the British government. But the prospect of an additional British escalation in the form of Trident makes any meaningful agreement for the 'European Theatre' even less likely. And the long-range, strategic potential of Trident for a pre-emptive strike could also hold up renewed SALT type talks on inter-continental missiles too.

Plans for new nuclear weapons systems are a token of the insincerity of the official and right wing 'multilateral disarmers'. Trident is the weakest link in the British nuclear-planning chain. The peace movement must break it decisively, to have a realistic hope of banning all nuclear weapons from Britain.

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