

The Defence Viewpoints interview.

Sir Kevin Tebbit, former Permanent Under Secretary at the Ministry of Defence talked to Nick Watts recently.

At a time of fiscal stringency where every department is undergoing spending cuts the retention of Britain's nuclear deterrent is once again under scrutiny. The current Coalition Government has undertaken a review to examine alternatives to the proposed Trident successor programme. As things stand, this will be based on a submarine launched ballistic missile system. Some initial design studies have already been ordered. The replacement is due to begin entering service in 2028. The current stockpile of warheads is reported to be viable until the mid-2030s. The MOD expects that the programme will reach Main Gate in 2016. The Trident alternatives review is due to report on the feasibility of alternative methods of delivering a nuclear capability in the first half of 2013. It is seen by some as an attempt by the Liberal Democrats to argue the case for nuclear disarmament.

In addressing the arguments for the retention of a Ballistic missile capability Sir Kevin considers that the fundamental argument for it is still all about the UK's national security, not, as some argue, a vain attempt to shore up the UK's declining political prestige. The difference is that the security rationale is no longer based on the outdated Cold War context of deterring a particular adversary. The nuclear deterrent going forward helps to ensure, existentially, that major powers will never again contemplate going to war with each other.

Nuclear deterrence is designed to provide the country with the assurance that it will be safe, not simply against today's threats, but against future risks and challenges. We have to ask ourselves what the world will look like in 30 years' time. True, Trident does not work against every threat; but it was never meant to do that in the past. The fact that it is not a counter to terrorism, unconventional forces or all asymmetric threats, is not an argument against safeguarding this country from intimidation or blackmail from a nuclear power in future.

Addressing the question of nuclear proliferation, Sir Kevin asks would a decision by the UK to disarm unilaterally encourage others to do the same? There is no evidence to suggest that it would, any more than the progressive and significant unilateral reduction of the UK nuclear stockpile over the past decade has done anything to restrain the actions of other nuclear or aspiring nuclear states. Disarmament must be balanced and multilateral if it is to be effective or add to our own security. The UK's arsenal is already at minimum capability now. Were the UK to disarm, France would be the only European nuclear power. Should that happen I don't think we should worry that France will gain in prestige and influence. It is much more likely that the pressure on France to denuclearise would be overwhelming. Would Europe then be happy to depend on the United States, Russia or China for its security?

The independence of Britain's deterrent is another area which is often questioned by the anti nuclear lobby.

Following the 1958 US UK Nassau agreement, Britain has been able to share design technology and acquire missiles from the US. The US supplies missiles from a common stock pool. But Sir Kevin is adamant that the UK's deterrent is truly independent in operational terms, which is what matters. This arrangement allows the UK to operate a submarine launched ballistic missile force at roughly half the cost of the comparable French system.

But affordability is still the main challenge to the Trident successor programme, certainly on the current basis, of a 4 boat force able to maintain continuous at sea deterrence. Many take the view that it is no longer affordable, given the need for public spending cuts. Against this Sir Kevin observes that The big numbers quoted cover the whole life span of the programme. These costs are not disproportionate compared to other large defence systems: around

5% of the defence budget over the lifetime of the capability. And the defence budget itself is now a relatively small proportion of public spending as a whole. The way costs fall in particular years does need to be managed carefully, particularly in the peak period of the early 2020s. But Sir Kevin points out that MOD is getting better at managing the peaks and troughs of programme expenditure. He points out that cost escalation [in the nuclear programme] is less significant than in other programmes. This is due, in part, to the efficiencies derived from co-operating with the US. The current generation of Trident was delivered on cost and according to the planned time scale.

What is also overlooked by those who argue that we could cancel Trident and save 70 billion, are the costs of the associated nuclear infrastructure, that would continue to be incurred. If the UK was to disarm, there would be an obligation to undertake de-commissioning and disposal of nuclear materials the warheads which could end up being as costly as continuing with a successor system. Sir Kevin says that the question of costs more generally is an area which needs close examination, because people quote figures which, I suspect, are in excess of the true costs of the successor system.

Regarding the much discussed question of an alternative method of delivering nuclear capability, Sir Kevin is of the view that both Cruise missiles and air delivery systems (bombs) fail to meet the vital criteria of invulnerability, reliability and effectiveness. There would also be costs associated with developing new infrastructure to manage these systems, which makes it highly unlikely that they would be a cheaper alternative. Sir Kevin is critical too of suggestions that the UK could rely on reducing the number of Trident submarines from 4 to 3 (which gives no savings in the short to medium term) or of the idea of replacing Continuous At Sea Deterrence by occasional random patrolling. He argues: by not having a submarine continuously at sea, particularly in time of rising tension or crisis, you risk either pre-emption by staying in port or of making the crisis worse by a perceived escalatory act of deploying. Having a submarine permanently on station, continuously deterring, is, therefore, inherently stabilising.

What of the recent developments in Franco-British defence co-operation? Sir Kevin points out that The Anglo-French Treaty began as a nuclear treaty, linked to a desire to save costs where possible, notably by pooling capabilities on testing. Joint Testing of certain effects will now be carried out in France; but experimental R and D will remain in the UK. This can be seen as a welcome vote of confidence in the French. Sir Kevin is, however, sceptical about the extent of cost saving that will accrue. And in any case, the UK must preserve its arrangements and relationship with US which is where the main advantage lies.

Looking at the defence budget overall Sir Kevin predicts that there will be inter-service arguments about equipment and costs, with strong military lobbies for air, ground and naval forces, involving systems as costly as Trident. But he argues that the unique nature of the deterrent makes the comparison between nuclear and conventional forces, and attempts to make trade offs between the two as difficult and as potentially dangerous as ever.