United Kingdom

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Current status
In September 2010, the UK government announced that it had “not more than 225” Trident nuclear warheads and that this would be reduced to “not more than 180” by the mid 2020s. The UK’s only delivery system is the Trident D5 missile. Until 2010 each of the two or three armed Vanguard class submarines carried around 12 operational D5 missiles. This will be reduced to 8 missiles per submarine over the next few years. It is estimated that the UK has 3.2 tons of separated plutonium in its military stockpile and 4.4 tons of civilian plutonium. It also has 21.2 tons of highly-enriched uranium, over half of which it acquired from the United States.

Modernization
The UK is upgrading its current warheads in conjunction with the United States. Between 2015 and 2020 the UK will decide on the development of a new nuclear warhead—the decision has been postponed until after the next election in 2015. US modernization of the D5 missile system will apply equally to the missiles on British submarines. There is an expanding programme to develop a new submarine, to replace the Vanguard class. The formal decision on whether to build the new vessels is due in 2016. Facilities at the Atomic Weapons Establishment (AWE) are being upgraded and annual expenditure at AWE has doubled to £1 billion per year. On 22 May 2012 the UK Ministry of Defence announced the award of a contract to BAE Systems, Babcock and Rolls Royce worth £350 million for the design of successor submarines. The key contract, worth £328 million, was awarded to BAE Systems. If the Trident renewal programme is approved, the delivery of the first submarines will take place in 2028.

Economics
Annual expenditure on the UK nuclear weapons programme, which was £2.1 billion in 2010/11, is due to increase over the decade. Meanwhile, public expenditure will be cut by 5.3% between 2011/12 and 2016/17. Ministers from the two Coalition parties in the UK government have publicly disagreed over whether to cut welfare benefits or Trident. In accordance with current plans, in 2021, 35% of the MOD’s core budget for capital expenditure will be spent on the Trident replacement. Despite the fact that no formal decision has been made on the outcome of the project for new submarines, the Ministry of Defence is already spending £2 billion on new nuclear weapons plans. The plans include a £734 million facility for dismantling and assembling of warheads, a £634 million plant that will handle enriched uranium and a £231 million high explosive factory. The new spending has caused some debate in the UK on how crucial military spending decisions can be pushed through parliament without a proper parliamentary procedure. In July 2013 the Cabinet Office of the UK Government released a “Trident Alternatives Review,” which looked at “credible” alternatives to a submarine-based deterrent and the effect of any such alternatives on the credibility of the nuclear deterrent. However, it did not consider the option of not replacing its trident system.

International law and doctrine
The UK government plan is not to keep nuclear weapons for a short period of a few years, pending multilateral progress on disarmament, but to introduce a new system that can remain in service until 2067. This implies that the UK government thinks it can continue indefinitely to retain and modernize its nuclear forces. While stating in the 2010 Strategic Defence and Security Review that the UK should retain a “credible, continuous and effective minimum nuclear deterrent,” the government also restated that the UK makes it clear that it will only use their weapons in extreme circumstances of self-defence, including the defence of its NATO allies. The 2010 review also stated that the United Kingdom would retain and renew its independent nuclear deterrent—“the United Kingdom’s ultimate insurance policy in this age of uncertainty.”

Public discourse and transparency
Political support for the Trident replacement plan has declined since the start of the project in 2007. One of the major UK political parties argues that the original proposal is no longer affordable.97 A second party is reviewing its policy.98 Two former Defence Ministers have spoken out against the current posture of keeping one Trident submarine at sea at all times.99 A third has described the replacement plan as “nonsense”.100 The Trident force operates from Faslane in Scotland. On 20 March 2013 the Scottish Parliament voted to reject the Trident nuclear weapon system.101 On 18 September 2014 a referendum will be held on Scottish independence. The Scottish National Party has proposed that the constitution of an independent Scotland would include a ban on nuclear weapons.102 Furthermore, some public discourse acknowledges that retention of nuclear weapons suggests a willingness to use those weapons. A recent study found that an attack on Moscow from one UK submarine could result in 5.4 million fatalities.103 The UK government has not attended either of the conferences on the humanitarian impact of nuclear weapons in Norway or Mexico, nor did it participate in the open-ended working group on nuclear disarmament in 2013. It has issued joint statements with France and United States disparaging both initiatives as well as the high-level meeting on nuclear disarmament hosted by the UN on 26 September 2013 as “distractions” from “ongoing” work on nuclear arms control.