

Security Tri-lemma: The UK's Nuclear Deterrent

The controversy over the renewal of the Trident nuclear deterrent raises difficult questions about British – and European – security and international relations.

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After lacklustre openings to the campaigns of the main parties, the British general election came to life last week with an [ad hominem attack](#) by Defence Secretary Michael Fallon on Labour leader Ed Miliband whom he claimed could not be trusted to renew Trident, the UK's submarine-based nuclear deterrent. Fallon's attack - that Miliband's desperation for power would lead him to "stab Britain in the back" by forming a coalition with the anti-Trident Scottish National Party (SNP) - was widely condemned for its crassness, but it raised real issues that the next British government will need to address. These issues range from the cost and utility of replacing Trident to the morality of maintaining a nuclear deterrent in light of [calls for disarmament](#), the effect of unilateral disarmament in an increasingly [complex, multipolar](#) world, and the efficacy of nuclear weapons in dealing with [asymmetric threats](#). The nuclear issue is politically divisive in the UK, with different parties taking different views. However the parties – and the electorate – must also contend with the deeper questions they raise regarding the role that Britain wants to play in the world.

Analysis: Effectiveness, Ethics & Britain's Place in the World

Whichever parties form the next British government, they will need to make a decision about whether to proceed with the renewal of the nuclear deterrent by the [end of 2016](#) in order for new submarines to replace the current Vanguard class boats that will begin to be retired by the end of [2030](#). The cost of renewing Trident and its submarine-based delivery system is estimated to range between [25bn GBP and 100bn GBP](#).

The (cost-)effectiveness of Trident is disputed, with [some commentators](#) advocating a cheaper, airborne or cruise-missile based nuclear capability. However, both [main parties](#) prudently remain committed to the continuously at-sea Trident system, as it alone guarantees second-strike capability. This stance aligns the UK with France, the nuclear power that it has most in common with in terms of capacity and positioning. Other critiques of the efficacy of the nuclear deterrent pertain to the nature of the threats that Britain (and its allies) face. Actors such as Islamic State and Al-Qaeda pose asymmetric questions that a nuclear deterrent [cannot answer](#), but some rising powers – and a potentially revanchist Russia – may pose both conventional and nuclear threats. Britain therefore requires a balance between nuclear and conventional forces, but should also address the political causes and security consequences of sub-state political violence.

The morality of maintaining a nuclear capability in light of the '[Prague Agenda](#)' for a nuclear weapons free world and longer-standing campaigns for disarmament and non-proliferation also need to be addressed by the parties. However, with the UK holding [less than 300 of the worlds 16000 nuclear warheads](#), a unilateral disarmament would not make a substantial contribution to these agendas, while it would significantly alter the UK's capacity profile and, potentially, its international standing.

Questions of standing and capability relate to the UK's identity and orientation as a security actor as well as how it seeks to enact its imagined role in the world. The [declining ambition and competence](#) of the UK's international engagements, has seen falling funding for the Foreign Office and [conventional military capacities as](#) well as confused positions on trade, aid and [foreign investment](#). Potential Brexit from the EU has harmed the UK's international standing and made its allies question its commitments, as has failure to meet [NATO defence spending targets](#). Britain's desired role in the world – as a declining power no longer punching above its weight – must be considered in the context of its alliances and the unclear division of labour that is shared amongst them. The UK needs to clarify its combination of values, interests and role in the world and to determine how it can achieve these in the EU and NATO and through global trade and aid. Changing the UK's nuclear stance could further complicate this situation without obvious benefit.

Outlook: Coalitions of the (Un)Willing?

Both Labour and the Conservatives have committed to maintaining the UK's nuclear continuous at-sea deterrent, but as they are [neck-and-neck](#) in opinion polls, it seems likely that each of the main parties would need to seek coalition partners in order to form a government. For the Conservatives, UKIP and the Liberal Democrats would be the most likely options, with the latter also being a potential partner for Labour along with the Green Party and, crucially, the SNP. The [plethora of opinions](#) on maintaining a nuclear deterrent means that the makeup of any coalition will be significant in determining the UK's future direction in this regard.

UKIP have made a vague statement about replacing Trident with a cheaper “advanced stealth cruise-type missile” and the issue is not featured in the policy section of their website. The Lib-Dems will only commit to funding the purchase of three or fewer new submarines, which would not allow for continuous at-sea deterrence. Both the Greens and the SNP have affirmed their strong opposition to the nuclear deterrent per se, which could mean problems for Labour in forming a coalition, particularly as SNP leader Nicola Sturgeon has declared this to be a [‘red-line’](#) issue, without the possibility for compromise. However, the Lib-Dems previously opposed trident and managed to govern with the Tories. Labour could potentially form a minority government with issue-specific support from the SNP, while relying on Tory votes on the nuclear issue.

Recommendations:

- ◆ **Labour and the Conservatives** should engage in clear public discussion about the moral case for and likely efficacy of maintaining a nuclear deterrent in the changing global security context.
- ◆ **UKIP and the Liberal-Democrats** should abandon their vague hedging and clearly outline how they would provide an effective deterrent or make the case for scrapping the UK's nuclear capability.
- ◆ **The Greens and the SNP** should account for the practical impact on the UK's defence capacity, global standing and potential loss of influence that unilaterally renouncing nuclear weapons could lead to – particularly in the increasingly uncertain and multipolar global security context.
- ◆ **All parties** should outline how they see Britain's position in the world, how their nuclear and conventional defence policies serve their respective strategic visions and how they would fund this given the UK's commitment to spend [2% of GDP on defence](#) and the economic pledges they make elsewhere.

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